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The Confession of a Royal Son

Aleksander Wat's poetry is like a spiral, which one can handle two ways. Either by burdening it with additions, annotations and commentaries, and in particular with additions, annotations and commentaries to additions, annotations and commentaries. Or, on the contrary, by compressing and condensing it to several motifs or phrases recurring in various periods and configurations. The first way, indispensable as it is as the preparatory phase for the scholar, ultimately leads one from Wat's poetry to mythology, topography, natural science, literature, religion, philosophy, and the author's biography. It leads one to a rich and tempting world, to an unweeded garden of culture and nature, in which, however, one can easily lose one's way or fall into bewilderment. The other way, quite sufficient for a non-professional reader, and desirable for the scholar as the point of arrival, should lead one to the essence of that poetry, its distinctive features and independence.

Wat's poetry as a spiral... This comparison bears a stigma of abstractedness, but its concrete materializations recur in Wat's poems. „Hence he drew in/like a spring under the finger” (incipit of *This night again* ...). Or: „Like a revolving spool I reel these dreams upon myself” (inc. *When he trembled in mortal sweat*...). Or else: „...I record this poem as if it were written by a grass-snake imprisoned in a jug full of milk” (*From the Basket*). Moreover, all those images suggest the contraction of a spiral, and not its spatial expansion.

The contraction of a spiral means the necessity of dissociating oneself from, or at least limiting, the context, which in the case of Wat's poetry, in many ways rooted in culture, may seem a loss. It must also mean directing one's attention to the text itself and the acceptance of its integrality and homogeneity. If such an operation succeeds it can at last be proved that the surrealist poem *The Stove*, poems from futuristic ephemeral publications and almanachs, the anti-religious poem published in cryptocommunist *Nowa Kultura*, the anti-Stalinist poems dating from the early 1940's, bitter but ripe fruit of a new tide of creative forces in 1955-7, and later 1962-3, and the wise poems of 1967, which summed up the author's biography and his epoch, constitute a coherent Work, intertwined in a lot of ways and consistent in its meanders.

1. The situation

„In order to write I must feel like a royal son, at least. Exactly like him, and not like a great writer, not like a genius”, Wat wrote on December 24 (Christmas Eve), 1963, in His *Diary Without Vowels*, encoded in the Hebrew way. A striking and uncommon confession. Out of those who have interpreted Wat's literary production probably two authors only have come close to that problem (by the way, in articles bearing very similar titles). Konstanty A. Jeleński wrote about identification with a „king” or a „sage”, frequent in Wat, the identification which satisfies two desires: that of sovereignty and that of omniscience.¹ Kazimierz Brakoniecki pointed to Wat's numerous poems which „present the person of King”, who is „as if dethroned (the ritual of the carnival?)”.²

The situation of a royal son is in many respects more advantageous than that of the king himself — it is more open, poetically more attractive. The king has less freedom; the anointment makes him rigid, the ceremonial limits his movements, his hours are counted. Sometimes he succeeds in dying a natural death, but in most cases Forbas, the legendary brigand, adds to his collection of crowned heads a new one.

¹ Cf. K. A. Jeleński, *Coincidences*, Cracow 181, Vol. I, p. 147 (Lumen obscurum. On the Poetry of Aleksander Wat) (in Polish).

² K. Brakoniecki, *Light in the Darkness. On the Poems of Aleksander Wat*, „Poezja” 1982, No. p. 13n (in Polish).

Being a royal son allows one to combine the presentiment of one's future majesty with the sense of humility vis-à-vis the Fate, which can always make a royal son become a nobody (the poem *Biography*). A royal son does not originate a new dynasty, he continues an existing one, and constitutes a successive link. The sense of being a royal son allowed Wat personally to join the tradition of the Old Testament. Hence his calling Salomon a „forefather” (*The Turtoise from Oxford*), hence his negative fascination with the person of Titus, „who drove your fathers to slavery” (*Hebrew Tunes 1*, *The Hymn* from the series *The Dark Tinsel*).

A royal son need not be an heir apparent, he even need not live at his father's court. In Arabic stories the sacramental formula „I am a royal son” is often uttered by a wreck dying of starvation, a pitiable cripple, or mendicant devish — a calender. Such a conception of royal son was developed by Gobineau in his novel *Les Pléiades* (1874). In saying „I am a royal son” I say: „My temper is bold and noble, alien to low insinuations of commoners. My likings are not subject to fashion, my feelings originate from myself, neither in love nor in hatred am I guided by the suggestions of a newspaper. The independence of spirit and absolute freedom are the unshakable privilege of my noble origin...”. The heroes of Gobineau's novel form the aristocracy of spirit. In order to be a royal son one need not be born one: one must rise to an adequate intellectual, aesthetic, ethical level, one must feel like a royal son — as Wat must have felt to be in order to write.

