ALEKSANDRA NIEMIRYCZ [1]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4380-7256

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Promethean struggle: Shelley, Keats, and Norwid in search of rescue in the risky world

Abstract. The myth of Prometheus sacrificing his freedom to give men authority over a powerful element of nature despite the will of the gods has, in modern times, inspired authors of different languages who kept transforming it according to their views. Both Western and Polish poets of Romanticism favoured the Promethean idea. In their Promethean – or Messianic – visions Mickiewicz and Słowacki emphasized the importance of armed or spiritual struggle for Poland's independence against Tsarist Russia, while English language poets praised the individual's rebellion in the face of the oppressive society. Cyprian Norwid's interpretation of the myth combined the individual and the collective. He saw Prometheus as a craftsman whose gift, fire – 'teacher of all arts' - is a tool for ultimate salvation through Beauty incorporated in masterpieces. Norwid's philosophy is profoundly rooted in Christian soteriology. According to the poet, the revival of both his nation and of the individual is possible only through arduous work, through creative effort understood as cooperation with Christ the saviour in the attainment of salvation leading to both individual and national resurrection.

Keywords: Norwid, Keats, Shelley, Byron, beauty, truth, Promethean struggle.

Human fear of death and suffering – the never-ending story

The human struggle for domination over nature, and sometimes for mere survival, continues to be one of the key themes of European literature and theological thought. We find it reflected in the Bible. In the *First Book of Moses,* commonly called Genesis, God, who created man "in his own image [...] male and female he created them, said to his supreme creature: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing

1 Independent scholar, e-mail: aniem@wp.pl

that moves upon the earth". Soon the abuse of this dominant power brought the danger of destruction of humankind because of human disobedience and lack of responsibility. The fear of death and annihilation of the world has accompanied us since the beginnings of philosophical reflection and is one of the founding themes of religious ideas, even if we replace strictly religious belief with confidence in science as a remedy to all pain and risk. We believe in science, which will let us find a radical solution, be it an alternative energy source, a miraculous vaccine or medication, a super anti-tank missile, or space missions aimed at conquering the Universe. We tend to forget that the Earth is and will remain our only home. Immersed in the chaos of conflicting thoughts and feelings, exposed to dangers not known to our ancestors, living in a world threatened with wars and diseases and in a parallel world of digital existence with all the multiplying information mingled with massive amounts of fake news, we go back to the sources of our culture to find out what went wrong. On the grounds of poetry, we recall the ancient myth of a Prometheus – Rescuer whose gift helped humankind cope with all the risks and find safety against the hostile environment.

Ancient roots of the Promethean ideas

Philosophers and poets of ancient Greece, who were able to contemplate stars in the unpolluted sky or the flow of clean waters in unpolluted rivers, gained profound knowledge of the nature of things and of man. Aristotle and Plato have inspired all their subsequent followers and opponents on the grounds of philosophy; Homer, Sophocles, Euripides continue to fertilize poetical visions. The idea of human impact on Earth and of human wrongdoings permeated the Greek and Roman myths, in which the gods continued interacting with the people and interfered in their fate, either supporting or preventing their actions. The myth of Prometheus is of special importance because of its universal and multifaceted value.

Carl Kerenyi, who devoted many years to studying the myth of Prometheus and wrote the most comprehensive study based on the original texts and analyses of images on Grecian urns, found out that the famous research carried out by the Polish ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski gave an example of the myth's universality, since "the role of mythology among the inhabitants of the Triobrand Islands fits in exactly with the mythologem of the sacrifice of Prometheus, the primordial sacrifice of the Greeks" (Kerenyi 1963: xx).

Remaining on the grounds of the Mediterranean culture and its most powerful Scripture, we read that the people very soon distorted the divine plan for them and took the risk of being smashed "from the face of the ground" by God, who "saw that the wickedness of man was great, and the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart". According to the Bible, people got another chance thanks to the righteous Noah, who "found favour in the eyes of the Lord". So, he was able to build

the Ark, rescuing God's creatures because of God's will. The act of Prometheus was so much different – he acted against the will of the gods, who punished the people by making them struggle by themselves with no divine assistance.

The mythical figure of Prometheus has been a theme for literary works and comparative religious studies since the earliest known mention by Hesiod in his Works and Days, written in the eight century BC, although the myth itself is older. M. L. West, author of a worthy translation of Hesiod's works into English, noted that "we now know that it was not the product of Hesiod's savage fancy but a Hellenized version of an oriental myth, other versions of which are represented in a Hittite text of the thirteenth century BC and the Babylonian poem of the eleventh" (West in Hesiod 1988: xi–xii). However, we should appreciate Hesiod's creative contribution even if he was not the original author of the myth, like we do in the case of Shakespearian themes, to refer pars pro toto to the greatest genius of literature. With attention paid to minor details of his narrative, Hesiod was, for example, specific in describing the trick which Prometheus used to steal fire from the gods: "the noble son of Iapetos stole it back for men from Zeus the resourceful in the tube of a fennel (Hesiod 1988: 38). The same motif appears in Prometheus Bound", the tragedy written three centuries later by Aeschylus, who gave the figure of the rebellious ancient god inspiring strength. His Prometheus was aware of the meaning of his gift of fire, as well as of the inevitable punishment the gods doomed him to suffer:

