

doi: 10.15584/tik.2024.5

Received: 10.04.2024

Accepted for publication: 10.05.2024

Cyprian Norwid's "Civilization" and Edgar Allan Poe's "Shadow". A Few Reflections about Could Norwid Have Read Poe?

Ewangelina Skalińska

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0002-2911-4074

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to trace the relationships and textual affinities between two short stories: Cyprian Norwid's "Cywilizacja" ("Civilization") and Edgar Allan Poe's "Shadow: A Parable". The comparative angle is strengthened by the fact that Norwid's 1852-1853 stay in America may have enabled him to read Poe's stories soon after their publication

Key words: Norwid, Poe, *Cywilizacja*, Civilization, *Shadow. A Parable*

***Cywilizacja* Cypriana Norwida i *Cień* Edgara Allana Poeego, czyli kilka refleksji o tym, czy Norwid mógł czytać Poeego**

Celem artykułu jest prześledzenie związków i podobieństw intertekstualnych pomiędzy dwiema krótkimi formami prozatorskimi – *Cywilizacją* Cypriana Norwida i *Cieniem* Edgara Allana Poeego. Uzasadnieniem tej próby komparatystycznej jest przypuszczenie, że podczas pobytu w Stanach (1852-1853) mógł Norwid czytać opowiadania Poeego w oryginale.

Słowa kluczowe: Norwid, Poe, *Cywilizacja*, *Cień. Parabola*

„A bord du *Pacific*, de Liverpool à New-York. Le navire sombre, une grande confusion règne à bord, des montagnes de glace nous entourent; nous savons que la mort est inévitable. J'écris la cause de notre perte, afin que notre sort soit connu de nos amis. Celui qui trouvera cette note est prié de la livrer à la publicité.

W. Graham”

(1856, „Le Moniteur Universel” 1861)

(Gomulicki 1964: 29)

Cyprian Norwid was the only Polish Romantic writer who decided to move from Paris (which was the biggest Polish émigré cultural and political centre after the fall of the November Uprising of 1831) to the United States

of America. Norwid first travelled to London, and in the autumn of 1852 he sailed on the “Margaret Evans” from Liverpool to New York. He left for the U.S.A. because of the dire financial straits he suffered in Paris, and because of the nervous breakdown he suffered because of the way he had been treated by other Polish émigrés.

In a letter to another poet, Józef Bohdan Zaleski (1802-1886), who was also living in exile in Paris, he wrote:

I have mentioned to you, my dearest friend, what my problems are: so much sorrow and bitterness! [...] I begin to see more and more clearly that I will not be able to do anything with my compatriots, I have tried very, very hard so that I will not be able to blame myself for it [...]

There is little time left. Europe will be scattered like a river thawing [...] I will not make any more moves—I am not militarily oriented. That is not my future. I will walk my way to the shadows and loneliness. (Norwid 1971, v. VIII: 153—trans. E.S¹)

The dangerous, long (as it lasted many months) and “hungry” (as Norwid was to describe it elsewhere) journey to America became a very unfortunate prelude to Norwid’s stay there. Some details from this trip became imprinted on his artistic imagination. As soon as he landed in New York he wrote to his friend Maria Trębicka (1821-1896):

I saw gigantic sharks—and seagulls, the wings of which are tired with the distances they cover, so they sit on the waves to rest a bit, before they return to rocks protruding on the horizon—this abyss with walls reaching to half the height of the masts, so that the ship is creaking, squeezed by waves—this red sun setting behind a moving plane so many times—these nights scary with their silences or gales in the most religious manner. (Norwid 1971, v. VIII: 191-192)

After disembarking in New York, Norwid, who similarly to other passengers, went there in search of work, managed to find some odd jobs which allowed him to live on a subsistence level. One of his best biographers, Włodzimierz Lubieński, put it this way:

As he wrote in his letters, which remain the only source of information about his American journey, he had a variety of different jobs, which allowed him to cope relatively well. After a bout of serious illness he painted a captain’s cabin aboard a ship sailing on the line from New York to Havana. He made pictures for the visitors’ book for the World Exhibition. (Lubieński 1989: 121)

However, he was not happy in New York. The escape from the Old World brought about neither the expected literary inspiration, nor contacts with the artistic world. Therefore, the news about the beginning of the Crimean War (1853-1856), which rekindled Polish hopes for independence, became a pretext for him to return to Europe. He was aware that his disappointment with America was not connected with the real place, but with his unrealistic expectations about it.