One month before the quoted confession of the poet he wrote a poem *Take the lute...*, as reaction to the assassination of President Kennedy. (Wat, shocked by that murder, thought about writing a novel entitled *Oswald*, in which one of the key moments would be that when Jack Rubinstein, a Polish Jew, kneels down in the ritual gesture of the sacrificer when shooting at the „king-killer” Oswald.) The landscape of that poem is mythical and Biblical, but its moral message („When the King is murdered everyone/is disgraced”) is universal, and the sense of responsibility for history is personal („So that the Plague may not sit among us/on the abandoned throne”).

The key of the concept of royal son can also be used to open the poem *The King and the Royal Dreams*, a jocular pen-portrait of Jerzy Giedroyc (a Polish émigré, editor of the Polish-language monthly *Kultura* published in Paris), with the title of his periodical encoded in the text of the poem.

All the poems mentioned above were written in 1962–3. But much earlier, in 1920, Wat wrote about a man of noble (royal?) birth („at one time he was bored by the aroma/of ordinary slave girls”), who was at the same time a king-killer: „... you were rushing then like a nomad,/cutting the air as earlier yours knife was cutting the bodies of kings”. Note that this astonishingly prophetic poem must be read in the context of such later items as *The Journey* (a forced ride in a closed windowless railway carriage) or *The Ballad of a Summer Afternoon* (the fear of death which leads one by one’s hand to a park, the motif of a wounded bird). And also some earlier works — *Jealousy Punished*, *The Stove*.

In the initial fragment of a novel entitled *Novel* and published in February 1922 Wat included a short chapter „A Colloquay Between an Old Woman and My Soul”. The old woman blames „the soul” (that is Wat himself) with exotic accessories:

No! Never! Running to the crossroads, striking the wall with one’s head, loudly deploring lost kingdoms, royal sons, serious and respectable men, minarets and bazaars. «Where are the pagodas and yellow hands of royal sons, where are the pagodas and the dull rolling of the Sunday of deities!» [...] Lord, I do not believe in the sincerity of your words [the criticized quotation is from *The Stove*].

The question about sincerity is essential for the identification with a royal son. The author’s soul replies evasively:

Aesthetics is a kind of literary panderism. [...] I prefer contemporaneity, for instance I prefer tramcars. They are more wonderful than the bird rug, we enter in them Coloristan which is more fiery than the Easts and the Wests”.³

His reply is seemingly futuristic (urban, masses-oriented, machine-oriented), but at the same time mythical and fairy. The background of Wat’s language, which is both Baroque and modernist, shows through the shining layer of modernity. Sincerity is proved just by unconsciousness, irresistible necessity, with which mythical elements penetrate the text.

Sincerity is the first condition of confession. Confession is (ought to be) a sincere conversation with ... certainly not with a priest. With

³ *Nowa Sztuka* 1922, No. 2.

oneself (soul searching), with Another, with God. In the case of a confession of a poet - with his reader, too. The situation of such a conversation marks almost the entire literary production of Aleksander Wat. It is not by coincidence that his summa, *Mój wiek* (My Century), was given by him the subtitle *Spoken Memoirs*. The specific characteristics of Wat's mind (the pressure of thought that developed more quickly than he could write) account for the fact that the dialogue was for him the most natural and most effective form of expression. The reaction of the interlocutor made him stick to the motif and to revert to the main theme. That is why Wat's poetry includes so many phrases intended to establish contact with the reader) („I say that unto you”, „Look”, „I accord you are right”, „I repeat”, „Believe me”, „But do not forget”, etc.). But the dialogue-based character of Wat's poems could hardly be called colloquiality. They are conversations which are intimate and solemn at same time. When one listens to them one has the impression that the author is someone very near to the reader (his father?), who sits next to him in an armchair (a confessional?), and at the same time that the armchair is a throne, and the trembling voice, the words of a monarch.

