

ŁUKASZ NIEWCZAS

NORWID'S VISUAL METAPHORS ON THE EXAMPLE OF "FORTEPIAN SZOPENA" ("CHOPIN'S PIANOFORTE")

Norwid's masterpiece—"Chopin's Pianoforte" could be—in my opinion—an important argument in the long debate on whether direct qualities are evoked in a work of literature more by metaphorical means or without them.¹ "Chopin's Pianoforte" is a poem, in which a pictorial element plays a very important role. However, it is achieved mostly through means different than metaphorical ones. Clearly concrete elements are particularly dominant in the fragment of visionary and parabolic character. In the fourth stanza this is a symbolic picture of the classic Virtue realized through direct use of language.² In the seventh stanza this is a parabolic representation of "an ear of corn". However, the most intensive visuality can be found in the final part of the poem, recalling the picture of events in Warsaw connected with the final throwing of the eponymous pianoforte onto cobble-stones.

¹ This debate was summarized by Henryk Markiewicz: *Wymiary dzieła literackiego*. Kraków-Wrocław 1984, s 26, 28, 30.

² It seems that this personification, as well as others used in this text are not created through metaphorical techniques of displacement of meanings. It is more probable that we are dealing here with the arbitrary assignation of certain human qualities to given ideas/objects/phenomena, particularly the ability to speak. On differentiation of metaphor from personification see Maria Grzędzińska. *Małe i wielkie metafory*, „Pamiętnik Literacki”1971 (4); Adam Karpiński. *Metaforyka staropolskiej poezji ziemiańskiej*, in *Studia o metaforze I*, ed. by E. Sarnowska-Temeriusz. Wrocław 1980, 105.

From this perspective the visuality generated by the text's metaphors assumes a very different shape. Metaphors project here a specific type of visuality which has very little in common with the poetics of the symbolic visions mentioned before. Who knows, however, if Norwid's metaphors, despite their weak poetic expression, do not constitute such a version of a picture, which is more typical for Norwid's poetry, more closely connected with his poetic idiom. Even more so because the breath-taking visionary fragments of "Chopin's Pianoforte", despite their poetic mastery and the characteristic style of Norwid, are written in a way characteristic for the Romantic poetic, with its prophetic visions, so strong in the poetry of Mickiewicz, Słowacki or Krasicki,

These statements have far reaching conclusions not supported by any analysis. Let us, therefore, look closely at the type of visuality evoked by metaphors in "Chopin's Pianoforte".

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The anaphora "I see you still" beginning the first three stanzas of the poem, seemingly introduces a reader into a concrete situation: it recalls Norwid's visit to Chopin just before the composer's death. The concrete aspect, however, is soon transformed in a symbolic situation. The first suggestion of it is the tension created by the grammatical singular form 'I' [can see you still] with the plural "in those days penultimate". Unlike in "Czarne kwiaty" ("Black Flowers"), where the metaphysical content is revealed through the cracks of the almost documentary report about an individual even, the concrete nature of "I can see you still" in "Chopin's Pianoforte" moves straight away into the sphere of generalization, mythical synthesis of "those days penultimate".

The whole phrase: "those days penultimate, you/living threadbare" seems to be semantically simple, and that is why, maybe, when we read it we do not have an impression of being exposed to a complex metaphor. Its clarity is already lost at the level of the organization of verses: the metaphor is cut into two parts. If we look at this

metaphor from the visual perspective, it seems to be non-visual, it does not evoke any direct ocular aspects.

This metaphor is barely visible under many layers of meaning. However, despite certain conventional aspects, it should not be treated as semantically redundant. It is essential in the semantic meaning of the whole expression. It subtly moves in the direction of cultural associations, being—maybe—a distant allusion to the myth of Parkas. This visual motif is important in Norwid's poetry, and is manifested in such poems as "Moja piosnka [I]" ("My Song [I]") or in [Ty mnie do pieśni pokornej nie wołaj] ([Do not call me to this humble folk song]).

While characterizing the metaphorical picture in the first stanza of "Chopin's Pianoforte" it is impossible to miss two parallel similes.

