

Last road

The experience of death as a journey in some poetical works of Antoni Lange

Aldona Jankowska

*Nieraz po ziemi błądzę, jak gdyby umarły,
I żda się, że oglądam świat z tamtego brzegu¹.*

As in previous periods travel in literature of the turn of the nineteenth century could be understood on many levels and thus it was a subject of many interpretations.

Depending on the nature of the journey we could talk about different forms (literal and metaphorical) of moving in time and space. The most significant thing from the point of view of the end of the road was always the target or the lack of it for all travelers.

The symbolism of the journey is characterized by vast amount of connotations. One of the most obvious association refers to the activities associated with overcoming a certain way to a designated place, seeking for new experiences, life wisdom and discovering the truths of the world. Travelling in this context refers to the cognitive stage which is very close to scientific cognition².

Purpose of trip is not always performed 'in isolation' but it is often shared with additional thematic circles.

One of them was the wandering understood metaphorically as the last way leading to crossing of the world's borders — to descend into the realm of the dead. Pilgrimage of the extraterrestrial realm which is available at the time of death was associated with a desire to know its essence which is always described as a great mystery.

1 Cited by: Lange A., XI. *Nieraz po ziemi błądzę...*, [in:] *Rozmyślania i inne wiersze*, choice and preface Poradecki J., Warsaw 1979, p. 43.

2 Kopaliński W., *Słownik symboli*, Warsaw 1990, p. 331.

For every man death is a difficult experience. From a biological point of view it is an irreversible stop of all vital functions, and thus the end of earthly life³. In the literary works this phenomenon operates as an integral part of human existence causing anxiety, sometimes relief... and especially arousing great interest.

Death (in many different variations and combinations) is one of the most important topics of the Young Poland literary period. Medieval version of the macabre replaced during this period personified death — nanny⁴ who liberated from the suffering nature of existence and introduced a state of tranquility and calmness — mainly by the characteristic gesture of laying of the hand on the temples of a dying person. Presentation of the selected scene of agony associates with the function of human habituation to the inevitable. Young Poland's equivalent of death as a next stage in the great migration is reflected in a reflexive — philosophical poetry of Antoni Lange.

The purpose of this paper is to present the experience of death as a journey through the border of two worlds — the earthly and extraterrestrial reflected in a number of selected poems of Young Poland poet. Analyzing his various lyrical texts I am going to discuss in more detail different variants of pilgrimage and the reasons for migration to the land of the dead. I am also going to consider the nature of life in the face of death and the role of death in the line of temporality.

The poetry of Antoni Lange has a very wide range of topics. His literary works consist of Polynesian and Mexican legends, a series of works about Eastern religions and Hindu philosophy⁵.

However, the most intellectually rich and consistent set of poems is *Rozmyślania* (*Thoughts*). This volume consists of a lyrical non-sonnet cycle which reflects reflexive and philosophical issues⁶. Thematic canvas of this volume are two dominant themes — death and alienation of man in the world.

3 *Encyklopedia zdrowia*, ed. Gumulka W. S., Rewerski W., Warsaw 1994, p. 280.

4 Figuration of death in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a skeleton but in terms of Young Poland literary period — deprived of morbid features — *Madame Mors* who was a reversal of the medieval version of *Danse Macabre*. See Lubaszewska A., „Życie — Śmierci doskonałość”. *Młodopolska antropologia śmierci i literacki świat wartości*, Cracow 1995, pp. 52–53.

5 Prokop J., *Antoni Lange*, [in:] *Literatura okresu Młodej Polski*, ed. Wyka K., Hutnikiewicz A., Puchalska M., Warsaw 1968, p. 423. See also: *Historia literatury polskiej. Młoda Polska*, ed. Skoczek A., part. 1, v. 7, Bochnia–Cracow–Warsaw 2006, pp. 266–271.

6 Close to Lange's non-sonnet reflective and philosophical poetry is *Zamyslenia* (*Reveries*) by Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, the cycle *W ciemności schodzą moja dusza* (*In the Darkness Descends My Soul*) — Jan Kasprówicz, *Symbol* (*Symbols*) by Wincenty Korab-Brzozowski. Themes, motifs manner of imaging is very similar to *Rozmyślania* (*Meditations*) by Antoni Lange.

