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**WHY DID CYPRIAN NORWID TEAR THE MEMORIAL  
DRAWING FROM EGYPT HE HAD RECEIVED FROM  
JULIUSZ SŁOWACKI? ON THE PRIVATE NATURE  
OF CZARNE KWIATY (BLACK FLOWERS)**

Private life became an important part of art in the Romantic period. This is a general statement which includes various issues and problems of an aesthetic nature referring to the period of Romanticism and to the culture of the reception of works of art and readers' expectations which existed at that time. The lives of artists, including their private lives, became more and more public in the sense of being subjected to the expectations and judgements of the public. Private and intimate lives had a powerful influence on the shaping of literary conventions and on the ways of development of lyric poetry.

The unofficial sphere was quite important in Norwid's aesthetics. It was dealt with, among others, in *Czarne kwiaty (Black Flowers)*. It seems that Norwid pushed further the border of what was private and intimate in art, further than it had been established in the first half of the nineteenth century. I would like to start my explanations with a detail. Adam Mickiewicz, in his notebook for *Dziady część III (Forefathers' Eve Part III)* in the stage directions for the prison scene wrote:

A corridor—guardsmen with carbines stand nearby—a few young prisoners, [in dressing gowns—G.M.] with candles, leave their cells—midnight.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers' Eve*, transl. by Charles Kraszewski, Glagoslav Publications, London, 2016, 181.

In the text which was published we find, however, the following words:

A corridor—guardsmen with carbines stand nearby—a few young prisoners, with candles, leave their cells—midnight.<sup>2</sup>

So the prisoners remained in their day clothes. This is an important detail.<sup>3</sup> Mickiewicz probably gave up these dressing gowns for many reasons, including the following one: “a dressing gown was a symbol of private life and as such was connected with it.”<sup>4</sup>

Norwid, in *Black Flowers*, introduced characters in an unofficial way, including in it aspects of their clothes. This is just a detail, but the description of the character is important in their general characteristics, their health, and psychological and spiritual situation. The main theme of *Black Flowers* is the intimacy of final meetings before death with friends and acquaintances, the status of whom was also public. The unofficial sphere transferred into the field of art became the main theme of this masterpiece and also an important feature of its narrative. *Black Flowers* is about moments of meetings/farewells. They become a type of treasure, both individual (that is connected with Norwid’s reminiscences) and communal (national and of the *émigré* community).<sup>5</sup> They solidify the moment of the transition from the individual memory of an author to the collective memory. This transition was accomplished also, or maybe in a predominant way,

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> I owe Maria Prussak thanks for the interpretative suggestion.

<sup>4</sup> This theme was discussed by, *Kariera szlafroka, czyli wokół karykatur szlachciców Norwida*, in *Norwid – artysta. W 125. rocznicę śmierci poety*, ed. by Krzysztof Trybuś, Wiesław Ratajczak, Zofia Dambek, Poznań 2008, 104.

<sup>5</sup> Agata Seweryn treated Norwid’s poem within the ‘cloister’ tradition: “*Black Flowers* [...] can be looked at in the perspective of ekphrasis – as a gallery of nineteenth century ‘coffin portraits’. They are also a contemporary version of ‘cloister’: these ‘flowers’ and ‘flowers of rhymes’ set in florilegia and hortuluses. At the same time ‘black flowers’ refer not only to “last conversations with people who had died and had gone to the invisible world, but also to the theme of vanity—cutting flowers with a scythe—clearly marked, for example in *Assunta*. Agata Seweryn, *Światłocienie i dysonanse. O Norwidzie i tradycji literackiej*, Lublin 2013, 20-21.

because of the publication of this book. This fact changes the status of the last visits and conversations of Cyprian Norwid with Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, Zygmunt Krasiński, Stefan Witwicki, Paul Delaroched and a beautiful Irish woman; the content of which was re-told and published in a work of art.