What can I write about my stay here? That I owe it to my weakness, that I was not given enough time to learn about it deep in my heart. So it is just a pause in my life—nothing more—this is the real content of the picture! (Norwid 1971, v. VIII: 205)

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all the translations of fragments from Polish are mine. E.S.

Eventually, Norwid managed to return to London, together with prince Marcei Lubomirski, his sponsor, aboard the luxury steamer "Pacific". However, this unfortunate American venture was to have a surprising literary outcome. It is very likely that it was during his stay in New York that Norwid came across the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, whose short story "Shadow: A Parable" probably became the inspiration for the ending of Norwid's "nineteenth-century legend"—"Cywilizacja" ("Civilization").

Franciszek Lyra wrote in the following way about Poe's reception in Polish literature:

Indications of affinity between Poe and Cyprian Norwid (1821-1883), first noticed by Faleński, may have been complemented by influence. Norwid certainly knew Poe's works in Baudelaire's translation, and probably read them in English during his stay in New York (1853-1854), where he met an individual by the name of Griswold. Was this person Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1815-1857), Poe's infamous literary executor and author of a scurrilous memoir on Poe that was widely published? Norwid mentions Griswold in a letter to a friend, written in London shortly after he returned from the United States, without providing Griswold's initials. In any case, the meeting between Norwid and Griswold did not include a discussion of Poe's works. Norwid remarked that he "talked to him only once for a quarter of an hour" on matters relating to Norwid's existential problems. (Lyra 1999: 104)

Lyra's hypotheses were later supported by various Norwid scholars. In a paper about Norwid and symbolists, Maciej Żurowski stated:

It can be stated about "Civilization" that it is based on ideas taken from four of Poe's short stories: "Manuscript found in a Bottle" (a symbolic ship which encounters icebergs), "The Conversation of Eiros and Charimion" (mankind destroyed in a cosmic cataclysm), "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (the callousness of nineteenth-century civilization as the cause of this cataclysm, a meeting in the nether world of two beings, this time of a man and a woman) and "Shadow: A Parable" (a strange voice, which speaks during the story's ending. Taking into account the date of "Civilization", 1861, it should be assumed that Norwid read these short stories not in America, but thanks to Baudelaire's translation. (Żurowski 2007: 207)

Naturally, not all parallels pointed out by Żurawoki have a similar interpretative value. The ideas of a letter in a bottle or of civilization's cataclysms were so popular in the nineteenth century that they did not have to come from Poe. But pointing to "Shadow" as the inspiration for the ending of Norwid's "Civilization" requires more attention. At the same time, it is important to mention one more theme—not analysed by Żurowski—connecting Norwid to Poe.

Kalendarz życia i twórczości Cypriana Norwida, (*A Chronology of Cyprian Norwid's Life and Work*), which was published several years ago, is a very good compendium of information about Norwid, and includes information about Poe. In a letter, written as late as March 1881, from Leonard Niedźwiecki to Norwid we read:

Knowing what I think about Americans, you will not be surprised that I am sending yesterday's "Constitutionel", which includes an article about Edgar Poe by Barbey d'Aureville. (Trojanowiczowa, Lijewska 2007: 780)

Leonard Niedźwiecki (1811-1892) was one of the most colourful figures of the so called 'Great Emigration', and he wrote many interesting letters

(of particular interest are his letters devoted to the Mickiewicz family²). He was not, it seems, particularly close to Norwid, but they exchanged many letters on literary topics in the early 1880s. Norwid's reply, unfortunately, is not known.

Taking all the above research and textual information into account, it can be stated that **Norwid must have known at least some of Poe's short stories**. But what was his attitude to Poe? Was his extremely unusual and unconventional style of writing inspirational to Norwid? I believe we can find an answer to this questions in the very text of "Civilization". One more general point could also be made here. If we were to look into Norwid's attitude to Western writers like Victor Hugo, Honore de Balzac, Charles Dickens or Charles Baudelaire, it would turn out that he wrote about them very sparsely³. However, before we compare Poe with Norwid we will first analyse the structure of Norwid's "legend".

