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## MALCZEWSKI'S KOCHANOWSKI AND NORWID'S KOCHANOWSKI

Comparative analysis between Norwid and Malczewski has been undertaken a few times in separate studies. Marian Maciejewski wrote about Malczewski's influence on Norwid's early writings and about his later attempts to overcome Malczewski's pessimism.<sup>1</sup> While Sławomir Rzepczynński analyzed Malczewski's presence in Norwid's writings in general and asked the following question: *Why did Norwid appreciate 'Maria'?* Zofia Szmydtowa showed, among other things, the presence of Kochanowski and Malczewski in Norwid's early writings.<sup>2</sup> Nobody—however, as it seems—has tried to research how literary tradition (including the literary tradition of Jan Kochanowski) in Malczewski's *Maria* influenced Norwid's attitude to Kochanowski and to the whole of Old Polish literature.

It seems that Malczewski's influence on Norwid's writings was really considerable. While the heritage of other Polish Romantic poets started, more or less about the middle of the 1850s to be treated by Norwid as reality that was merely textual and cultural and external to his own texts. *Maria* as a problem to be solved, as a certain vision of literary and emotional tradition, kept on influencing his own

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<sup>1</sup> Marian Maciejewski, «Spojrzenie w górę» i «wokoło» (Norwid – Malczewski), in Idem, *Poetyka – gatunek – obraz. W kręgu poezji romantycznej*, Wrocław – Gdańsk 1977

<sup>2</sup> Zofia Szmydtowa, *Norwid wobec tradycji literackiej*, in *Sprawozdanie gimnazjum Żeńskiego im. Cecylii Plater-Zyberkówny*, Warszawa 1925

writings: from the time of Norwid's Warsaw début till his final texts written in St. Casimir's old people's home.

The relationship introduced in the title of this paper is complex. After all, what we have here is not only a double comparison, Kochanowski—Malczewski, Kochanowski—Norwid, but also a particular attitude of Norwid to Kochanowski, which was the result of Norwid's reading of Malczewski. And so, in order to present this it seems indispensable to sketch the presence of Kochanowski in *Maria* "A Ukrainian novel".

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"Pieśń IX Ksiąg Pierwszych" ("Song IX of the First Cantos") by Jan Kochanowski (a fragment of which was selected by Malczewski as a motto of Song I in *Maria*) is considered by Old Polish literature scholars to be one of the so called 'revelling songs'. It seems that there is agreement as far as Kochanowski's philosophical attitude expressed in this song. This song exemplifies the uncertainty of human fate, shown in the light of "Christian stoicism".<sup>3</sup> All these claims are true in regard to Old Polish literature and culture. However, when we want to look at this song from the perspective of the Romantic breakthrough, or more specifically from Malczewski's perspective, things start to get complicated. I allow myself to quote some fragments of Kochanowski's song:

[...] Who is so wise to guess  
 What tomorrow offers?  
 God alone knows it and laughs from heaven,  
 When man worries more than it is prudent.  
 [...]  
 It's easy for Fortune:  
 One who stands, has fallen;  
 And the one who was just under its foot,  
 Behold him now, down at us he will look.

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<sup>3</sup> See Ludwika Szczerbicka-Ślęk, *Wstęp do: Jan Kochanowski, Pieśni*, ed. by L. Szczerbicka-Ślęk, Wrocław 2005, xxxvii-xxlviii.

All will strangely tangle  
In this world, so humble:  
He who'd like to grasp all things with his mind,  
Will die before the answer he will find.  
In vain the mortal cares  
For these timeless affairs.  
He will not escape, that much he should know,  
What God had ordained for him long ago.<sup>4</sup>

This song, read after the partitions of Poland and after the disaster of 1812, begins to sound at least in a double-edged, or even ironic, way. What were, then, the pieces of advice of Kochanowski for Malczewski's generation: "In vain the mortal cares/For these timeless affairs." Maybe in vain, but for young Romantics, such arguments were, as it seems, not to be accepted. But it was this generation, which included Antoni Malczewski, which had been brought up in the cult of Old Polish values of the 'Golden Age'. Wołyń Grammar School, in which Malczewski spent many years, was very much centred on the patriotic upbringing of its pupils, while, as the legend had it, the founder of the school personally gave Duchess Izabella Czartotyski the skull of Jan Kochanowski as one of the key exhibits, worthy of display in the temple of Sybilla in Puławy.

