

AGNIESZKA CZECHOWICZ

**“UNIVERSAL LAW, CUSTOMS OF GREAT AND
SMALL”: SOME REMARKS ON THE INTERPRETATION
OF “THRENODY XIX” BY JAN KOCHANOWSKI¹**

1

The final poem from Kochanowski’s cycle “Threnody XIX”—in which there are solutions to all themes, pictures get completed, the answers arrive and the questions die out, the questions which have been asked in the previous eighteen poems—has been treated in research in a separate way, which is the result of its final position, closing a larger whole. The remarks which follow are an attempt to read the ending of the poem in a slightly different way—most particularly the fragment in which the mother arrives in a dream hearing her son crying, and reminds him about the long years he spent learning a long time ago, and advises him not to wait for the flow of time to heal his suffering, but to speed up this extremely slow treatment with his reason: And here we have this fragment:

Finally, what have you to say for the years lost
To your labours, the self-sacrifice and great cost?
All those years spent poring over page after page,
Depriving yourself of the delights of this age.
Now is the time to reap the fruits of your labour
And attempt to save your shaken, fragile nature
You have cheered others in such a predicament,
Shall you not yourself, listen to this argument.

¹ This paper is a fragment of a larger text.

Now, master, heal yourself! Time is doctor for all.
 But the man who rejects the custom of great and small
 Should forfeit the cure that comes later in the day.
 Time heals all pain, you must allow reason to hold sway.
 And what is time's trick? Allowing old events to fade
 To be replaced by new ones, often of a happier shade
 Than before or sometimes of a similar measure.
 A man of reason is always prepared, demure,
 He looks rationally to the future. The boon
 Of reason; being soundly prepared for either fortune.
 Hold this thought, my son. Face like a man man's affairs!
 There is one Lord, sorrows and rewards he shares.
 Here she vanished and I awoke. How should I feel?
 Had I heard all this in a dream or was it real?

(l. 137-158)²

The mother's injunctions have been read in various studies on *Threnodies* as a call to internal equilibrium and a call to regain, now in adequate proportions, the lost faith in reason. The path to healing, which is open to everybody, but is too slow, should be preceded in the case of Jan, by a path of mature rationalization, as waiting too late for a remedy does not become him. The foundation should not be cold reason, disciplined with the long-standing toil of philosophical speculation, seasoned in turning away from the world and recognizing its matters as buffoonery, which even despairs in a methodical fashion and mixes dreams and reality, truth and illusion in a methodical way, negating the reality of life and the obviousness of its experience,³ but the reason which has been healed, cleansed first of all of *hubris*—the temptation of the Humanist Renaissance, overcome in *Threnodies*.⁴

However, in the context of the whole cycle, the directing of the poet, the Master, tormented not only with suffering but also with several

² Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies and The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys*, transl. by Barry Keane, Biblioteka Śląska, Katowice, 2001, 65-66.

³ Cf., A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Sen życia w Trenie XIX*, „Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. Adama Mickiewicza” 32 (1997), 44-45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

questions without answers, back onto the path of reason was not so obvious or unequivocal. Researchers have tried to somehow reconcile the meaning of all the poems in this collection as a whole with this alleged final postulate. That is they have tried to find common ground between a meaningful distance in the evaluation of acts of rationalization, and the proclaimed necessity of rational preceding of experiences which, through inattention, might be taken as the return to the point of departure and confuse with the prompt to "reason violently confound", described in "Threnody I" as an unwanted alternative to weeping.

The question which is at the beginning of this sketch was: did the mother—introduced in the figure of prosopopeia as the most important voice in the final poem of the mournful cycle in which the poet copes with, as never before, the mystery of God's judgements, appalling men's consciousness and hearts (cf. the epigram III 84, "Na słup kamienny" ["On a Stone Pole"]) — really convince her son that it does not become him to wait, as it happens with others, for the only remedy (that is time) that is capable of healing suffering, because her son should become faithful to his old choice of contempt of "custom of great and small" (XIX, l. 145-147), which is given to all people.

Researchers have approached this problem in different ways. Karol Irzykowski took the mother's injunction, as it was spoken, without any reservations: "And here the poet adds that time has a 'trick'; it "allows old events to fade, to be replaced by new ones." Yet the very thought about time is healing—reason should anticipate time (line 148), anticipate its operation."⁵

The greatest enthusiast of rationalization as a path of consolation appropriate for the despairing poet was Julian Krzyżanowski, and it was he who formulated this hypothesis about the ultimate return of Kochanowski's cycle to the point of departure:

⁵ K. Irzykowski, *Nurt uczucia w „Trenach”*, „Wiadomości Literackie” 1930, no. 23, 3 (reprinted in *Jan Kochanowski. Życie — twórczość — epoka*, ed. by B. Nadolski, Warszawa 1966, s 232—239; the quoted fragment: 236).