> I, poor I, through giving
> Great gifts to mortal men, am prisoner made
> In these fast fetters; yea, in fennel stalk
> I snatched the hidden spring of stolen fire,
> Which is to men a teacher of all arts,
> Their chief resource. And now this penalty
> Of that offence I pay, fast riveted
> In chains beneath the open firmament. (Plumptree 1894: 97)

Prometheus gave people some protection in a hostile world, so they could live quite safely, but soon the Promethean sacrifice was wasted. His brother Epimetheus brought "a disaster to men who live by bread, since he was the original one who received the moulded maiden from Zeus for a wife" (M. L. West in Hesiod 1988: 18). Epimetheus willingly accepted treacherous gift from the gods. His wife Pandora, Prometheus' sister-in-law, opened the notorious box. Who can prevent a woman from being curious? Like Eve from the Old Testament, Pandora did not obey the gods' order. Unrestrained female curiosity unleashed all the calamities known to humankind since then: wars, diseases, floods, fires, and volcanic eruptions. One is temped to add climate change, but the ancients did not use the term, and, of course, they knew nothing abut the Covid

pandemic. Zeus forced Pandora to seal the jar up before Hope could escape. In Dante's Divine Comedy only those entering Hell were to give up any hope: Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate, while in the ancient myth humans could not enjoy any hope on Earth. But Prometheus gave them fire, 'their chief resource', not only as protection against wild animals and cold weather, but also as a tool for creative work. Thanks to Prometheus, people gained what had been previously restricted to Hephaestus' forge.

Promethean inspirations in modern literature

The myth of Prometheus gained special importance as a literary theme since Milton's Paradise Lost. We encounter its echoes in the writings of poets and thinkers writing in different languages, including the most prominent authors like Goethe, Maria Konopnicka, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz or Franz Kafka, who transformed the myth most radically.

Carl Kerenyi emphasizes that "we usually come to mythology through the poets, and the best approach to it is through the poets who are closest to us. By their treatment of the material, they can communicate to us not only the content of the myths but also the experience of mythology" (Kerenyi 1963: xxiii). In his fascinating book *Prometheus. Archetypal image of human existence* Kerenyi focused on Goethe's vision of Prometheus, the Lord of the Earth, while Shelley's name is barely mentioned in the *Index*. It may be assumed that Kerenyi chose Goethe as a pars pro toto example of a modern "mythológos who put his own thoughts, the product of intense experience, into the traditional mythological figure" (Kerenyi 1963: 6). Most probably he did not know any poems by Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821 – 1883), the Polish poet and thinker who had the most profound understanding of the essence of the ancient myth, of the figure who – according to Kerenyi (1963: 3) – "presents a striking resemblance and a striking contrast to the Christian saviour". If he had known Norwid's writings, he would have focused on his ideas not less carefully than on those of Goethe, the only poet he included in his most profound analyses.

The figure of Prometheus was especially popular in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. The great and most influential author of the time, George Gordon Lord Byron, refers frequently to Promethean inspirations. The memory of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, read during his schoolyears at Harrow, remained vivid in his mind.

In his poem *Prometheus* Byron contained the essence of the myth and its importance for posterity:

> Of thine impenetrable spirit,
> Which earth and heaven could not convulse,
> A mighty lesson we inherit:
> Thou art a symbol and a sign
> To mortals of their fate and force.
> Like thee, man is in part divine,

A troubled stream from a pure source. (RA 2006: 888)

Byron's fascination with Aeschylus's hero transferred to Mary Shelley, who gave her most famous novel, *Frankenstein*, subtitle *The Modern Prometheus*.

The idea of drafting the story originated from lengthy discussions with Byron and her future husband, Percy Shelley, held in Geneva in 1816 during the excursion of the group of young and, by all their contemporaries' standards, immoral poets. However, Mary Shelley decided to follow Milton's view of the rebellious hero; she used a quotation from his *Paradise Lost* as a motto for her novel about the unfortunate scientist who wanted to be like the gods. Milton's Prometheus is Luciferian. The one who stole fire for people wanted them to become equal to the gods; fire was a pre-condition for any progress, for safety against the cold and wild animals, but fire could also mean destruction, so maybe the Greek gods considered it too risky to allow humans use it. Were they right? Mary Shelley's character, Victor Frankenstein, who believes in the progress of science at any price, reminds us of the dangers associated with stealing divine supremacy over nature – and of disasters released from research laboratories, like, for example, the awful consequences of the intense work of physicists involved in the Manhattan project, or, most recently, virologists from Wuhan and other well-hidden places. Success in science attained despite all the moral limitations may only bring destruction and unhappiness in the world of humans. Both Milton and Mary Shelley depicted the dark side of Prometheus.

