

SŁAWOMIR RZEPczyński

BETWEEN “COMPLETENESS” AND “ABSENCE”

THE CONCEPT

In the introductory chapter of her extensive book on women in Norwid’s works, Dominika Wojtasińska claims that, so far researchers have addressed this subject only occasionally.¹ The author therefore wants to fill in the gaps in such studies by attempting to integrate the three perspectives relating to the subject of women in the research tradition: the contextual and biographical perspective, the creation of female characters in the poet’s works, and the issue directly linked to the title of the book – the “complete” woman.² In her reflections, the author planned to expand the biographical context and take into account the sociological background of the epoch, in particular by considering the relationship between Norwid’s thought and the social transformation that took place in the 19th century in connection with the emergence of the emancipation movement. She preliminarily announces the originality of Norwid’s thought and its “anticipatory” (a term proposed by Dirk Uffelmann³) character, i.e. anticipating certain concepts in the

¹ D. WOJTASIŃSKA, *O koncepcji kobiety „zupełnej” w pismach Cypriana Norwida*, Toruń 2016, p. 470.

² The author lists the works by: Z. Czajkowski, J. Czarnomorska, Z. Dambek, E. Dąbrowicz, J.W. Gomulicki, K. Milczarek-Pankowska and *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Norwida* (Z. Trojanowiczowa, E. Lijewska, Z. Dambek) – in reference to the biographical context; M. Ingłot, M. Morstin-Górska, M. Wiater; W. Arcimowicz, Z. Falkowski, K. Braun, S. Rzepczyński, A. Siemińska, I. Sławińska, E. Żwirkowska – in reference to female characters from Norwid’s works; K. Cysewski, A. Kuik-Kalinowska, M. Turczyn and M. Wiater – in reference to the concept of the “complete” woman. She actively uses the research tradition, arguing with K. Wyka, A. Dunajski, M. Piechal, K. Cysewski and also with the authors of *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Norwida*.

³ D. UFFELMANN, *Norwid a topos antycypacji*, trans. J. Scholz, “Studia Norwidiana” 17-18(1999-2000), pp. 71-92.

poet's writings that would only be fully revealed at a later time. Wojtasińska, therefore, extends the context of her deliberations to include sociological issues (mainly concerning the problem of women's emancipation) until the present day, referring to the relationship between the poet's thoughts and tradition, and to Norwid's pioneering ("anticipatory") role in relation to later concepts linked to the "women's issue."

The ambition to combine these three perspectives explains the structure of the work, which consists of introductory considerations and four chapters: the first – *Norwidowskie zainteresowanie kwestią kobiecą – tło społeczne* [*Norwid's interest in the women's issue – a social background*]; the second – *Kobieta zupełna – tworzenie wzorca* [*The complete woman – the creation of the model*] (it was divided into three subchapters: *Wejrzenie w pogańską tradycję starożytną* [*A look into the ancient pagan tradition*], *Biblijne inspiracje* [*Biblical inspirations*] and *Norwidowskie kobiety (z) historii* [*Norwid's women (from) history*]); the third – *"Zawsze zemści się na tobie: BRAK!..." – rozczarowująca rzeczywistość* [*"Always – you'll be revenged by: NOT ENOUGH!..." – a disappointing reality*]. The book is closed by the concluding chapter entitled, *"Dopełnienie"* [*Completion*], and supplemented with a bibliography covering Norwid's writings, works on him, as well as other studies on the discussed issues and quoted manuscripts. The 470-page dissertation closes with name and Norwid's writings indexes.