What is even more surprising, a preeminent man, “who rejects custom of great and small”, who “must allow reason hold sway”, “a man of reason” who has just been crying over the loss of this “reason”, in this very human reason finds the only human remedy. To put it briefly, the solution of the philosophical drama in *Threnodies* is the return to the opening assumptions; reason, rejected under the influence of suffering, returns as the only way which allows man to understand the sense of existence.⁶

Stanisław Łempicki did not reject the idea of time as radically as Krzyżanowski had done. Respecting the complexity of the mother’s statement, he found in it a space where time and reason were not in confrontational positions. This space was created by a new understanding of reason itself, in which it was not speculation that counted the most, but the contact with reality:

And how, ultimately, can this human suffering be cured? The rebellion of suffering must transform itself into humility of suffering (hence religion), and when suffering has already gone through all its phases [...]—it is healed with time and reason. Reason should even precede healing through time. But this is not Stoical reason, trying to be smart in the time of suffering, but human reason, natural, which after the end of suffering of the spiritual wound, takes over. It orders (as we see in “Threnody XIX”) us to consider all human circumstances, all human musts and inborn necessities, all consolations and good hopes which are still possible, and in this way it leads a man to a final coming to his senses.⁷

Wiktor Weintraub, who through the comparison with “Threnody XVII” and “Threnody XVIII” discretely refused lyricism

⁶ J. Krzyżanowski, *Poeta czarnoleski*, in J. Kochanowski, *Dzieła polskie*, ed. by J. Krzyżanowski, Warszawa 1980, 18-19 (the text was written c.a. 1950).

⁷ S. Łempicki, *Rzecz o „Trenach”*, [w:] tegoż, *Renesans i humanizm w Polsce. Materiały do studiów*, Warszawa 1952, 217. See also on this issue A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Sen życia w Trenie XIX*, op.cit., 45.

to "Threnody XIX", saw this text as a fruit of the rationalization of a new world-view, stating in a manner similar to Irzykowski:

We have here a reminder that time heals wounds inflicted by misfortune, while a reasonable man should, not waiting for what time will bring, persuade himself to reject despair.⁸

The postulate of rational auto-persuasion, which could form the conclusion to the words of the other, was also found in the ending of "Threnody XIX" by Janusz Pelc:

As the mother's speech instructs, the "higher Wisdom" of God allows for some cases, for some deviations from the norms of nature (such as the death of a small child), but common and happening to other people to the extent that "a man of reason" should understand them and bear them humanely.⁹

This interpretative line was also continued by Stanisław Grzeszczuk, when he wrote that "Threnody XIX" brings back importance to human reason and reaffirms the value of wisdom achieved through long-standing effort.¹⁰ Having quoted the lines 107-110 and 137-143, Grzeszczuk stated:

These quotations "who rejects customs of great and small", "must allow reason hold sway" (l. 146-147), seem to document and justify the interpretation of the philosophical drama of *Threnodies* proposed by Julian Krzyżanowski, although not quite and not absolutely, they still somehow support the position that *Threnodies* [...] does not go beyond the rational view of the world.¹¹

⁸ W. Weintraub, *O poezji religijnej Jana Kochanowskiego*, in Idem, *Nowe studia o Janie Kochanowskim*, afterword T. Ulewicz, Kraków 1991, s. 101; cf., also *ibid.* 97.

⁹ Pelc, „Treny” *Jana Kochanowskiego*, Warszawa 1969, 90; Idem, *Jan Kochanowski. Szczyt renesansu w literaturze polskiej*, Warszawa 1987, 457.

