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ALEKSANDER WAT, AN ORPHIC POET

Somatic Poems—A Handful of New Footnotes

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz wrote a long time ago:

Mediterranean mythology tells us about four great Europeans, who, while still alive, found themselves in the underworld kingdom of the dead. They were: Heracles, Theseus, Orpheus and Odysseus. Heracles and Theseus went down into the underworld in order to act. Heracles led Cerberus to daylight and freed Titans from Tartarus. Theseus intended to kidnap the mistress of the underworld, Demeter's daughter, Persephone. Their adventures, although beautiful, did not seem to be of interest to poets of centuries to come. Orpheus and Odysseus went down into the underworld in order to know. Orpheus, by finding Eurydice, wanted to know about the nature of death. Odysseus, who at the entrance to Hades listened to the prophecy of Tiresias and the story of Elpenor, wanted to know about time past and time future. Knowledge of time is knowledge of history. Poets of the twentieth century who were going to hell were doing so either with Odysseus or with Orpheus. These were to be expeditions to acquire knowledge of death or of history. [...] Rainer Maria Rilke went down to Hades with Orpheus. He went down to acquire knowledge about the nature of death. This journey—undertaken in the autumn of 1904, eighteen years prior to writing *Sonnets to Orpheus*—resulted in a beautiful poem and brought about the birth of Orphic poetry of the twentieth century. Because knowledge of death, which Rilke acquired during his journey to Hades was only a reminder of knowledge Orphic poets once possessed. Death is return, death returns us to ourselves, death

is heritage regained. Eurydice, when she died, returned to herself: “*Sie war in sich*”. That much was also known to anonymous authors of hymns about Orpheus.¹

This long fragment showing Rymkiewicz arguments will help me to present my own ones—in a manner of intervention.

In the footnote to line 13 of *Wiersze somatyczne (Somatic Poems)*² by Aleksander Wat, which runs: “We are looking at Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes from a Neapolitan bas-relief”, Adam Dziadek says: “It’s about a famous Neapolitan bas-relief of Hermes, Eurydice and Orpheus (ca. 420 B.C.E, this is a Roman copy of an Attic bas-relief, which is to be found in National Archaeological Museum of Naples). A reference to these works of art can also be found in the poetic prose of Zbigniew Herbert “H.E.O,” and in the poem of Mieczysław Jastrun, “Stara grecka płaskorzeźba” (“An Old Greek Bas-Relief”).”³

This is an unfinished footnote. Why? I will return to it soon.

First, I would like to say how important Wat’s authorial footnotes were to the author of the introduction to a selection of Wat’s poetry published in “Biblioteka Narodowa” (The National Library) — he even devoted a whole chapter of his introduction to it.⁴ For example, while analysing the fifth poem from the cycle “Pieśni wędrowca” (“Songs of a Wanderer”), thanks to the confrontation with the authorial footnote, he very accurately showed that “Wat’s text is constituted as an interrelated knot of signs emitted by a text and a footnote.”⁵ Authorial footnotes were—in the case of Polish editions of *Wiersze (Poems)*, Cracow, 1957 and *Wiersze śródziemnomorskie (Meditarranean Poems)*, Warsaw, 1962—an important element

¹ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Ogród Persefony*, in *Mysli różne o ogrodach. Dzieje jednego toposu*, Warszawa 1968, 27–128.

² “Nowa Kultura” 1957, no. 30, 1 and 3.

³ See Aleksander Wat, *Wybór wierszy*, ed. by Adam Dziadek, “BN” I 300, Wrocław 2008,

124. I analysed both references of the Polish poets, Jastrun and Herbert in the book *Rilke poetów polskich*, Wrocław 2004, 168–170 and 254–256.

⁴ *Wstęp do: Aleksander Wat, Wybór wierszy*, op. cit., LII–LXVII

⁵ *Ibid.*, LXVI.

of the process of manoeuvring when handling with communist censorship. The footnote is a marginal form (as it might seem) of the paratext. As Dziadek wrote, in the poetry of Wat it "became important, because it acquired the features and values of a supplement, began to function as a specific case of anticipating a given text, and is very important in the reading of all the individual poems as it directs and determines the possible ways of reading."⁶

Now, I will return to the problem of the footnote to line 13 of "Somatic Poems". The one who gives footnotes to an author as careful as Wat should be at least as careful. Already in the description of the Neapolitan bas-relief from the fundamental *Studia orfickie (Orphic Studies)* by Adam Krokiewicz⁷ we can already find a connecting element (mediation), which for most of the twentieth-century references to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, is Rainer Maria Rilke's long poem *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes*.⁸ Krokiewicz wrote in prose what Rilke had written in verse. The poet himself was inspired by his direct contact with the Greek bas-relief in the museum of Naples (and maybe also by August Rodin's sculpture "Orpheus and Eurydice"). Many years later Josif Brodski,⁹ in one of his essays, pronounced this long poem to be the greatest masterpiece of lyrical poetry of the twentieth century.

