

explorations



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Melancholia and Katabasis in Majkowski's Life and Adventures of Remus

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Abstract. *A complex system of light and dark imagery pervades the Kashubian activist Dr. Aleksander Majkowski's 1938 novel 'Life and Adventures of Remus'. The light, of course, stands for the Kashubian culture and the dark for the German overlords. Underscoring this system of imagery are the themes of katabasis, or descent to a real or symbolic Land of the Dead, and melancholia, a turn of the century term for clinical depression derived from the Greek melaina khole, or "dark bile." These two themes, so important to the novel's literary goals, are somewhat compromised in the otherwise excellent 2008 English translation, due to the vagaries of the English language: what would be evident to a Kashubian or even Polish reader is cloaked to an English-language reader.*

Key words: *Katabasis, Kashubia, Melancholia, Classical literature, Aleksander Majkowski, Life and Adventures of Remus*

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Life and Adventures of Remus* was published shortly after the death of its author, Kashubian activist Dr. Aleksander Majkowski (1876-1938), who had worked on it for most of his adult life. Majkowski intended his work as an allegory of the rustic and supposedly backward Kashubian people's struggle to preserve its language and culture in the face of German domination, hence the novel's subtitle: *the Kashubian Mirror*. He received a Classical education at the *progymnasium* in Kościerzyna and the *gymnasium* in Chojnice, both in the Kashubian region of Poland, before leaving for the University of Berlin and, eventually, his medical studies at the University of Munich. Afterward, he divided his time between his medical practice and his efforts to advance the Kashubian culture, except for four years as a medical officer in the German Army during the First World War. As Majkowski's primary goal for his novel was to engage his Kashubian countrymen's hearts and minds, he carefully chose his language to include all of the dialects of the Kashubian language and his diction to reach all Kashubians of every level of education (Treder 2011, 82). At the same time his deep appreciation of European literature (Cervantes, Goethe, and Nietzsche are listed as major influences) and his Kashubian patriotism challenged him to situate his masterwork in the mainstream of European literature (Treder and Obracht-Prondzyński 2011, 117). He discovered in the motifs of *melancholia* and *katabasis* a powerful means to achieve both of these ends.

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Finally, Majkowski's emphasis upon *melancholia* and *katabasis* may well reflect his personal disappointment at the frustrations he experienced during his decades as a Kashubian activist (Borzyszkowski 2011, 60) and his well-founded concerns about Kashubia's immediate future amidst the looming clouds of a war with Nazi Germany. *Life and Adventures of Remus* was not translated into Polish until 1964; into French in 1984, into German in 1988, and into English in 2008. Though it has at last been accepted as a classical text within Poland's Kashubian community, it richly deserves more than the scanty international attention it has enjoyed to date. This article is based upon the excellent English translation of *Life and Adventures of Remus* by Katarzyna Gawlik-Luiken and Blanche Krbechek, although recourse has been had to the original Kashubian text.

2. REMUS, MELANCHOLIA AND KATABASIS

As befits a representative of the rustic and supposedly backward Kashubian culture, the protagonist Remus is a peculiar looking orphan boy employed on a remote manor in Kashubia's lake country. A severe speech impediment makes it impossible to understand him, so he is thought simple. The novel consists mainly of his written memoirs. As a little boy he sees a vision of a young queen who needs to be carried across the water to a sunken castle but he is too small to help. The young queen also points out to him the three demons *Trud*, *Strach* and *Njevorto*: "Difficulty," "Fear," and "Pointlessness," who thwart anyone trying to rescue the queen and raise the sunken castle. These visions recur throughout his life. The adolescent Remus encounters a beautiful young woman who appears to be (but is not) the young queen; he becomes so despondent at the delusion that he nearly dies. The farmhand Mjichol identifies Remus's condition as "mechalony" (*mankolija*); the English translation cleverly and appropriately highlights the mispronounced Latin medical term's incongruity in this rustic context. (Majkowski 2008, 98). Although Mjichol cannot pronounce the word correctly, his diagnosis is correct. *Melancholia* is derived from the ancient Greek word for black bile (*melaina khole*). At the turn of the nineteenth century, *melancholia* was also the common name for what is now called clinical depression (Radder 2002, 49); as late as 1917, Freud offered the following list of symptoms (Freud 1917, 243):

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.

