

The symbolism of *Adam Asnyk with Muse* by Jacek Malczewski

Michał Haake

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Editing and translation managed by:

Katarzyna Jagodzińska, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury / International Cultural Centre, Krakow

Abstract

The essay's goal is to interpret Jacek Malczewski's picture *Adam Asnyk with Muse* (1894-1897) as a symbolic work. The main argument is that the painting does not depict a scene with a poet being inspired by a muse. The starting point of the analysis is the conclusion that the Muse is not playing the lyre she is holding and that the wings of Hermes are attached only to one leg. The role of the instrument is crucial for the interpretation of the painting not only because it is not used in accordance with its function but also because of the planimetric as well as semantic relationships with other elements of the picture, above all with one of the sheets of paper on the table and the scythe held by a warrior in the spectral pageant. The Muse presses the sheet with the lyre, lifting it and directing its sharp point towards Asnyk's head. The sheet is made similar in its form to the scythe above it, directed towards the manacled young men above the poet. The comparison between the figures introduced in this way suggests that the real nature of the inspiration is destructive for the poet. A comprehensive interpretation of the relationship thus constituted leads to the conclusion that the symbolic meaning of the painting is based on the opposition between the conventional iconography of a poet and the idea of creation conceived as a liberation of the artist from traditional and ossified symbolism (music, the wings of Hermes).

Content

The Muse

Lyre and sandals

The scythe and the books

The symbol

Surface and depth

* * * * *

- [1] The subject of analysis is the symbolism of Jacek Malczewski's painting *Adam Asnyk with Muse*, created in 1894-1897 (fig. 1). Together with *Melancholy* and *The Vicious Circle* it belongs to works initiating the symbolist phase in the painter's career. Born in 1854 in Radom, Malczewski studied at the School of Fine Arts in Krakow under the master of historical painting, Jan Matejko. Historical references remained in the artist's sphere of interest but in the early 1890s he was intensely seeking a non-realistic poetics for expressing the problems troubling him. *Adam Asnyk with Muse* presents the eponymous figures sitting at a table and a visionary pageant in the background and in the upper parts of the picture. Asnyk, 16 years older than Malczewski, defended his doctoral thesis in Heidelberg and then settled in Krakow and devoted himself to public service. But for Malczewski's generation he was above all a great poet, taking issue with Romanticism and sympathetic to Positivism but also speaking of the limited powers of reason in discovering the elusive meaning of reality, which made him likable for the Symbolists.



1 Jacek Malczewski, *Adam Asnyk with Muse*, 1894-1897, oil on canvas, 154x177 cm. Raczyński Foundation at the National Museum in Poznań (Photo: National Museum in Poznań)

[<top>](#)

The Muse

- [2] It is generally believed that the fantastic and imagined motifs constitute the symbolism of Malczewski's work. The picture under discussion is believed to be the most important example of his portraiture.¹ In interpreting the symbolism of this and other paintings it is not necessary to invoke a definition of a symbol and symbolism, because then we could end up projecting meanings contained in the definition on the work; in other words, we would be focusing mainly or even exclusively on those features of the analysed work which remain in some relation to the previously collected data, either confirming or disproving them. The proposal of returning to the work itself means for me analysing its visual aspect, for it is only this aspect – taken as a whole, for in parts it may be the result of borrowings, quotes, and so on – that forms the essence of what we have before us. But asking the question about the symbolism and at the same time proposing to focus on the work itself assumes a close connection between the symbolism and the evident aspect of the work. We may wonder if such an assumption would be possible if we did not have a theory allowing for a connection of this kind, that is if the demand of

¹ Agnieszka Ławniczakowa, Jacek Malczewski, exh. cat., Poznań 1968, 38; Agnieszka Ławniczakowa, Jacek Malczewski. Wystawa dzieł z lat 1890-1926, Poznań 1990, 8; Katarzyna Nowakowska-Sito, *Między Wawelem a Akropolem. Antyk i mit w sztuce polskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, Warszawa 1996, 30-32.

making an interpretation free from a theoretical perspective is not in fact spurious. But such a conclusion would be wrong. For if we ask whether a painting is symbolic, this feature must be connected with its visual aspect, for it exists as this aspect, it is constituted concurrently with creating its visual sphere. Based on these assumptions, in this interpretation of Malczewski's painting I start with verifying the existing explanations of its symbolism on the basis of the visual features of the work.

- [3] As already mentioned, presenting imaginary figures is held to be the factor constituting the symbolism of Malczewski's paintings.² In the case of portraits the aim of such an operation has been perceived as supplementing the image of the seater's personality:

In his very numerous portraits Malczewski is writing poems about the models and trying to enhance their expression, he introduces additional figures, real or fantastic, he is placing some emblems and signs in their hands, he is painting various symbolic accessories in their hands.³

- [4] Considering the status of spectral figures we may on the one hand assume that they impersonate the world of experiences of the seaters, which allows the researchers to categorise Malczewski's works as the so called portraits of the souls and on the other hand we may say that these figures are part of the collective imagination, defining the culture to which the model belongs, personifying the cultural heritage from which he draws and which he confronts. The picture discussed here seems to exemplify both these possibilities. Since the pageant stretching above the poet and the Muse is supposed to originate from Asnyk's poem *The Dream of Graves*,⁴ we may fairly claim that a causal triad was pictured, developing from the foreground inside and from the bottom to the top, and composed of the artist, his poetic creativity personified by the Muse and the result of this creativity. At the same time the figure of the Muse, a recurrent motif in the poet's iconography, could be treated as an element of tradition, defining an ideological framework of being a poet (in this case formed to the largest extent by the achievements of Romanticism, especially by the work of Juliusz Słowacki). But some critics put forward a relation between the main elements of the painting which undermines such an interpretation: *A Muse in Krakow costume dictates a poem to Adam Asnyk. The emerging poem imposes order on the mental chaos visible in the background*.⁵ So the spectral

² The role of building by Malczewski of the space of representations in creating symbolic values was also mentioned. See Ławniczakowa, *Jacek Malczewski*; Wiesław Juszcak, *Malarstwo polskie. Modernizm*, Warszawa 1977; Wiesław Juszcak, *Narracja i przestrzeń w malarstwie Jacka Malczewskiego* (Notes from the Poznań exhibition), in: Wiesław Juszcak, *Fakty i wyobrażenia*, Warszawa 1979.