Mary's husband, Percy Shelley, one of the best-known Romantic rebels, saw it differently. Despite his loudly proclaimed atheism, he created his Prometheus as a figure echoing Christ, who sacrificed himself for humanity. We can find interesting parallels in his greatest literary achievement, so much appreciated by the Young Poland poet Jan Kasprowicz, in the masterpiece worth reading today, when environment protection and sustainability concerns prove to be of critical importance for the future of our world.

Shelley begins his *Prometheus Unbound* – conceived as a "supplement" or "equivalent" of one of the two missing parts of the Aeschylean trilogy – with an extensive introduction in prose, presenting his sources, his writing method, and his goal, assuring readers: "I have [...] a passion for reforming the world. [...] I'd rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon than go to heaven with Paley and Malthus" (RA 1094). William Paley, a thinker now quite forgotten but famous in his time, was in favour of the usefulness of the idea of hell to control morals. Thomas Robert Malthus argued that wars, diseases, and famines were necessary to control the growth of the population, and his name is remembered in the context of neo-Malthusian thoughts which emerge now and then, being either praised or condemned as the *Malthusian trap*. Shelley's irony in contrasting the great thinkers of the past with his contemporaries veils his profound knowledge of philosophical ideas and their consequences for people; he was aware of the danger of theories and their consequences not dreamt of by the authors.

In Shelley's tragedy, the suffering Earth, one of the "dramatis personae, cries in despair: Misery, oh misery to me [...] Howl, spirits of the living and the dead, / Your refuge, your defence lies fallen and vanquished".

The Earth is put at risk, but in the poet's vision neither Prometheus, nor humankind are doomed; there are the seals, stronger than *Destruction's strength: Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance.*

Interpreting Shelley's Promethean visions, one must mention his reception by representatives of philosophies which proved to be dangerous for the world. Friedrich Engels tried to translate Shelley into German, and Karl Marx appropriated his ideas in a completely distorted way. It seems that only Mahatma Gandhi appreciated Shelley's ideals of non-violence and respect for nature. However, researchers who claimed that Gandhi's vegetarianism stemmed from Shelley's dietary attitude were completely wrong. Not eating meat and not doing harm to any living creature is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism and other Indian beliefs constituting the whole background of the rich culture of the country colonized by England. Anyway, as Morton rightly stated, (2006: 41), "nowadays, Shelley is seen as prescient about health, nutrition, and the future of the planet".

Of the poets fascinated by Prometheus who gained appreciation during their lifetime, Robert Seymour Bridges, Poet Laureate, deserves special attention in the context of Norwid's poetry, and not only because of the merit of publishing the poetical heritage of Gerard Manley Hopkins, to whom Norwid is compared by some researchers who find similarities in both Christian thinkers' originality and innovative approach to the style and language of poetry. Bridges' poem *Prometheus the Firegiver: A Mask in the Greek Manner,* written in 1883, the year of Norwid's death, presents the aspect which was most important to the Polish poet: the creative power stemming from Prometheus' gift. Bridges' Prometheus gives people not only fire, but the ability to transform the Earth in a creative way:

> Now give I thee my best, a little gift
> To work a world of wonder; 'tis thine own
> Of long desire, and with it I will give
> The cunning of invention and all arts
> In which thy hand instructed may command,
> Interpret, comfort, or ennoble nature
> [...] with geometric hand,
> True square and careful compass he may come
> To plan and plant and spread abroad his towers,
> His gardens, temples, palaces, and tombs.
> [...] thy mind

Can picture what shall be: these are the face
And form of beauty, but her heart and life
Shall they be who shall see it, born to shield
A happier birth right with intrepid arms,
To tread down tyranny and fashion forth
A virgin wisdom to subdue the world,
To build for passion an eternal song,
To shape her dreams in marble.
(Bridges 1912: 23, 26)

The ideas presented by Bridges correspond with Norwid's beliefs. Shaping the Earth's dreams in marble was Norwid's dream in the years when he studied sculpture in Florence and admired the genius of his predecessors in this area of art.

It seems that beside philosophical attractiveness, the myth of Prometheus contained an idea that was especially appealing to poets who in their lifetime could not count on others' understanding or appreciation for their sacrifices made. In her poem *Felicia Hemans*, Letitia Elizabeth Landon gave a clear expression of that:

The fable of Prometheus and the vulture
  Reveals the poet's and the woman's heart.
Unkindly are they judged--unkindly treated—
  By careless tongues and by ungenerous words;
While cruel sneer, and hard reproach, repeated,
  Jar the fine music of the spirit's chords (RA 1454)

Byron and the poets *unkindly treated:* Shelley, Keats and Norwid

Among *those unkindly treated* we find poets of different languages, and three of them: Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats and Cyprian Kamil Norwid shall be discussed here.