Majkowski was quite aware of this condition from his medical studies in Munich, which was the center of new psychological thought for the second half of the nineteenth century. Remus presents with several of Freud's symptoms: he is listless, he cannot eat, he constantly dreams of the young Queen. He sees the demons *Trud*, *Strach* and *Njevorto*; he believes he is fending off the enticements of Satan himself. Although Remus recovers from his first episode of *melancholia*, he himself states at the end of Chapter 12 that "Only gray ashes were left at the bottom of my soul." (Majkowski 2008, 125):

Remus's earlier exaltation at meeting (or so he thought) the young Queen and pledging to raise the sunken castle has been reduced to ashes. Along with the visions of the queen and the castle, his *melancholia* will beset him at his lowest points, and his highest points too.

In its earliest form, the classical *katabasis* motif involves an epic hero who makes an arduous journey to a Land of the Dead, real (Odysseus and Aeneas) or symbolic (Gilgamesh). En route, the katabatic hero passes through a gateway and is presented with sights, often unpleasant and frightening, which force him to contemplate his mortality and his future actions. The katabatic hero is enlightened by one or more deceased wisdom figures. Finally, he exits the Land of the Dead reborn and refocused on his purpose in life (Holtmark 2001, 25-26). In Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas first seeks out the formidable prophetess Sibylla as his guide. She first goes into a trance and provides him with some chilling predictions of her own; after he presents her with the Golden Bough, she conducts him on a guided tour of the Land of the Dead. As the high point of his *katabasis*, Aeneas is presented by his deceased father Anchises with a detailed account of how good and evil is rewarded, along with a disquisition upon the nature of the human soul. Anchises then points out to Aeneas a large group of future Romans waiting to be born and a description of their future great deeds, culminating in Augustus Caesar himself. These Romans, he observes, will only come to be if Aeneas carries out his mission of founding Rome. (Klein 2004, VI. 777-807)

Now direct your eyes here, gaze at this people, your own Romans. Here is Caesar, and all the offspring of Iulus destined to live under the pole of heaven. This is the man, this is him, whom you so often hear promised you, Augustus Caesar, son of the Deified, who will make a Golden Age again in the fields where Saturn once reigned, and extend the empire beyond the Libyans and the Indians...

Anchises's message is much more patriotic than it is spiritual. Just as Aeneas has his personal mission, so the city of Rome has its own national mission (Klein 2004 VI. 847-853):

Others (I can well believe) will hammer out bronze that breathes with more delicacy than us, draw out living features from the marble: plead their causes better, trace with instruments the movement of the skies, and tell the rising of the constellations: remember, Roman, it is for you to rule the nations with your power, (that will be your skill) to crown peace with law, to spare the conquered, and subdue the proud.

Armed with his new knowledge of Rome's future glory, Aeneas achieves (after much labor) his mission of founding Rome. While the *katabasis* scenes in *Life and Adventures of Remus* recall others to be found in other great works, Majkowski's clearest model is the *Aeneid*.

Remus's first *katabasis* follows shortly after his first attack of *melancholia*, when he is summoned to speak with old Lord Zabloczi, owner of the manor where he works. Remus meets him in a supposedly haunted upper story room of the manor farmhouse. He is impressed by the extensive collection of Kashubian cultural artifacts which surrounds Lord Zabloczi, who rests upon what is obviously his deathbed. The old nobleman provides the young farmhand with a great deal of information about Kashubian history

and culture. The tone of his remarks, like that of Anchises' remarks in *Aeneid* 6, is primarily patriotic (Majkowski 2008, 144):

Our nation was once that large, and many princes and lords lived within its boundaries. Our own princes were governing us. The Kashubes were rich in their land holdings and also rich owners of ships on the sea. They had regiments of iron armies (knights). And they had freedom. They built villages and cities. They entertained visitors with gracious hospitality. They were able to repel enemies and chase them from their land. That is how it was six hundred years ago. And today?