³ Tadeusz Szydlowski, *Jacek Malczewski*, Warszawa 1925, p. 18.

⁴ Zenon Parvi, "Z Salonu Krakowskiego," in: *Przegląd Tygodniowy* 24 (1897), 286; Jadwiga Puciata-Pawłowska, "Jacek Malczewski a romantyzm," in: *Romantyzm, studia nad sztuką 2 połowy wieku XVIII i wieku XIX*, Jan Białostocki, ed., Warszawa 1967, footnote 8, 92. The author refers to Wiesław Juszcak's manuscript *Asnyk i Malczewski*. The spectral circle is also called "an allusion to the patriotic ideas of his poems". Dorota Kudelska, *Dukt pisma i pędzla. Biografia intelektualna Jacka Malczewskiego*, Lublin 2008, 753.

⁵ Teresa Grzybowska, *Świat obrazów Jacka Malczewskiego*, Warszawa 1996, 36.

pageant is either the result of poetic creation or raw material still undergoing literary processing. There is no argument allowing us to resolve which of these explanations is legitimate and that raises doubts in the correctness of them both.

- [5] Other proposals for explaining the relations between the figure of the poet, the Muse and the pageant also raise some reservations. It has been said that they belong to two different types of space, illusionary/spatial and elusive/visionary⁶, to the *time of narration* and *decoration*.⁷ These distinctions allowed Dorota Kudelska to set the decadent image of the poet (whose work also included erotic poems) sitting *in a rather nonchalant pose and holding a cigarette* against the patriotic themes in his poems.⁸ Based on this opposition, Kudelska ultimately categorises Malczewski's painting as an example of modernist *coincidentia oppositorum* (characteristic for many artists from the Young Poland movement), *seeking a balance between personal and intellectual independence and the duties towards the community*.⁹ But these considerations make no mention, for example, of the fact that Asnyk's head, diminished in relation to the torso and the legs, is placed against the background of books and pages – dematerialised through the use of light, which connects them closely with the spectral pageant – and this connection obviously undermines the legitimacy of ascribing the figure of the poet exclusively to the lower part of the painting. But the function of the books is also not explained by the phrase *'spiritual' backdrop of the 'halo'*¹⁰, as they were recently called. White sheets of paper are haphazardly lying on the books and beside them. They do not seem to represent the disorder of a writer's study. They cover the volumes as a kind of a shell, which is interrupted only in the upper right part. The pictorial function of the pages is to frame the books in a shape which is the opposite of an oval, in a horizontal rectangle corresponding with the length of the table. The tabletop is as bright and hazy as the books and pages and therefore – depriving the books of "exclusive rights" to spreading luminosity – introduces optical competition to the potential halo, creating a markedly opposite reference to it. We shall return to the meaning of these relations later.
- [6] We may also propose a reading based on a fragment of an article about the poet from 1887: *Asnyk's poetry (...) had to become a reflection both of the past, to which their creator emotionally belongs, and the present in its changing and scintillating*

⁶ Juszczyk, *Narracja i przestrzeń*, 147.

⁷ Kudelska, *Dukt pisma i pędzla*, 753.

⁸ The connection between Malczewski's characterisation of the poet and his erotic poems was noted earlier by Wojciech Suchocki but Dorota Kudelska does not mention it. Wojciech Suchocki, "Mówiąć chronić," in: *Historia sztuki po Derridzie. Materiały seminarium z zakresu teorii historii sztuki. Rogalin, kwiecień 2004*, ed. Łukasz Kiepuszewski, Poznań 2006, 153-154.

⁹ Kudelska, *Dukt pisma i pędzla*, 750-754.

¹⁰ Dorota Suchocka, "Jacek Malczewski. Portret Adama Asnyka z Muzą", in: *Uroda portretu. Polska od Kobera do Witkacego*, ed. Przemysław Mrozowski, Andrzej Rottermund and D. Galas, Warszawa 2009, 274, 276.

manifestations.¹¹ These words seem to allow for an identification of the spectral pageant, composed of Bacchic figures, scythe-bearing peasants and manacled Siberian prisoners, with the sphere of the past and for perceiving the poet as belonging both to the past (through the books) and to the present (based on his contemporary clothing and other factors). Although this proposal seems to some extent more justified than the previous ones, as it encompasses more data (upper sphere pageant, lower sphere – armchair and the volume of the figure, intermediate sphere – the poet's head and books), but it does not explain the role of the Muse and other things. It was rightly said about the Muse that she contains *contradictions within herself: the upper parts are remindful of a country girl and the lower parts of an ancient goddess*,¹² and these features can hardly be explained through the upper parts of the Muse belonging to the past and the lower parts to the future. The above review suggests that we need to be more careful in recognising the real – that is engrained in the visual structures – relations between the figures and the pageant, because such carefulness will prevent us from subordinating the picture to conclusions made independently of it.

- [7] The issue of the relation between Asnyk and imaginary figures and its seemingly obvious identification as poetic inspiration gives rise to the question if such an interpretation demands the introduction of the problem of symbolism. Why would Malczewski's painting have a symbolic meaning rather than simply represent a scene of poetic inspiration being born?

[<top>](#)

Lyre and sandals

- [8] The most convenient answer to such a question, confirming the rightness of looking for symbolic content, is to point at those aspects of the situation and objects depicted in the painting to which the cultural tradition ascribes a symbolic meaning. These aspects are the music (the poet seems to be listening to it) and the winged sandal worn by the Muse. Suffice it to recall the view popular in the nineteenth century culture, originating both from the ancient tradition and from the writings of Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer or Friedrich Nietzsche, that music is the purest form of art, making it possible to overcome most fully the entanglement of existence in the material world and – like a symbol – creating an opening to the world of the spirit.¹³ The present writer is not familiar with any text which would question the conclusion that the Muse is playing the

¹¹ Z. S(?)nicki, "Poeci i komediopisarze. Adam Asnyk," in: *Kłosa* 1151 (1887), 84.