The opening declaration in *Black Flowers* is important from the perspective of the research on the problem of the private sphere in this period. It reveals the awareness of Norwid as a writer, that it was a different text than others published in this period:

...One could write interesting things on this matter, but repulsion soon takes the pen away and the question arises? *Is it worth it?* With the attitude to reading and creative writing held today the tradition is almost lost, *when a writer attempts to avoid the style*, due to respect for described things, important as they are and when, on the contrary, *s/he disregards the style and for...* When s/he treads on the ground showing how low s/he could get, because s/he could not go any higher. These shades of meanings, so unambiguous for certain people, could be detected these days by very few readers, therefore it is dangerous to start even an inch on the new way, and it is safer to go, round and round, with the same motives and forms, in adequate proportions, not introducing anything new, nor venturing into any new territory.

However, in *the book of life and knowledge* there are such fragments, for the formulae of which there is no proper style, and it is quite an achievement to render the theme and expose them as they really are. Are they to remain closed personal acquisitions for fear of a coarse critic accustomed to just two formulae cut out in the way in which patterns are cut out for room painters?<sup>6</sup>

The fragment above is not so much an introduction, but rather a reflection opening this text and being an integral part of it. This text begins with an ellipsis. It does not have a conventional beginning. Norwid raised a question, formulated a problem, which was also an aesthetic problem, whether "the book of life and knowledge" can

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<sup>6</sup> Cyprian Norwid, *Czarne kwiaty*, in Idem: *Dzieła wszystkie*, ed. by Stefan Sawicki, v. 7: *Proza*, ed. by Roman Skreń, Lublin 2007, 43. Emphasis E. S. P.

be a theme for a work of art, because—in his opinion—there are no “formulae of style” in the language to express this type of existential experience. The problem is not so much (or not only) about moral appropriateness but about giving up formal markers and doubts, if the message is to be conveyed clearly. Norwid was writing about events in the lives of concrete people of public status, among other things, about unofficial meetings, while at the same time he was generalizing and universalizing them. These issues, in the context of the opening fragments of *Black Flowers*, were raised by Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak:

[Norwid] would declare his own search for the non-existing “formulae”—located between ‘bookish classicism’ and journalism. Let us concentrate, however, on a different aspect focused on in this quotation—the murky book is “the book of life and knowledge”, so the area of darkness is no longer the whole of history observed by an ‘eternal man’, but existence being a part of the rhythm of evanescence—contemporary life in which a hermeneutic author searches for signs and words referring to transcendence. We could formulate a hypothesis here that between Norwid’s return from America and his editing of *Vade-mecum* there was a change in the range of what art could recognize and put light on. The appropriateness of this hypothesis could be tested on Norwid’s texts such as *Quidam*, *White Flowers* and *Black Flowers*, the generic shape of which was clearly connected with the search for an artistic form for this ‘transferred’ area of ‘darkness’.<sup>7</sup>

Norwid was aware of the importance of the artistic decisions he was taking. He formulated these problems at the beginning of the text and introduced them to the body of this text. The question about the place of private (unofficial) life in literature, about breaking taboos,

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<sup>7</sup> Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak, *Ciemność życia i granice wyobraźni – status poety dzisiaj (o Norwidowskich wierszach napisanych w latach 1854-1861)*, in: *Symbol w dziele Cypriana Norwida*, ed. by Wiesław Rzońca, Warszawa 2011, s. 30. Cf., Maria Cieśla-Korytowska, *Od autobiografii do... w „Czarnych” i „Białych kwiatach”*, w: *Biografie romantycznych poetów*, ed. by Zofia Trojanowiczowa, Jerzy Borowczyk, Poznań 2007.

and crossing certain borders finds its reflection in the further part of the text:

Today it is a *good medieval diary* which has more chance of becoming popular than contemporary facts. So, readers are like a person removed from his friend who has his picture as a souvenir, which when the friend returns from his journey: "Don't disturb me," he says to this friend, "because now we have exactly the time when I am used to looking at your portrait and I was about to write you a letter."<sup>8</sup>

Norwid put together the traditional autobiographic genre, and also maybe the hagiographic one ("good medieval diary") with something that transcends autobiography (that is a certain model, an ethos), which can be defined, although not very directly, as a lyric form. The difference between traditional genres and "new" attempts of expression is analogous to the one which existed, to use Norwid's own simile, between watching a portrait of a given person and a meeting with this person; when s/he returns home and is standing in the door. Norwid referred to this problem taking into account a reader, contemporary to him, who had been shaped by the literary canons of that period. In *Black Flowers* he contrasted an effort of being with another man with the ease of being with an artefact.

