

Paweł Polit*

Tuwmim and Witkacy: Visual Translation of *Kalinowe dwory*

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz displayed in his texts a fancy for reading poetry. He acknowledged the “strange influence of good poems” when

we don't even know what world we are in: of pictures, sounds or meanings of words. We comprehend immediately their amalgamate in the immediate structure of a poem, and when the poem is over we wake up as if from a dream, as if we were in some obscure dimension¹.

He attributed to poetry the ability to directly express the “Secret of Existence” felt in the state of maximum tension of the unity of self, which he considered the only and inalienable starting point for any authentic creative process. For Witkiewicz the source of any piece of art, be it in plastic arts, poetry or drama, is the emerging (precipitating) in the state of the unity of the unique formal vision – “special nebulous concept”², as he called it in a text about Tadeusz Miciński. That vision in the process of its articulation into a closed form of a piece of art turns into an “idea of detached unity enchanted into that form”³. Basically, a piece of art according to Witkiewicz is a “thing consolidated out of a formal nebula given in the beginning as a potential wholeness”⁴.

The rigorous process of building a lyrical piece, completely subordinated to the criterion of adequate presentation of the initial formal vision, involves the possibility of its declamation. The audible component is, according to Witkiewicz, one of the three main constituents of the poem. Connected with the meanings of words and the images they evoke it is decisive for its impact. For example, the poems by Miciński are:

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¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *O czystej formie*, in: *O CZYSTEJ FORMIE i inne pisma o sztuce*, compilation by J. Degler, PIW, Warsaw 2003, p. 58.

² Idem, *Formalne wartości dzieł Micińskiego*, in: *Bez kompromisu. Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*, compilation by J. Degler, PIW, Warsaw 1976, p. 154.

³ Idem, *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia*, in: *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia. Szkice estetyczne*, compilation by J. Degler, L. Sokół, PIW, Warsaw 2002, p. 64.

⁴ Idem, *O czystej formie*, pp. 59–60.

as if under horrendous pressure, terribly explosive chemical compounds created in unbearable heat – their explosion is, it's adequate, not an intestinal declamation: the absolute connection of elements, and not only a suggested possibility of the fact, that is a well-written poem⁵.

That performative aspect of the poem structure has its counterpart in the process of reception. Listening to a declaimed poem is:

integrating the flowing moments, filled with the mush of poetic qualities, into a whole, which in the past coagulates spatially. Images, sounds and meaning seem to fight for priority against the wild fury, meshing together into those unanalysable poetical qualities, materialising in the moment of synthesis, which are as real, despite their evanescence, as pure sounds or colours. They fight, and yet none of them wins. The ideal balance of the internal forces of the poem, the artistic balance of its semantic structure with images and sounds – not “meaning presented in appropriate form”, but unity of sensual and semantic elements as purely artistic constituents – make it so that everything reaching the ultimate fury of power does not leave by a hair's breadth the ferroconcrete frame of the whole concept, filling it tightly, to the point of breaking⁶.

The “measure in the relationship of sounds, images and sense, with emphasis on their sonic force and power with which the visual imagination needs to imposed on the listener”⁷ postulated by Witkiewicz makes it possible to distinguish the purely formal content of the lyrical piece. It can be recognised directly through the unity of heterogeneous elements, contrary to the kind of unity achieved in painting built of homogeneous qualities – shapes and colours. The extent to which the audio-rhythmic, semantic and visual qualities are integrated is responsible, according to Witkiewicz, for the unique poetic value of the poem. Poetry, entangling the semantic component with the formal structure of the poem he considers, similarly to theatre, a complex art, requiring special care in the process of integrating heterogeneous components. Witkiewicz wrote:

The novelty of my theory lies in the fact that I assumed the semantic component of the word to be an artistic element. This is the only way [...] to maintain the theory of Pure Form in complex arts⁸.

⁵ Idem, *Formalne wartości dzieł Micińskiego*, p. 153.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 154.

⁷ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Teatr*, in: *Nowe formy w malarstwie. Szkice estetyczne. Teatr*, compilation by J. Leszczyński, PWN, Warsaw 1974, p. 260.