2. Landscape in action, or the domination of space

In one of his later - unfinished - poems Wat confessed: „I have always seen the most dangerous antinomy/in the order of time as opposed to the order of space”. The direct traces of that antinomy can be found in Wat in many places, beginning with the loud declaration made in *The Stove*, whose triply blasphemous sense was decapitated by Małgorzata Baranowska.⁴ These places and those moments combine to form an epic of the struggle against space and time, a struggle which results in the annihilation of both in their physical sense. That annihilation occurs in

⁴ „By calling himself the tsar of space he conquers it. That is a triple blasphemy: first, because in Polish poetry he declares himself a tsar; secondly, because he appropriates the entire space, which does not become a human being; thirdly, because he substitutes himself for God in *The Great Improvisation* [one of the most famous poems in Polish literature, written by Adam Mickiewicz]” (cf. M. Baranowska. *The Transfiguration of Space in the Literary Production of Aleksander Wat*, in: *Przestrzeń a literatura* (Space and Literature), Wrocław 1978, p. 285 (in Polish).

Wat's poetry in the early 1960s and produces a series of poems which take place in a synthetic space and a synthetic time. Bois de Boulogne is Paradise, those expelled from Paradise find their way to a concentration camp; a Parisian prostitute would receive a knight in his coat of mail as she receives the shopkeeper from the other side of the street; Biblical and ancient events take place today, over and over again, and present-day events acquire characteristics of ancient ones.

For the poet to master space means to name it; to master time means to grasp and stop it, provided that he recognizes the traditional antinomy. Wat's efforts have in view grasping space in its happening and naming time which freely changes its place.

The happening of space, landscape in action... In the first commentary to *Mediterranean Poems* (1962), probably the most spatially oriented work of Wat, we can find the opposition of space of two types - the becoming (*Préalpes de Grasse*) and the dying (*Provence*). „There the stormy and multishaped immensity of the becoming world, here the monotonous agony of space.” The present-day reader, who has - as compared with the author - the advantage of being able to assimilate his production in the chronological arrangement (at one or several sittings) will recall at this moment his poetic prose entitled *A Fragment*. He will recall the landscape of violet soil, aging in the process of levelling, above which there spreads the eternally young sky. And he will not be astonished by the recollection, in one of later *Mediterranean Poems*, of that violet landscape in Ferghana, with the commentary „the dramatic happening of the landscape”. The words „monotonous agony” acquire then the meaning of an incessantly resumed struggle with old age, with death.

If the natural landscape, which is only scarcely populated, changes so quickly, then what about the changeability of the urban landscape? That is referred to in two complementary poems of May 1956, *Paris Anew* and *Recollection*. Each first day of a new stay in Paris is like „the first day of creation” - a new stage in the biography becomes the beginning of history. There is no full return to previous visits, to previous stages. The fugitive formula of G. B. Vico, „L'infinità venuta del tutto” - is an illusion. But if everything changes, then there is also no ultimate, irrevocable death. The lack breeds hope, a shadow of hope.

3. The heart of stone and the speech of stone

„The heart of stone / is not in structures / nor in the relations of space-time, bountiful / it rebuilds structures / whereas powerless time destroys them”. This fragment of *The Wanderer's Song* opens the path to the separate, hermetic world of the inside of stone. Inside treated as a psychological concept, the world of the heart, dreams, and thoughts of stone. Wandering into that world is an escape from the world contaminated by death, made squalid by politics, affected by moral filth; that escape is possible at a moment of loosening logical relations, habits of thought, social bonds.

The need to penetrate the inside of stone has made a strong impression upon contemporary Polish poetry (*Pebble* by Herbert, *Conversation with a Stone* by Szymborska). The attractiveness of that motif can probably be explained to some extent by the history of Poland - a specific sense of the short life of man and the short life of the products of human hands and thought. In all those poems stone is an object of open or latent envy. Wat was attracted by the world of stones by the fact that „everything there is significant and pure”. Penetrating a stone would thus have an intellectual and ethical aspect. The sense of being a stone is single and the simplest - to be. Those mute witnesses of our pitiable convulsive movements do not know what corruption, decay, eczema, and leprosy mean. They are significant and pure... From that there is only one step to metaphysics. The poet does not hesitate to make it, insured by the conditional mood: „If God is, He is there. In the heart of stones. Also in their dreams.”

