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**ALEXANDER WAT
AND ROMANTICISM (ONCE MORE)**

“A Pole and a Polish poet deeply rooted in Poland, its historical tradition and its cruel fate—he belonged to Polish culture as Polish culture belonged to him, he was co-creating it.”¹

The references to the poetic tradition in Alexander Wat’s writings have never been seriously questioned. Showing the places and locations in which these references are present has also been quite smooth. Wat was described as a poet deeply rooted in the Romantic tradition, which was considered fundamental to his poetry.

A summary of this issue was made by Małgorzata Łukaszuk, and her text was included in an anthology of critical essays about *Dziady* (*Forefathers’ Eve*). I have selected some fragments in which Łukaszuk dealt with Wat’s Romanticism:

While thinking about influences in Wat’s writings on Mickiewicz I have in mind diverse, often not overt similarities and contexts, which became objects for interpretations, although some of them have been missed by readers. The Romantic background in Wat’s writings could be perceived in the very “biographical frame”, its ludic origins (songs sung by a nanny), its bond with set texts—this is one of the first, basic relations decisive for the specificity of Wat’s *oeuvre*. The works of Wat were determined by: his biography, which was at first appraised too quickly, too spontaneously and too egotistically;

¹ Józef Czapski, *Mowa na pogrzebie Aleksandra Wata*, w: Czesław Miłosz, Ola Watowa, *Listy o tym, co najważniejsze*, ed. by Anna Micińska, Jan Zieliński, Warszawa 2009, 168.

and reading, which was for Wat—as it had been for the Romantics—
“one of the fundamental forms of searching for knowledge about man
and knowledge of oneself.”²

Later on Łukaszuk added:

His works are not an interpretation of the Romantic perception
of the world and the Romantic definition of man, but at the same
time Wat was forged by the Romantics, who taught him about
childhood, manhood, lands of bliss and hellish lands, as well as
the sense of imagination, dreams, awareness.³

And then Łukaszuk, a brilliant critic of Wat’s writings, moved
on to more or less open, unambiguous, sophisticated and hidden
parallels: *Forefathers’ Eve* and Wat, Konrad and blasphemous notes
in Wat’s writings.

I must admit, despite obvious correspondences, that these parallels
have always been less interesting for me. I have seen them as somewhat
elusive. Under the hard shell of similarities there seemed to snooze
nuances of Mickiewicz’s personal experience of communal issues and
Wat’s leading of individual motives, for example that of suffering,
a long way beyond Romanticism. Besides, and on the margin—
Mickiewicz never really became a blasphemer, although—at
times—he moved in this direction, stumbling on a set of problems
offered by thoroughly remembered experiences and his knowledge
of the Catholic catechism and Catholic practise. Wat’s spiritual
background was different. The difference was in the twentieth-century
cultural and social conditions and, above all, in different biography,
different experiences. The blasphemy of Wat—at least in the earlier
period—always seemed to me to be quite easy; it created a certain
distance to the man-author.

² Małgorzata Łukaszuk, «Hybris» Aleksandra Wata (z «Dziadami» w tle),
w: *Rozmowy o «Dziadach»*, ed. by. Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska and Maria
Prussak, Warszawa 2005, 138–139.

³ *Ibid.*, 139.

It was different with Wat's late writings. Job's questions of his became more and more justified, and in a certain way even necessary, and in them there returned the earliest picture. This 'common ground' of poets who really suffered.

But Wat, in a surprisingly brief and very intense period, connected Job-like experience with "Lausanne" experiences (I have in mind here the moods and contents of Mickiewicz's late lyric poetry). The intensity of pain was united with poetics and rhythms in the last poems of Mickiewicz: stylistic figures of thoughts, experiences and axiological attitudes.