The next paragraph of *Black Flowers*, which is an extended, metaphorical picture, can be understood only in the context of the development, from the very beginning, of the epitaph type of a long poem. Norwid recalled the moment when he was sightseeing in Rome's catacombs. He inserted this memory in *Black Flowers* not only because it introduced the reader to "the land of death and memory", but also to express his own experience of contacts with the ones who had departed. Ampoules with the blood of the first Christians, drawings, slogans, signatures were for him clear signs, testimonies of the life and martyrdom of concrete people. This is a reading of signs hidden deep in the earth, very durable, almost eternal in comparison with the fragility of human life. Histories

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<sup>8</sup> Cyprian Norwid, *Czarne kwiaty*, op. cit., 44.

of people read underground on the basis of signs were compared by Norwid to “shelves of a library”, where next to one another we have people-books and people-stories, This is an important intellectual short-cut to the concepts described by Norwid: each being seems to have its spot in the library, which was many years later called a universe in Borges’s short story “The Library of Babel”. Thus Norwid undertook a theme connected with aesthetic conventions and literary forms. “A huge underground city”, to which the poet referred, is a figure of sense for another dimension of life, that is for the most internal and deepest of its streams. Norwid remained in this “huge underground city” in his long poem, moving through different spots dictated by final meetings, meetings just before death.

While closing his epitaph long poem Norwid returned to the meta-theme with which he started it:

I call the things described here: *Black Flowers*, they are as faithful as witnesses’ signatures, who could not write and signed with a clumsy cross. One day!... in the literature I *am going to see* that such texts will not look strange to readers looking for stories. There are novels and romances, dramas and tragedies in the world which have not been written and are not literary, of which our men of letters *had never dreamt*. But to define them—is it worth it? ... already?...<sup>9</sup>

This is a very important declaration: the one that his book is like the signatures of witnesses who could not express themselves otherwise and merely made signs of the cross. Norwid had an awareness that he was going beyond conventions and he turned *Black Flowers* into an aesthetic and literary manifesto.<sup>10</sup> Norwid paraphrased in the quote above Shakespeare’s: “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” At the same

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>10</sup> Sławomir Rzepczyński wrote, from a different perspective, about the aesthetic project of Norwid embedded in *White Flowers* and in *Black Flowers*, „Nowy budynek estetyki”. *Koncepcja literatury w „Czarnych” i „Białych kwiatach”*, in Kazimierz Cysewski, Sławomir Rzepczyński, *O „Czarnych kwiatach” Norwida*, Słupsk 1996.

time this is a reference to Mickiewicz's *Forefathers Eve, Part II*, where Shakespeare's words are the motto. Mickiewicz's long poem began Romanticism in Poland. It was a kind of existential morality play on the theme of death, but different from Norwid's poem. The poet's doubts expressed in the quoted fragment are meaningful, because Norwid moved beyond the literary and wrote about concrete people, revealing fragments from their unofficial lives. He used techniques present in reportage, a genre which started to develop in the second half of the nineteenth century, but he selected those elements which only in the twentieth century started to be perceived as mastery of the form, such as generic syncretism, psychological angle and subjectivity of the narrative.

Now *Black Flowers* is regarded as an essayistic or lyric long poem,<sup>11</sup> but Norwid used a language different from the literary language of his period, and a form different from earlier forms. *Black Flowers*, also thanks to the story about "private life", created new standards in literature. The book can be read as a long poem, a short story, an essay, etc., but does its character change when we interpret it in the context of the first edition? *Black Flowers* was published in an extra of the monthly "Czas"? How was it received by its first readers? While, the early *Forefathers' Eve* by Adam Mickiewicz might be treated as the beginning of the Romantic aesthetics of confession (connecting autobiography and literature), *Black Flowers* created a certain symbolic border, a point of arrival as far as means of expressing and exposing unofficial life is concerned. This initiated an important trend in art. The status of *Black Flowers* in the context of the first publication of the long poem in a periodical seems to be even more unspecified.