Just as significantly, Lord Zabloczci explains to Remus the proper context for his persistent visions. The young Queen stands for the ancient language and culture of Kashubia. The sunken castle stands for the Kashubian land, once free and thriving. Lord Zabloczci also tells Remus about the elemental conflict between Ormuzd, the spirit of light, and Aryman, spirit of darkness, over the Kashubian land. This conflict also informs all of the light and dark imagery throughout the work: one who serves the Kashubian cause is a "spark of Ormuzd." Moreover, by importing these two ancient Zoroastrian deities into his narrative, Majkowski indulges his erudition by situating it within the canon of great Western literature. One of Aryman's avatars is Kashubia's implacable enemy, the black spirit (*czorni duch*) Smętk. Smętk is a familiar figure in Kashubian literature, represented by different authors in different ways (Samp 1984). The English translation refers to him as "Smętek." A Kashubian or Polish reader could not help but know that Smętk's name is extremely close to the word *smutk*, or "Sadness," connecting both darkness and sadness with Remus's bouts of debilitating *melancholia*. Pan Zabloczci impresses upon Remus that Smętk is far more dangerous to the Kashubian cause than the monsters *Trud*, *Strach* and *Njevorto* are. Finally, he encourages Remus to become a "spark of Ormuzd." Remus agrees to leave the farm upon coming of age and to spend his life fighting for the Kashubian way of life. He promises Pan Zabloczci that he will travel even to the farthest regions of the Kashubian land. Much like Aeneas, Remus acknowledges his heroic rebirth upon completion of his *katabasis* by carrying out his appointed task.

3. REMUS AND TRĄBA VISIT KASHUBIAN HELL

The major part of *Life and Adventures of Remus* deals with Remus's travels throughout Kashubia, selling sundries, books and religious devotional items from the wheelbarrow he pushes before him. The books and religious items represent Kashubian literature and the Roman Catholic faith; Remus serves his cause by providing these items to people throughout the Kashubian land. Although Remus's travels exhaust him he presses on, fortified by his faith, the companionship of his jolly musician friend Trąba, and his desire to fulfill his pledge to the dying Lord Zabloczci. His adventures are poignant and compelling, and preserve realistically the flavor of Kashubian peasant life in the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, Remus is befriended by the King of the Lake, a renegade Kashubian patriot who wants Remus to marry his beautiful daughter, and he does his best to avoid Czernik, a Germanophile country barrister who turns out to be the assistant of Smętek. He becomes aware of his propensity for

melancholia, and tells himself one spring to go out into the world with his wheelbarrow “so the illness (*womona*) will not overcome you like it did during your boyhood years.” (Majkowski 2008, 362). Everywhere else in the English translation, the Kashubian word *womona* is rendered as “mirage” or “apparition.” Here, the translators demonstrate laudable sensitivity to the context by suggesting a connection between the work of Smętek and Remus's *melancholia*. Nor can Remus outrun these emotions, as he learns when he visits the tomb of the Pomeranian dukes at the Cathedral at Oliwa (Majkowski 2008, 364):

There was a marble stone in the shape of a casket. I knelt before it to pray for the souls of the great princes. When I looked up I saw the huge statues with royal robes and shining armor. They seemed to be looking at me, poor meager Remus. I needed to rest my head on that black monument stone so I would not collapse. What sorrow overwhelmed my heart! Thoughts, thick as the black birds that land as a flock and covered the old mountain ash in the field, covered my head. “Where have you gone, you host of knights and lords?”

Resting on the black monument and the simile of the black birds gives a physical dimension to Remus's deep sorrow. Fortunately, he is soon joined by his jolly companion Trąba just in time for his second *katabasis*.

Chapter 36 of *Life and Adventures of Remus* is entitled “Remus and Trąba in Hell,” but the *katabasis* of Remus and Trąba continues all the way through Chapter 40: it takes up 54 pages in the English translation. Seeking the farthest reaches of the Kashubian land, Remus reaches a thoroughly Germanized area far to the west of his home. Near the town of Sarbsk, located close to the Baltic Sea, Remus and Trąba are picked up by a gentleman in a carriage and his comical young friend, “Derda.” They are taken to a castle with an imposing entrance, where they will soon meet the owner, Lord Młotk (Majkowski 2008, 373). Since Lord Młotk and his daughter Panna Sławina are the last Kashubian speakers in the area, he enjoys conversing with the few Kashubians who pass through. At the same time, he considers himself the last of the Kashubians, and that the culture will die out in Sarbsk when he dies. In the meantime, Derda unsettles Remus and literally terrifies Trąba by announcing that they have not only arrived in Hell, but in Kashubian Hell. (Majkowski 2008, 373):

...But do not be too fearful. You will not wind up in the worst section of our hell, for beware – we have the true Kaszubian hell here. Ever since about five hundred years ago, or perhaps longer, the German hell, which is our neighbor, sends us a whole army of reprobates claiming they are not their people. During their lifetime the Germans are willing to count them as their own but in hell they are rejected.