The dominant metaphor of "completeness" was extracted from the poet's letter to Maria Trębicka of 1853 and linked to the metaphor of "completeness," which in Norwid Studies has already been discussed in a significant number of publications (including studies by Jadwiga Puzynina and Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak).⁴ Both metaphors constitute the framework of the book, which methodologically combines the analysis, interpretation and perspective of 19th century Christian feminism. The author's ambition was to reconstruct Norwid's anthropology in the context of his axiology inspired by Christian values and the tradition of European culture, which are exemplified with the poet's views expressed in his literary texts, journalistic texts, letters and biography. The author of the monograph, therefore, set herself the difficult task of embracing many aspects of thoughts expressed by Norwid as a "philosophising poet:" the philosophical, religious, theological, sociological, political, national, aesthetic and literary aspects. In her view, the contexts in which she examines "Norwid's women" – those that were literary creations, those that played an important role in history, and those that surrounded the poet – are not separate, they intertwine and permeate each other. Without the

⁴ *Całość w twórczości Norwida*, eds. J. Puzynina, E. Teleżyńska, Warszawa 1992; G. HALKIEWICZ-SOJAK, *Wobec tajemnicy i prawdy. O Norwidowskich obrazach „całości”*, Toruń 1998.

generalising metaphor of "completeness," it would be difficult to capture them synthetically.

Such an "evolutionary" structure of the work, revealing the dramaturgy of Norwid's thinking about the "women's issue," reflects the methodological assumptions declared in the introduction, including: hermeneutical interpretation, biographical analysis, reconstruction of the threads of social thought, juxtaposition of literature and the comments on the images of 19th century women inferred from discursive statements, and finally – the context of the Bible as a source of Norwid's assessment of the world. At the same time, it allows us to answer five research questions posed in the *Introduction* concerning, consecutively: the relationship between the concept of the "complete woman" and Norwid's anthropology and Christian values as the basis of this anthropology, the relationship between the creation of female characters in the poet's works with the concept of the "complete woman," the relationship between the women recalled by the poet, inspired by cultural tradition and literary creations, and the women from Norwid's life, and finally, the problem of the creative use of tradition and anticipating later concepts related to the "women's issue." The adopted structure of the work also results from treating Norwid's work as a whole which the primary perspective is his concept of the Truth (p. 16). The strategy of looking at the main problem from different perspectives required repeated quoting of the same poet's texts, but each time used to illustrate different problems which generally seems justified. Although, in some places it would have sufficed to refer to earlier quotations (this is primarily the case with Norwid's repeated references to his conviction that there are no "real" women in Polish literature, his view of women as "a link between the private and the public sphere," and Norwid's frequently recurring metaphor of seeing a woman's place at the intersection of the "vertical and horizontal" sphere).

THE MODELS OF "COMPLETENESS"

The starting point in the presentation of how Norwid creates the image of a "complete woman" is the image of women from antiquity. There is a certain problem in this approach which is in principle unsolvable. It is a question about the ontological status of the characters chosen by the author, whether a mythological goddesses, who, as the author notes, are more allegories of certain values (ideas) rather than actual women, characters "from history," whose status is confirmed, not by mythology, but by historical sources – with women from the life of the poet. The common plane of these characters is their textual mediation and

subordination to Norwid's creation of an ideal. Wojtasińska seems to avoid any decisions in this respect presenting ancient figures in juxtaposition with Norwid's assessment of contemporary women. As for the image of women from mythology, she presents the figures of Athena, Nike, Aphrodite, Hestia and Artemis as Norwid's "representatives" of five circles of values: a) wisdom, righteousness and courage, b) innocence and pride, c) love and beauty, d) bravery and victory, and e) gentleness, care and goodness, seeing in them the indicators of the concept of "completeness." The relation between "femininity" and the listed categories is not unambiguous and obvious, the perspective of the idealised model and the concrete reality merge here. Wojtasińska has been aware of the problematic nature of this approach, and in the final chapter she, in a way, justifies Norwid for the absence of a "complete" woman in his literary creations; she states that: "the very fact of creating such a concept and Norwid's addressing the women's issue in his writings is important [...]" (p. 418) Further, she adds: "If Norwid had tried to create one ideal type of feminine nature, he would have contradicted himself, as such a character would be unauthentic and would become a symbolic figure, and yet it is precisely against such efforts that the poet spoke out against." (p. 419)

