

Kazimierz Wyka

Czyżewski the Poet

Literary Studies in Poland 7, 101-107

1981

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Kazimierz Wyka

Czyżewski the Poet

Military bands and battalions of troops were marching in the streets and the first echoes of the Victory Day were resounding from all windows on the day we were coming back from the funeral of Tytus Czyżewski. Painting artists were burying a painting artist; writers—a poet. It was the very threshold of a new Polish independence. At the first threshold of our sovereignty, a quarter of the century earlier, Czyżewski was one of the prime innovators and animators. As on the previous occasion, also this time Cracow was teeming with artists from all over Poland. While bands are marching on, Zbigniew Pronaszko is recalling the names of those who witnessed the first threshold: “There are fewer and fewer of us, we are crumbling—Witkiewicz, Chwistek, and now Tytus.”

The main (quantitative) part of Czyżewski's poetic *oeuvre* was born around 1920. These collections of poems include *Zielone oko, elektryczne wizje* (*Green Eye, Electrical Visions*, 1920), *Noc-dzień, mechaniczny instynkt elektryczny* (*Night-day, Mechanical Electric Instinct*), drama essays *Osiol i słońce w metamorfozie* (*Donkey and Sun in Metamorphosis*), *Włamywacz z lepszego towarzystwa* (*Burglar from a Good Company*), *Wąż* (*The Snake*), *Orfeusz i Eurydyka* (*Orpheus and Euridice*, all from 1922). All these works were published in Cracow.

These were the years of the formistic and futuristic storm. Czyżewski participates in it as a theoretician, as a painter and as a poet. Beginning with 1919, he starts publishing in Cracow a periodical titled “Formiści” (The Formists). His poetry of the period has three strata. The further away we are from those years the stronger we feel the first stratum: the avid innovators echo continuously the poetry of *Młoda Polska* (*Jugendstil*). How much of it can we perceive in

Bruno Jasiński, or in *Młodożeniec!* An example from Czyżewski's work *Powrót* (*The Return*):

Dokąd lecicie tak późno
bracia moi żurawie siostry moje dzikie gęsi
przyjaciele moi łabędzie
plyńcie pływajcie w bezkres

[Where are you flying so late / cranes my brothers and wild geese my sisters / swans my friends / float float away into space unbound]

Is it Ostrowska or Zawistowska or just one of the epigones? Between the first and the second verse Czyżewski builds in "at 12 o'clock at night"—and immediately we have a modern poem that astounds. All this done mechanically and very economically.

Mechanically, because the second stratum that astounds has rather low creative merits: consciously and intentionally applied modernism—resonance of the poetic expression with the formism of Czyżewski's visual art. The artist does it in diverse ways: instead of saying "a window" he simply draws a window in the text of a poem; attaches abstract diagrams declaring that he presents in this way his "dynamopsychic stages" the author goes through while writing; he depicts a "mechanical garden" in such a way that names of flowers are written in squares, which in turn are planted by means of straight lines on another line drawn at the bottom of such a "poem."

These mechano-graphic playthings, instead of providing a truly new poetic construction, culminate in a slogan: "Love electric machines, marry them and procreate Dynamo-children—magnetize them and bring up to become mechanical citizens." In technologically very backward countries, as the poet's contemporary homeland was, the simplest mechanical devices function as magic, as if on the banks of the Congo. In Czyżewski's generation there was no contradiction between the cult of the primitive, the black art of the Oceania peoples, the makers of plain wooden images of saddened Christ on the one hand and a magical attitude to products of industrial civilization. It is not surprising, therefore, that the machine becomes pregnant by the pen of someone who is at the same time all but embraced by his Podhale kind of imagination.

Such an attitude to technological civilization will bear poetic fruition in somewhat later activity of Tadeusz Peiper. Nevertheless, Czyżewski was first in this regard and his claims to being the

first, put forth in the afterword to the rhapsod *Robespierre*, are justified. To give them substance, we thought it only due here to recall those funny and Peiperian *ante Peiperum* games and tricks. Yet Czyżewski does not fulfil the more difficult aspect of his declarations and pronouncements: he provides no truly modern construction of a poem, apart from the graphic features; his attempts are mechanical and superficial. He cannot claim any chronological superiority to Przyboś; Czyżewski does not come equal to the latter.