On board Norwid's "Civilization"

Generally, Norwid is considered to be a thoroughly religious writer. Almost all Norwid scholars point out the deep and consistently religious nature of his writings. Coupled with this is his frequent use of biblical motifs, as well as quotations from the Bible. However, there is also in his writings a trend which might—provisionally—be called "**the reversed Bible**". Norwid consistently and consciously converted and changed biblical motifs in such a way that their ultimate artistic message is in sharp contrast with primordial biblical motifs.⁴ The implementation of such artistic tools is, to a certain degree, connected with Norwid's theory about the omnipresence of irony (as is, for example, the case with the poem "Tęcza" ("Rainbow")). Elsewhere, crypto-quotations from the Bible operate as "resonance boxes", pointing to the subsequent semantic layers of some characters (for example, "Pragnę" ("I desire"), spoken by Cleopatra in the play *Cleopatra and Caesar*). The short story "Civilization" may, in turn, serve as an example of a situation when the reversal of the biblical motif becomes a diagnosis of nineteenth-century society.

Norwid wrote only a few short prose texts. Most of them were written after his journey to America. Two years later, the ship on which he had travelled from Liverpool to New York sank. This incident was used as the starting point of Norwid's "legend" entitled "Civilization".

² See L. Płoszewski, Mickiewicz w korespondencji i zapiskach Leona Niedźwieckiego. *Pamiętnik Biblioteki Kórnickiej*, no. 6 (1958).

³ It was totally different with Norwid's reception of Polish literature. Here we have a wealth of materials.

⁴ I wrote on this issue in my book *Norwid – Dostojewski. Zbliżenia i rekonstrukcje* [*Norwid – Dostojewski. Close Encounters and Reconstructions*], pp. 239-250.

This text fully deserves to be called "very strange"—very strange even for our post-modern sensibility as readers. What else can we call a text which follows no patterns of reading? A text which exceeded the horizons of expectations of its readers, it avoids the trap of being grotesque, and at the same time is a satire, a kind of morality play, a description of a deep religious experience⁵ and a gothic tale.

This whole range of hieroglyphic meanings is also placed within the simple format of a sea voyage ending in disaster. A tale like many others in the nineteenth century.

"A young acquaintance of mine told me that it is better to cross the Ocean in a sailing ship"—this is the opening of Norwid's legend. The valuable observations of "a young acquaintance" become an exquisite pretext for the narrator to show his fascination with the beauty and symbolism of sailing ships, which had been praised in legends for centuries. However, in 1861 (given in the extended title of "Civilization") a sailing ship is only a symbol, and, to tell the truth, a beautiful relic. It is a synthetic and hieroglyphic sign of mankind's history. From its keel reminiscent of Noah's ark, through its deck curved like "the back of a violin", to "the mystic trinity" of masts, with sails "dying in dregs of opal chiaroscuro". A ship thus portrayed is transposed into an idealized version of the past—that is into a positive legend, from which all the elements of the danger and arduousness of a many-week-long journey imperceptibly disappear.

The figure of a steamboat can easily serve as an icon of nineteenth-century modernity, a claim which is supported not only by Norwid's short story, but by numerous cultural artefacts from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Anyway, as we are dealing with the legend, a ship called "Civilization" focuses all the characteristic traits of modern civilization. Starting with its strong, massive structure, through "even, beautiful and smooth" trimmings, to the basic civilizational "species" on its deck. And because we are still within the convention of the story of Genesis—there are twelve of them, twelve apostles of progress. Among them are a popular Doctor and a Barrister who had to quit their work because of an excess of clients, an energetic and restless Cavalry Officer, a beautiful and totally impractical Stolen Lady, avidly (in the manner of a French romance) watching her companion, Young Traveller, a man of "sensibility", that is according to an explanation of one of the protagonists: an abusive conman. The second, less foregrounded, row of passengers includes: Citizen Conspirator, Editor, Captain, Translator "of a few savage ambassadors" of a principality from distant islands, Missionary, Emigrant, Archaeologist and Priest Missionary, bashfully hiding with a few nuns for most of the journey in his cabin.

⁵ On Norwid's 'experience of holiness' see Ewangelina Skalińska, O tym, na co „formuły stylu nie ma”. Norwid i doświadczenie świętości. [On Things "Which Are Beyond Formulae". Norwid and the Experience of Holiness", *Colloquia Litteraria* 2/2013, (15).

However, we should remember that we are dealing with a very unusual story. Twelve missionaries of a new order are presented symbolically during “the seven days” not of creation, but of destruction⁶.

