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UBI DEFUIT ORBIS... – AROUND THE MOTTO FOR “SPARTAKUS”¹

The question of establishing the source of the Latin quotation *ubi defuit orbis*, which serves as the motto to the poem “Spartakus,” has proven highly problematic for editors and scholars of Cyprian Norwid. The note by Roman Zrębowski – which accompanied the first printing of the poem in *Słowo Polskie* in 1907² – does not carry any information about the motto. Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki, on the other hand, provides in his commentary several possible translations of the motto, but was also unable to ascertain its origin.³ The Latin words *ubi defuit orbis* can be translated as “where the world ends” or “where the earth runs out.” In Gomulicki’s interpretation, this quotation refers to both the tragic situation of the eponymous gladiator and the bloodthirsty crowd. The gladiator would be unable to find a place for himself outside of the Roman arena, while the crowd would not be capable of experiencing any emotions outside the auditorium.⁴

This article attempts to trace the origin of this Latin motto, which was found in an epigram by a French author of comedies and traveller Jean-François Regnard. Born in 1655 in Paris to a wealthy merchant family, he received classical education and manifested a poetic talent already in his youth.⁵ Regnard became an acknowl-

¹ We wish to thank Professor Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak, who addressed the question of the Latin motto to “Spartakus” during a doctoral seminar, as well as Izabela Piskorska and Bartłomiej Łuczak, who participated in discussion. When Norwid’s collected works were being edited, a hint about Regnard’s inscription on the rock was provided by Professor Stefan Sawicki.

² R. ZRĘBOWICZ, “Z teki pośmiertnej Cypryana Norwida,” *Słowo Polskie* 12 (1907), no. 309, pages not numbered.

³ C. NORWID, *Wiersze. Dodatek krytyczny*, ed. J.W. Gomulicki, Warszawa 1966, p. 529.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ G. DECLERCQ, “Regnard,” [entry in:] J.-P. DE BEAUMARCHAIS, D. COUTY, A. REY, *Dictionnaire des littératures de langue française*, vol. 3, Paris 1984, p. 1883.

edged comedy writer and the author of plays such as *Le Joueur* and *Le Légataire universel*.⁶ He was considered to be the successor of Molière, and Voltaire himself argued that those who do not value Regnard are not worthy to admire Molière.⁷

However, before he became an acknowledged playwright, he travelled extensively.⁸ He set out on his first voyage to Italy already in 1674, perhaps later heading for Istanbul.⁹ His second voyage ended tragically as he was captured by Barbary pirates in October 1678 and sold as a slave in Algiers. It was only in May next year that he was bought out and could return to France.¹⁰ In April 1681, he embarked on a journey to the northern countries. Travelling across the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, he reached Sweden, where he was convinced by King Charles XI to visit Lapland.¹¹ He set out to head there with two fellow French travellers: Claude de Fercourt and Nicolas de Coberon.¹² The journey was recorded in the posthumously published diary kept by Regnard, titled *Voyage de Laponie*.¹³ Their journey ended at the top of a mountain, from where they could see the North Cape. They thought that no one has ever reached this place and concluded that this must be the end of the world and thus the end of their journey. They named the mountain Metavara. As proof, they made a Latin inscription on a rock, signed “de Fercourt, de Corberon, Regnard. Anno 1681, die 22 Augusti.” Regnard wrote in his journal that most probably no one will ever see it apart from bears. The inscription has the form of the following epigram:

Gallia nos genuit, vidit nos Africa, Gangem
Hausimus, Europamque oculis lustravimus omnem:
Casibus et variis acti terraque marique,
Hic tandem stetimus, nobis ubi defuit orbis.

The quatrain is composed using dactylic hexameter – the traditional epic metre of ancient poetry – and can be translated as follows:

⁶ J. HEISTEIN, *Historia literatury francuskiej od początków do czasów najnowszych*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1997, p. 196.

⁷ G. DECLERCQ, “Regnard,” p. 1883.

⁸ For more information on Regnard’s travels see: M. MATWIEJCZUK, “Jean-François Regnard – podróżnik nieznan?” *Czasy nowożytne* 2015, no. 28, pp. 73-93.

⁹ G. DECLERCQ, “Regnard,” p. 1884.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² M. MATWIEJCZUK, “Jean-François Regnard,” p. 83.

¹³ Regnard’s account and inscription after: *Théâtre de Regnard suivi de ses Voyages en Laponie, en Pologne, etc. et de la Provençale*, Paris 1871, p. 574.

The Gaul bred us, Africa saw us. From the River Ganges
We drank. We surveyed the entire Europe with our eyes.
Driven by many adventures on land and sea
We finally stood here, where the world ended for us.¹⁴

The poem’s hexameter follows classical principles from the golden age of Latin poetry (i.e. the reign of Caesar Augustus) since none of its lines are *versus spondiaci* (which feature a spondee instead of a dactyl in the fifth foot), which were carefully avoided at the time, while the only elisions occur before the caesura. In this epigram Regnard probably alludes to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*¹⁵, specifically to the wandering of the goddess Ceres, who sought her kidnapped daughter:

Quas dea per terras et quas erraverit undas,
dicere longa mora est; quaerenti defuit orbis

What lands, what seas the Goddess wander’d o’er,
Were long to tell; for there remain’d no more.¹⁶

The words “defuit orbis” invoke the same image of journeying to the end of the world. Just like Ceres, who wandered through lands and seas (“per terras et undas”) yet could not find Proserpine, the French travellers were “driven through land and sea” (“acti terraque marique”), finally reaching a place they deemed to be the end of the world, where they needed to stop (“Hic tandem stetimus, nobis ubi defuit orbis”).