Unlike Byron, the celebrity of the Romantic era, the three poets, rejected by their contemporaries for different reasons, gained recognition only posthumously thanks to the efforts of their *future grandsons* – if Mary Shelley, the editor and propagator of her husband's writings, can be included in this category, and if we forget about the reflected fame Shelley enjoyed thanks to his friendship with Byron, who attended his very romantic burial ceremony at the seashore. As Shelley's schoolmate and biographer observed, "there is scarcely a great poet from the time of Milton, down to the present day, who has not proved a mark for the invidious malice of his contemporaries. But among all authors of a past or present age, none has been more unjustly handled than Shelley" (Medwin 1847: 359). At least Shelley had a spectacular burial ceremony; his body, drowned in the

sea, was cremated on a beach near Viareggio. Prometheus's gift, fire, consumed the earthly remnants of his admirer. Zygmunt Krasiński, one of the Polish Romantics and once Norwid's close friend, when suffering in Rome from the poor condition of his heart, wrote jealously in his letter to August Cieszkowski: "Kto je spali, gdy pęknie, i zachowa popiół z niego? Czy napisze mi kto na urnie jak Shellejowi tu na cmentarzu: Cor cordium?" (Krasiński 1988: 92) 'Who will burn it when it breaks, and save its ashes? Will anybody write on my urn, like they did for Shelley, the heart of hearts?'. Well, Krasiński was not a rebel like Byron, Shelley or Norwid, who, paraphrasing Norwid's own words, newer bowed to circumstances, and never told the truths to stand behind the door.

John Keats also did not compromise on his vocation and praised the truth. He, like Norwid, was raised by his grandmother after the death of his parents, and, unlike Byron or Shelley (the latter being expelled from Oxford for his rebellious acts), could not have any formal classical education and struggled hard to study literature and art by himself, from books and through visiting collectors' galleries. Ian Jack's fascinating book *Keats and the Mirror of Art* helps us understand how individual paintings or the sculptures of the Parthenon marbles, robbed by Lord Elgin in Athens and exhibited in London, influenced the poet's writings and his concepts of art, which saves the most important treasures of human existence – the truth and the beauty: "a vase or an urn was sometimes 'the shape of beauty' that helped him to escape from mundane reality and disturbing thoughts" (Jack 1967: 216). Keats originated from a poor family. Though appreciated as a would-be physician, he rejected financial stability and gave up medicine because he knew that poetry was his real vocation. Having made friends in literary circles, he managed to have a few of his works published, but then, as a low-class *Cockney* poet, was faced with mistreatment "at the hands of the hostile critics [...] and unlike Shelley, could not sustain the abuse with which his creations were met" (Scrivener 1982: 273). Researchers found out that there were also political reasons contributing to the harsh critical opinions of Keats. The poet challenged the class structure of British society and praised those who struggled against oppression. As Evert Walter noted in *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats,* the poet's "political liberalism found something to admire, without distinction as to nationality or specific circumstance, in all who had ever risen grandly to the challenge of tyranny' (sonnet 'To Kosciuszko')" (Evert 1965: 78).

Beside being poor and criticized as a poet by influential critics, Keats suffered from the then lethal illness called *consumption*, later known as tuberculosis. His friend, painter Joseph Severn, decided to take him to Italy, in search of a healthier climate, but the travel difficulties contributed to a worsening of Keats' health condition. After the long sea journey, the ship from England stayed even longer in port. Based on Italian regulations, all the passengers had to remain in quarantine for a couple of weeks. The health authorities were afraid of typhus, which was taking lives in England, and wished to avoid the risk of spreading the disease in Italy. Likewise, after the poet's death, they

burnt all his belongings and all the furniture in the house today known as the Keats-Shelley Museum and ordered that the funeral be held in sanitary conditions. We know the system too well, living in our "safer" time.

Norwid, deaf, half blind and ill, died in a home for Polish veterans run by the Polish Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul at Ivry – then a suburb of Paris, and today part of the city accessible in fifteen minutes thanks to the fully automated metro line, but in his times the location meant an exile, making the poet feel abandoned and lonely. After his death, Norwid's body was laid in a grave paid for five years only. Afterwards, the ashes were exhumed from the Ivry cemetery and put in a cheap common grave at Montmorency. It is painful when one remembers that Norwid so tenderly cared for his poor living and dead compatriots. He designed and sculpted several Polish tombs at three cemeteries in Paris. Norwid's prophetic poem about the great heroes appreciated only long after their deaths is, in a sense, autobiographical. Nevertheless, Norwid strongly believed in his future fame, and he was not the only one who cherished such hopes. Timothy Morton (2006: 35) rightly observed: "Romantic poets were acutely aware of their afterlives, and their works reflect that". And one must admit that they were right. Unlike Byron, whom today's researchers and readers seem to forget, the three *unkindly treated* poets keep fascinating subsequent generations, gaining not only sophisticated critical editions of the whole of their writings (Shelley and Norwid had to wait for that till the twenty-first century), but also increased admiration among the public. Film makers and rock stars of our times take inspiration from their lives and poetry, just to mention Mick Jagger reading aloud Shelley's *Adonais*, devoted to the death of Keats, in memory of his friend Brian Jones at a concert in Hyde Park, or Czesław Niemen's unforgettable music written for *Bema pamięci żałobny rapsod,* written by Cyprian Norwid in memory of general Józef Bem, the national hero of Poland, Hungary and Turkey.