Czacki believed that everything depends on the good will of enlightened people. Others shared this conviction. [...] But, in order for *Maria's* bitterness to be created, it was necessary for such thinking to enchant the mind of young Malczewski.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to trace now in what Malczewski himself, the disciple of Czacki and Kołłątaj, might have believed. However, we can trace how the tradition of the faith he was exposed to, particularly the cult of Kochanowski, influenced *Maria*.

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Kochanowski, "Song IX, Book I", transl. by Michael J. Mikoś. [http://www.staropolska.pl/ang/renaissance/J\\_Kochanowski/song\\_I\\_9.php3](http://www.staropolska.pl/ang/renaissance/J_Kochanowski/song_I_9.php3)

<sup>5</sup> Maria Dernałowicz, *Antoni Malczewski*, Warszawa 1967, 44.

There are three direct references to Kochanowski in *Maria*. One of them is, as was mentioned, the motto opening the first part of *Maria*, and there are two references to Kochanowski's *Threnodies*, appearing in both parts of the text.

It seems that Malczewski read Kochanowski's song about the strange world in a manner at once ironic and Romantic. Romantic because the fragment used as the motto might be read as a sort of a manifesto of Romantic epistemology:

A kto by chciał rozumem wszystkim dochodzić,  
I zginie, a nie będzie umiał w to ugodzić  
[motto, l. 3-4] <sup>6</sup>

This fragment might just as well have been used to illustrate an article about the *idea and experience of infinity* or some fragments of Mochnacki's critical deliberations.

The problem with irony is more complex. Danuta Zawadzka wrote about "Pieśń masek" ("A Song of Masks"):

At the same time, who would not agree that this catchy little song, the content of which cannot be rationalized, constructed out of logical and aesthetic dissonances, having fun with the distinction into good and evil—that it is the best development of Kochanowski's song [...] <sup>7</sup>

If we were to agree with Zawadzka, it would be clear that the 'golden' tradition of Kochanowski was very sharply criticized by Malczewski and re-interpreted by him in a demonstratively different way. The point is not so much about an extremely pessimistic vision of history-philosophy, but of mocking what in this tradition might be

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations from *Maria* according to: Antoni Malczewski, *Maria. Powieść ukraińska*, intro. Halina Krukowska i Jarosław Ławski, Białystok 2002. This fragment in Michael J. Mikoś's translation is rendered as: "He who'd like to grasp all things with his mind,/Will die before the answer he will find." *Polish Literature: From the Middle Ages to the End of the Eighteenth Century: A Bilingual Anthology*, selected and translated by Michael J. Mikoś, Constans, Warszawa, 1999, 269.

<sup>7</sup> Danuta Zawadzka, *Pokolenie klęski 1812 roku. o Antonim Malczewskim i odludkach*, Warszawa 2000, 275

saved. Anyway, the multiplicity of various perspectives, overlaid on one another in this blasphemous song of mockery (including a type of reference to the anti-phonetic structure of mass hymns) builds up to an aesthetic evocation of evil, the presence of which somehow breaks from the literary structure of the represented world and would not be interpreted in any way.

The other, a bit less obvious trope leading readers to Kochanowski, is a dual picture of Maria sitting under "old linden trees". Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska wrote about the presence of Kochanowski's *Threnodies* in *Maria*:

A peculiar black climate, which we understand as the mood of the novel, creates a *tension constitutive for the texts, joining in a necessary manner with the frame created by the presence of Kochanowski; Kochanowski, the author of Threnodies and elegies, which do not allow for extreme emotions and solutions.*<sup>8</sup>

Fragments X and XI of Song I are the result of the multiple look of the narrator at Maria. Both fragments taking heed from the Old Polish tradition .