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<sup>11</sup> Elegiac aspects of lyricism of *White Flowers* and *Black Flowers* were discussed in: Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska, *Przemiany form i postaw elegijnych w liryce polskiej XIX wieku*, Warszawa 2002 (chapter: „Wokół „Czarnych...”, „Białych kwiatów” i „Vade-mecum”. Elegijność Norwida”). Kuczera-Chachulska stressed the cyclicity of *White Flowers*, *Black Flowers*, *Vade-mecum*, and she pointed to the fact that the main structural rule of these poems is 'the rule of a bouquet'.

Norwid decided to publish it very quickly. He probably completed it in 1856 and published it in the same year.

[...] it must have happened after 4 November (the day on which Paul Delaroché died) and probably still in November, as the text was published in an extra to Cracow's "Czas" for December 1856, and this extra booklet was ready on 31 December, as the editorial note informed readers that they would receive the extra booklet together with the standard December issue.<sup>12</sup>

In *Forefathers' Eve, Part II* by Mickiewicz, what philosophers had not dreamt of existed in the world of stories, that is in the literary world, in the ups and downs of protagonists; while in *Black Flowers*, what was most unusual, of what "our" men of letters had not dreamt of was hidden in the real world and in lives of real people, and therefore what had been considered 'non-literary' and private. Philosophers in Norwid's paraphrase of Shakespeare were replaced by men of letters, because Norwid asked questions about the development of art, and about direct relationships between works of art and real life. In the context of *Black Flowers* we should see Norwid's relations with the period which had started with the publication of Mickiewicz's *Ballads and Romances* and *Forefathers' Eve, part II*. Norwid's literary project grew out of his relations with the main stream of Romanticism:

His [Norwid's] Romanticism was a result of the tension between these images, which had been forced upon Polish consciousness by Mickiewicz's generation, with images which were constructed during long years of emigre life in Paris.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Roman Skręt, *Czarne kwiaty. Uwagi edytorskie*, in Cyprian Norwid, *Dzieła wszystkie*, v. 7, op. cit., s. 266. "Czasu" (31 December 1856).

<sup>13</sup> Zofia Stefanowska, *Norwid – pisarz wieku kupieckiego i przemysłowego*, in *Literatura. Komparatystyka. Folklor*, Warszawa 1968. Kazimierz Cysewski wrote about "literary studies musings" of the narrator of *Black Flowers* and also about his egotism. It seems that Cysewski was too critical of Kazimierz Cysewski, *Narrator...*, in Kazimierz Cysewski, Sławomir Rzepczyński, *O „Czarnych kwiatach” Norwida*, op. cit., 69.



That was the attitude which Norwid took to *Forefathers' Eve*, referring to Mickiewicz's motto, the theme of which was also contact with the dead. However, the dead in *Forefathers' Eve* had the status of literary characters—in *Black Flowers* they were concrete people with real names. *Black Flowers* pushed further the border of what is unofficial in Polish literature.

Zofia Stefanowska once compared a fragment from Norwid presenting sightseeing of Rome's catacombs with a scene from Federico Fellini's film *Roma*, in which frescos excavated during the construction of a new line of the underground disappear irrevocably under the operation of light. It could be claimed, in the context of *Black Flowers*, that Norwid preserved in it what would have been irretrievably lost, as these underground frescoes, but also thanks to art, details and fragments about the lives of concrete people introduced the general human perspective. This is more than an association. After all, in *Black Flowers* Norwid directly referred to the art of frescoes. He had studied frescoes as an artist and a poet, and he reminiscent sketchily:

I remember that one time when in Rome I was returning from the catacombs, where I enjoyed looking at the remaining frescos of the first Christians—I would not like to go into detail because this story would be very long—*about each sign and each line used there*—but I will only write this, that this underground city with its inscriptions and drawings showed to me, through the whole acts of a bloody drama that there had been almost not a single drop of blood shed that had not been honoured and prayed for by brotherly co-religionists.<sup>14</sup> (Emphasis—E.S.P)

We might consider the technique of frescoes in the context of the style of narration and Norwid's auto-thematic considerations in *Black Flowers*. Norwid was aware of the difficulties of the whole venture, problems with forms, problems with construction of each

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<sup>14</sup> Cyprian Norwid, *Czarne kwiaty*, op. cit., 44.

line, of each sign. Meta-textuality was to reveal and explain the effort and goals of Norwid.