Reflections on life and the desire to pass to the 'other side' are personal reflections included in loose connections⁷.

I guess that none of the Young Poland poets did not deal with the experience of death as inquisitive as Antoni Lange. His works were compared to the poetry of graves and described as a 'tombstone reflection' and 'conversation of the master and death'⁸. For many years death was the companion of his life and the most beautiful and most profound poems were created by him are dedicated to her. Writing about death he referred to the Bible, Greek mythology, the Hindu belief in the transmigration of souls and to the Platonic-Plotinic concept of anamnesis and pra-existence⁹.

A characteristic feature of his works is the presence of the numerous allusions, quotations, allusions, styling, paraphrases, known as inter-textual relationships¹⁰.

In this article a reflection upon the death as the trip will be based on an analysis of selected poems of the artist of the given word¹¹.

In the poem entitled *Cmentarz* (*The Cemetery*) the theme of a wandering entity is present. It is described as a great journey, the destination is the grave and reminds us about the end of the earthly phase of human life. The very title directs the recipient to the semantic field of death. The cemetery is the burial place for the dead.

The first stanza brings the image of a seemingly idyllic landscape. Rustic atmosphere has been achieved thanks to the appearance of the element of the landscape in the form of 'narrow path' long and winding that leads the narrator rapidly to an unspecified direction. Constitutive characteristics by which this pathway has been described bear the marks of anthropomorphism. The path transforming into 'winding snake' receives features characteristic for species of amphibians. Then it runs along the vertical line, as determined by the opposition of up — down. Such use of space refers to the symbolism of 'top' and 'bottom' as the ideas of heaven and hell in

7 Prokop J., op. cit., p. 424.

8 Borowy W., *Antoni Lange jako poeta*, [in:] *Studia i szkice literackie*, v. 1, Warsaw 1983, p. 395. See Borowy W., *Antoni Lange jako poeta*, [in:] *Dzisiaj i wczoraj*, Warsaw 1934, pp. 196–215.

9 Mikołajczak M., *O miejscu „Rozmyślań” Antoniego Langedo w liryce Młodej Polski*, „Ruch Literacki”, R. XL, 1999, v. 4, p. 427.

10 Włodarczyk J., „Z tej otchłani mi płyną niewiadome głosy”. O „obcych” słowach w poezji Antoniego Langedo, „Ruch Literacki” R. XL, 1999, v. 4, p. 413. Antoni Lange in designing the cycle *Rozmyślenia* referred to the works of Jan Kochanowski especially to *Treny* (*Lamentations*) and poetic texts of Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński.

11 Selected poems: *Cmentarz*, *Rozmyślenia*, [selection:] R. VI. *Chaosiem ciemnym bez rozumnej osi*, R. XI. *Nieraz po ziemi błądzę*, R. XXXIII. *W każdej chwili żywota jesteś w przegrodzie mogiły*, R. XXXVI. *Nie śmierć to właśnie*, R. XLIX. *Wybudowałem most*, [excerpt:] *Bezżenna noc*. Most of the passages I quoted is from issue: Lange A., *Rozmyślenia i inne wiersze*, selection and preface Poradecki J., Warsaw 1979.

the culture¹². The connection of the road with a snake which qualities are agility and speed direct the reader's attention towards the variability of the path's trajectory. Verbs emphasize the dynamism of the changing landscape which 'the pathway' is surrounded by:

Wije się, wije wąska drożyna
Na długie wiorsty wije —
To w dół się spuszcza, to w górę wspina —
Wije się w krętą żmiję.

Żmiją się kręci w zielonych lanach
I w łąki się zanurza:
Na wiorst kilkoro znika w tumanach,
Wije się wokół wzgórza.

(*Cmentarz, w. 1–8*)¹³

Disclosed gradually as a sort of a chain another elements of the landscape form more accurate view of reality. We are dealing here with a caset-like lyrical composition where different parts of created scenes reveal next ones are fused together causing anxiety in the recipient.