¹² Andrzej Jakimowicz, *Jacek Malczewski i jego epoka*, Warszawa 1970, 166. The author follows the observations of Malczewski's contemporaries. See Zenon Parvi, "Z Salonu Krakowskiego," *Przegląd Tygodniowy* 24 (1897), 286.

¹³ On the reception of Schopenhauer's thought in the Polish culture: Jan Tucezyński, *Schopenhauer a Młoda Polska*, Gdańsk 1969. A comprehensive reflection on the subject: Marcin Trzeziok, *Pieśni drzemią w każdej rzeczy. Muzyka i estetyka wczesnego romantyzmu niemieckiego*, Wrocław 2009.

wheel lyre she is holding. To play this instrument you must simultaneously turn the crank and press the keys. The first action produces a monotonous sound, the musical background of the piece, while pressing the keys produces the melody. To the observation of Dorota Suchocka that the Muse is only turning the crank¹⁴ we might add that playing the melody and thus filling the musical background with content is carried out in the poetic creation. But the opinion that the poet in Malczewski's painting is listening to music is insupportable, for the Muse is simply not playing the lyre. To play this instrument you have to place it on your knees and grasp the crank with all fingers of your right hand, as confirmed by pictures by other artists from the period presenting a lyre player (fig. 2) and by Malczewski's work *Blind Lyre Player* from 1878 (fig. 3), which has not survived.¹⁵



2 Franciszek Kostrzewski, *Ukrainian Lyre Player*, 1861, woodcut based on the author's drawing, drawing based on Karol Beyer's photo. *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1861, no 77, 96

¹⁴ Suchocka, *Jacek Malczewski*, 276.

¹⁵ *Lirnik ukraiński (Ukrainian Lyre Player)* by Franciszek Kostrzewski from 1861, in: *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1861, no 77, 96 (fig. 2); *Lirnik* by Hipolit Lipiński from 1876, MNK; *Św. Kazimierz rozdający jałmużnę* by Kazimierz Mirecki from 1884, MNK; *Lirnik przed chatą* by Kazimierz Pochwalski from 1889, MNW; *Lirnik ukraiński* by Michał E. Andriolli, woodcut, *Ziarno* 43 (1911), 853. Malczewski's painting was reproduced as *Dumka* in: Adam Heydel, *Jacek Malczewski. Człowiek i artysta*, Kraków 1933, 96. In the MNW collection there is a sketch for this painting, also depicting a lyre player with his hand clasped on the crank. *Studium sceny ze ślepym lirnikiem*, c. 1877, Nr inw. Rys. Pol. 5701 MNW. The present writer is not aware if lyres in which the crank could be turned with the left hand were produced.



3 Jacek Malczewski, *Blind Lyre Player (Dumka)*, 1878, lost. Photo in: Adam Heydel, *Jacek Malczewski. Człowiek i artysta*, Kraków 1933, 96

[9] Krzysztof Lipka observes that the manner of holding the crank by the Muse is lacking the *piety with which a player approaches the instrument*.¹⁶ But this does not mean carelessness, for the gesture does not announce any music-making, not even in a casual way. The Muse places two fingers (index finger and middle finger) on the crank or rather hooks them around it and her arched hand is gravitating inertly towards the floor and is not putting the crank in motion. The inertness of the hand corresponds to the demeanour of the figure, which does not seem to be addressing the poet with the intention of passing the creative impulse to him. The Muse is looking morosely, perhaps indifferently, to the side of the poet and slightly down. In Malczewski's painting there is no music, which means that the work's symbolic content, if it exists, is not carried by music.

[10] A number of interesting observations on the role of instruments in Malczewski's paintings can be found in the essays of Teresa Grzybkowska, including the remark that the *protagonists of the artist's paintings, nymphs, satyrs, shepherds and himself are holding the instruments in such way that no sound can be extracted from them*.¹⁷ Taking this

¹⁶ Krzysztof Lipka, "Instrumenty muzyczne na obrazach Jacka Malczewskiego," in: *Muzyka w obrazach Jacka Malczewskiego*. Materials from the conference organised by the Fryderyk Chopin Academy of Music in Warsaw to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the painter's birth, Teresa Grzybkowska (ed.), Warszawa 2005, 90.

¹⁷ Teresa Grzybkowska, "Wprowadzenie," in: *Muzyka w obrazach*, 8. We should also quote the opinion of Tadeusz Kobierzyński that *the instruments appearing in the paintings do not play, (...) they exist not for the ears but for the eyes*. But this opinion is general and as such it is contradicted by many pictures by Malczewski, for it would be risky to claim that, for example, the faun in the

opinion into account in our considerations we must nevertheless note that this claim is not quite clear when set against the remark that *in Malczewski's pictures there is melancholy and poetic silence, such as when music has just been played or when expecting music*, for this suggests an effective use of instruments, and when set against several interpretations by Grzybowska where she speaks about the protagonists playing music.¹⁸ And Grzybowska indirectly admits that the painting under discussion here does not fit her theory: *Adam Asnyk is listening to music which a girl in a folk costume is extracting from a wheel lyre*.¹⁹ Equally questionable are Grzybowska's reflections on the symbolic character of instruments in Malczewski's paintings. On the one hand she writes that the *protagonists of the artist's paintings (...) are holding the instruments in such way that no sound can be extracted from them. So the musical instruments are symbols of emotions*,²⁰ which suggests that it is the absence of music which allows us to define the instruments as symbols. On the other hand she claims that it is *the use of archaic instruments, producing poignant primeval sounds* which makes them into *symbols of emotions*,²¹ which means that the symbolising element is the sound – and that contradicts the previous opinion. One may partly agree with Lipka's conclusion that *Malczewski's instruments are not meant for playing but serve as props signalling a situation more profound than the depicted one*. But the claim they are "used for a supernatural playing" is a projection and speculation abstracting from the analysed painting.²²

- [11] The second element regarded as symbolic is the winged sandal on the right foot of the Muse. Referring to Perseus's expedition against the Medusa, after which the victor offered his sandals to Hermes, it is supposed to function as a symbol of *a victory against the odds*.²³ In the case of the painting under discussion we may refer this interpretation to the armed effort personified by the peasant scythe-bearers in the spectral frieze, not necessarily doomed to failure despite the military advantage of the occupier, as the symbolism suggests. But there are some factors speaking against such an interpretation:

Portrait of Maria Balowa is not playing the flute. This claim is also weakened by the fact that every instrument on a painting, including those used in accordance with their function, exists for the eyes as well. Tadeusz Kobierzyński, "Archetyp melancholii w malarstwie Malczewskiego," in: *Muzyka w obrazach*, 111.