I see you still in those days penultimate, you/Living threadbare, yet opaque,/Days, full—like Myth,/Dawn—pale like death.³

The conjunction 'like' clearly identifies them as similes. It is less obvious, to a reader, that these similes are subservient to the metaphor—they define two epithets, tied to "penultimate days": "full" and "pale". The traditional function of the epithet, as defined by ancient rhetoric, was to add plasticity to the presented reality. Norwid, however, used them very differently: he limited the concrete aspect and strengthened the symbolic one. Certainly, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the epithets from the first stanza of the poem do not constitute any visuality, but this is a very specific visuality, challenging the concrete aspect of the picture. This is the result of the semantic abstractness and lack of independence (the case of "full"), and something which may be called the specific colourlessness of a word (the case of "pale"). The first example seems to be especially crucial: after all, the expression "full days» forces further questions: full in what sense?, full of what? The comparison with a myth does not make the picture more concrete. On the contrary, it makes it even more intellectually abstract. Both metaphorical

³ Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Poems, Letters, Drawings*, ed. and trans. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, 71-74.

expressions can be considered characteristic for the ‘colourless’ style postulated by Norwid in “Białe kwiaty” (“White Flowers”). Both expressions, because of their problematic visuality, generate unclear, undefined semantics, eluding interpretative paraphrase.

Now, let us have a look at a different fragment:

And as for you, love’s profile,
 Fulfilment is your name alone,
 But in art called Style
 Penetrating the song, shaping the stone...
 You whom history as we hear it
 Calls an age, beyond history’s quest
 You have two names: the letter and the spirit
 And *constummatum est*...
 Whatever and wherever you attack –
*In Phidias? In David? In Chopin’s skill as
 In a play by Aeschyles?*
 There always comes the avenging one: the *lack*...
 Lack of fulfilment marks the world:
Fulfilment ... is its pain...
 Rather would it begin again
 with promise forward hurled.
 An ear of corn? Replete
 As a gold comet rushing by,
 Its own perfection shot awry
 In a rain of wheat.⁴

The researchers who have analysed “Chopin’s Pianoforte” have pointed to the singularity of stanza seven, quoted above, which is placed in the middle of the poem. Tadeusz Makowiecki wrote about its “thoroughly intellectual character”, which is revealed through a “profusion of abstract ideas.”⁵ Let us note, however, that this stanza testifies to the claim of the poetic character of this intellectualism.

⁴ C.K. Norwid, *Poems, Letters, Drawings*, op. cit., 73.

⁵ Tadeusz Makowiecki, *Fortepian Szopena*, in *O Norwidzie pięć studiów*. Toruń 1949, 120.

After all, the whole reflection is constructed around the metaphorical expressions: "love's profile" and "fulfilment". These are similes *in absentia*, which do not verbalize their referents; which means that they may be treated as specific metaphorical puzzles.⁶ Even if they suggest certain meanings (for example connected with the idea of 'beauty'), they also contain semantic qualities extending beyond the direct term. This semantic surplus, however, will not be spotted through the analysis of pictorial values, because these metaphors do not constitute traditionally understood concreteness, because they are not visual at all. "Love's profile", an apparent 'reification' based on attaching to an abstract idea the category of shape, does not take any specific form here; it is purely intellectual.

We encounter a similar situation in the case of another expression from the seventh stanza: "history's quest", which is repeated, with a certain modification, in the tenth stanza "The crest/Of all-perfection epochs".⁷ Formally speaking, this is a spatial metaphor, constructing the space for the category of historical process. This spatial aspect, however, does not imply any clear space. On the contrary, it is radically ascetic. Relying on relationships grounded in culture, Norwid contrasted the peak with its opposition. These relationships, particularly in the context of the ending of the poem, the pianoforte hitting cobblestones, are of paramount importance. A metaphor in a sense complementary to "history's quest" is "the world's brink" from the fifth stanza. This is also a spatial metaphor, which defines space in its horizontal, not vertical dimension. However, both the vertical and the horizontal dimension remain totally unspecified in terms of plasticity. This is not surprising as they refer to the non-visual space of values and intellect.