God as the dream of stones. This type of imagination or poetic creation makes one think about Rilke, about the dream of the earth in *The Ninth Duino Elegy*. Likewise, in the same *Wanderer's Song* the picture of a sculptor „whom the voice of the stone stops with the chisel already raised: / stop, here is your threshold”, is a clear reference to Rilke's book on Rodin. I mention this not because I am driven by the passion of a comparatist. That name just had to be mentioned herein in order to fix a certain level of possible references, to provide a measure.⁵

⁵ It would be interesting to compare two works inspired by the same work, a Greek

The second *Wanderer's Song* formulates three desires, worded explicitly, in an emphatic repetition: „To be in the heart of stone - how I desired that!... Dreams of stone! How I desired to see the dreams/of stone... Oh, how I desired to penetrate the thoughts of stone.” Whether we treat stone transcendently, as a cryptonym of the Absolute, or reductionistically, as a „sovereign monad”, the sense of these dreams is clear: to feel, to dream and to think differently. The fourth desire remained comouflaged, it is suggested by negation, by the words about „the dark speech of/human beings ... speech without eyes, no - with the eyes always gouged out”. The blind, blinded human speech evokes its opposition - the clairvoyant speech of stone.

The search for an individual language, one's own diction, a distinct speech, came to fruition in Wat's pre-1939 works in two solutions which are sensational in that respect. I mean *The Stove* and *namopaniki* (a nonce - word). *The Stove*, written in 1919 r („I on the one and I on the side of my pugiron stove”), is the best surrealistic poem in Polish literature. It introduced a number of linguistic innovations, the most important of which were listed by its author himself in his essay *This and That About „The Stove”*, written two months before his death. Separation of syntax from logic, bringing syntax to the brink of jabber, an endeavour to produce pictures which are unimaginable. In all those experiments we find the primacy of language — over logic, over sense, even over imagination. Let us say at the outset that that primacy is not absolute: manifestations of partial consciousness contained in *The Stove* proved to be prefigurations of many facts in its author's future biography, and that is why the various phrases recur in this connection in many of his later poems (*Return Home*, *A Night in the Hospital*, the eighth *Wanderer's Song*, the third *Ode*). But *The Stove* is not formally homogeneous, it is rather a series of endeavours made in various directions, the striving to transgress limits.⁶ Under the boldly built

relief. I mean the well-known poem by Rilke, *Orphaeus. Euridice. Hermes* (1904), and Wat's *Somatic Poems* (1957), in the first edition, probably following a suggestion by the author, illustrated with a reproduction of a relief from the Neapolitan Museum.

⁶ „What happened to the boy who early, too early, started his adventure of crossing all frontiers?” — Wat posed that question to himself in 1940, on his way from Kiev to Moscow (*Mój wiek*, London 1977, vol. II, p. 21).

bridges, which keep words together (but do not make them clash with one another), there are dark meanders which lead one to childhood, to the primitive, to archaic myths, to side corridors of culture, to the underground world.

In the said commentary to *The Stove* Wat mentions three men who before 1939 were fascinated by that book: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Stefan Napierski, Bruno Schulz. Without any considerable risk of error it may be said that each of them read a different work and responded to a different stratum in *The Stove*. S. I. Witkiewicz perceived in it a formal experiment, Napierski, a literary pastiche, and Schulz, the dark sphere of imagination. The putting together of these three interpretations opens *The Stove* to several literary genres. Witkiewicz looks toward dramaturgy: „The application and development of Wat’s conception in the theatre would bring, in my opinion, astonishing results.”⁷ Napierski would probably like to see in Wat a restorer of the tradition of literary essay. Schulz gave a reply-and-continuation in his own prose.

One of the experiments in *The Stove* points to *namopaniki*. The beginning of the fragment entitled *Self-portrait* is a phonetic variation on the word *powieki* (‘eyelids’ in Polish). While the various words used there function in Polish independently, one exception (‘kosujka’) refers one directly to *Biographies*, one of the three *namopaniki* preserved to our times.

Now, *namopaniki* mark a step forward as compared to „words at large” in *The Stove*: here morphemes were freed. At the first glance the result assumes the form of a funny jabber. But on closer inspection the texts reveal the rules that control them. In *namopanik*: (meant as the singular of *namopaniki*) entitled *charuna* the following three consonants: ch — r — n, are the factors which generate the text. On the one hand, words are transformed, on the other, they are associated with one another on the basis of phonetic similarity and not logic or imagery. We receive a sentencelike sequence, which resembles a magical incantation (as in Khlebnikov’s *Conjuration by Laughter*); *namopaniki* are marked by futurization and archaization (later analogous linguistic experiments

⁷ S. I. Witkiewicz, *Aleksander Wat*, in: *Teatr*, Cracow 1923, p. 248. That article, written on May 12, 1921, is probably the only review of *The Stove*, in some points a very penetrating one.

were used by Stanisław Lem: one formulation in *namopaniki* strikingly resembles his *Star Diaries*). They move forward, backward, and sideward — to other languages, Russian above all (Wat before 1914 attended a Russian school in Warsaw), but also to Romance languages and to German. For instance, 'kokodryl' in *namopanik* entitled *charuna* is not just an empty oddity but an exact calque of Italian 'il coccodrillo'.