¹⁸ On the painting *The Law* from 1903 *the faun's flute is enticing the artist so powerfully that he turns his back on death, listening to the life-giving melody of the ancient world*; in the painting *Unknown Note: the satyr plays his melody on the flute to an old painter Stanisław Bryniarski*. Teresa Grzybkowska, "Rola muzyki w obrazach Jacka Malczewskiego," in: *Muzyka w obrazach*, 20, 30-31.

¹⁹ Grzybkowska, *Rola muzyki*, 26.

²⁰ Grzybkowska, *Wprowadzenie*, 8.

²¹ Grzybkowska, *Rola muzyki*, 30.

²² Lipka, *Instrumenty muzyczne*, 93.

²³ Suchocka, *Jacek Malczewski*,

placing the wings on just one foot of the Muse as well as the context of the objects surrounding them and their mutual structural relations.

- [12] The wings are on the right leg of the Muse, put forward towards the viewer and the figure of Asnyk. The skirt is lifted up to the thighs, revealing both legs, which are covered with an airy, transparent fabric. The veil flows down to the floor and reaches the bottom frame of the picture, creating a continuous stretch to which the wings optically belong, and the visual meaning of this stretch is also defined by its relation to the poet, as it is running parallel to his silhouette. Writing about this silhouette, Wojciech Suchocki notes its being *clamped in its horseshoe-shaped armchair back, its capturing, surrounding, squeezing, constricting by the armchair*.²⁴ Hence the small cigarette held by the poet, which is *the only slight but clear disruption of the compact contour of the figure*, may serve the function of *pointing towards the Muse*, and especially *towards the place where her veiled thigh (the right thigh) disappears under the skirt*.²⁵ The scholar claims that such an appearance of the figure expresses the existential oppression of the poet by his addiction and points at the significant role of erotic themes in his poems.

- [13] When we take into account this aspect of Asnyk's writings recalled by Suchocki and note the already mentioned morose mood of the Muse, we may ask if the depicted situation is not aptly described by another fragment of the text quoted above:

his (Asnyk's – M. H.) Muse, although carrying air-lifting wings, seems lazy, overwhelmed by overabundance of pain and sadness; he is not striving towards changes, although his passions push him towards them, for as he says himself:

Próżnom się stworzyć sferę życia silił,
Sen mi był życiem, przebudzenie męką,
I z za obłoków chyląc się niechętnie,
Patrzałem na świat łzawo, choć namiętnie.²⁶

- [14] The dejection of the Muse, suggested in this description, would find its expression in declining to play music. But if we accepted this conclusion, the diagonal assignation of the wings created by the veiled legs would force us to place the wings in the sphere of passions, and that does not seem justified. We must therefore undertake a more profound analysis of the visual situation in the bottom part of the painting.
- [15] Making use of Suchocki's observation we may note that placing the poet's hand on the same level as the veiled legs of the Muse coincides with pointing by the cigarette towards the place where the fabric parts and reveals the left knee. This directs attention to these fragments of the Muse's lower limbs which are not veiled, that is the left knee and both feet. Removing the sandaled foot from under the veil should be seen as a tactile attempt

²⁴ Suchocki, "Mówiąc chronić", 153.

²⁵ Suchocki, "Mówiąc chronić", 153-154.

²⁶ S(?)nicki, *Poeci i komediopisarze*. [Vain were my efforts to create a sphere of life, / Dreaming was my life, awakening was a torture, / And lurking grimly from behind the clouds, / I was looking at the world tearily but with passion.]

at achieving intimacy with the poet, made impossible by the veil in the higher reaches, and it is in this context that we must consider the symbolism of the wings. The Muse's strivings do not seem to be fulfilled, for her right leg, resting on the inside of the foot, which does not provide support, is stiffened and equally limp as the hand hanging on the crank of the lyre. The limpness of the limbs makes both the lyre and the wings unusable, deprives them of their function. And uncovering of the left foot underlines its close connection with the black leg of the stool. The left foot is of the same length that the cigarette situated close by, equally slight and through its colouristic disharmony with the rest of the painting it is equally "irritating", for it unnecessarily attracts the eye. The visual value of this element is intensified by the other, more forward leg of the stool, optically "pressing down" the floored wing, located on a lower plane of the picture. At the same time the vertical direction of this leg has its analogy in the green drape flowing from the tabletop to the floor. These relations force a comparison between the wing and the heavy and limp drape, and the wing is "humbled" through its placing on the floor.

[16] The question arises then what function is played by the wheel lyre and the wings, if the former is not the source of inspiration and the latter seem to be emptied of their symbolic potential. Does such a condition of the wings confirm the claim that the muse is weary and declines to play the lyre or does it perhaps communicate another meaning?