Norwid – the Polish grandson of Prometheus

Cyprian Kamil Norwid, the Polish poet, sculptor, painter, engraver, and thinker so profoundly immersed in the sources of our culture, studied the ancient authors so intensely that he was able to depict ancient Rome in his *Quidam* as if he himself had lived there among our Greek and Roman ancestors. Norwid admired George Gordon, Lord Byron and Byron's Promethean ideas turned into life experience so much that – like Adam Mickiewicz – he decided to translate some of Byron's poetry into Polish. It is worth mentioning that Norwid, like Shelley, was a devoted translator of those whom he admired – of the greatest authors of all centuries. Therefore, his choice of Byron – beside Homer, Horace, Ovid, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Dante, Tasso, or Psalms, is meaningful, as Mieczysław Giergielewicz observed in his essay on Norwid's translation of *Moses's Prayer* (see: Giergielewicz in Günther 1962: 190). Norwid's admiration for Byron did not lead, however, to any attempt to imitate Byronic style or motifs. The

Polish poet was so much "himself" in his writings while remaining a careful reader of all the most important sources of Western Culture, both ancient and contemporaneous. Norwid included Byron among the greatest not so much because of *Don Juan or Childe Harold's Pilgrimages,* but primarily for his ability to sacrifice his life in defence of the Greeks' fighting for independence, which was Promethean to the full extent.

Norwid's fascination with Byron, reflected in his letters, is well known; literary researchers have analysed many aspects of it. George Gömöri (1973) presented the importance of "the myth of Byron in Norwid's life and work". Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak wrote the most in-depth analysis of Byron's recollections in Norwid's writings. She noticed that Norwid's contribution to creating the Byronic legend may seem surprising because "trudno na pozór znaleźć w XIX wieku dwie tak odmienne osobowości twórcze jak Byron i Norwid" (Halkiewicz-Sojak 1994: 5) ('apparently, one could hardly find two creative personalities who would be so different as Byron and Norwid').

Norwid himself emphasized, and was proud of, the fact that his birth (1821) coincided with Byron's death in Missolonghi in 1824. The death of Byron – a celebrity of the Romantic era – was known and remembered all over Europe in the context of the Greek war of independence. Norwid did not know that the deaths of the two poets less known during his lifetime, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1822) and John Keats (1821), coincided with the date of his birth even more precisely. The house in Rome where young Keats was dying of tuberculosis is located less than 200 metres from the house at 123 via Felice (today via Sistina), just behind the Holy Trinity church at the top of the famous Spanish Stairs, where twenty-five years later the young Norwid had his atelier for two years until January 1849, when he moved to Paris, the main centre of Polish emigration after the defeat of the November uprising of 1830-1831. Shelley had also lived in Italy, and both Keats' and Shelley's mundane remnants lay in the protestant cemetery in Rome. So, the three poets were close in time (by the death-birth vicinity) and in space, and most probably Norwid himself would have considered it important. Both English poets' resorting to the moral values which may prevent catastrophe, and to art, which is stronger than death, resounds with Norwid's thoughts transferred to his poetry, his prose, and his letters.

In his writings Norwid expressed ideas so valid today, when thousands are wandering round the globe escaping from wars and hunger, or simply in search of a better future. Being Europeans – living in our secure, welfare world for decades since the atrocities of World War II, all of a sudden we have been faced with not only the threat of another great war, but also with the challenge of being torn between utmost compassion and unbearable fear associated with all the risks associated with the strict application of the command left by Christ – to accept the needy in one's own home – in the situation when those in need may undermine our safety by bringing in not only helpless women and children, but also the cruellest terrorists acting on behalf of evil. Such dilemmas were not alien to people in the times of Norwid, he himself being an emigrant fleeing from

the oppressors who occupied his country, Poland, then divided into three partitions by Russia, Prussia, and Austria. He himself as a student was arrested and sent to jail in Berlin, accused of conspiracy against the authorities; he lost his health there and suffered from deafness in later years, when he lived in Rome, Paris, New York, and London, a poor emigree trying hard to make a living as a sculptor, painter and engraver, and to gain recognition among his compatriots as a poet and thinker. But very few of them could understand him, and fewer appreciated or accepted his innovative poetry. He objected to the commonly accepted rules and superstitions and never tried to please his readers by satisfying common tastes at the cost of compromising his artistic message; so, like Shelley and Keats, he could count on posthumous appreciation only.