In turn, the analysis of the creation of the heroines of Norwid's literary works from antiquity, in: *Tyrtej* [*Tyrtaeus*], *Słodycz* [*Sweetness*], *Kleopatra i Cezar* [*Cleopatra and Caesar*] and *Quidam*, brings us to the conclusion that the most important determinant of female "completeness" is the way in which they experience love understood as *agape* (p. 121). Wojtasińska extracts further determinants of possible "completeness" from the texts of the works. In the case of Egeia from *Tyrtej*, it is the ability to fulfil oneself both in the private and public spheres with the completeness of the character created by reciprocated earthly love; in the case of Julia Murcia from *Słodycz* – it is the "silence" of the character heroically accepting suffering and her submission to the love associated with faith; in the case of Cleopatra from the drama *Kleopatra i Cezar* – the destruction of a possible "completeness" caused by the fatality of history, manifested by the tragedy of losing "complete" love for Caesar and accepting the insincere sensual love for Mark Antony; in the case of Zofia from *Quidam* – a possible "completeness" is determined by talent, wisdom and the ability to experience love that is destroyed or abandoned.

The reflection on biblical inspirations in the creation of female characters by Norwid opens with a presentation of Deborah and Judith, to whom Wojtasińska attributes such features as: courage, wisdom, the ability to plan and predict the effects of one's own actions, the ethics of being in harmony with oneself, fidelity to one's beliefs and goals, and the power of character. (p. 126) The analysis of the poems *Do Pani na Korczewie* [*To the Lady in Korczew*] and *Vanitas vanitatis*, and

the poem *Zwolon* allows the author to state that the models of these characters are supposed to determine the behaviour for women who want to liberate themselves from the "salon stigma," (p. 136) as well as they determine models of behaviour concerning the participation of women in the national liberation struggle which polemicalises with Polish Romantic messianism.

The fragment of the book devoted to "Norwid's Biblical Marys:" the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mary – Martha and Lazarus's sister, Mary the Prophet, Mary of James and Mary Salome – the Virgin Mary's sister, leads Wojtasińska to the important conclusion that Norwid's concept of the "complete woman" is not synonymous with the ideal, rather "the femininity that Norwid expects also presupposes an imperfection [...]. After all, the whole [...] is always incomplete, and the most important thing is just to be on the way, to slowly approach the ideal." (p. 145) The next part of the book, concerning the two biblical sisters, Mary and Martha of Bethany, brings considerations on the relationship between the reflective nature of the former and the practical attitude of the latter which are complimentary and form a whole. However, for Norwid, Martha is the patron of the earthly dimension of human life and is used in the poet's work, for example, in the novella *Cywilizacja* [*Civilisation*] to critically assess the contemporary time with its veneration of the earthly life. Wojtasińska concludes her reflections on the biblical women in Norwid's works with the statement that the poet invokes them "to show the value of trying to be faithful to Beauty, Goodness and Truth" (p. 172), and "Norwid attaches the symbolic meanings of their names, which are established in the cultural tradition, to his ethical, anthropological, social, historiographic and aesthetic considerations." The chapter on "creating the model" closes with a presentation of three female figures "from history:" Wanda, Jadwiga and Joanna d'Arc, who – here the author quotes Mieczysław Inglot's opinion – are closest to the realisation of the ideal of the "complete woman" through the fact that they fit into the context of Christian values, and they choose a sacrificial attitude; in order to co-create history, they fail in the personal sphere.