[17] The wings attached to the Muse's leg are an element of a much more complex visual structure than has been held hitherto. Within this structure they play a role comparable to that of the lyre. For both these elements are connected with the place where the green cloth lying on the table on the left side reaches the part of the tabletop occupied by the books. The Muse holds the lyre in such a way that it presses down and stretches the cloth, inserting it into the diagonal arrangement described above. Stretching the cloth, the Muse enters a relation with Asnyk, for she arranges the edge of the cloth parallel to the right arm of the poet. This peculiar way of addressing the poet culminates in the way in which the location of the lyre unites the edge of the cloth with the white sheet of paper, which goes up, forms into a spike and points at Asnyk's head. This relationship allows us to find the "utility" of the instrument. The pointing of the sheet to the right and its visual highlighting is made all the more clear and pronounced by the optical subordinating of all other literary implements to the wheel lyre. It is achieved through a kind of dematerialising, contrasting with the haptic character of the lyre, and through such their arrangement that they look like this instrument (the rectangular inkpot and candlestick placed parallel to the lyre, an analogy between the candle and the figure adorning the lyre, placing the little bowl with ink in front of the inkpot, in the foreground of the whole set, which makes it directed towards the poet, just like the lyre). The sheet pressed down by the instrument is additionally highlighted by the fact that both the pen and two sheets of paper behind it – like sails protecting the implements – are pointing to

the left, for in relation to these accessories the pressed-down sheet defines an opposite tensile vector. Moreover, all these elements constitute a configuration peculiarly remindful of a sailing boat, with the spike-forming sheet serving as the bow. The boat moves towards the poet, presses on the books and overturns them as well as initiates the absorption of the neatly arranged books by the sheets which introduce chaos.

- [18] The wing attached to the Muse's foot enters into a relationship with the described place because it is situated on the opposite end – relative to the sheet – of the continuity created by the veil and the green cloth. And as it is analogous to the sheet in its shape, it is automatically compared to it by the viewer. The meaning of this operation is revealed by the fact that the floored wings and the raised sheet point in opposite directions, thereby contrasting the inertness of the former with the dynamic character of the latter.

[<top>](#)

The scythe and the books

- [19] The meaning of pointing the sheet of paper towards Asnyk may be defined only through a deeper reflection on its pictorial function. The fact that this pointing occurs above the table refers the act of the Muse to the spectral pageant stretching parallel to the tabletop. This reference is the most marked on the left side, by way of another attribute of the Muse – the flowery green ribbon. Floating above the table, the ribbon runs from the Muse's head towards the first group in the pageant from the felt, composed of an old man, a flying angel, and woman in a black veil and the body of a young man on her knees. The ribbon comes close to the young man's leg at the height of the place where one can see a vague shape of a manacle. The last section of the ribbon clearly corresponds to the shape of the manacle, for it assumes there a half-circular form, of equal width as the leg. And while the manacle is barely visible, the ribbon is prominent and haptic, taking over the features and function of the manacle. An analogous relationship based on making two different objects similar in form occurs between the sheet pointing towards the poet's head and the blade of the scythe held by the charging peasant, situated precisely above the sheet, running parallel to it and of equal length. The peasant with a scythe joins the Muse in overturning the books (as we might conclude from the fact that only where the figure of the peasant touches the books and by the sheets/sails and by the sheet pressed down by the lyre they are disordered, while on the left side and to the right of the poet's head they are neatly arranged). The overturned volumes optically merge with Asnyk's brightened forehead, visualising the armed effort as a subject for reflection inspired by the Muse.
- [20] The question arises whether this relationship contains a demand of the Muse to treat the writer's work (the sheet, the books) as a weapon in the fight for national independence. Such an interpretation is undermined by the enclosing of the books by haphazardly

arranged sheets. It is made even more doubtful by the fact that the peasant with a scythe is "cutting off" the head of his comrade in arms, bearing the standard. The standard-bearer belongs to the spectral pageant but is also set somewhat apart from it, because it stands slightly to the back. Moreover, just like the poet it is a figure of a reflexive type, which opens the possibility of comparing them. In the context of decapitation the reason emerges for placing the wheel lyre not on the Muse's knees but on the table. Apart from the fact that in harmony with the charging peasant the Muse aims at the face of the poet with the "blade" of the sheet, his head is "cut off" by the tabletop, just like the head of the standard bearer is cut off by the scythe. This also explains the purpose of deforming the "halo" of books through its subordinating to the length of the table with the use of the sheets of paper. At the same time the peasant with a scythe attacks the manacled group of young men. The scythe is directed towards the head of the first of them, placed exactly above the poet's head. Therefore directing the card towards Asnyk means also putting him in a state analogous to the torment of the disempowered figures. The inspiration carried by the Muse, whose look seems to ignore the poet, is a form of imprisonment (the ribbon) and a blade aimed at the poet. It is also an opposite to what the wings attached to the Muse's legs could potentially symbolise.

[21] The possibility of liberation from this pressure is offered by the almost achieved destruction of the shell of sheets through the vertically placed books on the right-hand side of the table and to the right of the poet's head – and therefore revealing themselves as a product of reflection. They define a clear vertical direction, opposed to the horizontal orientation introduced by the sheets. They also mean an upward direction, opposite to the downward orientation connected with the elements from the lower area of the picture (the legs of the stool, the green cloth flowing down). The vertical and upward direction of the books also influences the behaviour of one of the figures from the spectral pageant, placed exactly above these volumes. Contrary to its companions, the figure is facing frontally, straightens itself and raises its head. But the liberation from the dictatorship of the Muse occurs mostly through the fact that the vertical volumes are placed at the right edge of the painting. While the sheets of paper and the tabletop seem to go beyond the frame, the books create a reference to the border and the pictorial field, as a rectangle running parallel to it and copying its proportions. The Muse and furniture (the stool and the table) define the space of representation, while the books invoke a surface order profoundly different from the spatial-objective one, an instance of the "other".

[22] In the context of the above interpretation we may quote a statement by Malczewski preceding the painting, connected with the artist's journey to Greece and Asia Minor:

Hellada before me – how could its peace and rhythm not inhabit my body,
admittedly Gothic but still young. Perhaps the figures of my imagination will rid

themselves of wrinkled and bent foreheads and hands tugging at the manacles of enslavement – and eyes paralysed with horror.²⁷

[23] The recurrence of these themes in the later stages of the artist's career serves – as confirmed in many paintings – to visualise the burden they bring with them.²⁸ The majority of the figures tugging at the manacles of enslavement is dressed in a Russian military overcoat. As Kudelska proves, the overcoat refers both to the external oppression and to the weakness of the artists concealed from the world, to what *may be the most painful and most profoundly hidden, to dilemmas of artistic and existential nature*.²⁹ And thus the painting presents an analysis of the function of the armed effort, both in the collective and in the individual imagination (the latter due to the fact that it can also lead to spiritual enslavement). Also in this respect it remains faithful to the message of Asnyk's poem – already invoked here – *The Dream of Graves*, a critical reckoning with political Romanticism.

