

Jan Zieliński – WHEN TWO GIANTS COME CLOSE:
NORWID AND DOSTOEVSKYDOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18290/sn.2020.38-15en>

The following review of the book *Norwid – Dostojewski. Zbliżenia i rekonstrukcje* by Evangelina Skalińska¹ is bound to be personal, but I also hope that it shall be objective. I have known the author since 2007, since I began teaching at the Faculty of Humanities at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, first as an exceptional student following an accelerated learning programme, notable for her original and unexpected contribution to our reading of *Malte*, then as the author of a very good MA thesis in 2008 (*„Assunta” Cypriana Norwida jako poemat realistyczny*), written under the supervision of Professor Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska, which I reviewed and which includes findings from my then as yet unpublished book *Obraz lagodnej śmierci. (Norwid – Rafael – Maratti i „Śmierć świętego Józefa”)*. In 2012 I requested a copy of the doctoral dissertation by Evangelina Skalińska, also written under the supervision of Professor Kuczera-Chachulska and defended in 2012 at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, following which she was employed as an adjunct at the Faculty of Humanities. I mention these connections in order to account for my personal perspective on her book about Norwid and Dostoevsky, based on her dissertation, which I also reviewed alongside Professor Piotr Mitzner. However, this perspective should not interfere – as I am convinced – with the task of carrying out an objective assessment of the book in question.

Comparing Norwid and Dostoevsky seems to be the perfect topic for scholars of Slavic literatures, at least because they were born and died the same year. Still, this topic is rarely taken up, probably due to obvious divergences stemming from their preference for different literary forms, Dostoevsky's well-known aversion to Poles and Catholicism, the relatively marginal role played by Russian themes in Norwid's life and work (I consciously speak of stereotypes here in order to lend these divergences greater sharpness). On this background it becomes possible to better note the ambition of the young scholar, who decided to explore this topic

¹ E. SKALIŃSKA, *Norwid – Dostojewski. Zbliżenia i rekonstrukcje*, Warszawa 2014. 484 pp. Published by Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego as volume 10 in the series *Problemy Romantyzmu*.

due to her upbringing in two cultures – Polish and Russian – and her balanced view of sometimes weighty issues.

The study is divided into three parts. The first discusses the parallel beginnings of the two writers' careers: their tendentiousness, interest in "minor protagonists," as well as polemics with classicism and Romanticism. Skalińska juxtaposes Norwid's juvenilia with early prose works by Dostoevsky (written before 1846), but what lends greater dynamic to the parallels she draws is the discussion of Norwid's prose piece titled *Łaskawy opiekun* [*Gracious Protector*] in the context of Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*.

The second and major part of the study is comprised of eight "close-ups" that investigate the following areas: iconicity, polyphony, aestheticism, "thinking with the Bible," historiosophy, visions of civilization and modernity, and finally the problem of evil confronted with the question of irony. There is no need to explore the details of these topics; I would prefer to focus on one fundamental issue, which – *pars pro toto* – constitutes in my view the greatest merit of the book by Evangelina Skalińska. Seeking to find a common denominator, or a point of convergence where Norwid and Dostoevsky could meet despite all differences, she has reached out to the patristic tradition, to Christian thinkers from before the East-West Schism. In the case of Norwid she begins with his readings of works by Clement of Alexandria (as suggested earlier by Rev. Antoni Dunajski), tracing echoes of his texts in the poet's aesthetic reflections from *Promethidion* and *Fortepian Szopena* [*Chopin's Grand Piano*]. In the case of Dostoevsky, on the other hand, necessary material is provided by the novel *The Idiot*, which she analyses (as is her specialty) from the angle of ekphrasis, specifically in relation to works such as Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* and the painting that Myshkin offers to paint for Adelaída. Paradoxically, Skalińska traces the aesthetic fundamentals of this novel in Aristotle's *Poetics*, whose Russian translation was published in 1854. However, a broader context opens here thanks to works by early Church Fathers, with whom Dostoevsky was familiar since they are recognized by the Orthodox Church.

The final part of the book, which offers a synthesis of its themes, constitutes a daring comparative analysis of two texts whose plot pattern can be summarized as follows: "A middle-aged man marries an orphan, younger than him, who soon dies. Her death proves a tragedy to the protagonist, who attempts to come to terms with this event and understand it" (p. 424) These are: Norwid's *Assunta* and Dostoevsky's "A Gentle Creature." An important role is played in this analysis by ekphrastic issues, which are addressed independently and in a highly original manner.

It seems that special meaning can be attached to the frequent use of the noun "zbliżenie" [approximation] in chapter titles. It is not as static as "zestawienie"

[juxtaposition], not as dynamic as “zderzenie” [clash], and not as optical as “przybliżenie” [“close-up”]. The word “zbliżenie” suggests closeness or even intimacy. Charles Du Bos, a French literary critic popular in the interwar period, would arrange his articles in chronological volumes titled *Approximations* and given subsequent numbers. However, these were merely “close-ups,” despite the affectionate Latin dedication to his wife as well as the continuous attempts to mediate between writers and readers. Evangelina Skalińska approaches the texts and authors she analyses with affection, bringing them together and, more broadly, bringing together two cultures: Russian and Polish. Although her project may seem to have humbler scope, it in fact significantly expands our knowledge.