I accept here—as obvious—the fact that Mickiewicz's Lausanne lyrics defined a certain important standard for the language of poetry in the twentieth century. This standard in a meaningful and concrete way joins contemporaneity with Romanticism. We remember how this standard was maturing in the process of the reception of the Lausanne poems throughout the nineteenth century and, above all, in the twentieth century. Danuta Zamaćńska wrote:

While quoting both poets and critics I hover all the time around one idea: Lausanne notes, breaking vehemently away from earlier conventions of writing poetry, at the same time opened vistas of possibilities: of simplicity, naturalness, commonality and a specific tradition of poems being summaries and farewells. In other words: breaking from conventions—they created a new convention ... of self-appraisal.⁴

It is known, however, that this is not the only convention which is at stake here, that we can talk about the convention of pictures evoking contemplative senses (it was Marian Maciejewski who was the first to perceive it and describe it.⁵) It could be claimed, if we simplify

⁴ Danuta Zamaćńska, *Słynne – nieznanne. Wiersze późne Mickiewicza, Słowackiego, Norwida*, Lublin 1985, 36.

⁵ Marian Maciejewski, *Mickiewiczowskie «czucia wieczności»*, (Czas i przestrzeń w liryce lozańskiej), in Idem, *Poetyka, gatunek – obraz. W kręgu poezji romantycznej*, Wrocław 1977.

things a little, that Polish poetry and the poetry of Mickiewicz written before the Lausanne lyrics in some special, but tangible way, was the type of poetry which evoked movement, diverse changes which could be found on different layers of poems. With the Lausanne lyrics there appeared more duration, more stillness (maybe it was also caused by the mode of reception and a new aesthetic order), inviting readers to go deep into standards governing human spirituality, hidden rules of existence. Repeating the formula of one researcher of Romanticism: the direction from 'existence to essence' became more visible, the direction towards real duration in its presence; achieved through the means of the lyric form.

This evolution from 'movement' to 'duration' achieved in some brilliant, accelerated mode could be perceived in Mickiewicz's writings. It also seems that the qualitative difference of poetry between the Enlightenment and Romanticism was much bigger and clearer than the difference between Romanticism and the poetry of the twentieth century. Stretching the point and focusing on some conclusions to different commentaries from the period we might say that Romantic lyric poetry and the poetry determined by Romanticism is still alive, although, as some claim, the so called Romantic paradigms are no more. The 'lyric paradigm' is still alive and it was constituted, to a large extent, by the Lausanne poems. Marian Stala stated that: "these poems were becoming a masterpiece throughout the whole twentieth century".⁶

And, as Jacek Łukasiewicz wrote:

The Lausanne cycle is an example of a text which, by covering the whole of life, fulfils it, in a way, aesthetically. Encompassing and assessing this whole life as if [it was lived by] someone else, justifies it in this way.⁷

⁶ Marian Stala, *Wstęp do: Liryki lozańskie Adama Mickiewicza. Strona Lemanu. Antologia*, ed. by M. Stala, Kraków 1998, 8.

⁷ Jacek Łukasiewicz, *Cykl lozański jako dziedzictwo*, in *Liryki lozańskie Adama Mickiewicza. Strona Lemanu. Antologia*, op. ci., 377.

It could be stated that Łukasiewicz in this sentence defined the point of arrival of the development of Polish lyric poetry.

In a different fragment Łukasiewicz noted that the phrase "nad wodą wielką i czystą" ("over the water grand and clear") is:

one of the most important, archetypical, magical and most often repeated verses of Polish [...]. [the Lausanne cycle] is not-eternal, because nothing is eternal, but it has potential for a very long duration—as a standard of poetry.⁸

While Czesław Zgorzelski in fundamental statements about poetics of these poems focused on the exposition of an individual word which:

plays a more independent and leading role in the linguistic structure of these poems, at the same time assuming a depth of allegorical meanings.⁹

Alexander Wat as a reader, a poet and a critic of poetry seemed to understand these regularities very well.

In each language—wrote Wat in *Dziennik bez samogłosek* (*A Journal without Vowels*)—different and therefore untranslatable are these individual words which are poetically fully valuable. Where it is the phonetics itself which evokes sense. For example, in the Polish language the word 'płynąć' ('to swim', 'to float') has a wide breath, skies and activities in it. While in English this word is 'swim'. And nothing can be done about it.¹⁰

Here, we feel—commented Jack Łukasiewicz—Wat came close to the heart of the matter. The Lausanne cycle is connected with the nature of our language, which is revealed in poetry through a difficult process of breaking away from poetic styles.¹¹

⁸ Quoted in Marian Stala, *Wstęp*, op. cit.

