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Tuwim and “The Chorus of Idle Footsteps”

I will multiply my eyes by a hundred, I will drink the glances,
I will unleash them like hunting dogs into a tangle of lines,
Onto that orgy of space, on those stacks of houses
[...]
Here you will dance my poetic geometry,
In that fantastic city – no! in that dream incarnate
With a flourish and pathos into the labyrinth of streets.
J. Tuwim, *W Warszawie (In Warsaw)*¹

Tuwim wrote that in a poem from the book *Sokrates tańczący (Dancing Socrates)*.

He saw Warsaw as multiplied space, as a complex net of transport, as a worthy subject for new art. I'd like to complicate the truisms above (present in many critical analyses and mentioned in the same breath as the vitalism of early Tuwim's works, the bitterness of those later ones or his “poetic of the everyday”) by referring to the works of Michel de Certeau, observing the transformation of societies half a century later. The surprising similarities between many conclusions could evoke questions about the extent to which the human was lost at the beginning and at the end of the XX century, about the main motifs of early and late modernism, finally, about the encoded image of prototypical social contexts in poetry. Most important for me is to find in Tuwim's texts the “wandering steps”, the steps which are the language of the city, with its original and unique syntax, and also mean facing the modern hopes and fears (often coexisting).

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¹ J. Tuwim, *W Warszawie*, in: *Wiersze zebrane*, vol. 1, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1975, p. 184.

The language of steps – myths of memory

Neither Warsaw nor Lodz is a match for New York's Manhattan (at least when it comes to the height of the buildings), and yet I chose to use the diagnoses of Michel de Certeau, a French Jesuit, a representative of the social sciences. The starting point for his observations is the view of Manhattan from the height of the World Trade Centre towers. He writes:

It is a hymn for observational (*scopique*) and cognitive (*gnostique*) drive. To become only that observational point is fictitious knowledge. Is it, then, necessary to return to the dark space of the crowd, which – seen from above – doesn't see from below? It's the fall of Icarus.²

Tuwim's "multiplied vision" focused on "stacked houses" also seems to be driven by the need for fictitious knowledge. It is in this process that the city is created, which is now something different than before. It is no longer the sum total of architectural objects, it isn't a thing to be watched, but is created through being watched. It is then logical to assume that watching the city means creating simultaneously two identities: the urban and the personal. That fact, according to Bożena Tokarz, differentiates Tuwim's strategy from the tenets of the avant-garde:

Tuwim [...] creates a myth of reality based on a different rule of construction – identity. In his words the subject of cognition identifies with its object, as a result of which, the boundary between being and consciousness is blurred in the name of faith, which refers us to the romantic myth of the artist. Hence the multitude of literary roles he undertakes³.

The two constantly clashing myths in Tuwim's works – that of the "romantic poet" and that of the "poet of modern reality" – are connected with the inability to choose the final observation point: should it be the symbolic tower of Manhattan, or rather the being among the crowd, wearing the label of "fallen Icarus". By inability I mean not the weakness of character or the lack of psychological traits, but a deeply meaningful paradox in the work of Tuwim, described many years later (and in the form of a scientific paper) by de Certeau. The paradox is: the conceptual, "ideal" city could exist only without people, who

² M. de Certeau, *Wynaleźć codzienność. Sztuki działania*, translated by K. Thiel-Jańczuk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Cracow 2008, p. 94. First printing: 1980.

³ B. Tokarz, *Mit literacki. Od mitu rzeczywistości do zmiany substancji poetyckiej*, "Śląsk", Katowice 1983, p. 28.

always stand against rational organisation and tradition, desiring commonality and anonymity opposing the total subject which the urban system becomes. The real “creators” of the city are then the passers-by, their recorded stories and the actions they take.

In one of Tuwim’s poems, *Gawęda rymowana o ojcu i synu, o dwóch miastach i starej piosence* (*A story about a father and son, about two cities and an old song*) we can see an almost Baudrillard-like clash of the map and the territory. The father shows his son around Paris, but he does so remotely, drawing selected streets on a napkin in a restaurant in Lodz. He draws them until it’s time to rest. In the first part of the poem it means that it’s getting late, that night is coming:

Here he lived. Here he started his walk.
 And so he guided his staring son
 Through banks, boulevards and squares,
 He showed him churches and palaces,
 Here Notre-Dame, here Concorde, Invalides,
 Here Montmartre... but it’s time for rest,
 So at the corner of Carnott and Tilsitt
 He stopped. Enough. Go to sleep, son.