⁸ Idem, *O czystej formie*, p. 58.

The heterogeneity of the components of an artistic piece – “musical, visual, and semantic”⁹ – leads to distinguishing three types of poetic approach, associated with representatives of his contemporary literary world. Witkiewicz writes:

in Pure Form poems [...] usually some components dominate: for example, in Retard’s work – images, in Tuwim’s – sounds, in Peiper’s – the semantic side [...], but we don’t see in their poems pure visual representation in the first case, nor the pseudo-musical gibberish of Dadaists in the second, nor just imageless and soundless combinations of meanings in the third. One element dominates, but it merges chemically or amalgamates with the others perfectly¹⁰.

The emphasis laid by Tuwim on sound qualities in the cycle of poems *Słowieńnie* (*Wordsings/wordsingly*), included in the *Poems, Volume Four* (1923), is in accordance with his ideas regarding the poetic aspects of glossolalia, presented in a much later text *Atulli Mirohlady*, published in “Wiadomości Literackie” in 1934¹¹. Regarding the anonymous phonetic poem mentioned in the title of the text, Tuwim matches its poetic qualities with the semantic potential of the words used in it, alluding – consciously or not – to Witkiewicz’s idea of pure form in poetry. Tuwim claims that:

Here the words are freed from any connections with a real or unreal reality. The words exist of their own accord and for themselves and we are allowed to match their sounds, as in the case of musical notes, with written feelings and imagery, or to just experience the very euphony, the alliterative components of which rise within the rhythmic flow of the poem, resulting in a two-dimensional aesthetic event. “Sense”, “meaning” – those components would be the third dimension¹².

In the article *Prawda o “mirochładach” przez “ch”* (*The truth about “mirochlady” spelled with a “ch”*), published in the magazine “Zet” in 1935, Witkiewicz responds by presenting a full and proper, to his mind, version of the poem quoted by Tuwim. He received it from his father, who “overheard” it [...] from its author: a madman-resident in the manor of some Lithuanian nobility during the uprising of 1863¹³. As stated in Tuwim’s apologia for the autonomy of the poem, postulating the creation of semantic contents of the piece on the basis of its phonetic layer, years later he recalls his own idea of the poem. He claims that:

⁹ Idem, *Aleksander Wat*, in: *Bez kompromisu*, p. 134.

¹⁰ Idem, *Formalne wartości dzieł Micińskiego*, p. 153.

¹¹ J. Tuwim, *Atulli Mirohlady*, “Wiadomości Literackie” 1934, issue 31, p. 3.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Prawda o “mirochładach” przez “ch”*, in: *Bez kompromisu*, p. 180.

reducing poetry to some pseudo-music would mean a colossal emasculation of it, but it is true that sometimes you can write a good poem or a part of a good poem using words with no specific meaning¹⁴.

In the elaborate explication of *Teoria czystej formy w poezji* (*Pure form theory in poetry*), presented in the book *Teatr* (*Theatre*) Witkiewicz describes the semantic component as an element of form construction. He mentions examples of meaningless expressions (“living dead”, “square circle”; also phrases created by permuting the elements of those phrases: “living circle” and “square dead”) and claims that they are characterised by a tendency to fuse the scopes of their meanings¹⁵, which is characterised as “an immensely strong internal tension” making them “first-rate artistic elements”. Such expressions can, in his opinion, have, through their imaginary, meaning “counterparts in the artistic sense”¹⁶. Witkiewicz believes that:

an attempt to truly understand those terms, or, at least, to find a limiting counterpart for them, together with some particular consequences of quality, results in a certain flow of some images towards others: that moment is the exact realisation of artistic meaning and value attribution for these words, which, from a logical and real life standpoint, are meaningless¹⁷.

A separate category of meaningless expressions are neologisms (e.g. “kalamarapaksa”), in other words, “articulated words or unequivocally specified signs which do not have any specific scope of meaning”¹⁸. The semantic contents of such words, which, according to Tuwim, “exist of their own accord and for themselves”¹⁹, is explained by Witkiewicz by a separate kind of internal tension. Any words of such kind

depending on which already known word we are going to compare it to, it will take [...] various meanings, more or less specific. Its pure formal quality will be that certain indefiniteness of meaning, which gives it a special kind of internal tension, beside the possible purely musical quality it could have in that place in the poem²⁰.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Witkiewicz uses the term “scope” interchangeably with “meaning”.

