

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