And it is the importance of Rilke's long poem which I am calling for here, because Herbert in both of his prose variants of *H.E.O.*, the one in *Zeszyty Literackie (Literary Notebooks)*¹⁰ and the one in *Król mrówek (The King of the Ants)*¹¹ as well as Jastrun—a translator

⁶ Ibid., LXVI–LXVII

⁷ Adam Krokiewicz, *Studia orfickie*, Warszawa 1947, 5.

⁸ On this topic see Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, *Rilke poetów polskich*, op. cit., 247–254.

⁹ See Joseph Brodsky, *Von Schmerz und Vernunft. Über Hardy, Rilke, Frost und andere*, München–Wien 1996, 119–175.

¹⁰ "Zeszyty Literackie", no. 33, winter 1991, 9–10.

¹¹ Zbigniew Herbert, *H.E.O.*, in *Król mrówek. Prywatna mitologia*, Kraków 2001, 11–12. The footnote in this edition which Ryszard Krynicki wrote to the poetic prose of Herbert is very important. I would call it the footnote of a tender erudite:

and a very careful perennial reader of Rilke—anchored their texts in the long poem by Rilke.

Herbert places the initials of names which form the title of Rilke's poem in reverse order, clearly favouring a central position of Eurydice, and, in a way, making her the main character of his reinterpretation of the myth. Also, Czesław Miłosz, in the long poem published after the death of his wife, "Orfeusz i Eurydyka" ("Orpheus and Eurydice"), referred in both a polemical and agreeable manner Rilke's poem. Polemically, because in his perception, Persephone was more important than Hermes, and as a continuation of Rilke's image, because Eurydice was described again with the words of Rilke ("legs bound with a gown like a shroud, and Orpheus's sense of hearing is — as it was in the poem from 1904 — like a hound's. The landscape of crying was presented in a similar way¹²). Without Rilke, all these texts mentioned here — Jastrun's, Herbert's and Miłosz's — would have been different, or maybe they might not have been written at all. Therefore, it was through his poem, which initiated the twentieth-century re-narration of the myth of a lover's loss, that Polish contemporary poets looked at the Neapolitan bas-relief. The lack of reference to the text from the volume *Neue Gedichte* (1907) in the footnote of the standard edition disorients readers and ignores the basic fact that it was from this poem that the twentieth-century Orphic poetry commenced.

However, the footnote makes me think whether Rilke—the author of *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes* (where Orpheus is an earthly singer)¹³,

"Zbigniew Herbert also changed the title *HEO*, which probably caused the situation in which his American publisher read it wrong as *EOS*. In order both to avoid mistakes and to preserve a distant association with Rilke's poem *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes*—we preserve the earlier version of the title." (126).

¹² I wrote on this issue earlier in the sketch *Bez Eurydyki .Rilke, Herbert, Miłosz wobec mitu miłosnej żałoby*, *Zeszyty Literackie*, no. 83, summer 2003, 201.

¹³ Paweł Majewski in a brilliant erudite text combining diverse threads wrote on this issue: Paweł Majewski, *Antyk w poezji Rilkego i Iwaszkiewicza – próba porównania*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 2007, (2), 74–83 (fragment entitled. *Orfeusz, Eurydyka, Aketis – między życiem a śmiercią*). The twin myth about Alcestis and

but also the author of *Sonnets to Orpheus* (where Orpheus became a god)¹⁴—was equally important to Wat,¹⁵ who wrote two moving Orphic texts. I have in mind *Somatic Poems*, written in 1967 and "Wiersz ostatni" ("The Last Poem"), dated 31 May 1967, composed shortly before his death.

Somatic Poems was written in Naples, a decade after *Orphic Studies* by Krokiewicz, in which he described the bas-relief from Naples in the following way:

Admet Rilke interpreted referring to the drama of Eurypides. On this theme see also . Inga Iwasiów, *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj*, Kraków 2002, 61–62; Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, *Alkestis i mit miłości małżeńskiej*, „Polonistyka” 2004, no.1, 25–29.

¹⁴ Barbara Surowska and Larysa Cybenko have recently analysed the presence of Orpheus and the Orphic myth in Rilke's poetry. Cf., B. Surowska, *Orfeusz w poezji Rainera Marii Rilkego*, in *Mit Orfeusza. Inspiracje i reinterpretacje w europejskiej tradycji artystycznej*, ed by Sławomira Żerańska-Kominek, Gdańsk 2003, 329–340 (she pointed to the necessity of differentiation of Orpheus as presented in the volume *Neue Gedichte* (1907) from Orpheus from the late cycle of sonnets, an earthly singer to god) L. Cybenko, *Orfeusz modernistów. Metamorfozy mitu w twórczości Rainera Marii Rilke* in *Ateny, Rzym, Bizancjum. Mity śródziemnomorza w kulturze XIX i XX wieku*, ed. by Jarosław Ławski and Krzysztof Korotkich, Białystok 2008, 367–373.