The reduction of visual values connected with the use of a metaphor can also be noticed in the famous phrase which ends the poem:

⁶ On metaphors *in absentia* cf. Teresa Dobrzyńska, *Metafora*, Wrocław 1984, 35, 49, 50.

⁷ C.K. Norwid, *Poems, Letters, Drawings*, op. cit. 73.

“The Ideal has reached the cobblestones.”⁸ This metaphor is strongly connected with the earlier description of the ‘defenestration’ of Chopin’s instrument. This is an attempt—not very straightforward—to explicate the deeper sense of this event, of placing it on the plain of symbolic meanings. Generally speaking, the ending of the poem with the earlier description of the pianoforte’s fall could be described as an opposition of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ visibility. The description of defenestration is very concrete. It begins at the level of ‘sonic’ symbolism: „- runął – na **bruki z granitu!**”, and then „poterały”, „rozdziara”, „chrzęści”). Thus, the visual expressive associations are created, as, for example, the representation of the body of Orpheus being torn by furies, or the clear *pars pro toto* construction: “Grinding their teeth”.

In comparison, the two final lines bring a cooling of expression. It begins once again with euphony: „**Jęki y – głu che kamienie:** / **Ideał – sięgnął bruku –**” (II, 147). These phrases are parallel: “Piano crushed on the granite cobbles” and “The Ideal has reached the cobble-stones” make us look for the play of substitutes within these phrases. The concrete and unambiguous “granite cobbles”, seemingly are not much changed, while in essence they are transformed into a symbol of multiple meanings (“cobble-stones”). The verb “crushed” is replaced by a less obvious and less visual one: “reached”. And, finally, the most important change, as it creates the metaphor: instead of “Piano” we have “Ideal”, transforming the picture from the sphere of the concrete to one of spirituality. Norwid, when he constructed the ending of his poem, moved from literal to metaphorical and, at the same time, from strong and unambiguous visibility to visibility unclear and diluted, not concrete.

The cases analysed so far have shown different variants of metaphorical non-visual pictures, which have not evoked a tangible literal dimension. Now let us consider a very different fragment:

⁸ C.K. Norwid, *Poems, Letters, Drawings*, op. cit. 74.

III

I see you still in those days, Frederick!
Your hand—white alabaster
[...]

IV

And in that which you played—in that which the chords spoke
[...]

VI

So—you have played your piece—I shall
See you no more—but only bend
An ear to something... like a children's quarrel
As all the keys contend
Over desires in unsung staves
And straining as
They pluck in fifths and octaves:
*Is he playing again? Or disdaining us?*⁹

These lines are filled with the description of Chopin's play and poetic characteristic of his music. Both these motifs are presented in a plastic way. I mentioned at the beginning the visual aspect of the classic Virtue. Here, the picture of a musician, playing his piece, is filled with a realism of sorts, stressed by such motifs as "lyric touch light", "white alabaster" of the hand, "waving", "with the ivory loom", or the repeated phrase "and in that which you played". This picture is both literal and clearly symbolic: the transience and subtlety of the picture of the pianist is congruent with the atmosphere of "penultimate days".

A careful reader will also find another semantic move here. The two lines which end the description of Chopin's play: "So—you have played your piece—I shall/See you no more",¹⁰ the ending of the piece in literal and literary meanings, contain also a metaphor of death. Or, to be more exact, 'piece' is an *in absentia* metaphor of life which ends with the end of music.

⁹ C.K. Norwid, *Poems, Letters, Drawings*, op. cit. 72.

¹⁰ C.K. Norwid, *Poems, Letters, Drawings*, op. cit. 72.

This understanding of ‘piece’ as life radiates discreetly back in the poem, and forces us to look again at the stanzas preceding this metaphor. However, we should not go too far with this procedure by metaphorical translation of the realistic description of Chopin’s playing the piano. What really matters is the general suggestion of identifying musical order with existential order. The tool used to create such an identity is a discrete metaphor—barely visible, because it is obstructed by the concrete poetic picture present in the poem’s surface layer.