As read today, his "antique visions" on the death of Faun, Orpheus and Euridice are quite lively and funny. Czyżewski could not know Cocteau or Giraudoux. It was rather a protest against the solemn antiquity of Wyspiański that had drawn him into the spheres of art created by these authors. Biology is next door to grotesque in his work, it does not lead to a myth. The gods unstilted live through programmatic shocks of the mechanical poetry. Euridice complains she is "fed up with unheated underground places, semi-shades of telephones and microphones." There is a healthy and invigorating provocation in this grotesque. It will be followed by others during the next two decades, and it does not come as a surprise against the background of Witkacy's theatre since it had its budding period together with this art of drama.

It is not until the third stratum of Czyżewski's poetry arrives, taking shape already during the years of his formistic learning, that his most original pieces are born. In the edition published on newsprint, *Noc-dzień* includes the first three pastorals by the poet. Multiplied, and reprinted on a specially manufactured paper solely for this book, and adorned with woodcuts by Tadeusz Makowski (Paris 1925) the *Pastorałki* (*Pastorals*) consist for one of the most magnificent pieces of Polish publishing, and at the same time it is a collection in which the artist made his fullest statement. In this unique publication two related individualities met and became complementary. They were related in a kind of lyrical core, in the sorrowful joy of children with eyes open wide to the world—the world that is strange and filled with soft mysteries. Both individualities were highly poetic in nature, not exclusively oriented on painting, although only one of them switched between the pen and the brush. The personality of Tadeusz Makowski, just as lyrical as the personality of Czyżewski, found harmony in the *Pastorałki*, the harmony which in

the previous generation seemed to have been dominated by Wyspiański's lyricism and the grotesque as well as more ironic lyricism of Wojtkiewicz. The staring eyes of Wyspiański's girls, the little noses touching cold window panes beyond which the world is filled to the brim with continuing astonishment.

Tytus Czyżewski came from the cis-mountainous areas of Limanowa. His family owned land property there. He was brought to Cracow by his friends from the years prior to 1910 (brothers Pronaszko) when the city was bubbling with activity after the first world war. The images stemming from rituals cultivated by the Podhale folk, their simple expression, sophisticated and polysemantic in the interpretation of a modern mind, must have been going deeply into his artistic memory since it was in them that he rediscovered himself as a poet. At the same time he ceased to implement his modern programme mechanically, graphically, and by resorting to artificially impressive tricks.

The *Pastoralki* is both a modern work and at the same time one that reaches into the wealth of folk art. Its modernity finds expression in conceiving folkiness as an artistic inspiration far removed from the ethnographic folklorism; it also expresses itself in a close relationship to dadaism. The folk character is contained in a specific treatment of the word, verse, image, or chorus. Just as spots and stains in a glass painting, the verses, observations and choruses by Czyżewski are repeated in a limited number—they are there, consciously ungainly, primitive. It is from this ungainliness of the folk tools and materials that they draw their most authentic charm.

Czyżewski's *Pastoralki*, next to Leon Schiller's *Pastoralka*, certainly consist for the most beautiful tribute Polish modern art paid to the Polish folk imagination expressed in its rituals, particularly fond of the theme of Christmas. It would be a very gracious task to put them against those works in which the imagination was voiced at the earliest time: all those works by Grochowski, Dachnowski, Kacper Twardowski of the early Polish Baroque. It would be very rewarding because in Czyżewski's poetry we find the same things happening that three hundred years before filled the land of carols and pastorals of the Baroque poets.

Wnidą w szopę, a tu mali
 Aniołkowie heblowali
 Żółtej wierzby suchą lipkę
 Jezusowi na kolébkę.

Ci suche drewna zbierają,
 Drudzy ogień rozdymają,
 Usługuje każdy z duszy,
 Ten pieluszki mokre suszy,

Ow na kąpiel wodę grzeje,
 A miesiąc się z nieba śmieje,
 Rad by z zasług swego czyną
 Łaskę Matki miał i Syna.

[They enter the shed where / Little angels and cherubs worked / On golden ivy and dry linden tree / To make a crib to Jesus, to Thee. / Some pick up dry wood, / Others kindle the flame / Everyone brings his services, / This man dries up the diapers, / Here a man heats up water for bathing, / And the moon is smiling from above. / And the man would be happy that his deed / Could gain him grace of Mother and Son.]

This is Kacper Twardowski. The pastoral figurines and tiny little scenes by Czyżewski are made of the same stuff. In his poems the shed of little Jesus is visited by younger and older shepherds, a Jew from Sącz, even Łapaj the dog, and a wolf with a sheep riding him piggy-back. In the later pastoral we even find poachers who bring "a whole deer from Homolacs' forests where they caught him with no gun or dogs." Many of such elements are known to the Christmas "plays" in every corner of Poland. Czyżewski cleans the dust off those overused figurines, provides them with a new expression and adds the latest news and persons from the chronicle of regional current events.