WOMAN AND ABSENCE

The second part of the dissertation is concerned with the confrontation of the created model of the ideal "complete" woman with the contemporary world (in Norwid's time) regarding changes taking place in the social situation of 19th century women. The main context constitutes discussions on everyday life, customs, views on the role of women in the family, in marriage, the problem of women's

education and upbringing, professional matters, participation in civil and political life, and the presence of women in the cultural sphere of that time. Presenting the poet's "first experiences" in poems from 1839-1849, the author considers Norwid's biographical context and evokes disappointments associated with the poet's feelings for Brygida Dybowska, Kamila Lemańska and Maria Kalergis. Norwid's early writings (the poem *Mój ostatni sonnet* [*My Last Sonnet*], *Marmur-biały* [*White Marble*], the fantasy *Marzenie* [*Dream*], the poem *Wesele* [*The Wedding*]) reveal the poet's early conviction of the dissonance between the ideal woman and modern femininity. Only the poem *Do wieśniaczki* [*To the Peasant Woman*] offers a positive creation idealising the image of a woman who is "quiet, living in harmony with her inner self." (p. 196) Analysing Norwid's later works, *Pieśni społecznej cztery stron* [*The Four Pages of a Social Song*] and *Niewola* [*Enslavement*], the author emphasises that Norwid discerns the dissonance between the ideal of marriage as a means to achieve perfection and contemporary women's understanding of marriage as a goal to achieve a desired social position, which makes a woman "a caricature and a human being deprived of inner freedom." (p. 210) Wojtasińska recognises that Norwid's view of the role of women in society was fully formulated in his works from the 1850s; she distinguishes three groups of texts: the first – related to reflection on love, interpersonal relations, femininity and family relationships; the second – referring to personal experiences; and the third – concerning women's artistic work.

A contextual analysis of the drama *Noc tysięczna druga* [*One Thousand and Two Nights*] brings reflections on the impossibility of realising ideal love in the 19th century mainly due to the rift between the desire to meet expectations and the impossibility of their realisation. In the course of the argument, the author makes an apt and important statement, according to Norwid, "the actual emancipation [of women] is achieved not by blindly following popular slogans, but by collecting experiences and thus wisdom that will direct man towards his real vocation and teach him self-awareness." (p. 258) That is why Wojtasińska uses the biographical story of Norwid's love for Maria Kalergis and his relationship with Maria Trębicka as the context for the analysis of the drama. This context convincingly links the poet's output with his biography and shows how his own life experiences inspired his literary ideas and shaped his views especially those concerning anthropology and society. Similarly, the author analyses the poem *Szczesna*. Wojtasińska believes its creation was inspired by Norwid's affection for Kamila Lemańska and by a Romantic digressive poem modelled on Słowacki's *Beniowski*; although she sees clear differences from Słowacki's work, mainly in the implementation of this form. Norwid's digression is, as she writes, one-sided and concerns a lack of realisation of the "complete" woman in the contemporary

world. Moreover, Wojtasińska emphasises the personal invocation of the work addressed to Maria Trębicka. Wojtasińska continues this interpretation of Norwid's works in the context of biography in the section devoted to the character Zofia from *Quidam*, who was created based on another woman "from the poet's life," Jadwiga Łuszczewska (Deotyma), the addressee of several of his poems. She writes that "both of these characters, in spite of their dreams of making their life fulfilled through art, have squandered their talent, they could not direct it properly." (p. 293) With regard to this approach to the relation between Zofia and Deotyma, the study contains reflections on Norwid's views on women's education and paid work. Against the backdrop of these reflections there also emerges a picture of the 19th century discussions on the issues of emancipation, of which the most important is attributed by Wojtasińska to Entuzjastki [the Enthusiasts] and Narcyza Żmichowska.