The way of building of the world of poetry runs centripetal in depth leading to the final resting place. Such epithets as *black crosses*, *tribe of the dead*, *cemeterial silence* refer to the afterlife and remind us of the mythical Hades.

Starting from the first stanza through the entire length of the poem the theme is road crooked and prone to changing. Thanks to these accurate images the reader approaches the goal of finding the cemetery 'step by step'. The presence of it is clearly associated with death and the transience of everything earthly. One can get the impression that human actions taken in the conduct of life lead, as this road, only to death. As the title suggests the cemetery is a earthly marker of the end of the journey.

'A winding pathway' serves as a kind of guide through the earth indicating the transient elements of the world and leading to a place beyond known areas somewhere in the distance.

12 Vertical symbols oppose what is high: the sky and the stars, what is the 'bottom' — the land and beneath it — the underworld. Heaven is the model for the world, because it is a place where persons are sacred and good, ideal for people who are worthy of emulation, is also a goal because it is the place of final happiness and fulfillment. Hell, on the other hand, is a symbol of the negative values, where they are the elements that are the source of evil and its personification. Sometimes the sky contrasted with the underground world symbolizes life. See Jacko J.F., *Struktura symboli wertykalnych a ich rola w komunikacji międzykulturowej i w zarządzaniu*, [in:] *Religion in the Time of Changes*, ed. Klima E., Lodz 2005, pp. 176–194.

13 Work cited: Lange A., *Poezje*, Cracow 1898, part. 2, p. 69.

It is also portrayed as the goddess of destiny, which allocates the fate to every man and ‘spuns his web of life’¹⁴:

Idź po tej wąskiej — krętej drożynie,
Co w dal swą wstęgę przedzie:
Las, pole, łąka z oczu ci zginie,
Lecz cmentarz widać wszędzie.

(*Cmentarz*, w. 17–20)¹⁵

Imaginative, hypothetical situation of his own death and *post-mortem* wandering around the world of the living in an axis of the poem XI. *Sometimes I wander along the ground as if dead* published in the volume *Rozmyślenia* (*Thoughts*).

The narrator thinks that he is watching the temporality from an entirely different perspective — a man who lives in the underworld. The change of perspective makes the earthly world visible from a certain distance both emotional and spatial.

Watching from the top of what is going on in the world allows an objective judgment on the rights which govern it. People and things — its material and unstable components subjected to observation, seem to be less important. Remote and mental location of the ground from ‘that another shore’ is so big that you cannot determine exactly where and how far this land is located. What attracts the attention of the reader is the impression of continuous movement in the designated space:

Nieraz po ziemi błądzę, jak gdyby umarły,
I zda się, że oglądam świat z tamtego brzegu:
Ziemia gdzieś — jakąś oddal — w oku mym zalega,
A ludzie gdzieś pode mną błądzą niby karły.

(*R. XI: Nieraz po ziemi błądzę...*, w. 1–4)

The narrator of the poem discloses his largest fantasy — the desire to see what lies on the other side of life. The realization of this dream — and at the same time the aim of the journey — would lead to the honor of obtaining information about the nature of existence. This would rise to greater cognitive abilities and give an answer to the philosophical question of the meaning of earthly and *post-mortem* existence. The intimate knowledge of

14 In mythology the Fates were the goddesses of destiny. They assign the fate of every human being. In Homer's work there was only one and in Hesiod's work there were three: Clotho — she spun the thread of life, Lachesis — she allocated the fate and guarded the thread, and Atropos who cut the thread. See Kopaliński W., *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury*, Warsaw 2003, p. 784.

15 Op. cit.: Lange A., *Poezje*, p. 69.

revelation is described here as an illumination — the whole point is to acquire absolute knowledge:

Roję, że mi zaświaty nagle się otwarły —
I nagle w jasnovidztwie dusza ma spostrzeżę,
Czym jest byt, czym jest bytu alfa i omega¹⁶ —
Aż mi człowiecze sprawy na proch się zatarły!