Anatol Stern, Wat's partner in futurism, wrote in 1924: „Wat — who after having written the only strong work in Polish expressionism — is busy very productively expanding sounds by morphological and semasiological analysis.”⁸ This interpretation of the transition from *The Stove* to *namopaniki* is undoubtedly correct but one-sided. The experiment with *namopaniki* was not merely an analysis: from under the distorted words there emerges the age-old world of myths, the world of primitive relations between things and concepts. In *namopanik* entitled *barwistan* (this can be quite well rendered as 'coloristan') that world oscillates between two groups of words, referring respectively to colours and Arabic words. The latter group is associated with the nomadic wandering of Abraham and — to go further back into the Old Testament — the exit from Paradise. All the three streams meet in the final passage (which includes various nonce-words and phonetically resembles Ukrainian or Russian).

In a jocular and perverse essay *Chronicle But Not Goodwilled* (1948) Wat *en passant* characterized himself thus: „That was why I, Balaam, son of Beor, from the town of Pethor, returned home to write rationalistic stories, irrational poems, and sceptical treatises”⁹. The phrase „irrational poems”, written in a transitional period, at the threshold of socialist realism in Poland, about twenty five years after his poetic Muse fell asleep and a few years before she woke up unexpectedly, applies to the whole of Wat's poetry. But its sense must be modified by the first part of the sentence with its double subject („I, Balaam”). It is probably there that we find the key to the ambiguity of Wat's poetry: in its double and sometimes multiple subject, and hence also its multiple object. In the case of the poem *The Dark Tinsel* the very title is

⁸ A. Stern, *The Poets of New Art. A Letter to the Editor of 'Almanach'*, „Almanach Nowej Sztuki” 1924, No. 2 (in Polish).

⁹ *Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 33.

ambiguous. The vocabulary sense of lustre is the least represented in it. There is certainly the opposition: darkness versus light (as in another poem dated 1963, which begins: „What can I do about this that for you /I, lumen, am obscurum?“). Perhaps there is a reminiscence in it of the phrase „terrible tinsel” from *Król-Duch* (The Spirit King) by the Polish Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki. And there is certainly a reference to the situation of expulsion („Plato had me expelled”), and hence the tinsel is a instrument of expulsion, with a rod or a fiery sword, in the hands of dark forces. Equally stratified is the subject of the poem under consideration: I — the author, I — the poet who fascinates others, I whom Plato had expelled, finally an émigré. The temporal scale is equally vast: from antiquity (Plato), to the New Middle Ages („in a new Tower/of human Bones”), to our times. *The Dark Tinsel* is at the same time a poem about Wat, about every poet who fascinates people, a poem about every exile. Multipersonality accounts for the universality of Wat’s poetry, and at the time impresses upon it the individual mark of the author with his rich and intricate intellectual biography, both „external” and spiritual. Wat’s speech, like the speech of stone, has several layers, fully intermixed with one another: „.... a sheet of gneiss interlaid with chalk, yellow clay, carnelian”.

4. The skin and the inside of the body

The above quotation is from the sixth *Dream Above the Mediterranean*, which is a dream of a „thin-skinned”, hypersensitive man („I do not want people to see my shame through my skin.” The skin, the thin boundary between man and his external world, assumes the rank of the universal and non-replaceable medium, aspecially if we fully appreciate all the consequences of the carnality of man. The third *Ode* written three months before the poet’s death, is such a hymn to the skin.

The third *Ode* is a biography written in terms of dermic experience. When facing his death Wat reproduced the history of touching the world, the history of digesting the world through his skin. He mentions his passion for experiments („with my skin I tested every thing earthly” and his fear the antinomy of time and space („with my skin I measured the uncountable dimensions of space-time”). He relates his experience in

the prison and in the hospital, his erotic and interhuman experience as well. He also mentions his bold linguistic endeavours in *The Stove* („I made my speech consubstantial with the skin, so that it should not utter anything else than 'tiu-tiu-tiu tiam-tiam-tiam' "). Finally he describes the condition of his skin at the time of writing, the skin of a sacrificial animal, to be soon cut by the knife of the ritual butcher — the *shohet*.