¹⁰ S. Grzeszczuk, „Treny” *Jana Kochanowskiego — próba interpretacji*, in Idem, *Kochanowski i inni. Studia, charakterystyki*, Katowice 1981, 97.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

Krzysztof Mrowcewicz's position was quite similar:

The conclusion of the cycle, which includes "Threnody XIX", sounds very proud. Because it does not include requests for divine help, like in "Threnody XVII" and "Threnody XVIII". A man in adversity proudly tries to save himself. Reason, which has been so many times attacked by the poet, starts to rebuild the shaken order.¹²

Kwiryna Ziemia also concentrated on the agreement between these two realities—a common medicine in the form of time and reason, and she stated:

The character of time makes it bring consolation against changes of fortune and all suffering connected with life. The mother in "Threnody XIX" presents it in this way and adds that Jan should "anticipate with reason" the slow remedy of time. Because, essentially, time cannot be a remedy for time.¹³

In this brief survey of research about the issues dealt with here we can clearly see internal differences of interpretations of the end of the final poem of the cycle. 'The Mistress of Wisdom' from "Threnody XIX" speaks in such a way, and using such words (and they have been selected, as in the whole cycle, very precisely) that as a result the literalness of her statement does not interact with what can be felt as her (as well as the Mother's and the statement's) true intention. This is the reason for the apparent incoherence of the final injunction. While writing about the true intention I have in mind the assertive intensity of certain phrases, discernible through a particular movement of meanings, the syntax of sentences and the logic of the whole cycle. The changes in this intensity and its lack in some of the sequences ending "Threnody XIX" not only exist, but they can additionally be translated into an impression of the audibility of sequences of changes in intonation in the specific fragments

¹² K. Mrowcewicz, *Czemu wolność mamy? Antynomie wolności w poezji Jana Kochanowskiego i Mikołaja Sępa Szarzyńskiego*, Warszawa 1987, 191

¹³ K. Ziemia, *Kosmos i czas w poezji Jana Kochanowskiego*, „Topos” 2000, (3—4), 17.

of this monologue-conversation. As long as a level of meaning or some organizing rhetorical trope is not found, which would reconcile divergent senses, we are dealing with a text which is at least ambiguous; that is a text which we cannot understand properly, in concord with *intentio auctoris* and *intentio operis*.

In the interpretation of the intention of a text, which is a part of a bigger whole—in this case a cycle of 19 poems—we can always rely on the observation of the axiological field, surrounding the key words and pictures in their early usage. Taking into account that in the quoted fragment we deal with a remedy for suffering, and more specifically about two remedies, about time and reason, about the Master who had spent years studying books and about the “custom of great and small” he disdains, we should concentrate on these thoughts and on the words connected with them. If they have negative connotations in the threnodies preceding “Threnody XIX”, we have a premise that they have not lost these connotations at the end of this mournful cycle. And analogously, if in the earlier poems they have had positive associations and additionally they have been placed in the positive context, we have the right to assume that this has not changed at the end.

2

In order to understand better what the Mother is talking about, we should go back to the moment before *Threnodies*. In Kochanowski’s writings the frequency of the word “pospólity” (common)¹⁴ with its derivatives is not striking. However, it is difficult to overestimate its part in the deepening, and making more complex the cycle devoted to the deceased Orszula. *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku* (*The Dictionary of Sixteenth-Century Polish Language*), as the first and basic meaning, gives: “Universal, of all people and things, covering all people and things, directed to all”. Therefore, the word “pospólity” is the equivalent, among others, of such Latin words as *communis*,

¹⁴ Translator’s note: The phrase “tor pospólity”, literally “common path” was translated by Barry Keane as “custom of great and small”.

generalis, universalis, perpetuus, passivus, popularis, vulgaris and has a neutral not, not loaded emotionally, free from any specific axiological markers.¹⁵ Such markers, however, exist in the case of a word related to “pospółstwo” (populace), which may be synonymous with such words as “ludzka zbiorowość” (community), “ludzie” (people), “obywatele” (citizens), or “zgromadzenie” (assembly), but it also means “tłum” (crowd), “gmin” (common people), “biedota” (the poor), “plebs” (plebs), or even “tłuszcza” (mob). In Kochanowski’s works written before *Threnodies*, “pospółstwo” (populace), whose ways were far removed from the poet’s (cf., “Muza”, (“The Muse”) l. 19-22) it was much closer to “prosty gmin” (simple folk) and “liczba nieznaczną” (slight number) (cf., “Muza”, (“The Muse”) l. 19-24), than to “wspólnota” (community). It is not surprising that a poet who wanted to be the Polish Horace moved away from the crowd in a Horatian way.

The process of excluding oneself from a group of negligible ones (cf., “Muza”, (“The Muse”) l. 19-24) with consequences of this exclusion was most clearly shown in the epigram I 101 “O żywocie ludzkim” (“On Human Life”)¹⁶:

Eternal Thought, existing longer than Time’s span,
If You are ever moved by the same thing as man,
I believe in heaven You must have a true show
Looking at various matters of this world below.
You barely toss something out, when we, like children,
Will snatch up even scraps in this turmoil and din,
One will have his sleeve torn off, one will lose his cap;

¹⁵ *Pospółty*, [entry:] *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*, ed. by M.R. Mayenowa [i in.], t. XXVIII, Warszawa 2000, 82 (81-97).