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Let us observe two important, although contradictory, tendencies. The first is the non-visual aspect of the picture in the diverse ways of existence of the metaphorical pictures in “Chopin’s Pianoforte”. The first one: is unclear, foggy, obliterated, not specified, and it does not constitute any concrete aspects understood in the traditional way. The second tendency, which could be called dual-level imaging (the case of ‘piece-life’), is opposite; a clear concrete picture which functions as realistic in the foreground, at one moment opens itself for metaphorical interpretation, which, however, happens in a discrete and not obvious manner.

Both phenomena are closely connected, although in very different ways, with a more general issue, which I would like to refer to as the *invisibility* of the metaphor. My research on the poetics of Norwid’s metaphors points to the subtle, discrete, not palpable character of them, which makes them extremely original, especially during his mature phase. Visual aspects are only one of many connected with this phenomenon. Both tendencies of shaping poetic concreteness dealt with in “Chopin’s Pianoforte” are good examples of this. Non visual imagery makes metaphors unclear, depriving them of pictorial ground. It levels associational values, which might be fixed in the imagination and makes the metaphor more prone to concrete aspects. While in the second case the picture holds the metaphor at bay. It is seen only through cracks in reality, and therefore so easy to miss. Only during a careful reading of an obviously literal phrase

is an intuition of a different type of reading, a metaphorical reading, born.

The process of obliterating metaphors' clarity by concrete imagery makes this tendency similar to the phenomenon of the 'fulfilled metaphor' (in the understanding of Wiktor Żyrmundski¹¹). However, the differences in which metaphors function, and their relationship to the pictures are clear. In the fulfilled metaphor the whole pictorial structure starts with a metaphor, which is always the beginning of a picture, which can be identified and pointed to, although later this enters a state of dormancy, as the visual aspect is developed and achieves an autonomy of sorts, while the pictorial tendency observed in the context of the metaphor 'pieces-life' in "Chopin's Pianoforte" is reversed. The basic dimension at which the picture functions here is the concrete one. However, some suggestions, less or more clear, provide the possibility of a different, complementary way of reading, which does not obliterate the first one and does not make it less important. This is definitely a procedure of hiding metaphors in very subtle ways, which is also more subjective in identification than in the case of fulfilled metaphors.

As we can see, the metaphors of Norwid can approach the pole of textual invisibility both because of the weakness (or total lack) of the generated picture and because of strong concrete exposition hiding the metaphorical variant of reading. It may be posited that both these tendencies are connected with a shaking of the traditional (so difficult to describe) relationship between a metaphorical formula and its pictorial concreteness. I think that this is a specific feature of Norwid's poetry in general.

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Research on the poetic imagery of Polish Romanticism has resulted in taxonomies which ascribe the realistic type of pictures to Mickiewicz and creationist to Słowacki. Despite some simplifications, such

¹¹ Cf. Wiktor M. Żyrmundski, *Metafora w twórczości Błoka*, in *Rosyjska szkoła stylistyki*, ed. by M. R. Mayenowa, Z. Saloni, Warszawa 1970, 315-334.

taxonomies reveal the general tendencies of given poetics. The visual type projected in Norwid's poetry could be defined as the *semantic picture*. It is not evoked solely through metaphors. Sometimes it is the result of such tropes as similes or parables or symbols. I am convinced that the phenomena characterized above, connected with invisible metaphors, are particularly interesting manifestations of this variety of picture. The non-visual projections dealt with in the first part of this paper show reality as signs, reality which is seen as a set of symbols, devoid of everything which is not conducive to evoking metaphorical sense. On the other hand, the dual-level picture challenges the issues of the grounding of the sign in material reality, and makes the identification of it and its exposure problematic.¹²

¹² I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on this issue: *Niewidoczna metafora. Strategie mówienia przenośnego w poezji Norwida. (An Invisible Metaphor: Norwid's Strategies of Applying Metaphoric Language)*.