For the first time the picture of "a young lady" is shown in a deformed way, through the prism of a "misty ray". In this fragment Maria is presented as filled with sadness. Her face is seen in the pale light of the moon—the narrator compares her "to an extinguished hope of a quite tomb". The second picture of Maria is very different. She is no longer a person frozen in her suffering, but "a scared dove, flying to the door of light". This change in Maria's perception was brought directly by "The Book of Life", which the narrator seems to notice only when he looks at the protagonist for the next time. This picture also means suffering, but this time the narrator interprets it differently. Now, the earthly sufferings of Maria are seen by him as a catalyst of spiritual transformation:

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<sup>8</sup> Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska, *Wprowadzenie, w: teje, Przemiany form i postaw elegijnych w liryce polskiej XIX wieku. Mickiewicz, Słowacki, norwid, Faleński, Asnyk, Konopnicka*, Warszawa 2002, 9.

I wznosząc w górę oczy – doznała – jak lubo,  
 Rozbłąkanej w swym żalu swego szczęścia zgubą,  
 Gdy już z ziemskich i chęci, i strachu ochłódła,  
 Tęsknić szlachetnej duszy do swojego źródła!

[l. 239–242]<sup>9</sup>

Such a woman, almost sanctified while still alive, will soon be speaking with her father, paraphrasing *Threnody VIII* by Kochanowski:

Nieraz ja sobie wspomnę te dziecinne lata,  
 Tak lube! tak ulotne! i mojego tata  
 Aż raptem u dziewczynki wesołość się zrywa;  
 I wciska mu się w serce – powoli – nieznacznie  
 Póki się nie rozjaśni, i śmiać się nie zacznie.

[l. 285–290]<sup>10</sup>

The quoted fragment in the connection with *Threnodies* sounds like speech from beyond the grave. After all, the reader knows very well what made Kochanowski compose his mournful poems and the fate that soon awaits Maria, the daughter of Miecznik. Anyway, disregarding for a minute the further development of the plot of “the Ukrainian novel”, we can see that Maria, using the language of Kochanowski, agrees in fact to her own death, repeating and transforming this mournful song.

The presence of *Threnodies* is clearly seen in the text of *Maria* once more. Only this time it is the narrator who refers directly to it:

Ah! to Pana Miecznika siwa, nędzna głowa,  
 Niedawno żonę stracił – teraz córkę chowa;

<sup>9</sup> “And raising eyes, she felt, really/Lost in her grief, her fortunes loss,/When she got cooled from earthly wishes and fears,/Longing, the noble soul, for its source.”

<sup>10</sup> “I sometimes remember my childhood years/How blissful, how transient and my father,/And suddenly a girl becomes joyful,/And pushes into his heart—slowly—slightly,/Till it gets brighter and starts laughing.

Na to huśtał kołyskę, by w trumnie uśpili,  
Na to jej woził lamę, żeby całun szyli.

[l. 1445–1448]<sup>11</sup>

In this more objective and subdued tone, the narrator's reference to "Threnody VII" is almost stoical: "O sorrowful garments and pitiful apparel,/Worn by my little girl [...]/ Never more will they be so sweetly worn. My child! All hope is gone!"<sup>12</sup> There is no sense of drama in this fragment, so perceptible in the previous one, with Maria speaking directly. Anyway, the worst horror in the novel has already been described. The further story of her father after her own death brings to this long poem a tone more epic, detached, constructing a monument of words of this last of Polish knights.

The analysis of the fragments presented above may lead to a conclusion about the quite ambivalent role of Kochanowski's poetic tradition in the text of *Maria*. All Old Polish virtues, present in Kochanowski's writings, after the defeats and disasters of the turn of the nineteenth century were no longer enough, or, what is even worse, they started to sound false, ironic. The world of the sixteenth century, the world of beautiful loves (married love, parents' love, love of one's country) got broken under the weight of the existential awareness of nineteenth century narrator, in the sensitivity of whose "the spirit of old Poland" is transformed into "sighs of tombs".

Therefore, if we were to treat Malczewski's *Maria* (according to the interpretation proposed by Danuta Zawadzka) as a debate with the Old Polish tradition, then we can argue that a similar discussion with the spirit of the past (long past and just past) models the range of themes of more than half of Norwid's texts. And although the parallel Malczewski-Norwid is usually perceived as a purely religious discussion, as Norwid's attempt to break free from

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<sup>11</sup> "Ah, this is Mr. Miecznik's grey, miserable head,/He lost his wife a while ago, now he has buried his daughter,/He swung her cradle only to put her in the coffin,/ He bought her clothes which are used now for her shroud."