¹⁶ This epigram also has a long interpretative tradition. As far as recent research is concerned, fragments from Kwiryna Ziemia’s book should be recalled, *Jan Kochanowski jako poeta egzystencji. Prolegomena do interpretacji „Trenów”*, Warszawa 1994, s. 71-79, 112-115 (and the extensive notes to this text 163-166, note 4-5) and also A. Nowickiej-Jeżowej „U Boga każdy błazen”, in *Jan Kochanowski 1584-1984. Epoka — Twórczość — Recepcja*, ed. by J. Pelc, P. Buchwald-Pelcowa, B. Otwinowska, vol. 1, Lublin 1989, 425- 443.

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While still another will lose some hair in this scrap.
At the very end misfortune or death sets in,
And one will soon drop those trinkets, though unwilling.
Lord, if I may, let me feel this pleasure with You,
Let others fight on, while I wonder at the view.¹⁷

"The Stoical ethics—wrote Wiktor Weintraub—had an elite character. A Stoic, armoured with his wisdom, put himself high above a crowd of people who were slaves to passions."¹⁸ Kochanowski solidifies such an elite state of consciousness with an exquisite grasp of each individual word. A reader of this text becomes a witness of giving up a group and of a wondering 'I' extracting himself from a group, and creating through his own extraction a world of others strange to himself; others, who fight for gifts of fortune as silly children fight for trinkets, gifts which will have soon to be discarded anyway.¹⁹ It starts with 'we'. However, the subject of the poem quickly becomes individual, autonomous, and removed from the community—from the mob. He observes, already from above, "one who will have a sleeve torn away", "one who will lose his cap", "one will soon drop those trinkets". There is no more 'we' or 'us'. The Poet creates an image of a state of autarchy, the ideal of which was created by Greek philosophy and in which reason—as Sergiei Avierincev wrote:

Immune to the calls of other people, freed from dialogic situation, he achieves, thanks to the distance created between himself and others, 'I' which has previously unheard of capability of observing "from the outside" oneself and others, capability to characterize and classify this alien 'I'.²⁰

¹⁷ Translated by Michael J. Mikoś, http://staropolska.pl/ang/renaissance/J_Kochanowski/trifles_eternal.php3

¹⁸ W. Weintraub, *O poezji religijnej Jana Kochanowskiego*, op. cit., 97.

¹⁹ Cf., K. Ziemia, *Jan Kochanowski jako poeta egzystencji*, op. cit., 114.

²⁰ S. Awierincew, *Grecka „literatura” i bliskowschodnie „piśmiennictwo”*, in Idem, *Na skrzyżowaniu tradycji (Szkice o literaturze i kulturze wczesnobizantyjskiej)*, translated and edited by D. Ulicka, Warszawa 1988, s. 33.

In *Threnodies* the understanding of the destructive result of this separation was solidified. They become particularly bitter when it turns out that a person has to “stand as one among the countless masses” (cf., “Threnody IX” l. 20)²¹ means the awakening of a stranger among strangers. The sense of sharing with others the identity of fate—returns—in the sign of a communal subject in “Threnody XI”, but it is so far only a community in darkness, in front of the “unknown enemy”, and its augury can already be found in “Threnody I” in one of the most vivid words of a vision of a community of blind people: “We grope for rational cheer, but the presence of grief is all too clear” (l.17-18).²² The sign of the regained “pospólność” (being together) with others will come only in the first line of “Threnody XVIII”: “We are each of us Your wayward child.”²³

It is characteristic that Kochanowski’s early poetry in Polish, its symbolic *incipit*, is in the form of the hymn “Czego chcesz od nas, Panie”, (“What Do You Want From Us, Lord?”)²⁴, which registers a very different picture of consciousness—still not touched by separation and its consequences. The early hymn and the epigram “On Human Life” differ in all aspects—generically, semantically, in language register, tone, and even length. Both poems differ very radically also on the level of poetic pictures of experiencing of the human community and the images of God’s presence and generosity connected with them. Both the hymn and the epigram, in a way, assign the thresholds of the evolutions of Kochanowski’s

²¹ Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies*, op. cit., 35.

²² Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies*, op. cit., 19. On the ‘existential language’ of this sentence see K. Ziemba, *Jan Kochanowski jako poeta egzystencji*, op. cit., 78-79.

²³ Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies*, op. cit., 57. Cf., D.P.A. Pirie, *Wymiar tragiczny w „Trenach” Jana Kochanowskiego*, in *Jan Kochanowski. Interpretacje*, ed. by J. Błoński, Kraków 1989, . 193. The problem of oscillation between an individual and the collective subject in *Threnodies* is material for a separate study, and that is why I leave it here in this barely touched phase.

²⁴ Transl. by Michael J. Mikoś, http://staropolska.pl/ang/renaissance/J_Kochanowski/Song.php3

imagery of God, his creation and the relationship between the Creator and man.

The rhetorical structure of the hymn was based on the word "hojne" (lavish) used in the first line. This is a key-word. This song (hymn) also has its key-line and, similarly to many other works of Kochanowski, it is the first line which 'programmes' all the important analogies and semantic oppositions of this text.²⁵ The positioning (structural and semantic) of two initial apparent questions is completed with the two rhetorical exclamations of the last line. The disinterestedness of the question "What do you want?" focuses and foretells the disinterestedness of God himself, who, giving everything to man, does not want anything from him.

The first line also introduces and defines the relationship between the collective subject of the hymn and the addressee of the song—the 'You of it—that is God given the highest, among "the free", title of the L o r d.'²⁶ Freedom, autonomy of God, chips in also to a man. God does not want anything and a man is not bound by any compulsion. His thanksgiving and confession of faith is a free act of creation, which thanks to a given reason learns about the world and his place in it, God, and God's care of him and of the world. The lyric 'I' of the hymn is not individual and isolated, does not distance himself from the community of others who share the same fate, and participates with them in experiencing the world and God's gifts.

The Creator gives them in abundance, and His generosity on the verbal level soaks in the whole of the text in the multiplicity of words associated with abundance ("lavish gifts", "inexhaustible waters), vastness ("benefactions which have no limits" "earth untraversed"), multiplicity ("rich vegetation", "flowers, in abundance born"), variety

²⁵ The rhetorical mastery of Kochanowski, subordinated to the classical rule of "invented carelessness" which efficiently hides this, was described in A. Karpiński „*Wsi spokojna wsi wesola*". *Pieśń Panny XII i problem retorycznej kompozycji*, „*Poezja*” 1980, no. 8-9, 78- 84.

²⁶ Cf., preface to *Satyr*, in J. Kochanowski, *Dzieła polskie*, op. cit., 57 (l. 1).

(“apples of various kinds”), fullness (“You are everywhere, “it is all Yours” “the whole world”, “all animals”), limitlessness (“The Church will not contain You”), eternity (“forever, everlasting Creator”, “will not cease evermore”, “always”).²⁷

This primeval religious experience of Kochanowski’s poetry is very different from the reflection in the epigram “On Human Life”. In the epigram the process of the separation from others undergoes almost in parallel to the specific equation of the lyric ‘I’ with God, which is already signalled by the title given to God by the poet-sage “The Eternal Thought”. The epigram I 101 is located at the antipodes of the hymn also because of the perspective which the poet uses to describe the gifts of the Creator. The one who was called “The Eternal Thought” is not a generous Lord. He gives neither measureless benefactions, nor “lavish gifts” which fill all the creation, but “You barely toss something out when we, like children, will snatch up even scraps in turmoil and din”. The attention of the subject, who can properly—with a mixture of mockery and leniency—estimate this divine giving away, turns away from scattered trifles, and concentrates on the very confusion the fight for them causes in the human community.²⁸ While it is difficult to say anything about the alleged

²⁷ Translated by Michael J. Mikoś. http://staropolska.pl/ang/renaissance/J_Kochanowski/Song.php3. A detailed analysis of the hymn was given by W. Weintraub in: *Manifest renesansowy*, in Idem, *Rzecz czarnolesska*, Kraków 1977, 287- 303. See also J. Pelc, *Jeszcze o arcyhymnie Jana Kochanowskiego*, in *Nurt religijny w literaturze polskiego średniowiecza i renesansu*, ed. by S. Nieznanowski, J. Pelc, Lublin 1994, 307-332.