⁹ Czesław Zgorzelski, *Drogi rozwojowe liryki Mickiewicza*, in Idem, *O sztuce poetyckiej Mickiewicza. Próby zbliżeń i uogólnień*, Warszawa 1976, 43.

¹⁰ Quoted in Jacek Łukasiewicz, op. cit.

¹¹ Ibidem.

This is the feature which Czapski (in the opening quotation) evoked when he stated that *Wat* was deeply rooted in the Polish tradition: the Romantic tradition, consolidated in the Lausanne standard—which also was, to a large extent, formal.

Mickiewicz's late poems have thrown light—or shadow—at almost two centuries of Polish poetry. They have thrown it, maybe, to a bigger degree on the way of reading later poetry. Or, to put in a differently: they have left an irreversible mark in the field of communal aesthetic response, particularly where authors' projects come in contact with the mind of a reader used to certain situations (inside a poem); the situation from poetic tradition of which T.S. Eliot once said that “each new element added in time—each individual creative event—corresponds and influences the reception of what has been included in the past (tradition)”.¹²

Therefore, revealing the “Lausanne poems” influence on *Wat* has Eliot's sense in it. It shows and modifies the presence of Mickiewicz's late poems in the Polish cultural tradition.

“Lausanne” influences on *Wat* we can find, which is to a certain extent obvious, not only in poems from the anthology of Marian Stala. This is not necessarily and not exclusively “*Sen*” (“*A Dream*”) and “*Buchalteria*” (“*Book-keeping*”), particularly if we take into account the ‘confidence’ of the words in these poems, their power of entering semantic and diverse relations; although undoubtedly “*water*” which we encounter there has the weight and magic (this is Łukasiewicz's expression) of the poems from Lausanne. But here the “magic” itself turns out to be not so important; this magic is merged with something which might be called experience and the evocation of truth. Jacek Trznadel stated:

It is worth remembering that in this period just after the war Alexander was an author of poems from his futuristic period and of short stories, and the rest was yet to come. *My Century* was in him and later poetry was in him [...] [...] poems which were later included

¹² See T.S. Eliot, T.S. Eliot “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, in: *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Waking Lion Press, 2011, 30-39. (Particularly the opening fragments).

in volumes of poetry, and the ones which were left in manuscripts and should be published [...] supplement the picture of Polish post-war literature with a telling tone of truth. This is a streak which has started to be revealed.¹³

This streak seems to enter in quite an obvious and natural way in symbiosis with the "Lausanne poems", which with their raw, ascetic form, bring truth about life in a form as naked as possible.

In August 1956 Wat wrote a poem entitled "Z perskich przypowieści" ("Persian Parables"):

Be a great, swift water
on a stony bank
a human skull was
lying
and shouting: Allah la
ilah.

And in the cry such
horror
and such supplication
so great was its despair
that I asked
the helmsman:

For what can it still cry out? Of what is it
still afraid? What divine judgment could
strike it yet again?

Suddenly there came a
wave
took hold of the skull
and tossing it about
smashed it against the
bank.

¹³ Ola Watowa, *Wszystko co najważniejsze...Rozmowy z Jackiem Trznadlem*, Londyn 1984, . 127.

Nothing is ultimate
 -the helmsman's voice was hollow –
 And there is no bottom to evil.¹⁴

The connection with the Lausanne tradition here is very slim: “By a great swift water”. The change of water from “clear” to “swift”, as it will turn out later, is logically, lyrically and integrally justified. “A skull was lying”, but it was also shouting. In shouting there is: fear, pleading, despair. These are moods quite different from Mickiewicz's late poems. Apart from them, in the call “Allah lh illah”, if we are attentive enough, we could hear a hidden, nuanced tone of blasphemy, which seems to be closer to Job's stance than to Wat's from the early period.

The tension evoked between ‘I’ asking a helmsman the key question (“For what can it still cry out? Of what is it still afraid? What divine judgment could strike it yet again?—here we have a clear, moderate “Lausanne” tone—and the skull introduces some shakiness of indifference and pessimism.