Derda's account of how newspaper columnists are punished in hell, by being forced to drink their own bile and vomit out books and newspapers, reaches a Dantesque level of *contrapasso* (Majkowski 2008, 375):

The lord will bring you before our court here in hell and they will make the decision. Each one will be judged justly. Different punishments are meted out for different offenses. As an example, for one who writes mean things about his neighbors in

books or newspapers, the hell doctor pushes a dull tap into his liver and drains a half quart of the bile, which is making him so mean.

This literary foolery is lost upon Trąba, who wants to leave, even after it turns out Derda is actually a young Kashubian student whom Lord Młotk found on the road, just as he had found Remus and Trąba. In fact, Derda represents Kashubia's first published poet, Jan Hieronim Derdowski (1852-1902). Somewhat anachronistically, Derdowski's 1880 poem "About Mr. Czorlinczi, who went to Puck to buy a fishing net" (*O Panu Czorlińskim co do Pucka po sece jachol*) is one of the texts Remus offers for sale (Majkowski 2008, 22). After dinner, Lord Młotk shows Remus and Trąba around his castle.

Lord Młotk first presents a museum of Kashubian clothing and artifacts from daily life (much like Lord Zabloczi's) and then a room filled with portraits of Kashubian nobles and cultural leaders. Another room contains the portraits of Lord Młotk's own family. In the shadows, Remus notices a painter, working on a portrait nobody can see. As Lord Młotk describes his ancestors and their achievements, one is again reminded of the list of great future Romans that Anchises showed to Aeneas in Book 6 of the *Aeneid* (Klein 2004, VI. 808-853):

...There's Mummius: triumphing over Corinth, he'll drive his chariot, victorious, to the high Capitol, famed for the Greeks he's killed: and Aemilius Paulus, who, avenging his Trojan ancestors, and Minerva's desecrated shrine, will destroy Agamemnon's Mycenae, and Argos, and Perseus the Aeacid himself, descendant of war-mighty Achilles.

Significantly, the portrait of one of Lord Młotk's ancestors bears a striking resemblance to Remus, who reads the placard beneath it and suspects a possible connection (Majkowski 2008, 391-392):

...Witosław Joakim Jaszko Młotk of Sarbsk [...] While serving under the command of Hetman Jan Zamoyski, he was wounded in the battle of Pskov. In accordance with the peace agreement, he was granted an estate near Riga in Inflanty. There he was mortally wounded in a battle with rebelling burghers of Riga. He died in the year of Our Lord 1585. May he rest in peace.

Next evening, Remus's suspicions are confirmed. Lord Młotk and his daughter Panna Sławina meet him in the hall of the Młotk ancestors. The frail Panna Sławina goes into a trance and speaks in oracular language of a man who wanders about Kashubia, pursued by the devil Smętk, who can only be Remus himself. The Młotk lords and ladies then emerge from their portraits and wander about the room. Sławina confirms that Remus is indeed the reincarnation of the knight Witosław Młotk (Majkowski 2008, 396):

The Lord Młotk could not turn his eyes away from the portrait of the knight. In the silence his voice came, asking "Sławina, my daughter, why doesn't knight Witosław, the servant of the Polish King, Stefan Batory, killed during the burghers rebellion in Riga, come out?" Sławina turned her wide open eyes toward me. Gesturing to me, she

said "He is here!" At that moment a spark passed through my entire body as if I were struck by lightning.

The spark Remus references can only be the "spark of Ormuzd." At this point Lord Młotk confirms his daughter's opinion but reiterates that Remus's mission is in vain. She disagrees and recites a poetic prophecy that Kashubia will prevail. As they argue, the mysterious painter reveals his finished work - a portrait of a young queen and a magnificent castle, both defended by the knight Witosław Młotk. The power flashes through Remus as he examines the details of the portrait. He starts interacting with the portrait, defending the queen and saving the castle. But suddenly the scene turns terribly awry. Everything collapses on Remus: the light fades, the queen is once more lost, and the castle sunken once more. The patriotic knight Witosław Młotk regresses into the tongue-tied farmhand Remus. The triumphant moment of exaltation is ruined. Panna Sławina screams out that the painter is the Devil Smętek himself. Shaken by "the turmoil of interchanging illusion and reality, of awe, regret, nostalgia, pain and doubt," Remus collapses too (Majkowski 2008, 400). He has again failed in his mission (Szmytko 2004), through the agency of Smętek and to the wave of emotions produced by a recurrence of his *melancholia*.