(R. XI: *Nieraz po ziemi błądzę...*, w. 5–8)¹⁷

Due to the fact that the world seems to be enigmatic it is particularly important for a human to desire the discovering the mystery in which this world is embedded. The opportunity to reach the fullest knowledge is in death and then the ‘veil of death will deflect what was inconceivable at that moment’¹⁸.

In the poem XXXIII: *At any time of life* the narrator believes that life of a mortal human being on earth is in fact only a temporary stop on the road leading to his death, a state of suspension, waiting for the end of life. Therefore, bearing in mind always fulfilled promise of the transition into another dimension, crossing the worlds’ border — the imperative of adequate preparation for this important and inevitable journey to afterlife is extremely crucial.

This admonition is a kind of poetic form of ‘art of fine dying’ and addressed to lyric ‘you’ — a person with the status of ‘perpetual prisoner’:

W każdej chwili żywota jesteś w przededniu mogiły,
Jako wieczysty więzień, co kosy czeka śmiertelnej;
Czuwaj! Przygotowany bądź — i wszystkie siły
Zbieraj, byś stanął wobec niej — nieskazitelny.

(R. XXXIII: *W każdej chwili żywota...*, w. 1–4)

The man who is aware of his fate expressed in the necessity of taking the inevitable toil of parting with temporal goods feels the sadness and nostalgia because of the inevitability of the material loss:

I ogląda skazaniec, jakie to skarby zatracę
I co mu niegdyś się zdalo liche i obojętne —
Teraz ma tajemnicze kolory odświętne
I marzeniem, wspomnieniem, tęsknotą się w oczach wylęca.

(R. XXXIII: *W każdej chwili żywota...*, w. 9–12)

16 *alpha and omega* — the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. It is the symbol of the beginning and the end, unshakable authority. See Kopaliński W., *Słownik mitów...*, op. cit., p. 32.

17 Op. cit.: Lange A., *Rozmyślenia i inne wiersze*, selection and preface Poradecki J., Warsaw 1979, p. 43.

18 Op. cit.: Ibidem, p. 71.

The purpose of all of the living is a priori ‘entrance on the bridge’ leading to the land of the dead. We can observe here a kind of transfer of a medieval theme called *vado mori* to the Young Poland literary period. The above theme reminds us of transience, fragility of human life and the need of guidance by the principles of the Ten Commandments:

Tak my ciągle wchodzimy na jakiś most skazańców
I opuszczamy cudowne jakieś weneckie pobrzeża —
I płyniem w nicość jutra do tych krańców,
Gdzie cała przeszłość w złote słońca się rozszerza.

(R. XXXIII: w. 13–16)¹⁹

The figure of the bridge is grounded in Lange’s philosophical beliefs. The structure of the world as a result of restructuring and the development of civilization has become dichotomous and was divided into two opposing parts — the earthly and extraterrestrial²⁰. Originally it was a single entity. Similarly man — he/she consists of body and soul. Therefore, it is an important bridge connecting these two poles²¹.

The observed dualism was the reason for feeling the anxiety arising from the consciousness of duality of the real world and a man — within it. Restrictive division between spheres disabled the way of communication. The bridge in this context, therefore, represents the hope to restore the broken link between the two sides indicating a hard life and a happy death²²:

Wybudowałem most
I dwa złączyłem brzegi rzeczne,
Iż mogłem wprost
Z tej strony iść w jutro bajeczne...
Zostały za mną kresy ciemne,
[...] Ale, choć mi ich żal,
Muszę płynąć w dal —
W te krainy niepojemne...

(R. XLIX: *Wybudowałem most...*, w. 1–5, 8–10)²³

19 Op. cit.: Lange A., p. 74.

20 According to Lange’s opinion the ultimate cognitive goal of the human is to capture world as one, indivisible and still. See Szymańska B., *Poeta i nieznanne. Poglądy filozoficzne Antoniego Langego*, Wrocław 1979, p. 48.