J. Tuwim, *A story about a father and son, about two cities and an old song*⁴

The elliptical “Enough” seems especially important. The Paris tale begins at a slow pace, then speeds up through the enumeration of the known, sentimentally recalled places, only to slow down again to end with a rather abrupt “enough”. That word foreshadows death, complementing the idiomised metaphor of “rest”. In the second part the son, following his father’s coffin, recollects the map drawn on the napkin. Here we can see the struggle between the poet and the child. The child absorbs images, the poet translates them into words. The most interesting thing in the scene is the motif of losing track, wandering and return. The recollected Paris is not, after all, a real city, but still it seems to the child to be real – with real buildings, real meeting place, streets filled with people. The appearance is enough for the child to create a simulated map, more attractive than the territory. The poet’s jump “on the magical Lodz tablecloth”, which takes him to Paris, is real only as long as it follows the way delineated by his father. The poet can’t free himself from the story he heard years before, he has stayed in the same place where his father said “enough”. However, the death of his father, another “enough” uttered by the laws of life, doesn’t end the story about the city. The son has now three or even four streets to choose from:

⁴ J. Tuwim, *Wiersze zebrane*, vol. 2, p. 308.

the first – imagined, the second – in Paris, the third – Kościuszki street changed into Herman Goering Strasse (the poem is dated: Paris, December 1939⁵). The fourth street is the one in which the poet's father will become his "future neighbour". What happens to the map of Paris? As long as the father tells his son stories about it, it presents streets bustling with life, filled with the sounds of La Marseillaise. The son fills the streets with his imagination and the father tells him to wait at an imagined corner. And so he does. Being in Paris, watching the ongoing warfare, he still waits. And he will be waiting until he hears "enough" himself.

In the context of the map and the recorded "wandering steps" we should also note one more phrase from the poem. When the poet travels on his "magic tablecloth" to Paris, he falls "into the winding labyrinth of streets, like in a myth..."⁶. The work of the myth shown in the verse above is slightly different than that described many years before in a self-reflexive poem on the ways of writing entitled *Praca (Work)*. In *A story about a father and son* one myth replaces another. The four streets are equally real and unreal, because their perception is forever mediated through the original story. The situation presented in *Work* (incidentally, also based on a magical "four" – four quatrains) shows a similar way of remoulding perception, peculiar to Tuwim (and also important for de Certeau). The poet sits down to write, wanting to shape the verbal matter:

Again to recast in the fire of glances
Colours into the solid metal of sound
To conjure myths from facts
To cut the words' nervous root.
J. Tuwim, *Work*⁷

Conjuring up myths immediately from facts (the mimetic, presentative turned into magical), the performative power of words involves primarily synesthetic work. In the fire of glances he recasts colours into sounds, which necessarily involves the cutting of words. It seems that a similar procedure is applied to deal with the city. There, words' nervous root is not cut, but affective phrases are built – to the impersonal layout of buildings one responds with singular, particular emotions, which only then create the image of the city.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 310.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 309.

⁷ Ibidem, vol. 2, p. 30.

Space – synecdoches and asyndetons

The games of steps – writes de Certeau – shape space. They are the fabric of places. For that reason pedestrian movement is one of those “real systems, whose existence actually creates the city”, but which “don’t have any physical form”⁸. From such a perspective, steps are only partly real. Their existence, claims de Certeau, is a myth, which can be consolidated in a broader myth. A minor fact (a map on a napkin, steps) changes into a myth through words or, rather, is modelled on words. That is why de Certeau outlines two “peripatetic figures”, organising any thinking about space: the synecdoche and asyndeton:

Those two peripatetic figures actually refer to each other. One stretches one part of space, telling it to play the part of something “bigger” (some wholeness) and to substitute it (like a bike or a piece of furniture in a shop window substitutes the whole street or a district). The other part creates by means of elision something “smaller”, introduces absence to the spatial continuum, preserving just its fragments or remnants. One substitutes wholeness with fragments (something smaller to replace something bigger); the other stretches them, removing connections and causality (nothing replaces something)⁹.

With this understanding of figures we can read the two poems presented above differently. *A story...* is based on a juxtaposition of synecdoche and asyndeton. Building the urban space, extending it, wandering in it takes place in the space of a napkin, thanks to imagination and description which make it possible to identify it as a real city. However, the street of Lodz vanishes – due to the absence of the speaking subject, the absence of the father and the deprivation of its Polish character.

Synecdochal order is also revealed in the poem *There is no country...* :

Even the strangest words won't help,
Nor wild hymns, nor crazy chases,
Whatever will be – they'll come again
Old, everyday prayers.

I call, I call, wring my hands in despair,
God! Listen! Shine your sword in the sky!

⁸ M. de Certeau, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

And He – there, in the street, waits for me:
 My friend, grey, simple man.
 J. Tuwim, *There is no country...*¹⁰

The “simple man”, peculiar to Tuwim, and in that sense familiar to him, is – as we well know – a synecdoche of all “grey people” and, more broadly, of all grey cities. The character, anticipating the grey figures of Różewicz, appears at the end of the poem, which is an interesting example of a synecdoche. First, broader contexts are introduced (sky as the homeland, travels, crowds, oceans) only to put one man at the end – helpless, but representative of millions. From a humanistic point of view much more interesting than the sky or the ocean.