4. REMUS AFTER KASHUBIAN HELL

Despite his failure in Lord Młotk's hall, Remus discovers his true nature while in "Kashubian Hell." He is no longer just a tongue-tied farmhand turned peddler, but the reincarnated Kashubian knight Witosław Młotk. Still, this does not assure the accomplishment of his mission. Although Panna Sławina has prophesied that the Kashubian cause will ultimately prevail, Smętek and Czernik literally bedevil Remus for the rest of his life. Trąba dies through one such intervention, and Remus is forced to marry his abusive widow Trąbina. When he finally finds happiness with the Queen of the Lake, Czernik and Trąbina appear to Remus and ruins his idyllic peace (Majkowski 2008, 459):

It was then that I realized that my happiness would not last. It was shattered by sin. An intense sadness drowned my soul and a fear unknown to mortals raised the hair upon my neck. Not even enough time to say a few *Our Fathers* had passed before a narrow black cloud emerged from the place where the sky touches the ground. It expanded so rapidly to cover the sky that both of us were astonished at how quickly the light of the day disappeared.

Again, visions and other emotional trauma combine to defeat Remus, pointing to yet another episode of his *melancholia*. The sudden darkness portends a catastrophic storm which will force Remus to leave the Queen of the Lake, and again lends an external dimension to Remus's internal sorrow. She will bear and raise their son, who will be another "spark of Ormuzd." Remus retires and writes his memoirs, eventually concluding that his lack of faith caused his failure to save the queen and raise the castle. This supposed lack of faith may indeed have been responsible. But it can also be construed as a symptom of *melancholia*. Indeed, the very last sentence of Remus's

narrative is “Instead, I simply got up and went home because when I had discovered the truth, I became totally incapacitated.” He dies the next day in a freak accident caused by Czernik, who is killed by a lightning bolt later on the same day (Majkowski 2008, 479).

The theme of Remus’s *melancholia* complements Majkowski’s complex system of light and dark imagery. Two crucial connections to this system of light and dark imagery, as represented in the 2008 English translation, are worth particular study. The elemental conflict between Ormuzd and Aryman would be familiar to an educated reader, but still appreciable to an intelligent reader. Yet the crucial motifs of *katabasis* and *melancholia* would be better expressed in English if a suitable English equivalent for the name Smętek existed. A glossary at the end of the English translation construes Smętek as “possibly a remembrance of a black pagan god” (Majkowski 2008, 486). But neither “black pagan god” or “Lord Sadness” do justice to either Smętek’s provenance or his role in the work. The visceral reaction a Kashubian, or even Polish, reader would experience at seeing the name Smętek is therefore absent for the English reader. The same is true of Smętek’s human assistant Czernik, whose name is derived from the Slavic root meaning “black.” “Mister Black” (or, worse yet, “Blackie”) would be similarly undignified and untrue to the epic tone of *Life and Adventures of Remus*. As a result, Czernik is disconnected from the system of light and dark imagery for the English reader. When Majkowski sardonically describes the corpse of Czernik as “black as tar” (*czorni jak smoła*), the English reader is effectively left out from the joke. While the English translation is an outstanding rendition of Majkowski’s work, the English language serves the English-language reader less well.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The motif of *katabasis* helps propel the development of Remus’s character and helps lend the novel the epic tone Majkowski sought. His skillful use of the motif situates Remus among a long tradition of Western epic heroes including not only his exemplar Aeneas but Gilgamesh, Odysseus, and Dante as well. The lavishly described episode of Remus’s visit to Lord Młotk is a *tour de force* containing all the formal attributes of the classical *katabasis*. Despite the motif’s inherent lack of levity, the interaction between the clownish Derda and Trąba generates considerable laughter, far more germane to Aristophanes’s katabatic comedy *The Frogs* than it is to the *Aeneid* or the *Inferno*. The system of references to darkness and to *melancholia*, sometimes in conjunction with each other, clearly underscores the feeling of hopelessness associated with trying to advance the Kashubian cause under German domination. It is not out of the question, in the author’s opinion, that the *melancholia* which beset Remus’s efforts was not absent from Dr. Majkowski’s own very similar quest.

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