The poetic endeavours to make the world comply with one symbol and one metaphor are exposed to the double danger of straining facts and multiplying superfluous variations. The third *Ode* escapes that trap owing to its close connection with the author's biography. The tortured body of Aleksander Wat gave its colour and life to the skin from his poem. The *Ode* ends in his request to his brothers, whom he will leave his skin as inheritance „that you tan it to make the cover of this collection of my strophes”. I believe that Wat meant not only or not so much the material cover of the book as, say, the inclusion of the motif of the skin in the preface as the inner cover.

The thin skin tempts one to look inside, in the same way as the surface of the earth invites one to penetrate deeper. Through the itching and painful skin one notices „the drawing of the limphatic vessels and the design of the nerves” (*Some Mythology*). One can also look inside through the eye. That is done by the demonic Polyphemus from the North in the poem *In the Mountains* (1967). His only eye follows the work of „intertwined nerves, veins, and whatever else, the spasms of the muscles and the sighs of the mucous membranes”. And in his early poetic prose *My Heart* (1924) the poet looks „at the heart through the eye as if through a key-hole”. But he who would conclude from these examples that Wat's poetry is introvert would be wrong. The watchful following of the work of one's internal organs is a pertinent metaphor of the functioning of the Cyclopean world. And the study of his own inside (in the piece dedicated *To Ola*, that is, to his future wife) leads him to a clear diagnosis: „My hart is a compass which everywhere points to O.”

Thinking with one's body, sensing the world with one's body... That attitude, in Wat sometimes pushed to the extreme, makes one think about another writer, who wrote:

The body is the beginning of the spirit. The root of the spirit. And the spirit is the smell with the body.

Who supplemented his fragmentary records of description of the circumstances in which they came to being (in the bathtub, in the cab, at a walk — in a way similar to Wat, who wrote: „April weather”, „when it was very unblissful”, „in cold Paris”).

Who wrote:

The secret of the art of writing is in the finger tips, and the secret of the orator, in the tip of the tongue.

Who in the search for the tradition of certain sacred aspects of carnality and sex turned to Judaism, to the verses of the Old Testament pulsating with blood.

Who all his life quarrelled with God in an intimate way like prophets in the Old Testament, and in his records replaced His name by the letter G (like Wat: „On that night, well after midnight, L.G./for Lord God /came to me”). Whose name was Vasilij Rozanov.¹⁰

On June 11, 1964, after the appearance of Rozanov's selected writings in French, with a comprehensive introduction by Józef Czapski, Wat wrote in his *Diary Without Vowels*:

If I had only known Rozanov in my youth. I did know him but I have never thought it over: Myself and Rozanov. It was only Józio's [Czapski's] introduction that made me do that. That is natural: I find in myself no similarity to him, he is hideous to me but quite otherwise than I am to myself, his thoughts are alien to me and disgusting in a way. But his difficult life? But his thinking? But the twisted meanders in public life, but his bad end? And the presence at his side of his wife — wisdom, purity, strength. If I had thought him over in time I would have had achievements to my credit. Certainly, I was familiar with those small forms ... of the French, from La Rochefoucauld to Alain and Valéry, but that is something different, they are castlelike miniatures. And here we have leaves falling from a tree, and hence in the autumn. Disorderly carried away by the wind. For I, too, could never afford anything else, and I always wanted to write only *Red and Black* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. That had its bad consequences.

Aleksander Wat had no command of large literary forms. He could not to write a novel (even though he tried): his *Novel* dating from before

¹⁰ The quotations are from *Opavshiye listia* (Vol. I, 1913, V. Rozanov, *Izbrannoye*, Munich 1970, pp. 190 and 183).

World War II and *Loth's Escape* dating from after the war did not go beyond a few chapters, *Oswald* remained in the form of loose notes. And yet all his literary legacy — both that which has been published and that which is in the form of manuscripts, typescripts or has been typerecorded — combines to form a work of strange homogeneity. The various fragments hold together, the various motifs and phrases obsessively return in poems, short stories, fragments of novels, sketches and reminiscences. They owe that homogeneity above all to that stamp of individual and carnal sensing and conceiving the world.

The medium of the body allows one to experience and transmit the full scale of impressions, from the brutal („tearing out horseshoe nails together with the flesh”) to the most delicate ones („I am touching a petal of a rose careful not to make it feel/the thick tips of my fingers, fingers of an usurper”). It also allows one, more important still, to sense and convey thoughts and theories in one's own contorted way. In that poetry the body becomes a system and metaphysics, as in the drawing by Marek Żuławski, showing *Jacob Struggling with the Angel*.¹¹.