It seems that of the two discussed figures, asyndeton is more common in Tuwim’s work. It has some important interpretational consequences. For clarity, let’s have a look at two of his poems: *Nędza* (*Poverty*) and *Ruch* (*Movement*). Here’s a fragment of the first one:

Frostbitten raw potatoes,
 Dry cough, stove cold,
 Hard plank under the head:
 Such will be the hymns of poverty.

Was, was about cold and hunger,
 Is, is that you suffer and die,
 Will, will be a thin bone in water
 And brown loaf with sand, and dull sausage.

J. Tuwim, *Poverty*¹¹

Is it really a “walking” poem? We can interpret it statically. There is a group of poor people living in extreme poverty, and the subject speaks on their behalf, from the inside of their house. We could even believe that he sings with them that hymn of poverty. Here we can see the important difference between the synecdoche (demanding that we expand the reference of the hymn from one man to a crowd of poor people) and asyndeton. The enumerated in one breath potatoes, cough, stove, plank are signs of quickly and grudgingly cast glances. Are an expression of distance towards the poverty, that kind of superiority which makes the poet leave his high observation point and get real. He must experience the fall of Icarus. The pulsating repetitions (was, was – is, is – will, will be) not only highlight the lasting of poverty, its never-ending existence, a vicious circle so difficult

¹⁰ J. Tuwim, *Wiersze zebrane*, vol. 1, pp. 338–339.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 332.

to escape, but also show the observational field, which is important to the subject. We can say that Tuwim’s/Tuwim’s protagonist’s steps wander around the poor ghetto, going there with interest, with reluctant superiority but also with hidden feelings of guilt. And going there he co-creates the image of the city. Each “movement” of the steps may make the poor districts even poorer, because the more and more elite artist may exclude them from his discourse, nullifying them, or at least making the figure of the simple man more and more rhetorical. We cannot forget that the immobilising eye of the poet records actually a very mobile image. “Dirty and black” they shout about their poverty: “We will come out a crying bunch!”¹². Asyndeton, a number of empty places in the image of the city shows that it’s a soundless insurgence, always doomed to failure.

The second poem, *Movement*, pertains to the ironic, clearly stated problem I’m interested in. Nameless “them” (citizens, dwellers, all walking in Warsaw)

They got up, they walk. Oh, how lovely!
Here are the events. I don’t know why.

They walk, they go. They go to do.
They will come, they’ll do and leave again.

J. Tuwim, *Movement*¹³

Does the subject watch from a naïve or innocent point of view? Surely not, since at the beginning of my analysis of the poem I talked about irony. Here, however, the important thing is not the manner in which the observations are made (“Oh, how lovely!”), but the nearly mechanical division of the continuum of movement that rips the space apart. “They got up, they walk”, “They walk, they go”, “They will come, they’ll do” – illustrate the machine-like movement, repetitive, going, as de Certeau would say, continuously along the same lines. Tuwim confirms that intuition in the following stanzas:

Steps on the ropes. Thoughts in the head.
A wound up, moving man!
[...]

He for all. All for him.
Oh, how funny! Because I don’t know why.

J. Tuwim, *Movement*¹⁴

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem, vol. 2, p. 22.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

The purposefulness of actions seems doubtful to the subject, undisputed, however, is the work of asyndeton. In the poet's mind (reflective, contrary to the thoughtless masses) the space is built not of wholeness, but parts which – when placed next to each other without any conjunctions – can show a new truth about the man in a new time.

For historico-literary necessity we should mention here the influence of unanimism, because its impact (well researched) is important for Tuwim's technique:

The introduction of textual heterogeneity becomes important in its modern shape, resulting from the premises (not practice) of unanimism. That movement created soon after 1900 assumed departure from individualism towards taking greater interest in emotions and desires of the masses. Hence the later connections between poetry and mass media, shaping mass imagination in the act of acceptance or protest. That movement led to the creation in prose of the simultaneous technique, which involved the coexistence of various motifs without the need to connect them. Such a method of presentation was to guarantee a more adequate method of depicting the modern world with its dynamism and chaos¹⁵.

The phrase: "Steps along the lines. Thoughts in the head." connects the above-mentioned motifs. The ropes (and lines) and thoughts are connections between the individual (individual man, individualistic poet) and the mass (hence mass culture, mass media, simultanism) – that juxtaposition leads to heterogeneous dynamism. The decentred space, or more generally, the whole of the de Certaeu project, has a poetological character. In analysing the space we have to come back to rhetorical figures and synecdoche and asyndeton seem especially fitting to Tuwim's works.