[24] At the same time Malczewski's painting is paradoxically referring to the message of the poem *A sketch for a contemporary painting, offered Jacek Malczewski*, written by Asnyk on March 6, 1895, after visits in the painter's workshop. The poet criticised the abandonment of patriotic themes and of realism (*But our wounds will not hurt you, and the burden of life is alien to you, you drones!*) by artists indulging in symbolic art, bathing in *lewd-mythical ecstasy*.³⁰ Why paradoxically? For Malczewski is not pronouncing himself as an advocate of traditional symbolism. For the painting analysed here shows that this symbolism is cancelled by what is presented to the poet for consideration.

[<top>](#)

The symbol

[25] But the cancelling of the symbolism occurs only in the context of its conventional formula, that is, as I understand it, an unambiguous relation between an image and an idea. Although within such a symbolism a given motif may symbolise various things (for example, an oak may stand both for immortality and for courage) and its meaning may vary in different cultural contexts (a skull used to symbolise both piety and vanity), this

²⁷ Heydel, *Jacek Malczewski*, 111.

²⁸ In contrast to Kudelska, who claims in the context of this quote that the dream expressed in it was not fulfilled because of the insurmountable *contradiction of the artist's aspirations and the impossibility of liberating his art from the burden of the national context*, I believe that Malczewski's paintings do not contradict these words but fully confirm them. Nowakowska-Sito, *Między Wawelem a Akropolem*, 24.

²⁹ Kudelska, *Dukt pisma i pędzla*, 738, 756. The author follows the remarks of Kazimierz Daniłowicz-Strzelbicki, who as early as 1900 related the *signals of enslavement* (the uniform, manacles, confined spaces of the workshop) *above all with dilemmas of artistic and existential nature, free of any historical and patriotic overtones*. Kazimierz Daniłowicz-Strzelbicki, "Z dziejów artysty," in: *Wędrowiec* 25 (1900), 498-499.

³⁰ Adam Asnyk, "Szkic do współczesnego obrazu, ofiarowany Jackowi Malczewskiemu," in: Adam Asnyk, *Pisma*. Arranged and footnoted by F. Hoesick, vol. III, Warszawa 1924, 171.

meaning is always intelligible and corresponds to some concept. By contrast, the analysed work allows us – contrary to the widespread way of explaining the symbolic sense of various motifs in Malczewski's paintings – to reconsider the legitimacy of these ways of thinking about a symbol which assume that the essence of symbolic expression is unconventionality.

[26] This possibility is made available by the fact that the message of *Adam Asnyk with a Muse* is not produced by figures and objects forming the representation, but is constituted in the experience of the relations between them and the surface of the painting. As the surface in a way permeates the representation, as it is a value which is *omnipresent, co-existing in every being*³¹ manifested in the picture, this sense does not exist outside the painting as an independent interpretation known from other sources but it emerges in the unity of the sensual and extrasensual. Somewhat simplifying the issue, I want to point at a matter worthy of future consideration, namely at the concurrence of such an interpretation of the poetics contained in Malczewski's work with an understanding of a symbol proposed in a number of nineteenth-century theoretical works where a symbol was defined as a unity of the sensual and extrasensual (spiritual, ideal) factor, an understanding originating in the Platonic tradition and partly also from attempts at differentiating a symbol from an allegory, updated in twentieth century philosophy. The concept of sensual and intellectual unity of a symbol found a powerful expression in the work of Johann W. Goethe, defining not only the epoch to which the art of Malczewski belongs,³² for extending the concept of symbol to an ontologically universal category, inspired by the writings of the German poet, was so widespread that in the nineteenth and twentieth century his understanding of aesthetics, not only in Germany, has not been fundamentally changed.³³ (For there is no truth in the claim that it was the symbolists from Stéphane Mallarmé's generation who discovered the difference between a symbol and an allegory.³⁴)

[27] Such a tradition of understanding a symbol emerged not only from the German idealism but also from Romanticism.³⁵ One of those who inspired the Romantic movement, Friedrich W. J. Schelling, wrote:

³¹ Michael Brötje, *Der Spiegel der Kunst. Zur Grundlegung einer existential-hermeneutischen Kunstwissenschaft*, Stuttgart 1990, 21.

³² His marked dependence on the English Romanticism (especially the writings of Coleridge) must be borne in mind. An authoritative Polish history of the concept of symbol see Jacek Sokolski, *Słownik barokowej symboliki natury. Tom wstępny. Barokowa księga natury*, Wrocław 2000, 7-79.

³³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda. Zarys hermeneutyki filozoficznej*, translated by Bogdan Baran, Kraków 1993, 96-97, 98, 101. A similar conclusion is reached by Sokolski: Sokolski, *Słownik barokowej symboliki natury*, 14.

³⁴ Arnold Hauser also shared this view. Arnold Hauser, *Sozialgeschichte der Kunst*, München 1958, 446.

³⁵ Distinguishing and contrasting them by Hans Hofstätter in the context of the theory of symbols is unconvincing for many reasons. Hans H. Hofstätter, *Symbolizm*, Warszawa 1987, 29-35.

An imperative of absolute artistic representation is: representing with *complete indifference* (völlige Indifferenz), namely in such a way that the general is the particular and the particular is general rather than signifying it. (...) The meaning is here also the being itself, transferred into an object, they form a unity.³⁶

[28] This intellectual perspective, flourishing at the turn of the nineteenth century and born earlier, is well summed up in the pronouncement of Karl W. F. Solger, made in the context of reflections on the symbolic character of art: *The symbol is the existence of the idea itself; it really is what it means, it is the idea in its immediate reality, a symbol is always true rather than merely being an illustration of what is true.*³⁷ In other words, the meaning of a symbolic work of art is not defined by *an idea found outside the work of art proper*,³⁸ transferred from philosophical or literary sources.