The contexts connected here with the basic picture and an allegorical arch of meanings are different, although they are not very clear and they take us to Shakespeare and the seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. The last verse punctuates ‘the silence of Lausanne’ (tone, ‘objectiveness’, manner of recognition); simplicity and ‘finality’ of ascertainment, tranquillity, but it happens in the experience of radical pain. We have here the quality of this final recognition: of pain and recognition already tranquillized. Therefore, we have “water of Lemman” although it is not clear, and tranquillity and movement (but this is not movement initiated by Lausanne lightning, movement, after which we have adamant duration and silence, this movement is inextinguishable, as the stormy disharmony has no end); water which is “swift” takes with it both the “Lausanne poems” and Job.

¹⁴ Aleksander Wat, *Mediterranean Poems*, transl. by Czeslaw Milosz, Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1977, 6.

Between 1965 and 1967 Wat wrote a brilliant lyric poem, the first line of which reads [Naprzeciw skwer] [In Front of a Square]:

Naprzeciw skwer.
Dzieci bawią się w klasy.
Mleczne mamy robią na drutach. Ten krajobraz przebija
strzała, a nikt jej nie widzi. Poza starcem, choć głowę
ma zwieszoną, patrzy w piasek, liczy ziarnka,
Słucha jak po blasze nieopodal ściekają wody. Te wody
dają mu wspominać inną – wielką. Opływającą
kontynenty. Którą skaziła ongi jedna kropla gorzkości.¹⁵

I do not see any interpretative possibility which would definitely support the argument of the "Lausanne" character of the water present in this poem (if we were to rely solely on configurations of the poem's senses). But in the same way as we have been doing with Mickiewicz's late poems, at the level of the aesthetic reception of poetry, these waters of Wat cannot really be read without the context of Mickiewicz's Lausanne poems.

When we read this poem from the perspective of "Lausanne" space, we 'add' surplus meaning to an 'arrow', and then this arrow which sets between Zenon from Elea and the surplus value, springs to life, because an arrow appears here as if beyond the natural order of things, which is designated by the square, children, milk-mothers. This arrow is seen only by a protagonist, an old man. It is a creative gesture of the author, but the specific way of introducing it to the poem is the result of experiences. This gesture is not an exposition of creative capabilities, as was the case earlier and with different authors. The old man-subject sees the arrow, but he sees more, much more.

¹⁵ "In front of a square/children are playing hopscotch./Milk-mothers are knitting./ This landscape is pierced by an arrow but/no one sees it, apart from an old man,/ although his head is hanging low, he is looking/into the sand and counting grains./ He is listening to waters flowing down the sheet in the roof./These waters give him a chance to remember another one—grand./Circling around continents. Which were a long time ago infected/by a drop of bitterness."

The poem's perspective grows, through counting of grains of sand, the buzz of dribbling water (which is both real and symbolic; the symbolic-allegorical climate gets intensified in the second part of the poem); this buzz gets dissolved in some huge, lyrically magnified, grand water (which is introduced in a recollection, its presence is strengthened by the repeated, through the use of enjambment, epithet "grand")

Wat, as the author of this poem, seems to be 'clearly co-operating' with Mickiewicz's Lausanne water. But in the distant background, through a farfetched analogy there appears, close to the climax of the poem, the other water of Mickiewicz. The one from the sonnet "Stepy akermańskie" ("The Ackerman Steppe"), expanding the space of the poem, so that its hugeness will create an appropriately strengthening background for the final line in the sonnet "Onward, no one calls".¹⁶ Here, in Wat's poem, it turns out that it is Lausanne waters that flow into this pan-continental space, and with a clear line Wat draws "a drop of bitterness", just a drop, which will pollute these grand waters, a drop which is like a point, which is concrete, which is also the punchline of the poem; it will "infect", change the final outcome. This water, eventually and again, will not be pure. Maybe Job bathed in it, but the proportions of senses are clear in this poem, they do not point clearly to such a content.

An earlier poem, annotated "On Christmas Eve 1962, in Paris", suggests almost no references to the Lausanne poems. It was dedicated to Iwaszkiewicz and preceded by a sentence from Petrarch: 'S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento? What do I feel if this is not love?'¹⁷ What kind of love is presented here? Can we answer such a question at all? The first distich is about the Olive Garden, the final one is about a woman, about—her. Do we have two loves or one love here? If it is two, then is there a border between these two?

¹⁶ Adam Mickiewicz, "The Steppes of Akkerman" in *Crimean Sonnets*, transl. by Anita Jones Debska, Attic Angel Press, Toruń, 2010, 7.

