

Tomasz Bocheński\*

## Tuwim's Dialogues with Banality

“This Tuwim bloke, a dead man: he was always enjoying himself, no matter what he went through. And what about me? – a poor boy!”<sup>1</sup>. Let us hear out Puczymorda's complaint, the complaint of a character suddenly deprived of any significant desires by history. He lost power, and now after the shoemaker's revolt, he complains of his helpless and boring existence: helpless – for it is devoid of the gift of art, boring – for it is given away to babble. If in the time of the repetition of used up words he could write poetry, if he knew how to take that which is banal and turn it into the extraordinary, he could find consolation. Instead, devoid of the gift, he may only crawl, pressed against the ground with desire – Eros in common clothes. This is the only thing he has left, the comfort of mediocre people: “Only brutes get it up like they should, shagging is the poetry of the masses”<sup>2</sup>. Puczymorda envies Tuwim, because there truly is something to envy – getting out of the ordinary in such a way, when one is stuck in it up to one's ears, in a shoemaker's boredom, is an extraordinary ability. The grievance aimed at a non-poetic fate is heard in a drama, which was written by a historiosopher, just like the main character, tormented with banality, although he was a historiosopher comforting himself with verbal creativity which was just as extraordinary as Tuwim's creativity. Puczymorda is familiar with Witkacy's remedy for boredom, he hears other characters in the drama speak of it, but they torment him like forced, grotesque declamations – anti-decadent concepts being used up. He dreams of a means as effective as amnesia, as effective as forgetting what boredom is – the poetic gift. Would Puczymorda, or rather, would Witkacy give away the wisdom of a historiosopher for this ability – a primal, natural, out-of-nowhere, magical, poetic

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<sup>1</sup> S.I. Witkiewicz, *Szewcy*, in: *Dziela zebrane*, vol. VII: *Dramaty III*, compilation by J. Degler, PIW, Warsaw 2004, p. 385. I start with the fragment I have already interpreted – see T. Bocheński, *Czarny humor w twórczości Witkacego, Gombrowicza, Schulza. Lata trzydzieste*, Universitas, Cracow 2005, pp. 120–121. Please excuse me that auto-reference.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. Baudelaire, *Moje serce obnażone*, in: *Sztuczne raje*, introduction and translation by R. Engelking, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdansk 2009, p. 396.

ability separated away from wisdom? We know that he would not give wisdom away. All the more must he have been surprised by the naivety which creates art, the naivety of Tuwim. But was it really naivety? I believe that Tuwim knew more of it than Witkacy suggested, and more than Apollinaire, who did not consider the mass production of banality in his essay *The spirit of new age and poets*. He did write: “Do compete, dear poet, with the labels of perfume makers”<sup>3</sup>, but he did so believing in the poet’s triumph. He did assure that “one may rely on some everyday fact: a fallen kerchief may be a lever for the poet, with which he can move the entire universe”<sup>4</sup>. We understand that something as banal as “a falling kerchief” may move a universe, but can the world be moved by a cliché from a newspaper, or a political slogan, or rather: can these used-up forms be changed into poetry? A poet’s invention – Apollinaire believes – can turn any material into a new world of art. We will also find this belief in avant-garde manifestos, but it is often accompanied by a hidden irritation at the sea of triviality. Breton would go mad at Dostoyevsky’s banalities and the banalities of modern day novels: “When one ceases to feel, he must fall silent”<sup>5</sup>. In the sentences of realist writing, he saw signs of “vagueness” – a disease of many modern men. In *A Letter to the Rectors of European Universities*, he names places where banalities are produced, meaning places where banal people are produced, people from whom “the secrets of the body, cosmic laws of being” slip away: they are “factories, tribunals, universities”. However, when he spoke of enemy institutions, Breton missed the press. This is surprising, for when fully understood that exceptionality is a question of language. He understood banality as the quality of an object, and not a form of presentation, hence this omission. When he praised Apollinaire, he did it rather naively: “He could kindle a poetic event from a bunch of neutral circumstances, ones collected incidentally”<sup>6</sup>. To him, it seemed as though the demon of the ordinary rules by means of lazy consciousness, and not a widespread production of verbal banality.