5. The Son of God, the King of the Jews

„When you wrote: the king of the Jews/you took off your head/the crown of thorns/and you made my forehead bleed” — these words from a poem written in 1943 combine several aspects of Wat's religiosity: his identification with Christ in suffering, the sense of being a royal son (a chosen person), the sense of the genealogical rooting in Jewish history.

Wat's strife with God (Jacob's struggle with the Angel) takes place in a field produced by two poles: negation and fascination. In *The Stove*

the actor who in the mystery played God the Father went mad, the actor who played God the Son got drunk, and the actress gave herself up to debauché with servants, the only real person.

¹¹ „Aleksander Wat chose my Jacob for the cover of a volume of his poems. ...When I visited him in Paris for the last time, a photograph of that drawing was hanging above his bed. Ola, his beloved wife, with a sweet face of Madonna, walked on tiptoes... I think that Jacob's Struggle with the Angel symbolizes best the whole production, even the whole life, of Aleksander.” (M. Żuławski, *A Study to Self-portrait*, Warsaw 1980, p. 119 — in Polish).

In a poem dating from 1924, where God is the policeman of this world, who had „his own son pinned/to the cross for the violation of the law”. In a poem from 1941, written immediately after his conversion: „And I shall wait eternally until He comes to the Jewish cemetery/and by His live word raises me from the dead”. In a lyrical poem from the volume *Poems*, not included in the reprint *The Dark Tinsel*: “I no longer want the cross, I no longer want a cross on my coffin”. In one of the *Three Sonnets* about which Miłosz wrote „it is the only religious sonnet about Christ in the history of Polish poetry, who out of compassion for human beings *does not want* to rise from the dead”.¹²

Identification with Christ is not alien to Polish poetry. Among Wat's predecessors probably Norwid comes nearest to him. But this comparison immediately shows the difference, the feature which distinguishes Wat from all poets who followed Thomas à Kempis. Now Wat arrives at that identification not along the path which goes from our times, but along the path of the genealogical tree of Jewish kings. From Solomon and David, from Berenice, the daughter of Herod Agrippa, king of Judea, about whom he says in his soliloquy: „....she is the daughter of one of your aunts” (*Hymn* from the cycle *The Dark Tinsel*). In that perspective, Jesus is above all „a Jew from alpha to omega, the highest incarnation not only of Jewish psychology, but of the Jewish fate as well” (*Mój wiek*, II 335)¹³.

Because of their inner dramatism and the peculiar context Wat's Christological poems are the crown of thorns of his poetry. Both when they refer to the tortures experienced by a man sentenced to this-worldly cross and when they become a universal metaphor. For instance, in the

¹² Cz. Miłosz, *Private Duties*, Paris 1972, p. 68 (On the Poems of Aleksander Wat, in Polish).

¹³ An interesting light upon attitude towards Christ is shed by Wat on a loose leaf, dating from the period before his leaving Poland: „Practically, the Gospel begins with the Last Supper (or garden of Getsemane?). Everything that precedes it is a fable or a parable, or a morality, an educational commentary. Those who wrote down the Gospel were visibly under the powerful impression of Crucifixion. And they gave their testimony to that with shocking and inspired force. They knew about that past of J. Ch. nothing or very little — they added it in their human, pale, and mawkish manner.” In Wat's poems we find neither Christ the teacher nor Christ the worker of miracles. There is only Christ who is suffering, crucified, deposited to the grave.

poem *The friends ate...* Jesus, when carrying his cross, says the Kaddish (a prayer) for his father, the carpenter. Unbelievers do not give him the tallith. The apostles drink in a company of soldiers „from the silver post-Jewish cups”. The cups fall from the table but they do not break, they will be needed at the next crucifixions. Indeed, the element of time has been annihilated. And yet the world evoked by that poem does not collapse into Chaos. Jewish Jesus and post-Jewish cups form a single emotional order, that of eternal persecution.

6. The Excluded

The sense of being a royal son carries in itself a sense of being distinct, extraordinary, and also superior. These feelings are ambivalent. In the poem *The Childhood of a Poet* we have „dreams/in which he always floated one inch above the ground/Until he fell”. We find the same motif in *The Stove*: „You fool, did Lavan raise you one inch above the ground!” Thus exaltation (be it only in the sense of being a child prodigy) results in disappointment, in the fall.