As should be mentioned, the book by Evangelina Skalińska constitutes an open-ended project. She sketches a clear research perspective and exemplifies it, basing on various large-scale aspects. Still, these aspects do not exhaust the larger palette of possible cross-sections, while the texts themselves, after being subjected to close analysis, do not limit the number of possible points of convergence. Attentive readers should have no doubts that what the author is sharing with us here is merely the tip of the iceberg, and that this book will be followed by others, revealing new aspects and analysing other works. This is heralded already at the point of departure, where the comparison of the “beginnings” and “adolescence” of both writers raises the hope that one day we may expect a comparison of “late Norwid” with “late Dostoevsky.” I do not wish to criticize the author for not having included a chapter on this in the reviewed book – certainly, there are subjects one can tackle only after maturing as a scholar. The author herself is aware of this and approaches the matter with heart-warming humility and diligence. It is not accidental that the last sentence of her synthesis is: “It seems that the identification of cultural differences discussed in the main body of this study (especially in parts devoted to history, civilization, and the reception of the Bible) does not exhaust the analysed subject and naturally requires further research” (p. 468).

Let us consider the methodology adopted in the book *Norwid – Dostojewski. Zbliżenia i rekonstrukcje* on the basis of the subsection where the author juxtaposes two “London” texts: the poem *Larwa* [*Larva*] by Norwid, and a passage from Dostoevsky’s *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. This seems like a risky venture, just as any comparison of poetry and prose, especially by different authors, even if they were contemporaries. It remains problematic in such cases whether to trace similarities in terms of structure or themes. The context seems favourable: both writers visited London about the same time (Norwid arrived there in 1854, while Dostoevsky – in 1862), and both would witness the world of the London poor. The protocol of divergences, however, is long. Norwid speaks of a nagging monster he met on the slippery cobbles under a dense “sublunary”

fog. The protagonist of “Larwa” is a figure hiding in darkness and hence ambiguous – perhaps saintly, perhaps fallen – yet certainly evoking compassion and terror. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, describes a night meeting with a crowd of poor people, especially a throng of prostitutes, including ones that would offer the charms of their underage daughters. Skalińska considers the similarities and differences between the two texts, ultimately proposing a common denominator that is neither structural nor strictly thematic. She draws attention to Norwid’s risky comparison (in the third stanza) between the eponymous larva and a Bible book reeling in the mud, comparing this image with Dostoevsky’s description of a French woman who is handing out religious leaflets in the London crowd. God’s Word in the mud. This, however, is not the end. Instead of forcibly tracing similarities, the author emphasizes differences, arguing that Dostoevsky would interpret the leaflets as an instance of Catholic propaganda. She then immediately suggests an analogous scene from Norwid’s life, which is related, without commentary, in the reportage *Podróż po wystawie powszechnej [Journey through International Exhibition]*: “The poet received a gift from representatives of the evangelical church: a piece of paper whose devout content matches the leaflet that wound up in Dostoevsky’s hands. However, in Norwid’s essay this matter is simply acknowledged and does not require any commentary” (p. 362). At the same time, however, Skalińska provides the location of this description in volume six of Gomulicki’s edition of Norwid’s writings, as if teasing the readers to consult the text and compare them on their own. In Dostoevsky it was “a small, square piece of paper with the question ‘Crois-tu cela?’ on one side and an answer in French on the other: ‘I am resurrection and eternal life’ etc., along with several familiar sentences” (p. 362). In Norwid we read: “[...] a citizen sitting at the window offers me a small book with the following words printed on a pink cover, written in the language that I am now using to write this letter: ‘If you place your faith in Lord Jesus Christ, you and your home shall be saved’. I turn the page [...]” Thus, similarities extend further since both texts describe the gesture of flipping a piece of paper containing words about putting one’s faith in Christ. The author stops when she almost reaches the conclusion, leaving the readers to complete it themselves. There is something endearingly elegant in this kind of narration: not to impose anything, but to guide and help one to wake up.

In his review of the Evangelina Skalińska’s dissertation, Piotr Mitzner argues that it is “intriguing and compelling,” adding that her method of studying the history of literature is deeply inspiring. I have to admit to also being a living example of the beneficial influence of the younger scholar. Reading her book has inspired me to write a study about surprising similarities (not only typological ones but also genetic and intertextual) between one novel by Dostoevsky and one comedy

by Norwid.² Still, it is not a borrowing since Skalińska does not compare these two specific works.

Norwid – Dostojewski. Zbliżenia i rekonstrukcje is a book that we certainly needed since it fills an important gap and sets the horizon for further comparative research of works by these two writers, who are so different and yet so close.

S u m m a r y

A personal review of the book version of Ewangelina Skalińska's doctoral thesis devoted to Norwid and Dostoevsky. It discusses the threefold composition of the dissertation and underlines the dashing comparative analysis of Norwid's *Assunta* and Dostoevsky's *A Gentle Creature*. The open character of the research project is stressed. The reviewer discusses in detail another parallel, between two London texts: Norwid's *The Larva* and Dostoevsky's *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. In conclusion there is a passage on the inspiring role of Skalińska's book, which fills an important gap and draws a horizon for the future comparative research.

Keywords: comparative research; Dostoevsky; a literary parallel; Nineteenth Century; Norwid.

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² Paper delivered at the conference *Norwid wobec Rosji* (Colloquia Norwidiana XV) in Kazimierz Dolny on 19 May 2017.