After *Pastoralki* Czyżewski published two volumes: *Robespierre. Rapsod* (Warsaw 1927) and *Lajkonik w chmurach* (*The Cracow Tartar in Clouds*, 1936). Stanisław Wyspiański made the Cracow folk rituals hieratic, more rigid and burdened with historiosophic meanings. His crowded and stuffy imagination spared only the Cracow women selling flowers and produce in the square, otherwise it was merciless to his native town.

The contradictory Czyżewski took a look from a colorful produce

stand under a sun umbrella that he found to be a competitor of the town hall tower. The spires of St. Mary's church make bows in his texts, choruses of the market peddlers lament and so do coach drivers, students; St. Francis plays with the Tartar of Cracow (*Lajkonik*) addressing him: "Oh, my holy cinnamon / Good old man." Briefly, we find here all the elements of the city of Cracow that Wyspiański had used to put together solemn entities but this time they are sent in motion that is funny, similar to the ideas in Gałczyński's buffo-poems.

It is a kind of little theatre of grotesque lashing without respect at all that the Cracow Main Square can hold. It is a truly folk theatricalization in the spirit of a Cracow little ditty: "A bird flew in from Łobzów. It landed in the marketplace of Cracow." In the next stanza the houses went crazy and stood upside down.¹

The volume about *Lajkonik* brings in another fundamental attainment of Czyżewski's lyrical works: his Spanish poems. Quite a characteristic feature! The Polish poetic avant-garde which had already once before crossed swords with the Spanish Baroque, its vast, embellished and capricious poetic phrase (owing to Tadeusz Peiper's visit to Spain), repeats the gesture owing to Czyżewski, or literally does it, as in his excellent ballad *Corrida*:

Blyszczy szpada Lalandy
w słońcu żmija złośliwa
a byk to czarna chmura
o wstęgach krwawego deszczu

hombres! woła Lalanda
jak Roland woła na sługi
podajcie inną szpadę
promień boskiego Mitry

[Lalanda's spade glistens / in the sun the vicious viper / and the bull is a black cloud / with thrailing bands of bloody rain / hombres! calls Lalanda / like Roland he calls his servants / give me another spade / the ray of divine Mitra]

The Spanish poems somehow come in touch with the dense ornamentation the poet saw in Cracow's marketplace; they are also ornamental but in a more pathetic vein, more Baroque and filled with

¹ All this is a harbinger of *Zaczarowana dorożka* (*The Enchanted Horsecab*). Since Czyżewski himself cannot claim being the first in this regard, as he did in the case of Peiper, one has to do it for him.

more contrasts. The Spain of towns, customs and religion retained in Czyżewski's memory is in its way a folk Spain combining elements of town and country thus being similar to the Polish scene. "In Seville a green tramway is coming into Ferdinand's square, a flower girl is carrying bouquets of violets and jasmine"—all this could very well be taking place in Cracow's Small Square (Mały Rynek). In these poems there is also something of the architectural and synthesizing as well as moodish visions of Polish towns and townships as rendered then by Józef Czechowicz. In Czyżewski's poetry—*Zaragoza Zaragoza, Grenada, Roses of Andalusia*. After all Czechowicz and Czyżewski were to some extent related artistic organizations, similarly enveloped in folklore and its sophisticated simplicity.

Indeed, Czyżewski as a poet did not enjoy much attention during his lifetime. His place in the innovating problems of the poetry during the two decades between the wars is much more prominent than it had been assumed. He belonged to initiators although himself did not make any breakthrough. He initiated the function of technology in the present-day art, the rejuvenated themes of antiquity oriented on grotesque, the modernized folk motifs. He also initiated the artistic rendition of such themes—tradition linked up with the primitive, folklore with Baroque, grotesque was rising out of old stones, and this through and through modern artist learned his own expressions from the grammar of the folk syntax of imagination.

Artists from West European cultures had to make long voyages in the depths of Africa or to Polynesian Islands to acquire such a syntax. In Poland it was enough to stop at a crossroad outside a mountain village, under a wayside chapel of Sorrowful Jesus Christ, and listen in the blizzard to the sounds of the oncoming carol-singers. This is what Tytus Czyżewski did as a poet.

Transl. by B. Lawendowski