The invention of the city: the creation of *own space*, *non-time* instead of the resistance of tradition, the creation of *common* and anonymous *subject*

In the poem *Mgła (Fog)* the poet wrote:

Dark wet carbohydrates,
Who are you?

¹⁵ B. Tokarz, *op. cit.*, p. 243. In the following fragment she writes: "The seemingly traditional poem by Tuwim was bursting with factual material and a simultaneous defence of poetic individualism, which was supposed to evoke internal tension in that work. Using Whitman's inspiration, who unanimists referred to, he protested against the fading of poetic individuality in the external world" (*ibidem*, p. 224). For more on inspiration by Whitman see M. Skwara, *Polski Whitman. O funkcjonowaniu poety obcego w kulturze narodowej*, Universitas, Cracow 2010.

Foggy scholar, enchanted,
I wander the city.

[...]

I walk and get cold, I get cold and I yawn,
A beekeeper of atoms,
Spinning my cane, I silently praise
The universes of houses.
J. Tuwim, *Fog*¹⁶

The first of de Certeau’s ideas, called by him “the creation of *own* space”, could be explained thus: The ideal city, which would be a dehumanised city, would have to dispose of all traits of physical movement, intellectual and political “pollution”. “Walking in fog”, which Tuwim writes about, is connected with the silent praise of houses, houses with no people inside. There is also the agoraphobia-inducing echo. In Tuwim’s work “own space” oscillates between the micro (beekeeper of atoms) and macro (universes of houses) scales and the metaphors are oxymoronic (there are enough atoms to build a universe, house enables a rather narrow perspective). Many of the poet’s works show attempts at reducing space, which would allow the subject to stay in the city. But since the “ideal” city with its emptiness and deadness scares him, he has to transfer the city into his own space. And write it in such a way, to make it mentally habitable.

The second of de Certeau’s ideas sound even more enigmatic: non-time instead of resistance to tradition. The ideal, totally urbanised therefore utopian, city has to remove the markers of history to the greatest possible extent. It is to introduce “non-time” qualities instead.

In Tuwim’s work such a way of wandering would be connected with the experience of modernity. The city of the author of *Lurking for God* should be modern, which certainly means: rejecting the past (cities with such attributes are indeed sparse) and having semantically transparent facades. We should note here that without own space there is no own place in time. The utopian city can’t be fully accepted by Tuwim, because it wouldn’t leave any space for developing individual personalities.

Finally, the third difference between modern and older societies involves, according to de Certeau, creating a common and anonymous subject. That last conclusion is actually aporetic. How can we leave the vicious circle telling us to constantly move between individualism and mass society (common subject)? I think that Tuwim in his works grasped the moment in which full engagement,

¹⁶ J. Tuwim, *Wiersze zebrane*, vol. 2, p. 221 (emphasis added – M.T.).

present in the traditional culture, is replaced by “kind inattention”. Giddens, citing Goffman’s analysis, defines it thus:

Kind inattention means that in modern conditions the participants of social situations make a deal about mutual recognition and protection. Somebody who passes a different person in the street, with an unobtrusive glance expresses the idea that the other person is worth respect and next they look away to show the lack of aggression. The other person does exactly the same. In many traditional environments, where there is a sharp distinction between “us” and “them” the rituals of kind inattention do not exist¹⁷.

The poet lived and worked (it has been said numerous times) on the verge of the traditional epoch and the one marked by “inattention”. Due to it, the subjects become anonymous – although willing to compensate for the deficit, they establish a more oppressive system of supervision, control and curiosity. Tuwim not only described that mechanism, but also fell victim to it.

The conclusion of the text, connecting the perspective of the poet and that of an anthropologist, should be this: the author of *Ball at the opera* lyricises the wandering steps in the city, because he knows that thanks to them it will become possible to preserve the individual view of the city (from above, from a bird’s eye view, as if from the old tower of Manhattan). Without them the city vanishes – it will become a sum of artificial, dehumanised streets. For that reason one has to walk down to them, look from the level and perspective of the street, paying with the fall of Icarus.

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¹⁷ A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. “Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*, translated by A. Szulżycka, PWN, Warsaw 2010, p. 72.

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(Summary)

General aim of the article is to show city in Julian Tuwim’s poetry oppositely to older perspectives. Mostly critics write about his poems that they contain images of urban life and reflections of sociocultural change. I invert this traditional order and try to prove that city is created and seen by new ways of thinking – that the city is modified (not poetics first). I use Michele Certeau’s ideas, because they are similar to Tuwim’s literary *praxis*. Certeau writes about “walking in the city” creating by language (rhetorical devices named synecdoche and asyndeton). Moreover, Certeau describes three types of “spatial requirements”: creating own space, non-time instead of tradition and appearing of new subject (common and anonymous). Reading Tuwim with Certeau’s theses gives a new look into modern city and his literary representations.

Keywords: Julian Tuwim, Michele de Certeau, Tuwim’s poetry