The summary of the story’s plot is as follows. The main protagonist spends the first few days merely observing the other passengers. There are no attempts made by him to offer deeper psychological characteristics of any of these passengers; the narrator seems to be content to present just some key and most characteristic traits, and some typical sample snippets of their utterances. Because it is not only Norwid’s “gloomy sailor”⁷ but also his readers who are aware that the characters have been selected exclusively in a mythical and symbolical manner. Norwid’s nineteenth-century Polish readers, as readers of Jean de La Fontaine’s fables, who knew very well why a fox was sly, knew instinctively who “a sensitive young man” was, and who Citizen Conspirator was. However, what really matters is that:

We sailed on the first and on the second day, and on the third day, when we were passing through this initiatory belt where green waves wash against the calcareous and vertical cliffs of these small islands, the wind picked up and there was a tempest. Some passengers, once they learnt about it, went down to their cabins to stay in their beds, while others hastened to the deck to watch the tempest.

(Norwid 1971, v. VI: 50)

The safe, cocksure and pragmatic citizens of nineteenth-century civilization treat the tempest as a spectacle, an entertainment created and planned exclusively for them. It is an indestructible symbol of progress. That is why a subsequent phenomenon of nature, that is a rainbow, has not been popular with the spectators. The rainbow belongs to a different mythological and symbolic order than that of nineteenth-century progress. After all, it derives from the biblical tradition, is a sign of God’s order; it stresses that the safety and survival of a civilization depends on the Supreme Being. After all:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (6:5)

And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. (6:7)

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (6:8)

And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. (6:13)

Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch. (6:14)

⁶ Most Romantic and Modernist creators utilized biblical motifs in various ways, often transforming them almost arbitrarily. However, Norwid stands as an exception. He Bible was primarily the Holy Scripture for Norwid, and only secondarily - a literary text. Therefore, the biblical motifs present in his works usually did not undergo any transformations. All the more attention deserves the inverted motif in ‘Civilization’.

⁷ The expression “gloomy sailor” (“smutny żeglarz”) comes from a text by Maria Janion devoted to the analysis of Norwid’s “Civilization”. See Maria Janion, *Jak smutny żeglarz*, wstęp do: C. Norwid, *Cywilizacja. Legenda*, Gdańsk 1978.

Norwid's text is full of symbols: "an iconic" ship, twelve apostles of progress, a seven-day-long journey ending in disaster, and—overlaid on them—a reversed motif of Noah's ark. Reversed, because the steamship is destroyed, and the rainbow, the symbol of God's union with man, is disregarded and bereft of its biblical meaning. So far we have had an exquisite "anti-civilizational" tale, reminiscent of many contemporary pop-cultural visions of doom and... nothing else. However, something unexpected, something moving beyond the presented framework appears in the very ending of "Civilization":

And then, when, I do not remember, which sun after the memorable night, had risen, I began to recognize that I was supported by the shoulder of a grey sister, similar to the one of nuns I saw on board the sinking ship. But my mind has grown feeble, and it appeared that as a spirit devoid of the right to reality, I started to limit my vision to a horizon only a tiny bit wider than my palm.

So I was peering at the folds of a thick woollen vesture, with which the nun was covered. I raised my finger to rebuff a stain of congealed wax, which looked like an amber rosary going down her folds.

But she said to me in a strange voice; strange because it was similar to all the voices of my friends:

- Leave this wax, as it is from a blessed candle which I held in my hand during your funeral. (Norwid 1971, v. VI: 60)

It should be said with no exaggeration that this ending has so far not been exhaustively interpreted⁸. It simply does not fit into any of the interpretative standards of Norwid's writings.

Norwid rarely delved into the poetics of dreams understood as a manifestation of the supernatural or the 'work of the spirit.' The motif of dream vision was treated by him in an exceptionally realistic manner (no matter how paradoxical it may sound). In Norwid's short prose, we encounter yet another example of a description of a dream vision. In the novella "Stigma" (*Stygmat*), the narrator describes their dream, explaining certain social and psychological regularities (referred to precisely as 'stigma').