Regnard’s epigram survived and has been preserved in European culture probably because he recorded it in his journal. However, it remains uncertain whether Norwid knew *Voyage de Laponie*. This makes it difficult to ascertain where the Polish poet could encounter the words “ubi defuit orbis.” Regnard’s quatrain was certainly familiar to Ignacy Krasicki, who quoted it in the work *O rymotwórstwie i rymotwórcach* in a chapter devoted to French poets.¹⁷ Norwid valued Krasicki’s works, especially his fairy tales and satires, eagerly drawing on him and taking up the subject of social criticism. Norwid would often invoke works by Krasicki in

¹⁴ English translation was done by the translator of the article after the Polish rendition by Piotr Osieński.

¹⁵ The relationship between Norwid’s motto and the Ovid’s couplet was suggested by: W. WEINTRAUB, “Norwid – Puszkina. ‘Spartakus’ i strofa ‘Oniegina,’” [in:] IDEM, *Od Reja do Boya*, Warszawa 1977, p. 369.

¹⁶ OVID, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al., The Internet Classics Archive. Online: <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.5.fifth.html> (accessed 24 January 2021).

¹⁷ I. KRASICKI, *O rymotwórstwie i rymotwórcach*, ed. E. Zielaskowska, Poznań 2017, pp. 367-368.

mottoes to his own works.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is difficult to say whether this is what happened in the present case. It seems more probable that the author of “Spartakus” could encounter it in French literature, namely in the novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo, who recalls the exact same Latin words in the context of Claude Frollo and his hunger for knowledge:

As Claude Frollo had passed through nearly the entire circle of human learning – positive, exterior, and permissible – since his youth, he was obliged, unless he came to a halt, *ubi defuit orbis*, to proceed further and seek other aliments for the insatiable activity of his intelligence. The antique symbol of the serpent biting its tail is, above all, applicable to science. It would appear that Claude Frollo had experienced this. Many grave persons affirm that, after having exhausted the *fas* of human learning, he had dared to penetrate into the *nefas*. He had, they said, tasted in succession all the apples of the tree of knowledge, and, whether from hunger or disgust, had ended by tasting the forbidden fruit.¹⁹

Hugo incorporated the quotation from Regnard’s epigram into an image of transcending the boundaries of knowledge, which entails leaving the sphere of the permissible, the decent, and the just (a sphere denoted by the Latin term “*fas*”). The end of the world could thus stand for a metaphorical end of morality (“*nefas*”). Perhaps, then, this image of reaching the limit and crossing the boundary did make a considerable impression on Norwid. Conceivably, while reading the above passage the poet paid particular attention to the phrase *ubi defuit orbis*, but did not notice that it has another origin due to the abundance of Latin words and sentence fragments that appear in the description of Claude Frollo. Thus, it seems all the more probable that Norwid remembered the said quotation from Hugo and made it the motto of his own poem, especially since a certain analogy can be observed with regard to the use of these words. Both the French and the Polish writers speak of the similar experience of crossing a moral boundary.

In Norwid’s poem, the gladiators’ arena symbolizes a place where the limit is reached. The eponymous protagonist thus found himself at the world’s end – inside an arena that constitutes the site of distorting concepts and marks the fall of Roman civilization. Norwid would regard nonsensical bloodshed as an indicator of squandering the ideals of antiquity and its culture. In this sense, the said arena is a place where this culture has actually reached its end.

¹⁸ P. ABRISZEWSKA, “Norwidowskie pomniki literatury,” *Colloquia Litteraria* 2016, no. 1, p. 213, note 10.

¹⁹ V. HUGO, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, trans. I.F. Hapgood, Project Gutenberg. Online: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2610/2610-h/2610-h.htm> (accessed 24 January 2021).

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S u m m a r y

This article concerns the sources of the quotation *ubi defuit orbis*, which Cyprian Norwid used as a motto to his poem “Spartakus.” The phrase has been identified as part of an inscription carved in stone by Jean-François Regnard, a French traveller and comedy writer, and his companions during their journey through Sápmi (Lapland). Most probably, thanks to Regnard’s *Voyage de Laponie*, Norwid’s epigram became well-known in European culture. It was quoted by Ignacy Krasicki in the treatise *O rymotwórstwie i rymotwórcach*, and by Victor Hugo in the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. It seems likely that Norwid drew this phrase from the latter. The article further discusses these sources and the significance of the motto *ubi defuit orbis* for the interpretation of Norwid’s poem.

Keywords: Cyprian Norwid; Jean-François Regnard; *ubi defuit orbis*; Victor Hugo; Spartacus.