21 For the journey theme as the source of cognition see Legutko G., „Śmierć jest to podróż nad wszystkie podróże”. *Antoniego Langego wędrówka ku źródłom*, [in:] *Podróż i literatura 1864–1914*, ed. Ichnatowicz E., Warsaw 2008, p. 495 etc.

22 The structure of the world in which man acts the very notion of life precludes the possibility of perfect knowledge of its essence. But you can try cognitively get to the other world ‘the real one’ which is beyond life, action and change — to the Absolute. See Szymańska B., *Poeta i nieznanne*, p. 44.

23 Op. cit.: Lange A., p. 94.

Ability to travel to the destination appears to be the inner voice of the narrator for whom overcoming the distance is the true meaning of life. The prospect of finding the ‘other side’ is valued positively as compared to life on earth described only as a suffering. Stoic-purpose of the narrator explains his constant movement and a willingness to continue travelling.

Infinitive form of verb *płynąć* (to flow), neutral to the category of time, preceded by a modal verb *muszę* (must; I have to – *przyp. tłum.*) indicate the persistence and the universality of the operation based on moving forward into uncharted and mysterious spaces.

Willingness to travel stems from a desire to free himself from the burden of temporality. However, it is not so much an escape as the deliverance of man from further suffering. Finally it is the hope for a new, completely different life from the previous one.

In discussing of the meaning of life and the promise of death which is the final stage of human’s journey it turns out that the end is not the end but the beginning. What is more, life resembles agony — as it is characterized by stagnation. This kind of re-evaluation, a reversal of orders expresses the poem R. XXXVI: *Not Death it is*:

Nie jest życiem ta życia jawa,
już to śmierć przez pół...
A nie jest śmiercią owa bialo-krwawa
mara, dzierzżąca miecz i krzyż:

(R. XXXVI: *Nie śmierć to właśnie, w. 7–10*)

Earthly life is only an imperfect model of the latter, higher life, situated far away — in the imagination, dreams and thoughts. Hence the incessant desire:

Chcesz się wyrwać z życia kleszczów,
a przecież nie zginać,
lecz płynąć i płynąć
do krain czystych,
do wniebowziętych
duchów świętych...

(R. XXXVI: *Nie śmierć to właśnie, w. 14–19*)

Leading the discussion of death in the context of the trip the narrator in Lange’s poem realizes that death, companion, dream, target state — is another form of life and better future. Real, full human existence is possible only after crossing the border of worlds:

Bo w życiu tyle śmierci jest, ile mogily,
że w śmierci roim nowe życia przemienienie,

jakiś byt archanielski, czystszy, podobloczny,
promienniejszy od śmierci, ale nie tak mroczny,
jak to nasze półistnienie
na okręgu ziemskiej bryły.

(R. XXXVI: *Nie śmierć to własnie, w. 28–33*)²⁴

The experience of death as a complete philosophy of life is the basis of Lange's view of the world. The poet emphasizes the transition into the realm of the dead. It is a vision far from mundane existence as entering into higher status is highlighted. It is free from the negative signs of the earth's daily life and finally it is the next stage of journey and human activity.

All actions taken on the earth seem to be unfounded, devoid of higher idea. They lack a rational cause-and-effect relationship. The goal that is difficult to verbalize and strength that cannot be easily explained lead unconsciously toward the distant spaces:

Chaosiem ciemnym bez rozumnej osi
Zda ci się twoja na ziemi robota:
Moc tajemnicza w dale cię unosi,
Cel tajemniczy we mgłę ci migota.

(R. VI: *Chaosiem ciemnym bez rozumnej osi, w. 1–4*)

Death, according to the poet, gives hope to discover the mysteries of human existence and to understand the meaning of destination:

Lecz kir mogiły i całun śmiertelny
W logiczną całość powiążą ci życie.

(R. VI: *Chaosiem ciemnym bez rozumnej osi, w. 19–20*)²⁵

Man's life on earth seems to be clearly limited, therefore it is extremely important to be able to break away from the oppressive reality which is achieved when crossing the border of the worlds. The pursuit of the narrator in Lange's poems is close to the experience of death. The desire for liberation is a kind of inner voice from above and the general principle expressed in the poem *Bezsenność noc* (*Sleepless Night*):

Oderwać się od bytu — w szerokie przestwory
Ulecieć — jako lecą bezcielesne twory:
Oto pragnienie ducha — tak śmierci pokrewne,
Że zda się żądzą grobu. Lecz dola ma taka,
Że muszę w nieskończoność płynąć wzorem ptaka.