<sup>12</sup> Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies and The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys*, transl. by Barry Keane, Biblioteka Śląska, Katowice, 2001, 31.

ontological pessimism, as an attempt “to look up, not only around”, it seems that from such a perspective we clearly have no questions about the real reasons for which *Maria* influenced Norwid so much, why his poetic imagination was moved by this text and not, for instance, by Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve, Part IV*.

Marian Maciejewski started tracing Malczewski’s influence on Norwid from the stylistic construction of Norwid’s early poems, stressing their derivative nature and certain lack of skill in his attempts to transform Malczewski’s “philosophical apostrophes” into lyric texts. So, according to Maciejewski, Norwid relied here on Malczewski mostly in the area of the construction of lyric poems.<sup>13</sup> But maybe in this early and strong fascination of Norwid there was more than specific apostrophes? Maybe young Norwid somehow had faith in Malczewski and selected him for the patron of his writings. He also followed Malczewski pessimism, his dark, negative, ironic reading of Kochanowski. It happened that Kochanowski—despite numerous remarks of Norwid scholars about Norwid’s excellent knowledge of Kochanowski’s songs—appeared in Norwid’s writings early and rarely. He appeared in this manner in the poem “My Song [1] “Bad, bad, everywhere, always.”<sup>14</sup> Later, after Norwid’s return from America, it would be Malczewski, who would become a kind of avatar, of his own youth, of historical tradition and of Old Polish literature.

This specific combination of Malczewski and Kochanowski in the poetic imagination of Norwid is best seen in the poems written in 1844, defined by Gomulicki as “the black suite”.

In the first of these poems, “To rzecz ludzka” (“A Human Thing”), as Zofia Trojanowiczowa observed, the reference to Kochanowski exists in the very title, while later we have numerous references to Malczewski, and more specifically to a stream of pictures from *Maria* treated with black humour, connected in an unclear way with themes from Kochanowski’s *Threnodies*:

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<sup>13</sup> Marian Maciejewski, op. cit., 142.

<sup>14</sup> Cyprian Norwid, *Poems – Letters – Drawings*, ed. by and trans. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz, Carcanet, Manchester, 2000, 3.



Był to niby sen burzliwy,  
Niby konia dano dziecku.  
Drży, koleba się u grzywy,  
I koń zasię po turecku  
Wre, a z dała pisk cięciwy  
I szum wielki, niby grają;  
Cień z chorągwią rozwiniętą: [...]

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I cień przewiał...  
Jak chorągiew jego mglista:  
Dziecię, młodzian, starzec – zdrzewiał  
I rozesnął się do czysta,  
By ów niegdyś rdzeń żywiczny,  
Co był drzewem, potem statkiem,  
I zgnilizną; ta ostatkiem  
Przewionęła w mgłę ulicznej.  
[...]  
Oj! zapłakałbym nad wami,  
Że to prochów macie państwo;  
Ale błędem od kolebki  
I jam przysiągł na poddaństwo [...]

[I, 62–63]<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult—really—to show the key themes of this poem. “A Human Thing” becomes, most probably, the equivalent of the whole of the social, historical and cultural events to which Norwid was an observer and a participant in the 1840s. This lyric poem may also

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<sup>15</sup> All quotations from Norwid are given from this edition, Cyprian Norwid, *Pisma wszystkie*, ed. by Juliusz W. Gomulicki, v. I–XI, Warszawa 1971–1976; Roman numbers – volumes, Arabic numbers – pages. ”It was, as if, a tumultuous dream,/As if a horse was given to a child./Shivers, swings at the mane,/And the horse runs/Like wild and from afar a screech of a bowstring,/And great buzz, as if they played,/A shadow with a banner unfurled. And the shadow blew away,/As a misty banner:/A child, a youth, an old man, became like a tree,/And disappeared completely,/So that a former resinous core, / which was a tree,/And later a ship,/And rot,/Which at the end,/Blew in the mist of streets./[...]/I would cry over you,/That you have a nation of ashes,/ But I also from the cradle/Swore errors to slavery./

be treated as a portent to the later text *Zwolon*, filled with collages and pictures of madness. So we have here memories of old military combat (“It was, as if, a tumultuous dream”), and the ‘fossilization’ of the older generation of Romantics—insurgents, as well as negative judgement of the national past (shown in the way directly referring to *Maria*) and the declaration of the lyric ‘I’ of his deep anchoring in this mad national procession. “But I also from the cradle/Swore errors to slaver.” “A Human thing”, a national thing and a poetic thing get devoid here of the Old Polish pathos (Kochanowski) and ontological sadness (Malczewski). While their late grandson, exposed to this confusion, lacked even tears.