Soon after this fragment, in a separate part of text started with the ellipsis, Norwid referred to the meeting with the first person—Witwicki. The meta-textual reflection returned, spurred by problems of expression:

Whenever I recollect last conversations with people, who had already departed into the invisible world, having died here, I do not know how to omit what is self-evident from this collection of stories, and that is why I turn my pen, in a way, into a daguerreotype in order to be faithful.<sup>15</sup>

However, this type of change of the style of narration into a daguerreotype is only apparent one.<sup>16</sup> It was more the result of the awareness of artistic problems and doubts. The change of the technique to a daguerreotype one (realistic) would be a kind of resignation from Norwid's goal. Norwid's doubts in the text are reflected in his use of «in a way» in the phrase “I turn my pen, in a way, into a daguerreotype”. He not so much wanted to re-create events and immortalize them (mimesis), but attempted their immortalization (metaphysics). This is the main difference between the culture of the daguerreotype and the rich culture of frescoes. The latter of these techniques raises the importance of what is unofficial in the text of *Black Flowers*: suffering, pain, awareness of death. In this spot of a complex narrative structure martyrs from old times meet with people whom Norwid remembers; they meet in the human dimension of life and death. These moments become the source of truth, not of daguerreotype nature, but the one that was embedded in the art of frescos. The underground corridors Norwid

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>16</sup> The ‘daguerreotype’ nature of *Black Flowers* was discussed, among others, by: Kazimierz Cysewski i Sławomir Rzeczpczyński, O „Czarnych kwiatach” Norwida, op. cit., Adela Kuik-Kalinowska, *Cypriana Norwida „Czarne kwiaty” i „Białe kwiaty”*, Słupsk 2002.

walked (literally and metaphorically) allowed him to create, not to re-create. Studies over "each line and each sign" in frescoes are reflected in *Black Flowers*.

The word 'fresco' derives from Italian, where it means "fresh", "over wet, fresh plaster".<sup>17</sup> Norwid, in a sense, was painting "over wet, fresh plaster" not only because of the proximity of the deaths of well-known people, but also in the context of the technique and style of the art of frescoes, which is distinguished by: precision, durability and the requirement of quick creation.

This type of wall painting is very durable: the advantage of its durability is the result of the simultaneous crystallization of wet calcium with the paints applied with brushes: these paints are diluted with water. Because of these, colours must belong to the type of non-soluble by calcium, that is mineral [...] The whole work on the wall must be provisional—so that a part started on one day is finished at the end of the same day, before the wet plaster dries—that is why contours of figures and clothes are marked with blunt iron, with a nail, to cut off the dried edges and next to them, on the following day, put a fresh layer. This provisional technique has one advantage in the contest of mastery: a painter must work quickly, with no changes, work energetically and correctly to achieve an effect of great freshness.<sup>18</sup>

In *Black Flowers* Norwid directly referred to frescoes. This world "opened" for him the worlds "beyond the grave". The death of a person allows us to present the uniqueness of her life, to define her "contours" more clearly, to understand "traces" left (what is eternal, beyond evanescence), and hence Norwid's meta-textual doubts constantly troubling him:

Here I start to think if it is *worth it* to show this truth for cynical contemporary readers. Maybe, it is better to write some romance,

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<sup>17</sup> An entry in *Wielka Encyklopedia Powszechna Ilustrowana*, Warszawa 1899, vol. 23, 257.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

fantastically lying, after a dose of Indian *hashish*, which would be nicer and more expected!<sup>19</sup>

The meta-textual considerations of Norwid testify that it was a real challenge for him. This aspect was undertaken by Michał Kuziak, who wrote “about the ethical character of Norwid’s *mimesis*”