In his letter to Joanna Kuczyńska of 1 February 1869, Cyprian Norwid wrote (Norwid 1971: 388):

> Jestem przeciwny systematom spółczesnym, które głoszą:
> „Europe aux Européens !"
> Selon moi – Madame ! – il n'y jamais eu des Européens, car nous tous nous sommes venus ici de l'Asie – de ce pays qui nous reste maintenant sur l'embryon de notre intelligence comme un rêve du Paradis !
> Ja pochodzę of Jafetowego wnuka, co przykowany był na szczycie Kazbeku w Kaukazie – od dziada mego Prometheusa. JA JEDEN przeczę temu systemowi krwi i ras. Ja jeden – ale cóż robić! – to moje mniemanie takie. Moim zdaniem Europa nie jest rasą, ale principium! – bo gdyby by ka rasą byłaby Azją!!! (Norwid 1971: 388)

> ["I am against the contemporary systems which preach: "Europe for Europeans!" I think, Madame, that there have never been any Europeans, since we all came here from Asia – from the country which now remains in the embryo of our identity like a dream about Paradise. I originated from Jafet's grandson, from the one who was bound to the peak of the mount of Kazbek in the Caucasus – from my grandparent Prometheus. I am the only one who opposes the system of dividing the blood and the races. I am the only one – but what can I do, this is how I think of it. In my opinion, Europe is not the race, but principium! Because if it were a race, it would be Asia!!!"] (translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

Driven by the same feeling of compassion and belief in the equality of all humans, Norwid opposed slavery and racism in his poem: *Do Obywatela Johna Brown*. Taking the risk of straying from the point, one should mention that Norwid's verses, with their multi-layer meanings, plays on words, and depths of interpretation, constitute great difficulty for their readers in the original, so it is easy to understand translators' unwillingness to cope with the task, and the resulting scarcity of available – and acceptable –

translations from Norwid, continuously collected and analysed by Agata Brajerska Mazur. Only the bravest undertook the challenge, from the "pioneers" Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Adam Czerniawski to Danuta Borchardt and Walter Whipple. Unfortunately, there are too many poetical masterpieces by Norwid, not to mention his prose and letters, which have not yet been rendered in English. However, there are a few quite successful translations of the poem addressed to John Brown; I consider Peterkiewicz's version quite adequate. The poem attracted translators' special attention not only because of its international recognition, but also because of the ending lines presenting the poet's creed. Norwid wrote it in 1859 during the hectic efforts undertaken to save John Brown. The Polish author was among the Europeans who, like Victor Hugo, tried to prevent the hanging of the brave man who fought against injustice and the sufferings of the blacks in America, "the land of the free" (Norwid 2000: 33), where John Brown was eventually killed. Without a literal reference, Norwid praises the Promethean deed of the American hero, who gave his life in defence of the equality of people. John Brown, like Prometheus, opposed the ruling "gods" – the owners of Black slaves in the American South. Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in the state of Virginia, the courageous act aimed at the initiation of the liberation movement, was like the blessed crime of the mythical fire-giver. The American abolitionist leader, like Prometheus, wanted to provide helpless humans with weapons against the misery and dangers of life in darkness of slavery. But beside the sacrifice, Norwid alludes to the Promethean ideas dearest to him, to the saving power of art:

> So, till the shadows – Kościuszko and Washington –
> Tremble, accept the start of my song, John –
> Since before song matures man often dies.
> Before song dies, nation must first arise. (Norwid 2000: 33)

Norwid's spiritual grandfather Prometheus sacrificed himself for all men, without differentiating between races; the only division he objected to was the division between the almighty gods and the poor humans left abandoned on earth as prey for frost and wild beasts. Norwid could see much more profoundly into the theme. He saw divisions in society, and injustices and cruelties caused by humankind. The idea of the equality of all human beings as well as of the goal of history is the topic of his poem *Socjalizm* [Socialism], numbered III in the volume *Vade-mecum*:

> Ludzie – choć kształtem ras napiętnowani,
> Z wykrzywianymi różną mową wargi –
> Głoszą, że oto źli już i wybrani,
> Że już hosanna tylko albo skargi…

– Że Pyton-stary zrzucon do otchłani:
Grosz? – ze symbolem już, harmonią?... – targi!
Oh! Nieskończona jeszcze? Dziejów praca –
Jak bryły w górę ciągniecie ramieniem:
Umknij – a już ci znów na piersi wraca,
Przysiądź, a głowę zetrze ci brzemieniem...
– O! nieskończona jeszcze dziejów praca,
Nie-prze-palony jeszcze glob, Sumieniem! (Norwid 2004: 16)

['People – though branded with the shape of races –
Preach with lips distorted by varying lingos –
That the *evil ones* and the *chosen* are in their places,
From now on either hosanna or weeping are their shares,
That the old Python has been sent to limbo
Penny? – just a symbol now, and harmony? ... the fairs!
Oh! History's work has not yet been completed –
It is like hauling up a block of stone with your arm
You slip away – it gets back to your breast to hit it
Sit down, and the load will smash your head and harm...
Oh! History's work has not yet been completed,
The globe has not been burnt with Conscience!']
(Translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

In this poem the myth of Prometheus is combined with that of Sisyphus – like in the text by the Polish poet Maria Konopnicka, but the most important phrase of the poem refers not to myths but reflects Norwid's views in relation to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, congenially developed and sometimes opposed by August Cieszkowski, the Polish philosopher, Norwid's friend and benefactor. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel considered Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, and his teaching the attainment of the goal of human history; Cieszkowski thought that the incarnation of God in a mortal human, Christ, was just a turning point: God became a man, and the people gained a share in God (see: Cieszkowski 1972: 305).