Also, in the analysis of Norwid's "high" comedies: [*Hrabina Palmiry*] [*Countesses of Palmyra*], *Aktor* [*Actor*], *Za kulisami* [*Backstage*] and *Pierścień Wielkiej Damy* [*The Noble Lady's Ring*], the author links the interpretation of these works with the biographical context and social thought of the era, and, in particular, with the views of Herbert Spencer. She rightly notes that the convergence of some of Norwid's views with positivist thought is rather due to the general worldviews in the second half of the 19th century, but for Norwid the Bible and Christian tradition were more important. Therefore, the basis of his social concepts should be sought there. This part of the book shows "great ladies" portrayed in the dramas, (probably) modelled after the women from the poet's circle, above all Maria Kalergis, Joanna Kuczyńska, Maria Czartoryska, Delfina Potocka and others. Wojtasińska notices in their literary creations, Norwid stigmatised the dismissive attitude towards artists, not always selfless philanthropy, the lack of authenticity of feelings, and the inability to have a sincere dialogue with others. According to Wojtasińska, these are the creations of "disappointing" contemporary women whose "artificiality and inner emptiness is offensive." (p. 338)

In the part of the book concerning the last decade of Norwid's life, the author continues a parallel presentation of his life and work linking the creation of the heroine of the poem *Assunta* to Zofia Węgierska, whom she presents as a person close to Norwid's ideal of "completeness" because, by combining intellect with practicality, she contradicted the salon lady type. Her death inspired Norwid to write the poem *Na zgon Poezji* [*On the Death of Poetry*] and to create the character of Assunta. The author reads these works as texts about the loss of the beloved. In her interpretation of the poem about the silent granddaughter of the gardener there appears an interesting and convincing proposal to read the values she represents through the prism of the colours the poet evoked in her presenta-

tion. According to Wojtasińska, the poet inscribes the colours into the horizontal and vertical axiology, i.e. into the metaphoricity that in Norwid's case forms the whole, complete human existence. Thus, Norwid associates the colour blue with sublimity, gold with holiness and beauty and white with spirituality, perfection, purity and goodness – he assigns these colours to the symbolism of the verticality of existence; Norwid links the colour red with indirect meaning, associating it with the category of love, including sensual and erotic love; finally, Norwid associates the colour green, which does not appear in Assunta's description but characterises her surroundings, with senses related to the world of nature, to life, maturity and maturation, also to hope. Wojtasińska also stresses the connection of the "colour" metaphor with the established cultural tradition, above all with Marian representations. However, in her opinion, Assunta is not a successful attempt at an artistic creation of the "complete" woman due to the fact this creation lacks some form of activity in everyday life. The subsequent works discussed in the book *Miłość czysta u kąpieli morskich* [*Pure-Love at Sea Baths*] and *Stygmata* [*The Stigma*], illustrate Norwid's conviction that it is impossible for the ideal of the "complete" woman to exist, as her "whole" "is suppressed by social conventions, a distortion of the idea of love and Christian marriage, selfishness, a lack of interest in the other person, denying women the right to be independent individuals who realise the fullness of their dispositions" (p. 383). In her interpretation of these works, Wojtasińska makes an interesting contextual use of the views of Emmanuel Lévinas and Józef Tischner, concluding that femininity in Norwid's work is a creation of the "other;" on this approach, a woman, while complementing a man, is his equal.

EMANCIPATION AND CHRISTIAN FEMINISM. ANTICIPATIONS

While considering the relation of Norwid's concept of the "complete" woman with 19th century conceptions of the Catholic Church (he recalls, inter alia, the papal encyclicals of Gregory XVI, Pius IX and Leo XIII as well as the views of the Resurrectionists), Wojtasińska rather points out that the poet's way of thinking ("surprisingly" – as she writes) deviates from the position of the Church, stems more from an active reading of the Bible and is close to what appeared in 20th century Christian feminism, and above all in the teaching of John Paul II in the conceptions of Jacques Maritain and Edith Stein. This is an interesting part of the

book that could be developed into a separate study, it completes and, in a way, summarises the previous discussions.