In *Mój wiek* the motif of exclusion appears on several occasions, always in a way which is essential from the psychological point of view. In one case, as a recollection of the hiding place under the table where Wat in his childhood used to spend hours playing and reading and watching adults fragmentarily and in a frog's perspective: „Oh, how ugly! the flat meanness of their footwear, their shape and shine made them resemble cockroaches. That trivial ugliness alienated me effectively from the life of my fellow-men, and gave reality, brilliance and value to that only which took place in books” (II 48). In the second case, the sense of separation came when Wat in prison had an opportunity to peruse *Nowe Widnokregi*: „...everyone was at one time in the situation of being excluded from the game, and his heart was breaking. They play and I have to stand aside” (II 103).

Somewhat different, but even more unmasking, was the sense of exclusion from the community at Zamarstynów, whom all the people around prayed loudly and sang songs to Virgin Mary: „... I had the vivid feeling, exceptionally strong, that I was rejected by God because I did not believe in His existence. In other words, while not believing I did

believe, but my only faith was the sense of being rejected" (I 337-8). That experience, negative and positive at the same time, later resulted in his conversion to Roman Catholicism.

The sense of exclusion is very strongly linked in Wat with two spheres, that of love and that of death. In his youthful works there are many references to an ugly student, Aleksander Wat, surrounded by beautiful ladies. It does not matter whether that was true. Harem-like dreams or real promiscuity must be seen in the perspective of the approaching end. In *Something About „The Stove“* Wat admits that that work was to be a kind of „a psychoanalytic confession of a soul ... which prepared itself for death — for a long time my decision was to commit suicide as a *poète maudit* before I turn 25, which age seemed me the last barrier to vileness”.

The poet, doomed to an early death by of fate or by his choice, pulled himself together to make what would be left by him express as much as possible. Hence *The Stove*, written with the thought about „that place on my forehead where one night I will drive in the lazy bullet of the Browning”, was, as it were, a condensation of Wat’s work, the work of a man who at that time had not yet experienced pain and persecution, commitment to the communist cause and abandonment of communism, whose reading list was still limited, but who filled those gaps with astonishing premonitions and boldness of visions. But in April 1923, that is before the lapse of those magical 25 years (Wat was coeval with our century) the poet met a person whose presence helped him to postpone the execution of his youthful promise by — also magical — 44 years (an allusion to Adam Mickiewicz, Polish Romantic poet). What would he be had he taken his life in his youth? Perhaps a brilliant but forgotten author of the odd poem *The Stove*, a dubious hero of scandals at Futurist parties, a late *poète maudit*. Fortunately, he is an exceptional poet, who from his experiences in prisons, bodily pain, and vast readings succeeded in obtaining — in the crucible of oversensitivity — his own poetry in prose, on some occasions light as open-work in metal and on others heavy as a tombstone.

It is time now to revert to the initial interpretation of Wat’s poetry as a spiral. What is its shape, what is it made of? Two answers suggest themselves, each taking us in a different direction.

The spiral of language. Like a tamandua which with its long and sticky tongue catches insects that live in communities, Wat draws the

words of his poetry from the various communities of words (natural science, Jewish language, psychoanalysis, old Polish language, geography, religion, etc.) in order to grind them into the food of his own phrases, individual diction, his own speech. His language is active and passive at the same time: active in exploring the various linguistic systems, in the process of drawing material from their immense resources; passive in not resisting alien words, other people's speech, as if he were certain of the force and rightness of the voice with which he speaks.

The spiral of dreams. Some people use it to rise into the high, for a mad flight of imagination, covering distances and times. Wat is one of those who lower the spiral of dreams into the depth of their subconsciousness and the mythology of the place in which they happened to occur. Hence the importance attached by him to the indication of the place where those oneiric poems were written, hence the title *Dreams About the Mediterranean*. Like uneducated emigrants from Europe who in America have dreams from pre-Columbian mythology, learned Wat in Sicily dreams about the escape of Orestes, and in Warsaw about the extermination of his nation. Going into the depth of himself means here going into the depth of culture, the depth of history conceived not as a chronologically ordered set of facts, but poetically ordered sequences of images. By dreaming one joins the unwritten history of places which decay into dust, and of people who ceased to exist long ago. Wat's dreams drag us into their orbit, because the reader always has the impression that are nonaccidental, inevitable, ineluctable.

The spiral of language links Wat's poetry with the social, rigid, verifiable. The spiral of dreams links it with what is both individual and universal, both susceptible and petrified, both unpredictable and self-evident. The world of his poetry is both human and cosmic, mythical and mathematical.