Cyprian Norwid, *late grandson* of Jan III Sobieski, the famous Polish king, known as a defender of Christianity, believed, like Cieszkowski, in humanity's responsibility for the *work of history* in its continuous course. He would never have agreed with Francis Fukuyama's prophecies contained in *The End of History and the Last Man*, saying that the achievement of the goal of humanity, a fair social system of democratic liberalism, meant the end of wars and political turmoil on Earth. Norwid strongly believed that history – the centuries' work – has not ended yet, because the globe has not yet been

burnt out with conscience. Burning the globe through with conscience refers again to a purely Promethean idea of fire as the indispensable factor enabling the growth of humankind. The one who stole fire for people wanted them to become equal to the gods; fire was a pre-condition for any progress, not only for safety against the cold and wild animals. But fire could also mean destruction. Yet burning through the globe with Conscience, although risky, is a *conditio sine qua non* for the attainment of final salvation, so the labour of ages must continue.

Norwid's Promethean idea goes far beyond that, and beyond the visions of Byron of Shelley. He would not recommend or praise stealing power from the gods or sacrificing oneself for the salvation of humanity – one cannot do more than Christ. His idea is different – he demands that people "cooperate" with the saviour God's mission – people need to save themselves throughout history, in their earthly dimension.

Mickiewicz's famous vision of *Poland – Christ of nations* from *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] emphasized the Messianic aspect of Poland's suffering; Słowacki found another Promethean symbol, the Swiss hero Winkelried, and so in his *Kordian* Poland is "a Winkelried of nations". Both concepts give Poland a unique place among the nations – as a country which sacrifices itself for others. Norwid considered such ideas false or even blasphemous. Being a faithful Christian, he wanted to follow Christ's teaching, and so he was against such national *hubris* and lack of individual responsibility of everyone. Mickiewicz and Słowacki appealed to the collective identity of the Poles; Norwid put the emphasis on individual effort and struggle for salvation, both in the personal and national dimensions.

So, the Norwidian Prometheus would not fight with the gods to either protect or doom people; he would rather fight with humans against the shortfalls of their nature, against what he referred to as brak, the Polish word meaning a lack, a missing of some part of the whole, of the entirety, a shortfall taking revenge on the individual for his or her inefficiencies. Norwid's Prometheus encourages people to save themselves and their nation through hard creative work, because, as the poet wrote in his poem *Język ojczysty* ('The Native Language'), it is not the sword or the shield which defend the nation's language – its identity – but only masterpieces. To make it short, Norwid thought that Prometheus should be incarnated in every human being, and especially in the artist. Prometheus – not God, not one of the Titans, not the hero suffering for people, but Prometheus – the craftsman, the artist, the one who helps humans become human, to transform idle marionettes into industrious creative beings able to cooperate with Christ their Saviour in the deed of salvation.

Salvation is possible through beauty, which for Keats is tantamount to truth, and for Norwid, *is the shape of love*, and is attainable only through work in the sweat of one's brow. The work must be of the utmost difficulty, must cost the hardest pains – to pave new paths for human existence and its highest expression – art. We are all called to

participate in the beauty of God's plan for humanity, every one of us humans. As we read in *Promethidion*, Norwid's most important poetical treatise on beauty and art,

> Każdy w sobie cień pięknego nosi
> I każdy – każdy z nas – tym piękna pyłem. (Norwid 2011: 106)
>
> ['Every man in him has beauty's shadow / And each—each one of us is beauty's dust'] (translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

Arduous work is necessary in the service of beauty and truth to achieve the perfection of the ancient Greeks and of the greatest artists. Those who have suffered most in this struggle for a more complete human being, though never understood by their contemporaries, left us the pattern we need to follow. Beauty and truth are redeeming values and are to be strived for. We find these values materialized in statues carved by Michelangelo, in Chopin's music, in words more durable than those carved in stone – and not only those of poets like Horace or Sapho, but of Roman codes of law, of Egyptian art of engineering, in the highest achievements of different nations. In *Promethidion* Norwid specially addresses his compatriots and their dreaming of Poland's salvation. He believes that his country's revival is possible only through art. Norwid's Promethean idea was far from that proposed by Mickiewicz, who identified the suffering Poland with the crucified Christ, and who offered his homeland the role of a "Christ of nations." Norwidian thought is much more profound – and much more demanding.

We, humans, must grow and mature – like the song-seagull sent to John Brown across the Ocean – to reach *beauty's shadow*, which is inherently associated with our nature – created to be the image of God.

The essence and nature of beauty, the theme so important to Cyprian Norwid, fascinated John Keats, the poet who lived so briefly, but left so much beauty enshrined in his perfect poems. He saw the beauty of nature, believed that opposite to mortal humans, *the poetry of earth is never dead*. Keats, like Norwid, believed in the redeeming power of beauty, and of art. In *Endymion* he expressed his conviction that beauty has a moral value which never disappears:

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness [...]
> Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
> From our dark spirits" ... (RA 1344)

Keats' words of beauty being truth resound with those of Norwid, for whom beauty constituted *a shape of love*.