In the last chapter, entitled in Norwid's style – *Dopełnienie* [*Completion*], Wojtasińska summarises her reflections, emphasising once again the importance of the poet's creation of the concept of the "complete" woman, the concept that anticipates "important and current questions." One of the conclusions is "Norwid's work is largely intellectual and philosophical in nature, so it is difficult to find (and expect from it) themes that address the problem of sensuality, eroticism, the specific relationship between a woman and a man, the 'feminine' nature – the subject matter strongly related to human sexuality in its biological aspect." (p. 422) In principle, we should agree with that if we take into account the specificity of the 19th century discourse in Norwid's time. However, the contemporary methodology provides tools that make it possible to extract from the text, often contrary to the so-called author's intention, the "secret" content. For example, I believe that an analysis of bodily discourse or psychoanalysis would also help reveal in Norwid's texts "the problem of sensuality and eroticism." The possibility of an "intimate" reading of Norwid was indicated by Danuta Zamącińska in her work *Słynne-nieznane. Wiersze późne Mickiewicza, Słowackiego, Norwida* (Lublin 1985), a proposal to read Norwid from an erotic prospective was presented by Dariusz Seweryn in his article "*Śpiąc z Epopeją.*" *O możliwości badania wyobraźni erotycznej Norwida* (in the book *Jak czytać Norwida? Postawy badawcze, metody, weryfikacje*, eds. B. Kuczera-Chachulska, J. Trzcionka, Warszawa 2008, pp. 145-165).

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The conclusion of the considerations presented in Dominika Wojtasińska's book on the "completeness" of women can be considered a statement from the final chapter: "'Completeness' of a woman is therefore a combination of Beauty, Goodness and Truth, and a 'whole' woman is a figure worthy of the name 'eternal-man' – a person close to the ideal, unique and valuable, guided by Christian values in life," (p. 421) and with regard to the place of women in the social space: "He [Norwid] was in favour of the activity undertaken by the representatives of the fair sex in the public and private sphere, depending on their will and aptitude. He valued their maternal vocation, but did not limit women to that. [...] is in favour of such emancipation that teaches self-awareness and conduct according to one's own will, talents and personality traits, with no restrictions on activities typical of women and men. None of the social functions, even those hitherto reserved for men, should be seen as inappropriate for women – they will perhaps perform them differently, which is not to say worse." (p. 406)

Norwid, as presented in the monograph, emerges as an idiomatic poet, rooted in tradition, arguing with Romanticism and his time, and open to modernity to which he wants to give its own shape, concerned about the future, seeking the criteria for subjugating life in the name of the Truth (and searching for the Truth itself). It seems particularly important to use in the book the “anticipatory” topos, not only in relation to Christian feminism, but also to changes relating to human co-existence, all “otherness,” also – this may be what the author will develop in the future – to the feminist movements of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Incidentally, Wojtasińska’s book reveals the semantico-stylistic problem in the Polish language related to the lexeme which refers to women. Apart from the basic term “kobieta” [woman], the author interchangeably uses, though not always accurately, the lexemes: “panie” [ladies], “damy” [ladies], “niewiasty” [women], “przedstawicielki płci pięknej” [representatives of the fair sex], “postaci żeńskie” [female characters], sometimes to indicate the context of an utterance, but most frequently to avoid stylistic repetitions.

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BETWEEN “COMPLETENESS” AND “ABSENCE”

S u m m a r y

The article presents a review of Dominika Wojtasińska’s book *O koncepcji kobiety “zupelnej” w pismach Cypriana Norwida* [On the Concept of a “Complete” Woman in the Writings by Cyprian Norwid]. The book is an attempt at capturing Norwid’s view of the essence, place

and role of women in the context of the transformation of the 19th-century society. In her reflections, the author refers to the following contexts: biographical, sociological and religious. She also refers to 20th-century Christian feminism and the philosophy of dialogue represented by Emmanuel Lévinas and Józef Tischner. The researcher is searching for the models of the female “completeness” in the ancient and biblical tradition and in the medieval historical tradition. In her book, the author presents Norwid as a poet who anticipates the 20th-century emancipatory movements and Christian feminist concepts.

Key words: Romanticism; Norwid; philosophy of dialogue; feminism; anticipatory thought.

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