¹⁷ Translated by A.S. Kline, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/what-do-i-feel-if-this-is-not-love/>

Gdy drżał w śmiertelnych potach w ogrodzie
Gethemane, myśmy spali. Myśmy spali, spali.

Bo sen za palce sny nam przywiódł w
korowodzie, powiewny dotyk ich, ich śmiechów
grę na wodzie.

Lecz coraz szybszy bieg snów, ciaśniejszy coraz splot ich,
ciemniejszy coraz blask, natrętny szmerów motyw.

Jak szpula wirująca nawijam sny te
na się, Bym senny sam snem był i
snem byś była ty.

Ciemnieje twoja twarz, jak nóż pod wodą w
cynie Ucięte nożem wpół nasz sen i ja i ty.¹⁸

Despite the regular, rhythmical distiches, the poem is clearly ternary, and each part gives a different vision, a different perspective. Mickiewicz's *Lausanne*, and only slightly, resonates in the last part (the last distich).

The first part (the first distich), ardent and simply indicative, opens the vision of the basic space of life and its time. The ardency of this distich, initiated both with the initial phrase "when he shivered" and with the phrase repeated three times: "we were asleep", is clearly connected with Petrarch's "if this is not love". We know how complex and constant mature Wat's attitude to Jesus Christ was, and we also know that, regardless of circumstances and complications, Wat's great intuition made him turn in this direction, even if the destructive conviction of tragic and mysterious predestination reduced his conviction of sense. This distich reveals poignant remorse and

¹⁸ "When he shivered in deathly sweat in the garden of Gethsemane/We were asleep, we were asleep asleep.//Because the sleep brought us dreams in a chanting procession./Delicate touch of them, the laughter on water.//But the ever faster run of sleeps, ever tighter, darker/glare, intrusive motive of murmurs.//As a spinning reel I spin these dreams,/So that I would be sleepy and you would be sleepy too.//Your face is getting darker, as a knife under water in tin/Cut with a knife in two our dream and I and you."

reproach to himself and to others, and presents the basic mode in which human beings live in time. And now a remark completely on the margin: how typical of Wat it is, the understanding of sleep does not correspond with the sleep of the early Romantics, but with that of Norwid, for whom life-sleep is Plato's mirage, blocking entrance to true reality.

But Wat's picture of sleep-life is in this poem, and against everything, a value in itself, which cannot be called, caught or told otherwise.

In the middle part, consisting of three distiches, the poet revealed his good 'ear' for listening to the rhythms of life, which has earlier been described as sleep.

Sleep causing sleep, a procession of sleeps, "laughs' play on water" (a reflection?), the speeding succession of sleeps—the intensive 'disappearance' of time?—which is, after all, commonly experienced, similarly to—"the ever tightening knot of them" and "darker brightness" and, nevertheless—a specific activity of the lyric 'I':

As a spinning reel I spin these dreams,
So that I would be sleepy and you would be sleepy too.

That is a brilliant picture, an excellent metaphor: a spinning reel in the merciless squeeze of winding threads-sleeps; that is how, in an aloof manner, a certain state of emotions is recalled, the state of being lost in love, a love which is mixed with an earthly love, a love which in some (unspecified) way is connected to the love from the two opening lines.

The second and third distiches could be described through the quotation from Bakhtin:

Rhythm overflows the lived experience.[...], inevitable rhythm brings peace.¹⁹

¹⁹ Michał Bachtin, *Bohater w czasie*, in Idem, *Estetyka twórczości słownej*, transl. by Danuta Ulicka, ed and intro. by Eugeniusz Czaplejewicz, Warszawa 1986, 186.

I once used this fragment from Bakhtin to interpret the cyclic nature of the Lausanne lyric poems.²⁰ It seems no coincidence that Bakhtin returned here. But the following distich—the one with the metaphor of a reel—clearly dodges the power of Bakhtin’s commentary. A spinning reel does not belong to the spheres of “lived experience”. It refers to the subjective now. The Lausanne mood reveals the love for her, a female protagonist (a love which is maybe Romantic in nature, because it is the only one, and is not doomed, but preserved in earthly time), but at the same time the Lausanne mood is blemished; this time is not necessarily Job who does it.

