

## the professor's knife

I

THE TRAINS

a freight train  
cattle cars  
a long string

passing through fields and woods  
green meadows  
grasses and wildflowers  
so quietly the buzzing of bees can be heard  
passing through mists  
golden buttercups  
marsh marigolds harebells  
forget-me-nots  
*Vergissmeinnicht*

this train  
will never depart  
from my memory

the pen rusts

flies off turning lovely in the light  
of awoken spring

Robigus the almost unknown  
demon of corrosion – a second-rank god –  
consumes tracks rails  
locomotives

the pen rusts  
flies off sways rises  
above the earth like a lark  
a rusty  
smudge against the blue  
crumbles  
earthwards

flies off  
to warm lands

Robigus  
who in antiquity  
ate metals  
– though he never touched gold –  
consumes keys  
and locks  
swords plowshares knives  
guillotine blades axes

rails that run  
parallel  
never meeting

a young woman  
flag in hand  
gives a signal  
then disappears  
into oblivion

toward the end of the war  
a gold train left Hungary  
left for the unknown  
“gold”? the name was given  
by American officers  
mixed up in the Affair  
they knew nothing  
had heard nothing  
besides they’re dying off

gold trains amber rooms  
sunken continents  
Noah’s ark  
maybe my Hungarian friends  
know something about the train  
maybe its *Kursbuch* survived  
its last schedule  
from besieged Budapest

I stand in the last car  
of the Inter Regnum – a train  
to Berlin  
and I hear a child nearby  
exclaiming

“Look, the tree’s running away! . . .  
into the woods . . .”  
the engine carries the children away  
I open my book  
a poem by Norwid  
I am building  
a bridge  
to link the past  
with the future

*The past is today,  
but a little further on . . .  
Beyond the wheels a village is there  
Not just somewhere  
Where people have never gone!*

freight trains  
cattle cars  
the color of liver and blood  
long strings  
crammed with banal Evil  
banal fear  
despair  
banal children women  
girls  
in the springtime of life

you hear that cry  
for a single sip  
a single sip of water

all of humanity calls  
for a single sip  
of banal water

I am building  
a bridge to link the past  
with the future

the rails run  
parallel  
the trains fly past  
like black birds

they end their flight  
in a fiery oven  
from which no  
song rises  
into the empty sky  
the train ends  
its journey  
turns into  
a monument

across fields meadows woods  
across mountains valleys  
it races ever more quietly  
the stone train  
stands  
over the abyss

if it is ever brought to life by cries  
of hatred  
from racists nationalists  
fundamentalists  
it will crash like an avalanche  
onto humanity  
not onto “humanity”!

onto people

## II COLUMBUS’ EGG

years later Mieczysław and I  
are sitting at breakfast  
the 20th century is ending

I cut bread on a board  
spread butter  
add a pinch of salt

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“Tadzio, you eat too much bread . . .”

I smile I like bread  
“you know” I reply  
“a slice of fresh bread  
a slice a crust  
with butter

or lard with crackling  
and a little pepper”

Mietek raises his eyes to heaven

I bite the crust  
I know! salt is unhealthy  
and bread is unhealthy  
(white bread!)  
and sugar! that’s death . . .

remember “sugar fortifies”?!  
I think that was Wańkowicz’s  
Wańkowicz . . . Wańkowicz  
we were a “world power”  
sugar no longer fortifies . . .

do you fancy a soft-boiled egg  
asks Mieczysław  
if you’re having one I will  
an egg for breakfast sets you up

Mieczysław is standing at the stove

Tadzio! don’t talk to me  
while I’m boiling the eggs

why not . . .

just because! . . . now I've gone and forgotten  
how many minutes they've been boiling

don't you have a watch or clock or something  
a timepiece I mean we're entering  
the 21st century there are supermarkets internets  
there are egg timers  
or whatever they're called  
in modern households  
in Germany  
they have all kinds of gadgets clocks  
that chime send signals give warnings!  
they have these special devices  
in which you can boil a whole egg  
without the shell  
in the kitchen they have microwaves or maybe it's  
short waves it's all a mystery  
to me one day Mietek we'll be eating  
virtual eggs with no yolk  
because yolks are unhealthy  
not us but our grandchildren

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Tadzio! you have to understand that boiling  
an egg requires attention  
concentration even  
it'll probably be overdone

the Germans now the Germans are mechanized  
mechanical eggs



mechanical or metal  
music not something for us

so then?!  
what?  
what do you mean what  
how's your egg  
let's see  
you taught me  
how to open an egg  
I used to tap the shell with a spoon  
but you cut the top off  
with a single decisive  
slice of the knife  
of course with the egg in the shell  
you won't make a mess with spoons and fingernails

how's yours?

mine's good  
not too hard not too soft

what was it you did . . . before you put the egg  
in the water  
I saw you pricking it  
with something sharp . . . a needle?  
I'd never seen that method  
before . . .  
I knew it! mine's hard-boiled

I think you're using too much salt

well you know a soft-boiled egg  
without pepper or salt . . .  
there are certain principles . . . and as for  
the matter of timing my aunt had  
a way of measuring it a soft-boiled egg is done  
in the time it takes to say three hail marys

but that's not a good method for atheists

says the atheist?

what atheist . . . have you ever met a real atheist  
or a real nihilist in Poland

there've been plenty  
freethinkers atheists  
materialists communists activists  
marxists even trotskyists  
what do you say to that?!

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I say they were all jumping with impatience  
to join the pilgrimage  
of the cultured and the artistic  
from Warsaw to Częstochowa  
that was always the way here  
everyone had their own Jew or their priest  
everyone contained a Father Robak  
a Jankiel or a Konrad Wallrenrod

where did Konrad Wallenrod come from?

I don't want to worry you but you've over-salted it . . .

you know there are blanks in the memory I know  
listen I cannot for the life of me  
remember how it was with Columbus' egg  
Columbus stood the egg upright? how did it go  
was it that he stood the egg on the table "on end"  
we should check in Kopaliński

you have your method and I have mine

scrambled egg with sausage or bacon  
is out of the question now

I remember now what Norwid said  
at the Matejko exhibition in Paris  
in 1876 (I think it was) you know for the last two  
years I've been immersed in Norwid I intend  
to write a little book  
learning Norwid or learning from Norwid  
Norwid said about one of Matejko's paintings  
– I'd missed this though I know  
almost all there is to know about Matejko –  
Norwid called it "the scrambled egg of the nation"  
it was *Zygmunt's Bell*  
I don't know where the painting is now  
from the Palais de l'Industrie (in 1873)  
Scrambled egg of the nation! between