¹⁵ Wat had a high opinion about Rilke (what is interesting — similarly to Herbert — he put Rilke alongside Eliot), which is supported by a fragment of letter to Józef Czapski written in Cabris on 15.03.1962: "Everything, a contemporary poet says today clearly in the manner of the old [poets] — is practically a better or worse stylizations, repetitions (it is different in painting, but I will probably write about it elsewhere), frankly speaking quite pathetic. It would be better if each of such poets, more than once excellent ones, published (he could write as much as he wants for himself) an anthology of old poems, which would express him so much better. (That is why I always feel like mixing into my dark poems, poems of others, so brilliantly expressed a long time ago. So, for us — the late scions — only the darkest issues and layers remain; most intimate, least verified, and if verified (because each great poet was also in great depths), not very conscious — and, of course, things most personal, often accidental, but falling into some geologically deep grooves — they must be unconditionally elevated in a clear and objective way. Then, they are good, sometimes great, as for example is the case of Rilke and Eliot, and how often, how very often — as far as our poets are concerned — only of Miłosz's [poetry]". K, part 1, 64–65.

The National Museum of Naples has a modest (1,18m) bas-relief made of Parian marble, of Hermes, Eurydice and Orpheus. Orpheus wears Thracian dress. He holds a lyre in his left hand, and with the right one he removes a veil from Eurydice's face, who with her left hand touches his right arm. On the other side of Eurydice there stands Hermes, leaning slightly backwards. With his left hand he holds Eurydice's right hand, as if he wanted to put her further away from Orpheus. The heads of Orpheus and Eurydice are close to each other. Eurydice's face, and particularly Orpheus's face, are filled with sadness. The face of Hermes is serious and focused. Hermes and Eurydice both wear Greek dresses.

It is usually claimed that this bas-relief shows the heroic but futile effort of Orpheus. He loved his young wife Eurydice. When she died, having been bitten by a snake, Orpheus missed her so much that eventually he went to look for her to the land of eternal darkness and begged the gods of the underworld to let Eurydice return with him to sunlight. Orpheus played the lyre and sang so beautifully that the affected gods agree with his request, but on the condition that he would leave the kingdom of the dead without turning back till he reached home (a motif of a folk tale). But Orpheus failed to do so. He looked back too early to see if Eurydice was following him and she had to leave him again, as he had not kept his promise given to the gods. The bas-relief shows this very moment. The distraught Orpheus Despairing, Orpheus soon died. He was to be torn apart by Thracian women either because of anger and revenge that he had rejected their love, or because Dionysus induced them to a murderous frenzy because Orpheus, although he had the fame of a prophet thanks to him, had not mentioned him in the song he had sung to the gods of the underworld, and because after Eurydice's death he had started to worship luminous Apollo more than him [...].

This bas-relief is very beautiful. The beauty of individual figures is strengthened by a synthetic beauty and a specific, metaphysical meaning of a group as such. Orpheus and Eurydice are more closely connected, which the artist stressed through various artistic means, for example, through the proximity of their heads and the centripetal line of the dresses' folds. Hermes represents the moment of separation and the necessity of parting. Orpheus and Eurydice are spiritually united by their reciprocal love, but this union is not perfect enough

for the discreteness of their individual bodies to be merged. Spiritual unity and corporal multiplicity come close together. People cannot overcome the multiplicity which separates them, even if they are connected by the most honest of passions. On the other hand, multiplicity is not so strong as to prevent spiritual union. In this way this bas-relief, which may be called the most fine monument of Ancient Orphism, has become a symbol of one of its key metaphysical ideas: a mysterious relationship of multiplicity with unity.[...]The anonymous creator of the original composed a *symbol unintentionally*, and such symbols are often more powerful than the intended ones.¹⁶

I will quote Wat's *Somatic Poems* in their completeness, as they were published originally, because in the edition of "Biblioteka Narodowa" ten differences between the original version published in *Nowa Kultura (New Culture)* (1957, no. 30) and the version from the volume *Wiersze (Poems)* (1957), used by Adam Dziadek,¹⁷ were not noted. This seems of particular importance to me because the original text is much more dramatic, and all the repetitions (removed already from the book version of/in? 1957) point to a big difference between Wat, the poet in pain and Wat, a proof-reader outside pain/outside the realm of pain? (while being in remission for a while). Or, these changes might be perceived differently: what happened between 1957 and 1957 that Wat's text was so fundamentally altered/modified??

¹⁶ Adam Krokiewicz, *Studia orfickie. Moralność Homera i etyka Hezjoda*, in *Idem, Dzieła*, v. II, Warszawa 2000, 7–9, Fragments emphasized in the above quotation are highlighted by Adam Krokiewicz..

¹⁷ I believe that the omission described here breaks the rule of the "BN" series. In the fragment of the declaration published in one of the early volumes of "BN", published again in Wat's volume („BN” I 300, s. II), we may read: "Stressing the care of introductory sketches and interpretations of texts, BN at the same time takes it as its duty to give the best texts of the authors, based on autographs, first editions and critical editions". Because as the basis of the 1997 edition (P. 216–217) the 1957 edition of *Wiersze*, the version from the first edition —confronted with the authorial corrections made in the same year—becomes for the time the basis for interpretation for all—except for reader of 1957 "Nowa Kultura".

Wat had a perfect Orphic ear. The first version of the text, published in the periodical, seems to be much better. So, is it also the result of the intervention of censors as—and Dziadek discussed this issue—the volume of 1957 keeps numerous traces of censorship:¹⁸

1

Głos pierwszy:

Między serca rozkurczem a skurczem jest taka chwila
gdy jesteście śmierci.
Za krótka ona byśmy ją postrzegli.
Spazmatyczne jest nasze postrzeganie poznanie. A nam
się zdaje żeśmy rzeką .Rzeką
żywą. Rzeką
płynącą szybciej wolniej ale ciągle i w kierunku.
Esse est percipi et percipere – powtarzamy poruszamy
głową kładziemy rękę na sercu głośno zamykamy
książkę
podchodzimy do stolika z jeszcze ciepłą herbatą
wpatrujemy się w Orfeusza Eurydykę z neapolitańskiej
płaskorzeźby mówimy: dobranoc kochana.
Zegar bije wiatr nadyma firankę gasimy światło.
I pogrążamy się w nicość
jeszcze wtedy pewni, żeśmy **rzeką żywą rzeką rzeką
rzeką**. Żywą rzeką która tylko **pociemniała ociemniała**
– okresowo – wdowa – okresowo – po dziennym
świecie
(ono wróci, wrócić musi jak skurcz po rozkurczu)
a lemury na ociemniałym jej nurcie
to przywidzenia lunatyczne

Głos drugi:

Tymczasem
nicość jest z nami nicość za nami nicość wokoło i w nas
wiele nicości.
A to co nazywamy ruchem dzianiem się życiem to

¹⁸ *Wstęp do: Aleksander Wat, Wybór wierszy, op. cit., LVI.*

przerwy między nicościami, ~~czyżby tożsamymi?~~ pewno tożsamymi.

Głos trzeci:

Jak piękna może być nicość Orfeusza
Ile dobroci ile czułości ile słodczy w nicości Orfeusza
Dobranoc Orfeusza
Dobra jest noc Orfeusza
Orfeusza
Orfeusza ~~Dobranoc~~.

2

Obciosać się. Uschnąć. Wyżąć **się** z wszystkiego co szpikiem, krwią, wydzieliną.
Z serca się wypruć z trzewi z mózgu.
Tylko woreczek zawieszony jak dzwon w opuszczonej campanilli z kroplą żółci dzwoniącą.

3

Gdzie czułość i okrucieństwo w jeden **się** uścisk **się** spleta, tam z latorośli umierającej w patetycznym geście **źródź tryśnie życia źródź życia tryśnie**.
O ekstazo ekstaz o skór komunii o ~~bolesne słodyczki o~~ **bolesna słodycz** penetracji w inne. Śmierć za życia!
Życie za przedprożem śmierci. Zejścia **zejścia!**
zejścia plutonium W **plutonje** koloru krwi i popiołu.¹⁹

¹⁹ I have marked as crossed out fragments, which are given in the 1957 book version, and which are different from the first edition; in bold the version from the first edition. "The first voice;/Between the heart's contraction and the heart's diastole there is/this moment when we belong to death./It is too short for us to notice/ Spasmodic are our observations, cognition./And we think that we are the River. The live/ River. The River flowing faster or slower but always,/In the direction./ Esse est percipi et percipere—we repeat./We move the head, put the hand on the heart/ Loudly shut a book./Come to a table with tea still warm/we gaze at Orpheus's Eurydice from the Neapolitan relief./We say: good night, my love./The clock tolls the wind blows the curtain we turn on the light./And descend into nothingness./ Still then sure that we are ~~the river live river~~ **the river. The live river**/which only got

“Wiersz ostatni” (“The Last Poem”) (and some more)

I will begin with the fragment of poetic prose by Jules Supervielle’s *Orpheus*, which, in my opinion, is a good introduction to Wat’s “The Last Poem”:

“I only like miracles when they are hidden,” he thought. “And if I chose Eurydice for a wife it was because she didn’t raise her arms to heaven like the other young girls whenever I began to sing. She kept her emotions to herself.”

But Orpheus was so much with love with his music that it made him forget his wife. And she was loved in secret by a brutal shepherd, called Arestheus, who had long since killed all the music in himself. Once when he was pursuing Eurydice among the lagoons and the reeds, she was stung to death by a serpent, born of the night itself and embodying the surprises and treachery of the night.

Thereupon Orpheus rushed thither from very far off, guided by his heart, which was at last awakened. Stirred by the incense of the funeral rites, his love finally shook off its torpor. Stricken with silence before the inert body of his wife, the poet decided to hold his peace forever, not even replying to questions put to him by the gods. All music, every word, seemed to him henceforth a profanation.

dark **got blind**—periodically—the widow—periodically—after/ day’s light./(she will return, she must return as contraction must after diastole)/and lemurs in her current/ are only lunatic delusions./The second voice:/Meanwhile/nothingness is with us nothingness behind us nothing around us and in us/there is a lot of nothingness./ And this what we call action movement life are breaks between/ nothingnesses ~~identical, is that so?~~ surely identical./The third voice:/How beautiful can nothingness be Orpheus/How much goodness how much tenderness how much sweetness in nothingness Orpheus/Good night Orpheus/Good is the night Orpheus/Orpheus/ Orpheus/~~Good night~~/2/To chop off oneself to wither to wring out **oneself** from/ everything which is not marrow blood secretion/From the heart to disembowel oneself from the guts from the brain/Only the bladder hanged like a bell in a deserted companilla/tolling with a drop of gall./3/When tenderness and cruelty in one clatch are mixed,/there from the sprout dying in the pompous gesture/~~the spring will erupt of life the spring of life will erupt~~./O! ecstasy of ecstasies o communion of skins o ~~painful little sweetneses o!~~ **painful sweetness**/Of penetration into others Death during life! Life behind the threshold/of death. Descent **descent!** ~~descent plutonium~~ In plutonium of the colour of/blood and ash.”

The gods could not long endure being deprived of that voice, which was so pure that it linked earth to heaven with no effort and with the greatest tact.

Orpheus was given permission to go and fetch his wife, restored from the dead and to bring her from the underworld, going before her with his gaze fixed on the door of the Shades.

But when he was within a few paces of deliverance, the most human of poets could not prevent himself, in spite of the divine command, from turning his head towards his beloved. At first he did not see that his gesture had made his wife disappear, but almost immediately he began to sing a song so sad that after it there was no longer any place in the world for Eurydice.

Cruelly enlightened by his own music he grew desperate at having loved his wife so ill, and in his frenzy this poet, who could infuse life into rocks, hastily put together some verses which came swiftly to him from the far reaches of his mind, in an attempt, in spite of everything, to set the heart of Eurydice, which had turned into stone, beating once more.

But already the wind of death was blowing Orpheus far away from the underworld.²⁰

A moment later the Bacchantes, "who hated music and poetry, which slake the thirst of the senses without feeding their lust"²¹ not being able to seduce Orpheus, killed the son of Oeagrus (Ares or Charops) and Calliope (Polyhymnia or Clio). His severed head and his lyre did not stop the singing about Eurydice (nymph-dryad or, as others insist, a *daughter of Apollo*).²² Supervielle added: "Many hours after his death his lips went on murmuring many new images and beautiful sounds which none but poets to come could hear."²³

²⁰ Jules Supervielle, "Orpheus" in *Selected Writings*, New Directions, New York, 1967, 136-137.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²² Information on similarities and affinities of myths are as presented in Pierre Grimal, *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej*, ed. by Jerzy Łanowski, transl. by Maria Bronarska et al., Wrocław 1990, 94 (entry "Eurydice"), 260 (entry "Oeagrus"), 266-267.

²³ Jules Supervielle, *op. cit.*, 137.

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, in “Ogród Persefony” (“Persephone’s Garden”) (a long fragment of this text has been quoted at the beginning) also wrote about poets of the future, by which he meant that is poets of the twentieth century. He wrote, which is important, that “hell of the twentieth century is hell for everybody”, that “you do not have to be an ancient hero, an outstanding European to get there in your lifetime.”²⁴

One of these poets of the future was Aleksander Wat, when at the very end of his life, with his head and his lyre alone, in his long, incurable illness, in pain that put him on the brink of insanity, he wrote about the loss of Eurydice and his own funeral, about irretrievable katabasis:

Schodzenie
 schodzenie
 ciągle schodzenie
 I żebym to ja sam!
 w zaciszu, po ciemku.
 Te przede mną, za mną
 obok nogi
 przeganiają
 ten stukot butów,
 to dudnienie w metro Châtelet?
 Tylko jeden nieruchomy
 beznogi akordeonista charon.
 I gdzie ja się zabłąkałem?
 Eurydyce? Eurydyce!
 Schodzenie
 Schodzenie
 ciągle schodzenie
 ciągle w dół
 schodzenie

²⁴ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, op. cit., 129.

a jutro stwierdzą
to tylko trzy łokcie pod ziemią²⁵

It seems that no one (most probably) has moved beyond Celan's (auto)definition of the poem: "The poem is lonely. Lonely and *en route*. Its author stays with it" („Das Gedicht ist einsam Es ist einsam und unterwegs. Wer es schreibt, bleibt im mitgegeben"), it is worth asking who is *en route* with this lonely poem, apart from the one who wrote, or rather who whispered it? Because, after all, Celan finished his thought in the following way: "Does this very fact not place the poem already here [...]—in the mystery of the encounter?" („Aber steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch [...]—im Geheimnis der Begegnung?").²⁶

The mystery of the encounter. At first Wat 'unbearably' returns to Norwid and his beginning of "Moja piosnka [I]" ("My Song [I]" Bad, bad, everywhere, always/The black thread weaves and worries./Behind me and before me and nearby."²⁷ In *Somatic Poems* the mystery is expressed by "the Second Voice":/Meanwhile/nothingness is with us nothingness behind us nothing around us and in us/there is a lot of nothingness. And then, in "The Last Poem", as a refrain, which one cannot avoid humming: "Te przede mną, za mną" ("These in front of me, behind me"). It turned out later that this same movement downwards appears in the long poem "Orpheus and Eurydice" by Czesław Miłosz. There, the mournful 'I' moves over hundreds

²⁵ The poem dated Antony, 31 maj 1967. First published in *Ciemne światło*. The title "Wiersz ostatni" ("The Last Poem") was given by Ola Watowa. (see the footnote in Aleksander Wat, *Wybór wierszy*, op. cit., 260). "Descending descending/ constant descending and/If it was only me! In/ a shelter, in the dark. These/in front of me, behind me/next to me legs outrun/this patter of shoes, this rumble/in the underground Châtelet?/Only one legless/accordionist charon./Where have I wandered?/Eurydice? Eurydice?/Descending descending constant/constant descending down/descending and tomorrow they will ascertain it/only three cubits below the ground."

²⁶ Paul Celan, "Meridian", in *Collected Poems*, transl. by Rosemarie Waldrop, Routledge, New York, 2003, 49.

²⁷ Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Poems – Letters – Drawings*, transl. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, 3.

of corridors and floors ([...] “He descended many floors, a hundred, three hundred, down,/He was cold, aware that he was Nowhere”²⁸) in order to arrive finally in a hospital morgue which is also the mythical underworld (“Standing on flagstones of the sidewalk at the entrance to Hades/Orpheus hunched in a gust of wind.”²⁹). This same feeling of ‘underground loneliness’ appears in Adam Zagajewski’s poem “Wielki Piątek w korytarzach metra” (“Good Friday in Corridors of the Underground”) (from the volume *Jechać do Lwowa (To Go to Lwów)*, 1985), with an important ending: “W korytarzach metra ból się nie przemienia, / tylko trwa, boli bez wytchnienia.”³⁰ Wat’s “one legless/accordionist Charon” will be repeated as a homeless person, as nobody in the poem by Ryszard Krynicki “Byłem tutaj” (“I have been here”) (from the volume *Kamień, szron (A Stone, Hoar Frost)* (2004): “We wnące zmroku bezdomny / rozkłada swoje kartony na nocleg. Nikt / odbija się w ścianie”.³¹

In the myth of Orpheus there are tfragments which are more prone—according to Lessing’s classification, more *nebeneinander*—to be transposed to paintings (Gustave Moreau’s (1865),³² Jean Delville’s

²⁸ Czesław Miłosz, “Orpheus and Euridice” in *Selected and Past Poems, 1931-2004*, Penguin Books, London, 2014, 260

²⁹ Ibidem.,

³⁰ Adam Zagajewski, *Wielki Piątek w korytarzach metra, Późne święta*, Warszawa 1998, 111. “In corridors of the underground the pain is not transformed,/but it lasts, it aches without a break.”

³¹ Ryszard Krynicki, *Byłem tutaj* (1990), in *Kamień, szron*, Kraków 2004, 23. “In the niche of the gloom a homeless/puts down his cartons for the night. Nobody/is reflected in the wall.”

³² The cut off head of the poet-singer ‘hugged by’ the lyre on the 1865 painting of Moreau known under the titles “Orpheus” or “Thracian Girl Carrying the Head of Orpheus”, the variant of the same motif in Delville’s painting “Orpheus” from 1893. Redon’s drawings have very different stylistics, particularly in the charcoal drawing “Orpheus’ Head” from 1881. Maria Poprzęcka wrote about the 1865 painting: “In the figure of this girl a picture of posterity was perceived, collecting and patiently protecting the works of a genius. Marcel Proust, who devoted an article to ‘the mysterious world of Gustave Moreau, advised to visit this painting in the museum, as one visits graves. A flash of hope was also perceived in his sadness:

(1893);³³ Odilon Redon's (1881)³⁴ or sculptures (the Neapolitan bas-relief discussed here, Rodin's sculpture with lovers growing into a stone (1893)). There are also such elements of this myth which are more prone to storytelling—they belong to the domain of *nacheinander* in Lessing's terminology—these are closer to poetic or prose re-narrations: an attempt to regain Eurydice is exactly such a story within a story.

Maybe we could also treat as an important one the trace that leads to Redon, there is a poem written by Wat in Paris in November 1956

Orpheus is dead but poetry will not be silenced, because there are two small turtles at the feet of the girl, their shells will one day be used by poets to make their new lyres". See Poprzęcka, *Orfeusz*, „Wysokie Obcasy" [dodatek do „Gazety Wyborczej"], 27 November 1999, 41. Of course, 'a motif of a prophesying head, of the song coming out of the dead mouth of Orpheus, is connected with the iconographical theme of Salome with John the Baptist's head, which was so fascinating to artists of the end of the nineteenth century. As Poprzęcka wrote the best pictures of this head "the most perfect ones, filled with perverse desire were created also by Gustave Moreau"). See M. Poprzęcka, *W stronę ukochanych cieni. Obraz Orfeusza w sztuce symbolizmu*, in *Mit Orfeusza*, op. cit., 227–244. Cf., also: Jean-Pierre Reverseau, *Pour une étude du thème de la tête coupée dans la littérature et la peinture dans la seconde partie du XIXe siècle*, „Gazette des Beaux-Arts", septembre 1972, 173–184.

³³ As Poprzęcka wrote (*W stronę ukochanych cieni...*, op. cit., 242): "Orpheus' of the Belgian symbolist Jean Delville connects in a hazardous way lack of reality of imagination with illusionary mimetics and is closer to an ethereal Phantom than to the macabre of the decapitated man in its literal representation [John the Baptist—K.K-K]. The head, lit by the night light, grows almost organically from a richly ornamented lyre. Around there stars twinkle, and they are reflected in the transparent, lightly ruffled water. The head itself, surrounded by frenzy of golden hair, charms with its androgyny (the painter's wife posed for the painting).