¹⁶ See S.I. Witkiewicz, *Teatr*, opp. 273–274.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 274.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ J. Tuwim, *Atulli Mirohlady*.

²⁰ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Teatr*, p. 275.

In that tension of scopes of meanings of meaningless words and, by extension, the tension within the words uttered in a theatrical performance, the relationship between complex arts – of poetry and theatre – and painting manifests itself. He connects that tension with the internal dynamics of a painting's structure, claiming that:

Deformation of external world objects in painting is an analogue of the lack of meanings of verbal connections in poetry, be it in expressing specific thoughts or emotions, in theatre it would be the lack of meaning of utterances and actions with the rest of the individual entities²¹.

Witkiewicz doesn't provide any detailed explanation regarding the way the indefiniteness of meaning of meaningless words in poetry corresponds to deformation of shapes in painting. Interpreting his works, I'd say it is connected with the dynamics of form, a kind of cumulated energy they possess, achieved by specially chosen directional tensions. I'd go as far as to claim that the effects of directional tensions in Witkiewicz's paintings have a linguistic dimension. In many drawings they are strengthened by verbal explanations about people and events. It happens in the drawing, the title of which is an evaluation or a diagnosis of a certain pathological case: *Prof. Krzestomir jest dobry człowiek tylko trochę perwersyjny* (*Prof. Krzestomir is a good man just a bit perverse*) (1936). In this work the spiky contours of the model highlight the sensual and, at the same time, hierarchic order of the relationship between them. The circular order of that work's reception is doubled by a closed circuit of the sadomasochistic interaction it stages. In that work the linguistic component interferes directly with the structure of its composition. The diagonal orientation of one of the model's limbs is highlighted by a (rhetorical?) question written along it: "Why do they suffer?". The linguistic element – the title of the work or the description of the scene created by it – seems to serve in Witkiewicz's paintings the function of intensifying indefiniteness of the meaning of shape. It cumulates its internal pressure – after all Marcei Kizior-Buciewicz from *Jedyne wyjście* (*The only way out*) entitled the composition he painted *Zapełniająca się gnębity* "because of the additional directional tensions in one of its parts"²².

The lost oil painting *Viburnum Courtyards* (*Kalinowe dwory*) (1921), currently known only from a sepia photograph, seems to establish a much closer relationship between image and word. Anna Żakiewicz, in her essay *The Lost Collection*, describes the appropriateness of the formal arrangement in the aforementioned painting, and the structure of phrasal verbs in Julian Tuwim's poem

²¹ Ibidem, p. 266.

²² S.I. Witkiewicz, *Jedyne wyjście*, compilation by A. Micińska, PIW, Warsaw 1993, p. 148.

Kalinowe Dwory from the *Stopiewnie* series (1921). She singles out a closer correspondence between neologisms written into the rhythm of Tuwim's poem, and the constituents of Witkiewicz's painting – she distinguishes motifs of blooming mullein in the foreground near the painting's left edge, a fantastic courtyard with a fronton behind it, she focuses on the main figure of a “wonderer”, who glances over at “sycamore maidens”, which are brought out by the background of a lighter rectangle at the right edge. Żakiewicz also considers the colour palette of the painting, coming to the assumption that it is dominated – accordingly with the colour associations called out by the poem's contents – by an intense red “contrasted by an emerald green”²³.

I would like to propose an interpretation of Witkiewicz's *Kalinowe Dwory* which will correspond not only with his opinions on aesthetic issues, but also ontological ones. The word-formative aspect of Tuwim's poem associates it with a kind of painting which is in agreement with the canon of pure form; the poem seems to register the process of building a reality with the help of words. Therefore, it seems justified that it could have been an inspiration for a way of building directional tensions in a painted composition. The first stanza attributes colours to objects:

Viburnum courtyards
Glow of the sycamores,
Raw rowanberries,
Redden to the latch!²⁴

The lightness – the glowing – of the surroundings which are constructed this way, corresponds with the muscular figure of the “wonderer” from Witkiewicz's painting, who remains in a direct – multisensory – relationship with his surroundings. His profile, turned towards the mullein flowers, fits scent into the range of experiences which happen through him; the beam of his glance marked by a lighter strand of colour coming out of his eye, it penetrates the layers of spaces – which in accordance with the words in Witkiewicz's ontological writing may be described as the partial stretches which collect it²⁵ – determining places filled with complexes of modern qualities, simultaneously coexisting in one fragment of space. The nude “wonderer” soaks in reality through his senses; the intensity

²³ A. Żakiewicz, *Tajemnicza kolekcja*, in: *Witkacy. Materiały sesji poświęconej Stanisławowi Ignacemu Witkiewiczowi w 60. rocznicę śmierci*, A. Żakiewicz (ed.), Muzeum Pomorza Środkowego, Słupsk 2000, p. 126.

²⁴ J. Tuwim, *Kalinowe dwory*, in: *Wiersze zebrane*, vol. I, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1975, p. 313. Further citations are taken from that edition.

²⁵ The meaning of the term *partial stretches* in Witkiewicz's ontological system is described in, e.g. *Twierdzenie 34* – see S.I. Witkiewicz, *Pojęcia i twierdzenia implikowane przez pojęcie istnienia*, in: *POJĘCIA I TWIERDZENIA IMPLIKOWANE PRZEZ POJĘCIE ISTNIENIA i inne pisma filozoficzne*, compilation by B. Michalski, PIW, Warsaw 2002, p. 245.

of his experience seems to intensify the presence of a female (?) figure situated to his right, who, with half-closed eyes, is enjoying the taste of a bunch of grapes reaching her lips from the lower edge of the painting.

This painting may be considered as a kind of visual treatise on painting which intertwines references to Witkiewicz's ontological theories into its structure. The neologism "dziwierz" (the wonderer) brings out the frankness of the relationship of the nude figure from Witkiewicz's painting to the world, associating it with a state of metaphysical wonder. The protagonist's left hand is placed on the background of a nearly rectangular field, and enclosed in that field appear "sycamore maidens", as if hewn from wood. This interior field doubles the shape of the rectangular canvas, designating an additional space within it. Lighter-filled shapes visible within the boundaries of the internal field associate it with the space of a mirror image. The mimetic structure which is created in this way establishes an environment for the artist's activity. Let us evoke Tuwim's poem once more:

The wonderer treads this way,
Lookines at scorcheers,
Hey, beautly will byrn
Viburnum courtyards!

The poem's last verses, when applied to Witkiewicz's composition, appear to anticipate the conclusion of the creative process (also announcing, perhaps, a specific erotic situation). This process can be described in categories of the translation of a three-dimensional space of direct experience to the two-dimensional plane of a painting. The emblematic – portrayed with nearly anatomical precision, if one were to not consider its distortion – hand of the "wonderer" exposes a piece of equipment carefully placed in the fingers, equipment which would be used to establish the proportions of shapes in an image.

The emblematic, presented with nearly anatomic accuracy, except for its deformation – the hand of the "dziwierz" exposes the mysterious apparatus, carefully placed in its fingers, which might be used for measuring proportions in the painting. Two fingers hold its broken surface from below, investigating by touch its volume; the third finger touches the garland hanging from the upper edge of the putative picture, entering the expanded flower. The fourth finger is hooked and touches the upper surface of the apparatus, catching the optically warped bands of "dziwierz". The fifth finger hangs limply in space, pointing to, perhaps, "temporal monoqualities" – smells, sounds, tastes – which do not have, according to Witkiewicz, any precise place in space²⁶.

²⁶ For more on the difference between temporal and spatial see § 19 and 20 in: S.I. Witkiewicz, *Pojęcia i twierdzenia*, pp. 216–220.

The apparatus painted in the discussed work can be treated as a tool for the transposition of the three-dimensional reality, experienced with many senses, into a two-dimensional diagram, composed of intersecting silhouette forms. Behind it there is the internal circle of *Kalinowe dwory* placed in such a way that the diagram seems to draw in the mobile three-dimensional reality in order to put it in the frame of the picture. Props of that kind often appear in Witkiewicz's drawings as visualisations of theoretical concepts. They are often described as measuring devices. The apparatus presented in *Kalinowe dwory* is used to measure the internal – optical – space of the painting. Reducing the volume of things perceived by touch to a structure of flat forms makes the flat surface the measure of formal construction.

The process of translating three-dimensional space, encompassing the “partial stretches”, filled with spatial qualities belonging to the durations of individual beings, introduced in the ontological writings of Witkiewicz, into its two-dimensional diagram is mediated through touch. *Kalinowe dwory* seem to expose touch, according to the general direction of the ontological deliberations of Witkiewicz, as the basic form of sensual contact with the surroundings²⁷. The look of “dziwiarz”, slanted, and therefore as if secondary to other kinds of perceptions or at least not exceptional among them, can explain the anamorphic distortions of the shapes within the “first” space of the composition, directly experienced by him (and the other individual seen in the picture). The elongated shape of the eye, parallel with the smudge of the look penetrating the depth of the space connects it to a type of touch. It can be associated with looking with one eye, required by Witkiewicz for constructing forms on the surface of the canvas. The “dziwiarz”, looking with one eye, the artist intends to provide the spaces of the painting with characteristics of “pure field of vision” anticipated by him²⁸. The figures of “jaworowe panny”, seen in the rectangle of the internal space of the composition, can be associated in this context with the idea, explicated in aesthetic writings of Witkiewicz, of projecting three-dimensional sculptures onto the two-dimensional surface of a painting²⁹. The painter shown on the canvas seems to apply the measure of the painting surface to a sculpture seen as a profile, introducing at the same time into the two-dimensional structure a residuum of touch.

Kalinowe dwory by Witkacy would be then a visualisation of two equal ways of building space in a painting composition: the anamorphic, creating a flat di-

²⁷ For more on the role of touch in constituting a psychophysical subject – individual being – see § 17, in: S.I. Witkiewicz, *Pojęcia i twierdzenia*, pp. 214–216; also idem, *Traktat o bycie samym w sobie i dla siebie*, compilation by B. Michalski, “Pamiętnik Literacki” 2002, issue 4, pp. 220–241.

²⁸ For more on the role of looking with one eye and pure field of vision in painting construction see S.I. Witkiewicz, *Szkice estetyczne*, in: *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia. Szkice estetyczne*, pp. 231–242.

²⁹ For more on translating sculptures into the surface of the painting see ibidem, pp. 239–242.

agram of multisensory, interaction of individuals with their surroundings, felt primarily with touch and described by Witkiewicz as measuring extent through sensual data; and the relief-like, describing the abstracted field of vision composed of silhouette forms agitated by effects of chiaroscuro. That picture seem to present the circular order of moving from one mode of perception to another. The dual-level quality of the internal space makes it a visualisation of the very essence of painting.

The visual translation of *Kalinowe dwory* by Tuwim, proposed by Witkiewicz, agrees with the tenets of his essentialist aesthetics, formulating the conditions for the structural unity of the work belonging to a given art discipline, the unity based on homogeneous or complex elements. That translation was performed by means of providing the verse of Tuwim's poem with the function of increasing the internal dynamics of shapes in the composition of a painting. The interpretation of that indefiniteness of meaning of the poems lexical elements corresponds to the deformation of forms in the painting's composition. The visual content of Tuwim's poem, juxtaposed with certain motifs from Witkiewicz's ontology, was used by him to build an allegoric representation of the essence of painting.

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Tuwim and Witkacy: Visual Translation of *Kalinowe dwory*

(Summary)

The article offers a comparative analysis of a lost painting by Witkacy (known only from a photographic reproduction) and a poem by Julian Tuwim. Tuwim's poem inspired Witkacy to create his work. The poem is used by the author as a model for interpreting philosophical aspects of Witkacy's painterly composition, offering a concluding remark that the visual translation of the poem reflects Witkacy's aesthetic philosophy. The article also provides a new way of reading Tuwim's poetry in which the painterly aspect of his writing is being particularly exposed.

Keywords: Julian Tuwim, Witkacy, *Kalinowe dwory*