I think that this may be the result of the ethical question of how to express what cannot be expressed—the experience of death. *Black Flowers* seems to show the imperative and impossibility of representing it. This imperative is the only certain thing. The problem is what is expressed, the expressing subject and his text. How can we speak and write about mystery, and not to touch it, not to replace it with this speaking and writing? This seems to be a fundamental question inscribed in this text. The ethical question connected with the category of testimony, which should be given, and which, maybe must not be given (it is not worthy to give it? The work of memory is an answer, which allows us to come into a specific relationship with its subject, the relationship of nostalgia—of union and distance, an effort to come ever closer to what existed and what remains elusive.<sup>20</sup>

*Mimesis* in the art of frescoes, in contrast with the technique of the daguerreotype, has a noble character (metaphysical, not to say, transcendental), and therefore *mimesis* is transcended. Krzysztof Trybuś wrote:

Norwid insisted not only on verisimilitude of representation, but, first of all, on the proper shape of memory for the departing ones.<sup>21</sup>

The questions raised in the quote above return on this level. Norwid was coping with the challenge of “How to represent what is unrepresentable?”, “how to speak and write about mystery?” It seems that

<sup>19</sup> C. Norwid, *Czarne kwiaty*, op. cit., 51

<sup>20</sup> Michał Kuziak, *Czarne kwiaty, których nie ma*, in *Strona Norwida. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Stefanowi Sawickiemu*, ed. by Piotr Chlebowski, Włodzimierz Toruń, Elżbieta Żwirkowska, Edyta Chlebowska, Lublin 2008, 281.

<sup>21</sup> Krzysztof Trybuś, *Pamięć romantyzmu. Studia nie tylko z przeszłości*, Poznań 2011, 66.

an unusual attempt to use lines and signs characteristic for frescoes allowed such a search. A fresco painting, particularly religious fresco painting, seems to be an expression of what exists in concrete shapes and lines, and its main theme is mystery (metaphysical context).

One more nagging question arises from dealing with the sphere of the unofficial in literature. Would Witwicki, Słowacki, Chopin, Mickiewicz, Delaroche and the beautiful Irish lady have agreed to the publication of *Black Flowers*? Did Norwid ask them about it? Did he ask their families and people close to them about it? Probably not. Should these questions be raised since a text considered to be a masterpiece was created? Does the mastery of *Black Flowers* remove the sense and meaning of such questions? They tell us a lot about the sense of *Black Flowers* and about Norwid's decision.

There is a scene in *Black Flowers* which is extremely important in this respect. Norwid mentioned a drawing he had been given by Juliusz Słowacki:

I have Juliusz's drawing he drew from nature in Egypt; he was particularly good with landscapes, but I cut this souvenir into two and I gave one part to an album of a person who had come from Poland and left the other part for myself, so that the words written in *Beniowski* would come true: "[...]that your right glove will be placed in some museum, while there will be complaints about the lost left one. Irony, so clearly non-scathing as Juliusz's irony was, does not interfere with after-death reminiscences.. In fact it seems similar to the words which Philip of Macedonia ordered to be woken up with: "Your Highness! The sun is rising, remember throughout the whole day that you are mortal."<sup>22</sup>

Norwid cut this important drawing from Egypt he had from Słowacki in two. He sent one part to Poland and kept the other one. His decision has a symbolic dimension. It mirrors his meta-textual problems with *Black Flowers*, reveals the conception of writing and representing characters (entering the private sphere) and

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<sup>22</sup> Cyprian Norwid, *Czarne kwiaty*, op. cit., 49-50.

simultaneously an attempt to immortalize what is fragile and transient (individual life and its memory). Norwid converted the drawing into two fragments; on the one hand he destroyed the drawing (a gift from Słowacki), and on the other he immortalized it in a work of art. His gesture is similar to Fellini's twentieth-century gesture. It is interesting which particular sheet Słowacki gave to Norwid (it was probably part of *Raptularz wschodni*, and through Norwid to the whole world. What was its content? What was the dimension of this gift?