(*Bezsenność noc, w. 46–50*)²⁶

24 Op. cit.: Ibidem, p. 79.

25 Op. cit.: Lange A., *Rozmyślenia i inne wiersze*, p. 36.

26 Op. cit.: Lange A., *Rozmyślenia i inne wiersze*, p. 199.

In this passage appears the theme of duality the separation of the soul from the body which occurs at the moment of death. Traveling to the land of the dead makes it possible not only to free himself from the burden of temporality but above all an opportunity to learn higher truths. Thus migration — death is imaginative quest for the ultimate wisdom, understanding the meaning of his own existence and the laws of ‘here and there’ existence.

This particular type of travel the longest, most mysterious, because of its unique nature is unknowable but can be described as the ‘meaning of life’. In this perspective death is not the end, on the contrary, it is the experience of duration and existence. By writing ‘life — the excellence of death’ and ‘death is the journey of all journeys’ the poet is trying to change the negative man’s attitude full of fear towards her.

The idea of ‘taming death’ is typical of the thanatology of Young Poland literary period where the creation of ideas personified *Madame Mors* was a response to the fear resulting from the fragility of human life.

The theme of the journey has many options for implementation. One of them is the understanding of the experience of death as a kind of quest where there is a crossing of the border of two worlds: the temporal and the underworld.

From the analysis of a selected poems by Antoni Lange emerges a conclusion that death as the journey is a denial of the end of human life. This is another and short human travel because of the earthly phase. Travelling towards the ‘other side’ has a cognitive value. This journey is an imaginative and mental form to reach the essence of life and death. The moment of death is the best time to know life. In Lange’s poetry to wander is to answer the fundamental questions of human existence.

The space in which *homo viator* travels in poems of Antoni Lange is boundless. The narrator overcomes his way in different directions but always tries to move forward. He sometimes goes through intricate paths following the trail that can bring him astray. Depending on the direction in which he moves he selects the appropriate way of transportation: he walks, runs or swims.

Bibliography:

- Lange A., *Poezje*, part 2, Cracow 1898.
- Lange A., *Rozmyślenia i inne wiersze*, selection and preface Poradecki J., Warsaw 1979.
- Borowy W., *Dzisiaj i wczoraj*, Warsaw 1934.
- Borowy W., *Studia i szkice literackie*, v. 1, Warsaw 1983.
- Encyklopedia zdrowia*, ed. Gumulka W. S., Rewerski W., Warsaw 1994.
- Historia literatury polskiej. Młoda Polska*, ed. Skoczek A., part 1, v. 7, Bochnia–Cracow–Warsaw 2006.
- Kopaliński W., *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury*, Warsaw 2003.
- Kopaliński W., *Słownik symboli*, Warsaw 1990.
- Literatura okresu Młodej Polski*, ed. Wyka K., Hutnikiewicz A., Puchalska M., Warsaw 1968.
- Lubaszewska A., „*Życie — Śmierci doskonałość*”. *Młodopolska antropologia śmierci i literacki świat wartości*, Cracow 1995.
- Mikołajczak M., *O miejscu „Rozmyślań” Antoniego Langego w liryce Młodej Polski*, „Ruch Literacki”, R. XL, 1999, no. 4.
- Podróż i literatura 1864–1914* ed. Ihnatowicz E., Warsaw 2008.
- Religion in the Time of Changes*, ed. Klima E., Lodz 2005.
- Szymańska B., *Poeta i nieznanne. Poglądy filozoficzne Antoniego Langego*, Wrocław 1979.
- Włodarczyk J., „*Z tej otchłani mi płyną niemiadome głosy*”. O „obcych” słowach w poezji Antoniego Langego, „Ruch Literacki” R. XL, 1999, no. 4.