[29] The symbolic expression of an idea through the sensual which is not a conventional bearer of this idea but its germ, is also described by the author of the text *Symboliści w sztukach plastycznych* from 1892:

Since in art the direct representation of an object is not its goal, all elements of the painterly language, such as lines, planes, shades, light and colours, become abstract elements, which may be combined, enlarged, modified in accordance with their expression, in order to *arrive at* (emphasis added – M. H.) the general purpose of the work, that is to express an idea, a thought.³⁹

[30] As Jacek Sokolski notes, various definitions of the nineteenth-century symbolism may be reduced to a simple formula, fully compatible with Goethe's notion, used both in philosophical reflection – a symbol as a sensual bearer of spiritual content⁴⁰ – and in literary theory – a symbol as a sensual counterpart of an idea.⁴¹ Also Ryszard Nycz puts the concept of art advocated by the symbolists in a much broader framework of philosophical and aesthetic reflection, transcending the assumptions of *fin de siècle*.⁴²

³⁶ Friedrich W.J. Schelling, *Filozofia sztuki*, translated by Krystyna Krzemieniowa, Warszawa: PWN 1983, 78. In the context of painting Schelling wrote: *Painting is profoundly symbolic when it expresses an absolute idea by means of the particular, in such a way that this idea and this particularity constitute an absolute oneness.* Schelling, *Filozofia sztuki*, 260.

³⁷ Karl W. F. Solger, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, ed. K. W. L. Heyse, Leipzig 1829 (reprint Darmstadt 1969), 129.

³⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Alegoria i symbol," in: *Symbole i symbolika*, Michał Głowiński, ed., Warszawa 1990, 102.

³⁹ "Symboliści w sztukach plastycznych," in: *Przegląd Tygodniowy* 24, (1892), 290-291.

⁴⁰ Ernst Cassirer, "Problem symbolu i jego miejsce w filozofii," in: Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol i język*, translation and foreword by Bolesław Andrzejewski, Poznań 2004, 47-65. The essence of a symbol is defined by Merleau-Ponty's term *parole parlante*, signifying a state where *the semantic intent is in the incipient stage*". Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia percepcji*, translated by Małgorzata Kowalska and Jacek Migasiński, Warszawa 2001, 229. The most important twentieth-century philosophical currents undertaking the problem of symbolism are: Neo-Kantianism (Cassirer and others), phenomenology (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty), the philosophy of existence (Jaspers), philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, Ricouer, De Mann), semiotics (Eco).

⁴¹ Sokolski, *Barokowa księga natury*, 14. The author invokes the conclusions of Podraza-Kwiatkowska. Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Symbolizm i symbolika w poezji Młodej Polski*, Kraków 1994, 22.

Surface and depth

- [31] The necessity of the sensual in the constitution of the ideal was expressed by Malczewski in a beautiful metaphor:

Great art is as deep as an ocean. There is grandeur and majesty in depth. Were the ocean not deep, it would not be wonderful, despite its huge area. The look of the surface alone is wearysome and if the sight is able to *remain* (emphasis added – M. H.) on the surface for so long, it is only because under the directly perceived waves it senses invisible ones. This depth and the one escaping to infinity is a feature of great art.⁴³

- [32] The visible waves point towards the invisible ones but this pointing occurs with the eyes glued to the surface.
- [33] Aquatic metaphors are commonly used to express the essence of life and artistic creation in literature. Particularly frequent motifs are the waves and the depth of the sea or ocean, for they are semantically powerful. Antoni Lange compared to waves both human existence, emphasising its transitory character, and the eyes of his beloved.⁴⁴ He employed the depth metaphor to describe the creative potential of the agent: *I am not a lyricist. In me erupt the waters / Of some tragic and grim bottomless pits.*⁴⁵ The use of aquatic metaphors within one work is particularly important, for it involves defining their mutual relations. In Asnyk's poem *Chór oceanid* (A Choir of Okeanids) *the constant argument of all elements* is revealed both in the *bottomless depths* and *in the dark bosom of the seas*, as well as *on an eternally changeful and moving wave.*⁴⁶ But Malczewski makes a distinction between depth and surface, focuses not on their harmony or identity but on the tension between them.
- [34] This feature, although only roughly sketched here, allows us to invoke the famous reflection on the essence of art contained in the description of the sculpture *Laocoon* written by Johann J. Winckelmann, for he also juxtaposes the motifs of depth and sea waves/surface serving him to express the unique character of the Greek statues:

⁴² Ryszard Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej*, Kraków 2001, 18: (...) *from Novalis, Schelling and Hegel to Friedrich, Steiner, Dorn, Derrida and Lyotard the theme of ineffability – and within it especially the oxymoronic formula of 'expressing the inexpressible' – seem to define the crucial features of modern artistic creation, both in the wider sense of art produced from the Romanticism until the decline of the avant-gardes and in the narrower sense of the symbolic art from the turn of the twentieth century.*

⁴³ Jacek Malczewski, [response to a survey], *Przegląd powszechny* 23 (1906, IV, V, VI), 80. Reprint: *Głos Narodu*, 272 (1929).

⁴⁴ *Hit by the wave of life / my soul is crying (...) Errant has been my life / Errant is its end. A. Lange, Rozmyślenia part IV; O waves – whence is your green glare / Like that which shone in her eyes – green as the sea?, Rozmyślenia part XXII, IV, in: Antoni Lange, Wiersze wybrane, Kraków 2003, 18, 39.*

⁴⁵ Antoni Lange, *Rozmyślenia*, part VII, in: Lange, *Wiersze wybrane*, 22.

⁴⁶ Adam Asnyk, *Chór oceanid*, in: Asnyk, *Pisma*, 139-140.