Keats, like his friend Shelley, like Norwid, and a few other visionaries of the Romantic and post-Romantic times, fortune-told the future of humankind with a warning that people must change themselves, be more compassionate to others and to the chain of being. Norwid and Shelley came to similar ethical conclusions, despite the major difference concerning religion – Norwid being a Roman Catholic of strong faith, and Shelley declaring himself an atheist. Also, they both – like John Keats with his unforgettable praise of the Grecian urn – believed in the redeeming power of art.

Byron focused on slightly other aspects of Promethean heritage. He evokes the pantheistic feature and loneliness of the rebel Prometheus in the famous scene from *Manfred*. His hero complains upon the cliffs of the mountain of the Jungfrau:

> The spirits I have raised abandon me
> The spells which I have studied baffle me,
> The remedy I recked of tortured me;
> I lean no more on superhuman aid,
> It hath no power upon the past, and for
> The future, till the past be gulfed in darkness,
> It is not of my search. My mother earth,
> And thou fresh-breaking day, and you, ye mountains –
> Why are ye beautiful? I cannot love ye.
> And thou, the bright eye of the universe
> That opens overall, and unto all
> Art a delight – thou shin'st not on my heart. (RA 903)

The idea of the idleness of beauty does not resound with Norwid's thoughts, but Byron's *bright eye of the universe* inevitably makes us think of one of the most beautiful – and most philosophical – of Norwid's poems, the one numbered VI in *Vade-mecum, W Weronie*, in which the artist's – painter's view permeates the image evoked by words:

> W Weronie
> Nad Kapuletich i Montekich domem
> Spłukane deszczem, poruszone gromem
> Łagodne oko błękitu –
> Patrzy na gruzy nieprzyjaznych grodów
> Na rozwalone bramy do ogrodów,
> I gwiazdę zrzuca ze szczytu –
> Cyprysy mówią, że to dla Julietty,

Że dla Romea, ta łza znad planety
Spada, i groby przecieka,
A ludzie mówią i mówią uczenie,
Że to nie łzy są, ale że kamienie,
I – że nikt na nie… nie czeka! (Norwid 2004: 19)

['In Verona
Over the Capulet and the Montague houses
Thunder-shaken, rinsed with rain which douses
Mild eye of the heavenly blue –
Looking at ruins of unfriendly castles
And smashed gates in the gardens' rustle,
Throws from the high a star leaking through
Cypresses say that this heavenly tear
Is for Julliet and Romeo whose tombs are near
That the tear falls to wet their bones
But people say in a scholarly tone
That these are not tears but minerals alone
And – no one awaits these … stones! '] (Translated by Aleksandra Niemirycz)

In this poem Norwid – unlike the Byronic hero – expresses his profound trust in nature. Even if the people lose the feeling of transcendence, or even if they cease to believe in the redeeming power of eternal poetry – Shakespearian heroes are referred to as its representatives – the cypresses, trees of great symbolic meaning, will speak on behalf of human culture, like the evangelical stones which were supposed to praise the glory of the Lord if humans were silent.

Another image gets associated with Norwid's "star thrown by the mild eye of the blue", and of Byron's *bright eye of the universe*. It is T. S. Eliot's eagle from his Choruses from the *Rock* which "soars in the summit of Heaven while the Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit." In Eliot's vision the two orders, the heavenly and the earthly, are separated, and the idea behind it is pessimistic. Eliot, like Norwid, asks fundamental questions associated with our human condition – since we are creatures torn between the safety and dangers of life, between the lie and the truth, between the beauty and the waste, the divine and the profane:

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness.
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence.

Knowledge of words, but ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? (Eliot 1988: 148)

All these sad statements make us ask the question of whether the risk of ultimate sacrifice – be it that of Prometheus, of Christ, or of an abandoned and suffering artist, misunderstood by his contemporaries – is worth taking if the people remain ungrateful, forgetful, lost in the universe, and sometimes evil.

Norwid gave us his answer. It is a statement and an appeal at the same time, expressed in his poem *Bohater* [Hero], so profoundly understood by the Polish Pope-poet John Paul II, the greatest of Norwid's late grandsons, and the most careful of his readers and interpreters:

Heroizm będzie trwał – dopóki praca,
Praca? – dopóki stworzenie!… (Norwid 2004: 93)
'Heroism will last – until there is work,
Work? – until there is creation!…'

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Aleksandra Niemirycz is a Polish researcher, poet, philosopher, literary translator and conference interpreter. In the past she worked as an editor, a journalist and a high school English and Polish teacher. She graduated from the University of Warsaw (M.A. in Philosophy 1988, M.A. in Polish Studies 1989; Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies in Translation and Interpreting), and continued her literary education in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. In November 2016 she earned her doctorate at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw.