

doi: 10.15584/tik.spec.eng.2020.23

“I Did Not Know Then...” Two Autothematic Poems

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Abstract: The author discusses the autothematic motifs in the poems *Sitowie* by Julian Tuwim and *Przeciwnie wiatry* by Tomasz Różycki. The author analyses both poems and compares the transformations of the autothematic motifs, emphasizing the connections with literary tradition and the dialogue of the poets' artistic attitudes. In both literary works the key problem is the relation between words and things.

Keywords: poetry, autothematic motifs, Julian Tuwim, Tomasz Różycki

Autothematic motifs in poetry often work as a touchstone of the epoch itself, a litmus test of artistic awareness or – at least – an index of its preferences and worries.¹ They are focused on the art of creation and on the individual perception of the linguistic potential and they disclose more than the author's *signum*. They also allow us to notice changes occurring in the longer and wider time perspective. In this sense they may provide an interesting illustration of the general culture-related problems and artistic ideas featured in various periods.

The complex transformations of literature in the last one hundred years covered such a wide scope of artistic practise, theory, concepts and problem areas that distinctiveness, variety and unique character have become some of its basic indicators. Artistic awareness, program-related invention, the drive for originality, search for new forms, ideational and the aestheticizing approach as well as continuous changes of systems and principles of communication, together contributed to a particular intensification and heterogeneity of the literary trends of the modern and post-modern epochs. In such a specific context it remains one of the most interesting interpretative approaches to trace the transformations of the autothematic motifs which disclose hidden relations with the literary tradition and the dialogue

¹ For a discussion of the particular Polish origins and connotations of the term 'autothematicism' ('autotematyzm'), see Dieter de Bruyn, "The Problem of Autotematyzm in Polish Literary Criticism," *Perspectives on Slavic Literatures*, Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2007, pp. 127–139.

of the artistic attitudes of the poets who – to some degree symbolically – serve to connect the first and the second halves of the century 1918 – 2018. Two poems were selected as examples in point. The time span between the publication dates of the two poems is 80 years and the authors belong naturally to distinct social, cultural and literary contexts.

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The work *Sitowie*, [Rushes], comes from the fifth volume of poems by Julian Tuwim entitled *Słowa we krwi* [Words in Blood], published in 1926. Literary historians referred to this collection on numerous occasions treating it as a conventional borderline point in the artistic output of the poet, testifying to the exploitation or transformation of some sources of inspiration (for example, the sense of community, dynamism and presentism) and introducing the activation of other tendencies (among others, reflection and reserve toward the world).² The new stimulations also evidence the existence of autothematism which were to be foregrounded in the ensuing volume *Rzecz czarnoleska* [The Czarnolas affair]. The two forerunners of this problem area include the poem *Słowo i ciało* [The word and the flesh], which opens the volume *Słowa we krwi* [Words in blood], and is treated as an introduction to Tuwim's philosophy and *Sitowie*, where the unusual type of sensualism goes hand in hand with a strong expression of poetic self-awareness.

This work has an explicit trifold structure which brings about a lyrical reflection with a characteristic juxtaposition of the past, present and future. It is based on memories from the past, a simple but extremely intensive experience which is deeply rooted in the sensual memory and it comes back as such in the lyrical form:

Above the lake, the scent of fragrant mint:
The tufts of rushes rocked like cradles, bathed
In dawn that stained the waves a rosy tint;
Wind rushed across, the mint and rushes swathed.³

Here, we have a view of a lake/pond surrounded by thick bushes where the green, refreshing mint has the strongest fragrance. The rushes sway in the dawn wind, which is all around tinted with rose and carries the fragrance of the mint over the water up to the shore and the tufts of other plants. The intensification of the sensual impressions is instant and it is reflected in the poem by virtue of the subtle arrangement of sounds and tonal rhythmisation. The situation becomes an example of very intense experiencing of nature, triggered by the flowery and water landscape.

² See, for example, J. Sawicka, *Julian Tuwim*, Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1986.

³ J. Tuwim, *Sitowie*, in: idem, *Wiersze*, edited by A. Kowalczykova, vol. 2, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1986, p. 11. Translation by Jakob Ziguas. Available from: <http://www.nereview.com/vol-40-no-2-2019/>.

Piotr Matywiecki called the flowery motifs the "fifth element" of the poetic world of Julian Tuwim.⁴ Also, in this poem the flowery motifs embody nature which completes and fills in the surrounding reality. The condensation and harmony of this image is archetypically patterned, according to the most primary and natural arrangement of the external world. In this context the author of *Twarz Tuwima* [Tuwim's faces], wrote about the unique suspension in time, about the aura "without a beginning or end," where the "whole cosmos" is embodied.⁵ In turn, Marzenna Maria Cyzman pointed to the religious context of this verse which in its purity may be reminiscent of the "first day of creation" and the presence of the Holy Spirit over the waters.⁶

The second part of this work uses the present tense. Behind the description of the image beheld by the author there is a person who reflects on this view (or rather on the experiences) with the benefit of hindsight and shares the consequences connected with the attempts to retrieve that moment. The three-verse sequence reads as follows:

I didn't know these plants were to become
Years later, in my poems, only words;
That flowers from afar I'd call by name,
In lieu of lying on such lakeside swards.

I didn't know I'd seek, with such distress,
Words for the living world; since it appears
That, having knelt beside the water thus,
One must then suffer over many years.

I only knew that there, where rushes line
The lake, are strands so supple, slender, long:
From which I'd weave a net both light and fine,
But, in whose mesh I would not catch a thing.

The opposition between "then" and "now" dominates the foreground and there is an observing subject related to this opposition who has changed from an observer into a poet. The awareness of the difference between a thing and a work constitutes the cost of this transformation. The contemplated world was the realistic background of the experiences, the embodiment and physicality of the impartial feelings, while the world brought about through the words is only a sign, an equivalent, an intellectual structure. There is a fundamental difference between an object and a word, just as there is between an experience and its verbal expression. The bitter knowledge of the poet is expressed in the awareness that

⁴ P. Matywiecki, *Twarz Tuwima*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2007, p. 470.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

⁶ M.M. Cyzman, "'Sitowie' Juliana Tuwima. O ontologicznym uwikłaniu poezji świadomej siebie," in: *Poezja świadoma siebie. Interpretacje wierszy autotematycznych*, edited by A. Stoff, A. Skubaczewska-Pniewska, D. Brzostek, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2009, p. 129.

there is a distinction between the existence of things and words and this is verbalised in the phrase “I didn’t know” repeated three times.⁷ This confession related both to the existential truth about the unpredictability of one’s own fate and to the unexpected restrictions of the writer’s potential. Experience equals its verbal expression. The reference of words is limited. The real rushes with a strong mint fragrance are one thing and the rushes as a word with all the features and properties assigned is another thing. The source of the poet’s “suffering” is not so much the fact of passing by and the technical problem of choice of artistic means of expression to fit the matter described, but the ontological reflection which – in its essence – questions the rationale of the writer’s effort. We need to agree here with the opinion of Marzena Maria Cyzman, already mentioned, that the poem *Sitowie* is primarily “asking about the essence of the word,” its “ontic status” and relations towards the object.⁸ Words are a key aspect in Tuwim’s poetry and – as is known – they have attracted many researchers and critics. As was noticed by Jadwiga Sawicka “poetic language in Tuwim’s poetry is not only a tool but also an object of reflection, experiments and analyses.”⁹ In this context *Sitowie* is one example of poetic scepticism, preceding the birth of the myth pertaining to the opposition between a word and a thing, known, for example, from later collections *Rzecz czarnoleska* and *Treść gorejąca* [Burning matter].

Consequently, the final verses with the address to the God “of childhood years” and the questions about the future are rooted in the reflection on the very process of creation and the romantic belief shared by Tuwim that poetry is a vocation which – in this situation— becomes a curse:

Good God of childhood years! O holy God
Of dawns once bright and recollections fond!
Will life no longer bring me where I trod,
To find some fragrant mint beside a pond.

Will I now always and from everything
Uproot and tear the words out in despair;
And there where rushes, common rushes, cling
No longer simply see them growing there?

The poetic cognition means here the description of the extra verbal reality by means of the existing tools, the language of prefabricated formula and thus it is conventional, limited and inadequate to the unique and extraordinary character of experiences. This gives rise to the verses about pulling words out in despair and disbelief in the purity and primacy of the past. At this point we may ask the question – following Michel Foucault –

⁷ In the Polish version the phrase “I didn’t know” does appear three times – the English translation by Jakob Ziguas, quoted here, includes the phrase only twice (*translator’s note*).

⁸ M.M. Cyzman, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁹ J. Sawicka, “*Filozofia słowa*” *Juliana Tuwima*, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1975, p. 5.

about the limits of what is possible to express.¹⁰ For the person speaking in Julian Tuwim's poem this knowledge was inaccessible "at that time" when "a net both light and fine" made from the rushes did not serve a purpose, but it only put the viewer closer to the world. It was there only when the "world alive" disappeared under the surface of the world.

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The poem by Tomasz Różycki *Przeciwne wiatry* [Opposite winds], was written in 2003 and it was included in the volume *Kolonie*, transl. *Colonies*. Also for the poet born in 1970 it was the fifth collection of poems (if we count the narrative poem *Dwanaście stacji* [Twelve stations], 2004 as separate), after the volumes *Vaterland* (1997), *Anima* (1999), *Chata umaita* [Decorated cottage] (2001) and *Świat i Antyświat* [The world and antiworld] (2004). The fact that the poem in question made up part of the collection *Kolonie* is significant here because the whole volume constitutes a set of 77 sonnets with exotic, "colonial" titles and the said poems are about imagination, childhood, maturity, travelling, memory, love and death as well as about poetry itself. The complex and multidimensional structure of the poems by Różycki links memories from childhood and unrestricted imagination with the feelings of anxiety and disillusion of mature man, openly facing all the existential challenges. However, leaving aside the extensive problem area modified by the auto ironic approach, it is worth noting the remarks relating to the activity of writing, understanding and justification of exercising poetry, as also included in this volume. Różycki introduces these aspects by employing a phrase that is repetitive in various variants, for example: "Kiedy zacząłem pisać, nie wiedziałem jeszcze," ["When I started to write, I did not know yet"] (*Kawa i tytoń* [Coffee and tobacco]), "Kiedy zacząłem pisać, jeszcze nie wiedziałem," ["When I started to write I didn't yet know"] (*Żywy towar* [Fresh meat]), "Kiedy zacząłem pisać, nikt mi nie powiedział," ["When I started to write, nobody told me"] (*Woda ogni-sta* [Firewater]), "Kiedy zacząłem pisać, nie wiedziałem wcale," ["When I started to write, nobody told me"] (*Koralowa zatoka* [Coral Bay]).¹¹ This is how the nine autothematic poems in the collection make an expressive and recognisable cycle about the sources, mechanisms and consequences of writing. The poem *Przeciwne wiatry* which refers to the relations between words and reality is one of them (and second in the conventional order of the metaliterary motif). Here we read:

When I started to write, I didn't yet know
that my every word would take

¹⁰ See: M. Foucault, *Słowa i rzeczy. Archeologia nauk humanistycznych*, translated by T. Komendant, Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2006.

¹¹ T. Różycki, *Kolonie*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2006, pp. 5, 21, 31, 43. Translation by Mira Rosenthal. Available from: <https://culture.pl/en/work/colonies-tomasz-rozycki>

away from the world bit by bit
leaving only empty spaces instead,

That slowly my poems
would replace my homeland, mother, father, first love, second youth
my thoughts written down here will vanish from this world,
they will turn into some volatile substance, they will become a flow of air.

Wind, shiver and fire and what I touch upon will turn into stone
and will crumble into tiny bits, that they will become almost a case of asymmetry,
dust which is almost invisible.

Swirling in the air till they fall
into the eye and it shall fill with tears.¹²

The parallel introductory formula, just as in the poem by Tuwim, creates a time perspective in which both the elements (the past and the present) are not equivalent. The time before writing starts can be reconstructed only by reversing the sense of the events that happened later and it comes across as a time of innocence, the traditional course of life and harmony of the world. There is a place there for people, feelings, homeland, “second youth” and stable bonds. It all changes when the time comes to write poems. The censorship itself is not acute. Poetry is a promise at first. It spreads the charm and introduces the power of creation. However, after some time it also unveils its ominous price of addiction to the pathological – as the case turns to be – illusion and irrevocable disconnection from life. The experience of creation turns out into a dangerous game as if it was an answer for the words of Krasiński: “There is a stream of beauty running through you and you yourself are not a beauty.” Poetry gives a lot but at the same time it takes away a lot. The expression “I did not yet see” finally becomes an announcement of there being much evidence of powerlessness. There are a few instances of this motif in other poems and the examples are as follows:

When I started to write, I didn't yet know / what poems would do to me, that they would turn me / into a strange spectre, (*Kawa i tytoń*)

When I started to write, I didn't yet know / That every stupid word that is left on the paper on its own [...] Will slowly subsume in/become light, meat, bark will take on flesh/ Of wives and animals (*Żywy towar*)

“When I started to write, nobody told me / it was a disease, that I would be treated / by family and friends” (*Woda ognista*)

When I began to write, I didn't know the subject would be death, that I'd crumble to letters, soot, and toxic dust. (*Delfiny* [Dolphins])¹³

The complete picture of the complex autothematic utterance of Różycki needs to be complemented by the ironic elements introduced by the poet in compliance with the convention of semantic play. These works were referred to by Tomasz Cieślak as humorous and he stated that the author, among

¹² Ibid., p. 15.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 5, 21, 31, 75.

others, "jokes with the romantic image of a poet – phantom, the motif of cursed poet."¹⁴ At this point I omit this interpretative context because of its lesser usefulness with regard to the poem discussed.

In turn, *Przeciwne wiatry* needs to be considered as a variant of Tuwim's relation between word and reality. The core of the attitude presented in the work emerges from Schiller's formula which has been referred to by so many poets: "That alone for which you accept to die is whereby you can live." A variant of this formula is found in the poem by Różycki in the words: "what I touch upon will turn into stone." It needs to be noted that the sequence was meaningfully reversed: the poem does not make the past alive, but – the other way round – it petrifies and annihilates it. The poetic word constructs the autonomic world and at the same time it deconstructs reality itself. It does not happen on a large scale but affects individuals, not in reality but symbolically. As noted by the poet, "what is left are only empty places." The created world is substituted by reality but this also creates a trap, since the life span of poetic entities is not so much defined by the Horatian bronze but by the post-modern aesthetic awareness which imposes a relative and instrumental perspective. Consequently, what is registered is equally fragile and unsustainable as the designated object itself. Tuwim's words became detached from the real world but they did not negate the autonomy of the poetic pictures created. In turn, the words by Różycki appropriate the reality but at the same time they disclose its unsustainability, triviality and insignificance. In conclusion, Tuwim invokes the God "of bright dawns," while Różycki simply makes a remark about the eye shedding tears brought about by linguistic operations.

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The autothematic motif in the poems of the two poets does not define all the aspects of the metaliterary nature and it relates only to a few issues, in the relations of the word to the extra-verbal world and in the consequences emerging from the beliefs expressed therein. Both of the works are characterised by an awareness of the distinctiveness of reality construed by verbal communication and its incompatibility with the real world. Admittedly, the said works differ in their attitudes to the reflection of reality which is defective, and thus untrue (Tuwim) and temporary, amorphous and thus elusive (Różycki). Another common feature of the two works is the initial state of ignorance which is gradually substituted with an awareness of the mechanisms of creation for which one has to pay a high price. The world presented in the poems is not an equivalent of the form which has been seen and experienced. Thus the poets will always stay close to despair and

¹⁴ T. Cieślak, "Poezja jako temat liryki najnowszej," in: *Nowa poezja polska. Twórcy – tematy – motywy*, edited by T. Cieślak, K. Pietrych, Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2009, p. 210.

suffering. The reason is that perhaps the “manifestation of loneliness” is the hidden aim of writing, as noted on some other occasion by Tomasz Różycki:

Manifestation in all his weakness. In his megalomania, hypochondria, egotism, vanity, the feeling of being underappreciated, numerous complexes, envy, fear, immaturity greediness for words – that is all what makes a poet.¹⁵

The statement “I did not yet know” turns out to be a useful key to autothematic reflection both in the interwar period and currently. The fact that it is marked by difficult knowledge emerging from the experience gives rise to the opportunity to search for the answers to the questions about the truth of the word and the world; about how rushes “exist” and how the poem “captures” life.

Translated by Edyta Więclawska

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¹⁵ T. Różycki, “O kolorach,” *Zeszyty Literackie* 2008, No. 1, p. 14.