An interesting attempt at the interpretation of the ending of "Civilization" was given by Gomulicki

The story ends with the catastrophe of the ship "Civilization"—as such a civilization leads directly to the catastrophe. However, we do not know if the ship had sunk or how many passengers were rescued. This uncertainty is, in turn, the result of a consciously ambiguous ending, which allows for at least four different alternative interpretations. Firstly, the vision described in the ending may be set in a different reality. Secondly, it might be a nightmare of a castaway-narrator. Thirdly, it might be a dream of this narrator. Fourthly, and this is the most interesting option: the whole description of a sea voyage on board "Civilization" might be a dream in which the narrator's meditation on and fears of his own age have undergone the process of 'parabolization' and 'symbolization'. (Gomulicki 1964: 33)

⁸ However, it should be mentioned that an attempt to interpret it was carried out by Zofia Trojanowiczowa. See Zofia Trojanowiczowa, "Cywilizacja" Norwida. Propozycja nowej lektury. In: A. Artwińska, J. Borowczyk, P. Śniedziewski, (eds.) *Romantyzm. Od poetyki do polityki. Interpretacje i materiały*, Kraków 2010.

The solution of a vision in a dream suggested by Wiktor Gomulicki does not seem to be adequate in the context of the comparison between Norwid and Poe. Of course, the motif of a vision in a dream was popular with the Romantic poets, both Polish (like Słowacki or Krasiński) and English, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge's poetry as a source of inspiration for Edgar Allan Poe was analysed by, among others, Alexander Schulz:

Poe felt without a doubt that he had discovered the voice of a kindred spirit in Coleridge's prose, where elements of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* resurface with the persistence of those subconscious depths of guilt and speechless dread that fascinated both writers equally. (Schulz 2008: 195).

However, it seems that the most interesting solution to this puzzle is the assumption of **Norwid's conscious and direct reference to Poe's "Shadow"**.

The quoted ending of "Civilization" has some crucial aspects: a chasm from the main part of the story, a detailed description of the narrator's optic-physical sensations, and a clear reminiscence from the ending of Poe's "Shadow".

This detached, isolated, almost "unnecessary" ending of "Civilization" is so specific that it can be treated—in my opinion—as a separate literary text. Its connection with the main part of the story is on the one hand obvious, and on the other difficult to describe. We may assume that it breaks away from the clear, cohesive model of a myth, a legend, or a parable—a type of text so dear to Norwid. It is worth adding here that Poe's short story is called 'a parable' in its extended title. So, we are dealing here with a type of legend known as a parable. In Poe's story, as is also the case in Norwid's "Civilization", the parabolic sense of the story gets very complicated. Poe's story is so short that, similarly to Norwid's ending, it looks like a fragment of some larger context, and takes on the character of just one flash (or shadow) from the nether world.

Another aspect is the detailed description of "physiology", which cannot be found in Norwid's other writings. The narrator, while he is regaining consciousness, has difficulties with his sight. His field of vision is very limited; he is not able to see the space around him, and he focuses on objects which are nearest to him. Such solicitude with physiological details is, of course, typical in Poe's short stories, for example in "The Mystery of Marie Roget". However, in the context of Poe-Norwid comparisons, two sentences from the closing stages of these short stories offer an interesting case. Norwid wrote:

But she spoke to me in a strange voice, strange because it was similar to the voice of all my friends.

(Norwid 1971, v. VI: 60)

While Poe wrote:

And then did we, the seven, start from our seats in horror, and stand trembling, and shuddering, and aghast: for the tones in the voice of the shadow were not the tones of any one being, but of a multitude of beings, and, varying in their cadences from syllable to syllable, fell duskily upon our ears in the well remembered and familiar accents of many thousand departed friends. (Poe 1978: 189)

The textual parallel here is, perhaps, too strong to be accidental. It gives the strongest support to the hypothesis of Poe's presence in Norwid's "Civilization". At the same time it should be stressed how much Norwid altered the sense of the phrase from "Shadow": "accents of many thousand departed friends".

Poe's story is a scary gothic tale. However, it is not the eponymous Shadow which is the most scary, but the voice of this Shadow which, according to Oinos, "stands trembling, and shuddering". And what about Norwid? "Civilization" is a horror *sensu stricto*. It is not the unspecified, ghost-like figure of a "grey sister" which is scary, but the realistically described social and civilizational whole. Norwid, using in his ending one of the most interesting motifs from Poe's *Selected Stories*, creates a "reversed gothic tale." Things which seem to be indestructible turn out to be most scary. It is very scary how keen people are to write a reversed version of the Book of Genesis, how the nineteenth-century narrative of progress becomes contradictory with the story of Genesis. In this context the vision of a "grey sister", which in a traditional gothic tale would bring terror and fear, brings relief. The fact that her voice is a synthesis of all friendly voices brings calm, eliminates tension, and opens a possibility of tranquillity and a new beginning.

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