³⁴ Maria Poprzęcka wrote about the charcoal drawing by Odilon Redon (ibidem): "It is unusual not only because of the simplest, barely introductory technique. Also thanks to the severity of the line, elimination of colours, moulding, and almost abstract background. The artist, from the painting devoid of any painterly tricks, also removed all requisites of historical and mythographical erudition. It is unique not only because of the rudimentary, introductory technique. The painting was cleansed not only from narration, but also from all 'delusive representations'. The head itself—big, black with ruffled hair—surfaces vertically in an inexplicable way – not only flow, but in an inexplicable way emerges vertically from the water".

entitled “Na wystawie Odilon Redona” (“At the Exhibition of Odilon Redon”) would give a clue particularly because of the clearly Orphic study in black:

Czerni jest tyle
ile kolorów
na palcie
Natury
a każdy kolor ma własną czerń.
Przyjrzyj się czerniom
na rzece
omżonej blikami latarni gazowych;
czerniom
na bryle antracytu;
podwodnym czerniom
oceanicznym,
gdzie koncha perłowa otwiera łono
promienne,
gdzie koral się pręży
jak gałąź ciernia.
Czerniom się przyjrzyj Redona
Czerniom się przyjrzyj Rembrandta.

Dałbym sobie krwi utoczyć
kwartę
czerwonej
najczerwieńszej
krwi kwartę
utoczyć
żeby osiągnąć syntezę:
czystą
czarną
czerń.
Natura przed nią się cofa
jak koń siwy
przed kobrą

warującą w poprzek drogi
szmaragdowej życia.³⁵

Nature retreats from perfect, synthetic blackness as [...]—I will try to sort out this simile which is so complex because of many symbols piled one over another. An emerald way of life, that is: green and precious. Cobra—also greenish,³⁶ therefore, thanks to mimicry, hidden and 'staying put' on the way of a similar colour—a therefore even more dangerous. Grey horse—the symbolism of horses, depending on their colour and connections with elements, may be lunar (white seahorses) or solar (grey, gold, fiery on the earth and in the air);³⁷ in Greek myths: "White horses pulled the chariot of Apollo and Mitra, as well as Poseidon's, and they were also mounted by Dioscuri [...]"³⁸ When Orpheus loses his wife (Apollo's daughter) bitten by a snake (cobra?), there is some fault in it, some lack of solar vitality; from this perspective Orphic katabasis could be seen as a reparative action. It should not sound paradoxical that Orpheus went down to the underworld to get sun, to get "everything which is most important". While Orpheus's words in the poem by Wat, that he would allow to tap "a quart of his blood" "for the blackest

³⁵ Aleksander Wat, *Wybór wierszy*, op. cit., 117–118. "There are as many blacks/ as colours/on a palette/of Nature/and each colour has its own blackness/Look at blacknesses/on a river/with flashes of gas lanterns/blacknesses on a chunk of anthracite/submarine blacknesses/of the oceans,/where a pearl conch/opens the bosom/radiant,/where coral flexes itself/as a thorn branch./Look at blacknesses of Redon/Look at blackness of Rembrandt./I would allow my blood to be tapped/a quart/of red/the reddest/to tap in order to/achieve synthesis/pure/black/blackness./Nature retreats from it/like a grey horse before cobra/waiting across the road/esmerald of life"

³⁶ Among others an emblem of an Egyptian goddess Wadjet, "the Green", a titular goddess of the Lower Kingdom of Egypt. I am quoting Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1990, 448, hasło „Wąż” (entry "Serpent")

³⁷ See Jean C. Cooper, *Zwierzęta symboliczne i mityczne*, transl. by Anna Kozłowska-Ryś i Leszek Ryś, Poznań 1998, 112, hasło „Konia” (entry "Horse")

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113–114.

of blackness”, suggest a pact with an obvious evil for the price of one’s life, a Faustian price for artistic absolute.³⁹

Nature retreats from perfect blackness, from the quintessence of blackness—Wat seems to be saying at the end of “At the Exhibition of Odilon Redon”—as it retreats from death (and from the kind of pact to which man, particularly an artist or thinker, is ready).

The most important question. What is more Orphic than a descent into blackness: deep into the earth (kingdom of death) or descending into one’s own depth? What defines poetry more than this descent? So, Wat in “The Last Poem”, similarly to Rilke in *Sonnets to Orpheus*, did something remarkable: he descended down into someone’s death. Maybe Wat went even further than Rilke, because the latter went down into the death of Wera Ouckampa Knoop, a young dancer, while the former went down into his own death (from an anthropological point of view this is impossible). As if he was giving a testimony to the opening words of *Somatic Poems*: “Between the heart’s contraction and the heart’s diastole there is/this moment when we belong to death.”

Rilke’s long poem “Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes” was written for three different types of steps: each protagonist had his or her own. The way they walked defined them—a man, a woman, a god. Orpheus devoured the road with huge bites; he wanted it to end as quickly as possible. Eurydice had her feet bound by a shroud, she could not walk fast, her rhythm was the rhythm of a dead person.