The next poem of “the black suite” is “My Song [I]”. Zofia Trojanowiczowa wrote:

“The Czarnolas tradition” from “My Song [I]”, the magic medicine for the ‘disease of the heart’ of the young poet, is a clear sign of tribute and attachment to Kochanowski’s poetry. Why, then, this surprising ending „...and sadder still am I”? Surprising, because the poet uttering these words was not let down by his “lyre of golden strings”, he played with it, one would like to say, he played with it in the manner of Kochanowski.<sup>16</sup>

If we were to stick to the highest role of Kochanowski’s tradition in Norwid’s writings, then the final stanza of “My Song [I]” would be surprising. After all, as Zofia Szymdtowa pointed out: “Jan Kochanowski, supports him [Norwid] with his word, when it comes to declaring prudence in life and relying on God’s mercy.”<sup>17</sup>

The other option is to insist on the ambivalent role of Kochanowski’s tradition in Norwid. I am going to stress it: the tradition, not his writing or the figure of the Renaissance poet as such. It seems that a similar way to that of relying on Kochanowski in the poem

<sup>16</sup> Zofia Trojanowiczowa, «Moje piosnki». Próba nowej lektury, in Eadem, *Romantyzm – od poetyki do polityki. Interpretacje i materiały*, ed. by Anna Artwińska, Jerzy Borowczyk, Piotr Śniedziewski, Kraków 2010, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Zofia Szymdtowa, *Norwid wobec tradycji literackiej*, op. cit., 77.

["Bad, bad, everywhere, always..."] is supported by the motto used by Norwid: "What are you reading, Your Highness? Words, words, words."

As Zofia Trojanowiczowa convincingly argued, that main theme of "My Song [I]" is a literary tradition and Norwid's attempts to find his own spot in this tradition. So, according to Trojanowiczowa, apart from Kochanowski and Shakespere we have here Mickiewicz and the tradition of poetic improvisations, alive in the nineteenth century. The last resort from the mourning mood of this tradition for Norwid was "rzecz czarnoleska". But, after all, this leads to a final statement: "and sadder still am I". Such a conclusion—so it seems—could come to mind only to a faithful reader of Malczewski.

The reading of Malczewski, so important for young Norwid, would take on different shades in different periods of his life and writing. Most clearly we can see it in Norwid's declarations about the lack of "a complete woman" in Polish literature. One might assume that this type of Norwid's critical obsession was connected, first of all, with *Maria*. Anyway, Norwid gave very different verdicts on *Maria*, from "the only type of Polish woman", to totally weak artistically construction "which had no time to develop into a complete character, before she was strangled with pillows, that is drowned in a marsh". (introduction to "Pierścień Wielkiej Damy" ("A Ring of a Grand Lady"), 1872, V, 188–189).

Following Maciejewski, many critics have treated a late long poem by Norwid entitled *Assunta* as his final victory over Malczewski's pessimism. Sławomir Rzepczyński wrote:

So he [Norwid] had to write his *Maria*, that is *Assunta*, in which the look "around" is opposed with the "look above". In this opposition he was polemical both with Byron and with Malczewski, but polemical in a specific way, as there was much acceptance and additions in it, being the result of the conviction of continuing on the way, so it is not overgrown with "wormwood, moss and hemlock".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sławomir Rzepczyński, op. cit., 445.