²⁸) A contemporary reader in this place is inescapably reminded about the scene from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, in which Pétya Rostov, taking part with the Muscovite crowd in enthusiastic welcome of the emperor, under windows of his palace fights in an epic way with some lady for one of biscuits from the Emperor’s plate, which the monarch - having at that moment no other gifts, had thrown through the window, wanting to honour his subjects and to reward their attachment: A largish piece of biscuit the Emperor was holding in his hand broke off, fell on the balcony parapet, and then to the ground. A coachman in a jerkin who stood nearby, sprang forward and snatched it up. Several people in the crowd rushed at the coachman. Seeing this the Emperor had the plateful of biscuits brought him and began throwing

Carnival of God, it is hard not to notice that the one who mocks for sure is the lonely 'I' attempting to reach a state being close to his own image of "The Eternal Thought".

3

In *Threnodies* cleansing of the attachment to "high paths" begins with the first poem, with the words "error – the age of man" (l. 18), which is a diagnosis of the same type of reality which in the epigram I 101 was defined as "various matters of this world below", "scraps", "this scrap", "fight", and now is offered in a very different way, devoid of mockery. The one who in "Threnody IX" recognized himself as "one of many" in "Threnody XI" in the face of "the boors" does no longer imitate divine distance, but first of all discerns "self-admiration" (l. 9- 10).

Regaining of the sense of belonging to the human community, with the sense of proportions of one's own calamity, becomes a starting point in "Threnody XV" with the question:

Am I wrong? Or does pondering man's precarious state
Lead to a truer appraisal of one's own tragic fate? (l. 7-8)²⁹

The scale of suffering the individual undergoes gradually becomes relative once one allows for the perspective of sharing with others the same trials and participating in a similar fate. This change is accompanied by the change in tone, which was noticed by Donald Pirie, who pointed to the presence in the quoted lines of the important word

them down from the balcony. Pétya's eyes grew bloodshot, and still more excited by the danger of being crushed, he rushed at the biscuits. He did not know why, but he had to have a biscuit from the Tsar's hand and he felt that he must not give way. He sprang forward and upset an old woman who was catching at a biscuit, the old woman did not consider herself defeated though she was lying on the ground—she grabbed at some biscuits but her hand did not reach them. Pétya pushed her hand away with his knee, seized a biscuit, and as if fearing to be too late, again shouted "Hurrah!" with a voice already hoarse. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, ed. and transl. by George Gibian, Norton, New York, 1996, 601.

²⁹ Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies*, op. cit., 35.

“skromniej” (“humbler”).³⁰ Jan understands better and better that the only way out of this situation, both hopeless and tragic, is humility, lowliness in the face of harsh, higher forces. In the empty space created by the exit of philosophers the countenance of the Creator becomes more and more clear.³¹ This intuition, expressed in the question about the size of one’s grievance, is confirmed by the mother in the last poem of the cycle. However, there is a harsh tone in her voice, unbecoming of the standard perception of motherly consolation: “We are all borne down upon from on High, my son./Do you truly think that you are the only one?” (l. 115-116)³²

The firmness which could be found here, and even some hoarseness, emotionally strengthens the clear message of the apparent question. *Pluralis*, used by the poet in the fragment directly preceding the recalled (“Such a law is hard to ignore, though we may try/But possessing good will or no, we must comply” l. 113-114) and the confrontation of all the suffering in the same way with the tormented consciousness of the one who feels that he is the one suffering the most, take away the positive value of making absolute both individual pain and individuality as such. Making the fact of one’s being different from all others absolute and drawing out of it conclusions going too far is *hubris*, which the poet finally manages to avoid thanks to the confrontation of “universal law” and “customs of great and small”, performed from the religious perspective.

The despairing father of the deceased Orszula is exposed to the adventures of the world as everybody is, because this is the universal law, concerning everybody, even if it seems to be “wholly unjust” (“Threnody II”, l. 21). The mother impels Jan to surrender to this law, arguing at the same time that this submission is a condition to save his dignity:

³⁰ Translator’s note: the word “skromniej”, which literally means “humbler”, was translated by Barry Keane as “truer”.

³¹ D.P.A. Pirie, *Wymiar tragiczny w „Trenach” Jana Kochanowskiego*, op. cit., 191-192.

³² Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies*, op. cit., 115.