Hermes, *Psychopompos*, could communicate, in any way possible, between the vehement, amorous vitality of Orpheus and the deadly condition of Eurydice. But Orpheus could not enter into Eurydice’s

³⁹ Similarly Miłosz, in the poem “Orpheus and Eurydice”: “He remembered her words: “You are a good man./He did not quite believe it. Lyric poets/Usually have—as he knew, cold hearts./It is like a condition. Perfection in art/Is given in exchange for such an affliction” op. cit., 260..

death or either she could not return to life, as it was not his death and it was not her life.⁴⁰

Similarly, in *Somatic Poems* the conversation of a suffering body with itselfs, in the first part of the poem, a dramatic miniature, with three voices, but in the second part it becomes a categorical imperative of dying ("To chop off oneself to wither to wring out oneself from/ everything which is not marrow blood secretion/From the heart to disembowel oneself from the guts from the brain"), a very sudden descent into its own death, and in the third part a state, which is almost impossible to record: of death during life, where both death and life are facts endured by someone experiencing unbearable pain, who is fully conscious "O! ecstasy of ecstasies o! communion of skins o! painful sweetness/Of penetration into the Other. Death during life! Life behind the threshold/of death."

It is different in *Sonnets to Orpheus* and "The Last Poem". An auto-katabasis and an epitaph are, in a way, put together. Rilke's epitaph for a dancer takes 55 sonnets (maybe this is the case of multiplicity Krokiewicz wrote about, maybe Wera Knoop—a nineteen year old dancer who died of leukaemia, of which Rilke was to die soon, is the Eurydice of this cycle). Wat's auto-epitaph is inhibited in the liminal sense (the lyrical situation is liminal indeed: "Descending descending constant/constant descending down/descending and tomorrow they will ascertain it/only three cubits below the ground." Maybe Wat managed to present *as many as one dying person — himself*, poetry became an antidote to segmentation by pain.

Perhaps he managed to succeed in doing what Karl Dedecius regards as the essence of Orphic poetry, an attempt to overcome "a precipice between past and future, beginning and end, life and

⁴⁰ Ola Watowa is a great counterpoint to such a construction of Euridyce, who after her husband's death was giving titles to his works (some of these titles are brilliant, for example *Dziennik bez samogłosek* (*A Journal Without Vowels*), and above all she wrote, similarly to Nadezhda Mandelstam and her *Hope Against Hope* – a book as important as *Wszystko co najważniejsze*, (*The Most Important Things*), with its opening sentence "The most important things in my life are connected with Aleksander". Ola Watowa, *Wszystko co najważniejsze...*, Warszawa 1990, 9.

death.”⁴¹ Maybe his success was partly the result of his reading of Rilke, as it was the phrase from the third sonnet part one from *Sonnets to Orpheus* which kept Wat alive during the worst moments in the Soviet prison.

Nescio: and if asked what poetry is, I wouldn't know either, even though its substance was so self-evident as to be almost palpable in Lubyanka, I could detect its presence with my fingertips, even though poetry's spiritual content is perhaps even purer than that of religious experience since the latter contains psychological elements—a person's feeling towards his father, his relationship to nature, and so forth. Poetry, however can feed on those elements too, but it can also do without them. Perhaps poetry could do without everything and is a state of nirvana, not meaning nothingness but, on the contrary, the highest fullness, “*Gesung und Dasein*,” I repeated after Rilke, and that was enough for me.⁴²

What does being an Orphic poet mean? To experience what is poetic as elementary. I will once again quote Supervielle:

Before his day, the wind in the foliage made no sound, the sea sleeked its waves in complete silence, rain fell on roofs without a murmur, and people were always remarking on the muteness of waterfalls. The nature was waiting for her first poet.

Birds used to look at you with their songs lying inert at the back of their beaks. It was Orpheus who unlocked the throats of the nightingales. And they still sing today as they did in the days of the first poet, recording the time when he came.

If the fish remain silent, it is because they lived even then in the water and so could not hear the poet's voice. But the mermaids, whose only fishy part is their tails, were able to profit by his lesson. It was thanks to Orpheus that the swallows learned how to set about bringing news from the horizon. And if he had not died so young, he would have

⁴¹ Karl Dedecius, *Notatnik tłumacza*, transl. by Jan Prokop, Irena and Egon Naganowsky, Warszawa 1988, 24.

⁴² Aleksander Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, ed. and transl. by Richard Lourie, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, 209.

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gone from space to space, giving a voice to the moon, the sun and the stars, and even to those stars that we shall not see for centuries to come. But hear him speak:

"My father was an eminent waterway. One day Calliope, who was to become my mother, was blissfully bathing in this river. Call as they might to her from the bank, she stayed in for hours, clasped in the delightful arms of the stream.

I am a fruit of that union—half-carnal and half-aquatic, half-white and half-glaucous, half-silence (my mother remained taciturn right up to my birth) and half-music. I have poetry in my blood."⁴³

We see deep white and deep blue colours, when a grey horse retreats from the blackest blackness on an emerald way of life: at the same time an Orphic poet loses a quart of thereddest blood.

⁴³ Jules Supervielle, *op. cit.*, 133.