A universal and fundamental feature of sculptures is their noble simplicity and quiet greatness, both in the posture and in the expression. Just as the depths of the sea always remain calm however the surface may rage, so does the expression of the figures of the Greeks reveal a great and composed soul even in the midst of passion.⁴⁷

[35] But this juxtaposition is not complete, for the soul *is revealed on Laocoon's face and not just on his face, despite the most violent suffering*. In a similar vein Malczewski regards the surface as a bearer of what exists underneath but is experienced only through them. Both these positions confirm that any essential content of a visual art work is revealed through what is to be seen, in the direct image.

[36] Although it would be difficult to find a more complex and multifaceted issue than the possibility of visualising infinity in art, in the context of symbolism we must at least note the connection between this term and the problem of inexpressibility and ineffability of what is symbolised, a problem considered both by Goethe and the theoreticians of symbolism.⁴⁸

Symbolism – claims one of Goethe's maxims – changes a phenomenon into an idea and an idea into an image, and it achieves it in such a manner that the idea in the image always remains active and (at the same time) unreachable and although it is expressed in all languages, it remains ineffable.⁴⁹

[37] Mallarmé spoke about suggesting which does not lead to a determination of content. The symbolised object may only be suggested and its content only approached but it should not be specifically named.⁵⁰ A painterly image (which means that this regards also Malczewski's work) becomes an ineffable structure in every situation when it offers relations between representation and the surface of the painting, which are a stimulus for interpretation. These relations are characterised by a process occurring in seeing, namely *a constant discarding by the surface of its inviolability by the elements of the represented world and then its withdrawing into itself, becoming silent*.⁵¹ For whenever

⁴⁷ Johann J. Winckelmann, "Myśli o naśladowaniu greckich rzeźb i malowideł," translated by Jolanta Maurin-Białostocka, in: *Teoretycy, artyści i krytycy o sztuce 1700-1870*. Selection, foreword and comments Elżbieta Grabska and Maria Poprzęcka, Warszawa 1974, 192.

⁴⁸ *It is the indeterminacy of meaning that allowed the victorious flourishing of the word and the concept of symbolism when the rationalist aesthetics of the Enlightenment era was replaced by critical philosophy and the aesthetics of genius*. Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda*, 98.

⁴⁹ *Die Symbolik verwandelt die Erscheinung in Idee, die Idee in ein Bild, und so, dass die Idee im Bild immer uneendlich wirksam und unerreichbar bleibt und, selbst in allen Sprachen ausgesprochen, doch unsussprechlich bliebe*. Johann W. Goethe, *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur*, ed. H. Steinhagen, Stuttgart 1999, 315. Translation based on: Johann W. Goethe, *Refleksje i maksymy*. Translation, footnotes and foreword by Jerzy Prokopiuk, Warszawa 1977, 208-09. *A true work of art, like a work of nature, for our reason always remains infinite, although seen, felt and acting upon the reason, it cannot be comprehended and its essence and value cannot be captured in words*. Johann W. Goethe, "Über Laokoon," in: *Goethe, Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur*, 101.

⁵⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, "From the response to J. Huret's survey: Evolution Littéraire [1891]," in: *Moderniści o sztuce*. Selection, footnotes and introduction by Elżbieta Grabska, Warszawa 1971, 252. The survey was published in *Echo de Paris* from 3rd to 5th March 1891.

⁵¹ Brötje, *Der Spiegel der Kunst*, 26.

the word attempts to define the relation of a given element to the surface, it refers this element to an instance which is present both in this element and in all other motifs but it cannot be reduced to a sum of these elements for it is experienced as one whole. Speaking about the relation of a given motif with the surface, we are unable to express the superiority of the surface's manner of being relative to the represented world. The sensual aspect of the picture, that is the motifs but also the colours and texture, always refers to something more than itself, something characterised by an ineffable manner of being. For that reason the claims quoted above, namely that the meaning of Malczewski's painting is to show the deadness of the old symbolism as well as reflect on the armed effort, will always remain inadequate attempts at capturing the idea emerging from visual relations between representation and the surface. The painting itself confirms the necessity to strive at a more precise naming of the emerging ideas, including the fact that the logic of seeing leads to the liberation of the poet's thought and the viewer's eyes from the pressure of the objectively spatial world through making the reference to the "other", which is binding for them.

- [38] The question of this reference reminds us of the third – besides the sensual and ideological unity and ineffability – component constituting a symbol. The sensual aspect of a symbol refers it to the extrasensual sphere, which is not a natural feature of the former but is "other" in relation to it. Analysing the symbolism of a work of art just on the basis of the objective elements and colours is only a completely arbitrary and conventional discursive addition. For if a given motif (for example, spruces in Caspar D. Friedrich's paintings or the figures forming a circle on Malczewski's picture *Vicious Circle*) is accorded a symbolic meaning just on the basis of itself, we are unable to prove that we are really dealing with this extrasensual "something more" than just a spruce or a circle of figures. A symbol is such a form of the sensual which refers to something extrasensual, which is not a natural feature of a given thing, figure, person, etc. For example, contrary to widespread belief and superficial interpretations the human skull is not a symbol of death, for it is in its essence connected with death, we could say that it forms its material trace. A skull is at best a sign of death.⁵²
- [39] The meaning of Malczewski's painting is something other than what seemingly appears to the eye as a scene of inspiring a poet by a Muse. For the conventional theme was presented in this painting as possessing content which is not inherently bound with it. But these meanings would risk being involved in reflections on the general cultural situation, which would result in the viewer withdrawing from experiencing the sensual and material unity of the picture, if they were not inscribed in a reference to what

⁵² Hans A. Fischer-Barnicol, "Die Präsenz in der symbolischen Erfahrung. Anmerkungen zu ontologischen Problemem der Symbolforschung," in: *Symbolon. Jahrbuch für Symbolforschung* 6 (1968), 107-136.

constitutes the "other" in the case of painting – the surface of the picture. Thanks to these features Malczewski's painting is a living and real symbol.

Translated by Tomasz Bieroń

[<top>](#)