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And so you must submit to universal law,
Prevent poisonous mishap from turning your heart raw,
(l. 133-134)³³

The death of Orszula, the death of a child, although tragic, is a possible event in the natural order of things, and, after all, it is not so rare, which reminds us of the observation of "human adventures". At the same time, however, it is a drastic breach of the natural order and the breach of the law written in human hearts, which says that a child should live and grow, not die. The breaking of the innocent has always filled man with terror, and reason has not found an answer to this question, because it comes close to a mystery going beyond the capability of understanding. The epigram III 84 "On a Stone Pole" deals with this issue:

Jest coś na świecie (kto chce pilno wejrzeć w rzeczy),
Z czego się dowcip wypleść nie może człowieczy.
Co rozumowi barziej, proszę cię, przystało,
Jeno żeby się złym źle, dobrym dobrze działo?
W czym tak częsta omyłka, że ten to sąd boży
Niejednemu sumnieniu i serce zatrwoży.
(l. 1-6)³⁴

The flow of life is not fully rational. This is supported not only by the experience of personal trauma, but also cool ("eager", pilna) observation of things in this world. Helplessness of reason is revealed at last in "Threnody XVII":

Reason in times of lightness,
Spoken for mishap or distress,
Has but today so lost its sense,
It offers no recompense.

³³ Jan Kochanowski, *Threnodies*, op. cit., 65.

³⁴ "Is there anything in the world (for those who want to look deep into things)./
Which cannot be solved by human wit./Which is becoming to reason./That it should
go badly for the bad and well for the good?/In this the common mistake that God's
Judgment,/Will scare consciousness and heart of many".

How "futile is the argument
That those bereft need not lament.
He who laughs at adversity
Only warrants my pity.
[...]
So I must weep these tears,
I have lost every hope there is.
Reason cannot save my life,
God alone can end this strife.³⁵

(l. 25-32, 49-52)

There is no emotional excess in these words, no hyperbole, which the poet will want to correct in a moment. On the contrary, this will be confirmed by the monologue in the last text. Let us pause for one more moment at "Threnody XVII", because here for the first time we have a "cure" which is too hard, which consists of what "reason tries to alleviate", and also of tears:

O Lord, the medicine I take
Is hard for my poor mind's sake.
Those concerned for me, make sure,
To find for me a better cure.³⁶

(l. 45-48)

The request in the quoted lines will be fulfilled at the end of the cycle. A friend comes when he hears a cry and points to time as a really efficient remedy, which helps everyone in the same way: unstoppable change. "Threnody XIX" shows the poet, who, after dealing with the world and its laws and with fortune and its matters, gives voice to the nearest man to say for him something he cannot say himself, because he has not tasted it yet.

³⁵ Ibid., 55.

³⁶ Ibidem.

"Threnody XIX" is really, as has been stressed more than once, full of rhetorical tropes,³⁷ and in its ordered and rational construction there is hidden a strong load of an answer to reason, curbed in tropes taken from the classical repertoire of the art of rhetoric. An aspect which has been overlooked in the earlier interpretations of this text, which allows in a more economical way to get to its hidden whole, and to a hidden whole of the whole cycle, is irony, which lasts longer than the phrase "Now, master, heal yourself!" (l. 145). Its particular resonance is embedded in the whole statement in lines 141-148, except only for the second part of line 145—"Time is doctor for all."

It is difficult to point precisely to the cutting edge of the anti-phrase which Kochanowski put into the mouth of his mother because of the high dose of irony present in the whole fragment (lines 141-148). Undoubtedly, a very strong load of it is concentrated in the word "przystoi"³⁸ in the sentence: "But the man who rejects custom of great and small/Should forfeit the cure that comes later in the day" (l. 146-148). "Becoming" is an aesthetic category described, among others, by Łukasz Górnicki, who in his *Dworzanin polski* used this word as a translation for the Italian "grazia", that is charm.³⁹ In Górnicki's book "przystość" ("becoming") is connected with the aesthetics of behaviour and the triviality of this context evoking "human taste" in the perspective of the tragic situation, lack of appropriateness in its application by the mother to the state of internal confusion, which has happened to her son—even taking into consideration the need for order and beauty even in misery—is perhaps the best indicator of the crucial, that is contrary to the literal, sense of the sentence

³⁷ This is pointed to also by A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, who analysed in detail the inventional background and the argumentation of the mother, A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Sen życia w Trenie XIX*, op. cit., 45-55.

³⁸ Translator's note. Barry Keane translated the word "przystoi" as "should", in the further part of the paragraph I have decided to translate this phrase, as "to become to" as more appropriate in the context in which it is later used.

³⁹ Ł. Górnicki, *Dworzanin polski*, ed. by R. Pollak, Kraków 1928, I, 54-55.

about the apparent ‘not becoming’ of waiting for amnesia—a daughter of time.