This is all very true, but one must honestly state that *Assunta* is a very strange protagonist. And although researchers have been writing so beautifully about her “meaningful look”, it is difficult, however, to treat a character so sketchily drawn and mute as an attempt of the most perfect realization of the female protagonist in the literature of Polish Romanticism. Anyway, it is worth noting that Norwid himself did not even hint at anything like it. In the introduction to this late text he wrote only about a very few “long love poems” in Polish literature, and also stressed that *Maria* is a “novel” (III, 264). So he did not mention any female character in this context nor any lack in this respect. Because *Assunta* is, first of all, a long love poem, depicting the love of the main protagonist, so different from the love of Waclaw for Maria.

There is one more text in Norwid’s *oeuvre* in which he, as it seems, tried to enter into some polemic debate with Malczewski. I have in mind the poem entitled “Śmierć” (“Death”), which was included in *Vade-mecum*.

1

When you hear a worm bore a bough,  
Hum a song or strike timbals;  
Don’t think of forms ripened elsewhere;  
Don’t think – of death...

2

Pre-Christian this and blissful way  
Of creating for oneself *soft dalliances*  
And *hard* faith that *death: touches beings,*  
*Not circumstances – –*

3

And yet, whatever death has touched  
It’s the *backdrop*– not essence, that he’s rent,  
Barring the moment when he took, but took nothing: –  
Man – is death’s elder!

[II, 116]<sup>19</sup>


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<sup>19</sup> Cyprian Norwid, *Poems*, transl. by Danuta Borchardt, Archipelago Books, New York, 2011, 57

It may seem that the strongly polemic tone of the poem, clear from the beginning, has no definite addressee. But, after all in Polish literature we do have a "little song" starting with the refrain: „Ah! na tym świecie, Śmierć wszystko zmiecie, / Robak się łągnie i w bujnym kwiecie” (*Maria*, w. 734–735).<sup>20</sup>

I have already quoted Danuta Zawadzka and her argument that the so called second song of masks from *Maria* is the fullest development of Kochanowski's motto. If we assume that it is the song of masks which Norwid was referring to in "Death", it would lose its abstract-polemic character and would become one more of his skirmishes with the spirit of his youth.

Stefan Sawicki read this particular poem of Norwid in a general, symbolic, way:

A maggot destroying a branch—a symbol of life, becomes a sign, a symbol of everything which passes, declines and dies. This interpretation is unambiguously suggested by the words of the forms which "grew mature" and are just a moment before decline and by the words of death. The title, as well, dictates the tone of the whole poem. Someone humming this tune or "banging the dulcimer" is in this context the symbol of cheerfulness and joy.<sup>21</sup>

It seems, however, that this manner of reading could become more specific.

Each of the stanzas of the song of the masks introduces a different manner of death and an ambivalent (mocking-comforting) attempt to alleviate the experience of death ("peace will return, angel, mirth", etc.) We see a similar situation in Norwid's poem. On the one hand, the poet presents the experience of death ("quickly you will hear"—quickly you will feel approaching death). The difference is that

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<sup>20</sup> "Ah! In this world death will sweep everything,/A worm hatches also in rampant flowers."

<sup>21</sup> Stefan Sawicki, o «Śmierci» Cypriana Norwida, in Idem, *Norwida walka z formą*, Warszawa 1986, 84

Norwid's comfort created by an explanation of the nature of death was written absolutely seriously.

The experience of death is in both poems equally universal. But Malczewski and Norwid looked at it very differently. The death according to Malczewski, the death sung about in his masks, is constantly winning over everything which is good and noble. Norwid's death is winning only provisionally, it destroys the background, but not the sense of life. It takes only a moment, which is necessary to transfer into "the invisible world" (as he wrote in *Black Flowers*).

The third part of this equation is—naturally—Kochanowski. The mocking comforts of Maria's murderers seem to be only pastiches of the stoical sentences of Kochanowski. And what about Norwid? His reference to Kochanowski is a bit more subtle. He used in this poem a Sapphic verse, introduced to Polish prosody by Kochanowski himself in his *Songs*. And also the advice at the end of the first stanza is a bit reminiscent of Kochanowski's distinguished instructions.

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It seems that the ghost/spirit of Malczewski was one of Norwid's most faithful friends. I am convinced that Malczewski's influence could be found also in other poems by Norwid.

. Naturally, not all the times were these influences so gloomy as in the examples shown above. However, there is no doubt that Malczewski was for Norwid one of the most important conductors/transmitters of the Old Polish tradition.