This distich is most clear in the terms of articulation and most reminiscent of Mickiewicz’s last poems:

Your face is getting darker, as a knife under water in tin
Cut with a knife in two our dream and I and you.

Water, duration. But what kind of water? And duration in what? “Darkening” water; Mickiewicz wrote about “dark faces” of reflected bedrocks. The picture is similar, but Mickiewicz’s intentions were different. A symbolic pun there was less concrete, more universal. In the best known Lausanne poem (“Nad wodą wielką i czystą”, (“Over the Water Grand and Clear”) motionless witnesses of loneliness have “black faces”, bedrocks have “proud foreheads”, rocks threaten while clouds appear as carriers. The lyric ‘I’—alienated most deeply—thanks to the power of imagination and also thanks to some unconscious feature of personality, sees the landscape around through the figures of people in action. Personifications again support the basic longing of the protagonist: remorse which is horrible, even though it is quiet and poised.

Aborted, impossible ‘life with’, lost ‘closeness’ and as a result feeling of enormous defeat dominated Mickiewicz’s poems from

²⁰ Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska, *Liryki lozańskie – cykl zamknięty? Kilka uwag o podmiotowych źródłach jedności ostatnich wierszy Mickiewicza*, in *Od Kochanowskiego do Mickiewicza. Szkice o polskim cyklu poetyckim*, ed. by B. Kuczera-Chachulska Warszawa 2004, 229–234.

the Lausanne period. In Wat's poem, the Lausanne experiences are acquired as a pair of people, the lyric 'I' is not painfully lonely, although the perspectives of the other shore are recalled with some hidden radical aspect. If we are to talk about 'duration', it would rather be duration when the sleep ends, duration of this very moment.

There is love in this poem, there is being together and the other shore and this love from the first distich, maybe somewhat inconceivable, Biblical and very real. These different themes, different than in Romantic love, because more concrete, because—in the case of loving a woman—fulfilled, are intertwined with the visions of the Lausanne poems. These visions result in stronger, new and individualized expression, and the last verse ("Cut with a knife in two our dream and I and you") bears the burden of the distant and tranquil Job who appeared in other poems by Wat.

We can look at the 'Lausanne problem' of Wat from a different perspective; in the way Miłosz did in his essay "O wierszach Aleksandra Wata" ("Of Alexander Wat's Poems"). Let us note some key fragments of this text:

How is it possible that someone writes poetry of this quality only when he is over fifty years old, and even this in short respites of relief which the illness allowed him?²¹

Wat moved beyond literary fashions, at best they amused him. It could not have been different because each of his poems was a note, scribbled hastily, with the feeling that time is running short, that it is a gift if he could write something before a new a paroxysm strikes and painkillers will not make him dumb for long weeks or months.²²

In his *Pieśni* (*Songs*) Wat used a motto which stresses what I wrote about his *objectivism through subjectivism* (emphasis—B.K.-Ch.).²³

Young poets think that simplicity is lack of originality, that a line of a poem in which words "are not surprised by each other" must be very pale. No wonder. In order to have this lightness of touch which Wat possessed, this gift of an offhand, circumstantial

²¹ Czesław Miłosz, *Prywatne obowiązki*, Paryż 1985, 62.

²² *Ibid.*, 63/

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

sketching (Goethe claimed that all poetry is circumstantial), you must experience a lot and learn a lot. It is only then that the most ordinary words are at your service.²⁴

All Wat's thoughts and observations led exactly towards the problem and character of 'preserving experiences'; experiences which were preserved earlier by the pen of the greatest Romantic poets, but at this moment of his writings, when he moved beyond Romanticism and was no longer comprehensible to his contemporaries.

Mickiewicz did not stop writing poetry, but he stopped publishing it, although his friends pressed him to do so. According to Stefanowska, Mickiewicz suspected that this poetry would not be understood by his contemporaries, wrote Małgorzata Burta.²⁵

It seems, and this is also indirectly implied in Miłosz's essay, that Wat's poetry without a "Lausanne" key remains equally incomprehensible, or comprehensible only to a very limited degree.

²⁴ Ibid.,71.

²⁵ Małgorzata Burta, *Reszta prawd.« Zdanie i uwagi» Adama Mickiewicza*, Warszawa 2005, 235.