It is not Cicero who gets the final word in Kochanowski’s cycle.⁴⁰ The ending of “Threnody XIX” which is, as Stanisław Grzeszczuk has shown, mostly a clear reference to *Tusculan Disputations*, changes the value of their meanings exactly because of the presence of irony in which the intertextual dialogue between *Threnodies* and Cicero’s writings is implicated. *Humana humane ferenda*, similarly to a “man of reason”, are phrases which in *Threnodies* mean something opposite to what they meant originally. Kochanowski discretely gave new sense to old “terms”—because new ideas were spoken with old words this transformation has been almost unnoticed by researchers.⁴¹ It is here worth recalling the statement of Wiktor Weintraub, one of the most accurate and succinct interpreters of Kochanowski’s work: “Kochanowski’s poetry is deceptively simple.”⁴²

The closing of *Threnodies* introduces to the whole cycle—wrote Janusz Pelc—accents of specific, difficult optimism.⁴³ At the end of her long conversation with her silent son the mother reveals the kind of wisdom which so far has been alien to him, or maybe forgotten or abandoned. Her long statement, as Pelc noted, can be summarized

⁴⁰ Different conclusions are drawn by W. Weintraub, *O poezji religijnej Jana Kochanowskiego*, op. cit., 102 and S. Grzeszczuk, *Cycero w „Trenach” Jana Kochanowskiego*, in Idem, *Kochanowski i inni*, op. cit., 128-130.

⁴¹ Such, “renewal of meanings”, which is quite often undetected, of existing and often noble terms, has had a long tradition. As an example we can give the taking over by medieval precursors of humanism of the term *poeta theologus*, which existed in scholastics and was used exclusively for ancient writers, who speculated on deities, and ‘smuggling’ under its protection completely new, non-scholastic concept of poets and (cf., U. Eco, *Sztuka i piękno w średniowieczu*, transl. by M. Kimula, M. Olszewski, Kraków 2006, 158-160) and the change which Petrarch introduced to the term “allegory”, which in the Middle Ages had been used in the theological and philosophical sense, and Petrarch gave aesthetic sense to it (Cf., W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki*, vol. 3: *Estetyka nowożytna*, Warszawa 1991, 17-18).

⁴² W. Weintraub, „Fraszka” w *tragicznej tonacji*, in Idem, *Rzecz czarnolesska*, op. cit., 304.

⁴³ J. Pelc, *Wstęp*, J. Kochanowski, *Treny*, ed. by J. Pelc, Wrocław 1972, LXVI.

through the postulate that a man should take life as it is.⁴⁴ Rationality does not have to have much in common with it, unless we think about the notion described as 'common sense'. The consoler in "Threnody XIX" does not persuade Jan to attempt to look through matter sealed with God's verdicts: "The higher wisdom"—she states, and adds that the best solution is to agree with God's verdicts. (l. 121-122)

"The only hope for him—wrote Pirie about the poet—is a gradual wiping out of pain from the memory by time [...] and trust in God's care. [...] Jan understood that it was not reason but faith which saves."⁴⁵ Taking life as it is, dignified and rational acceptance of its flow, turns and accidents, postulated by the mother, has very little in common with the wisdom methodically gained in the toil of resignation from full participation in experiencing life. The mother gauges negatively the effort and time Jan spent studying books: costs, loss, spent years, the fact that he deprived himself of the "delights of this age" to become the master. So, now she comes as an advocate of life, and she turns him towards it again.

Threnodies is the great cycle of poems of the return to the human community and of regaining the sense of being "one of many". It presents the overcoming of isolation, which has been the result of the choice of the high route towards God's mysteries (cf., "Threnody XI"), that is of choosing ways "inszych niż pospólstwo" ("other than populace") (cf. "The Muse", l. 22). This cycle is an accomplishment of Kochanowski's humanism with a dimension which perhaps concerns man in the deepest sense, and which is the acceptance of the mystery of one's fate and predestinations transcending the cognition which is available here and now.⁴⁶ And finally, sorrow

⁴⁴ Ibid., LXVIII.

⁴⁵ D.P.A. Pirie, *Wymiar tragiczny w „Trenach” Jana Kochanowskiego*, op. cit., 192, 195.

⁴⁶ This mystery, revealing and bearing existence, was already shown by Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa, writing about apophatic pictures of heaven in the mother's statement and of the path of apophatic cognition of God, which turns out to be a remedy against pride. A. Nowicka-Jeżowa, *Sen życia w Trenie XIX*, op. cit., 55.

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and prize turn out to be divine gifts, which the Creator generously gives to his unruly children.