Anyway, what would he have done with automatic writing if he found out that the individual speaks not through a wonderful subconsciousness, but an automated machine, that is an individual turned into an automated banality machine? The subconscious laid out with cliché is not remedied best through automatic writing, it is the futuristic “words set free” which work better, or Peiper-like searches for metaphors. But let us ask how Tuwim deals with banality, programmatically aprogrammatically; let us ask how he copes without theory.

<sup>3</sup> G. Apollinaire, *Grajek z Saint-Merry*, translated by St. Brucz, in: *Wybór pism*, compiled by A. Ważyk, PIW, Warsaw 1980, p. 212. Breton cites that poem by Apollinaire in the article *Surrealistyczna sytuacja przedmiotu* (1935).

<sup>4</sup> G. Apollinaire, *Duch nowych czasów*, translated by M. Żurowski, in: *Wybór pism*, p. 748.

<sup>5</sup> A. Breton, *Manifest surrealizmu*, in: *Surrealizm. Antologia*, compiled and translated by A. Ważyk, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1976, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, *Surrealistyczna sytuacja przedmiotu*, in: *Surrealizm. Antologia*, p. 159.

To see banality as the background of poetic invention is, of course, an *ex post* assignment, given by the modern post-avantgarde ruling of used words. It must be said, that Tuwim, as he is seen from the contemporary perspective, seems to be a gardener of banality at some times, and a sewer of the extraordinary at others. This is the riddle which Witkacy placed inside *The Shoemakers*, and which pervades the minds of many: how could an “unwise” poet have created poets which bring comfort so wisely? Some, like Wittlin, consider this riddle a sign of talent:

He phosphoresced. Sparks flew off of him. And at times fear engulfed me, when we sat – the two of us – in a closed room. It was not so bad if the windows were opened. A similar fear engulfs some people before a storm. It was amplified by the contrast between that which Tuwim spoke (he liked to “fool around”), and the terrifying gravity of what he was, or rather that which was in him, blazing.<sup>7</sup>

An intriguing issue – a poetic form that is wiser than the poet, a poetic form which is “terribly serious” – the form of everyday speech – trivial. It is easier for Wittlin to understand Tuwim's triviality, than to explain his seriousness; it is easier because he finds conventional arguments: “he phosphoresced, “a great poet”, “unknown reservoirs (of poetry)”, “a magician and pyrotechnist” etc. When it comes to banality – Wittlin claims that triviality came into Tuwim's poetry when he considered the masses, when he wrote for the masses. The point is, then, the poetry written in the years of Stalinism, and not the earlier creative work. It is as though no connection between triviality and (communist) ideology existed. Wittlin does not mention that other interwar triviality of Tuwim's, perhaps before the war a poet could protect his poetry more effectively. During a time of mass everything, Wittlin claims, “real poetry is born out of loneliness, and everyone that it gets through to experiences it alone.

Even though there were millions of such people, these were not masses, but millions of loners”<sup>8</sup>.

Let us say, then, that Tuwim the poet would most often speak to himself. A strange sentence, although it sounds like the definition of lyricism. How is it possible that an artist whose biography was so taken over by public life, would speak so little to others in his poetry? I imagine this unusual exertion of the spirit, a contemporary spirit which does not let uninvited guests into the home of poetry, this exceptional rule which allows a separation of focus from disturbing voices. An Anchorite in the middle of city turmoil, a loner usually present in the company of others, a lyricist out in an epic sea? Before the war, he managed – I was still

<sup>7</sup> J. Wittlin, *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow 2000, p. 622.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 620.

perplexed – to win in the unequal fight with modern babble? With empty words, clichés, perseverance, he won against ideology? Tuwim would then belong to the small number of poets, who could save his own voice before the war amongst the invasion of impersonal talk? Maybe he locked himself off in a regressive way of speaking and simply did not contact contemporary interlocutors? He avoided the tragicomic loneliness of an epigone, and did not reach for the wisdom of a dissident of modern superficiality. He neither delved into the depths of young Poland, nor did he sink into revelations for “future generations”. I considered the thought in its many rhetorical versions: “a witty loner”, “a famous introvert”, “a praised metaphysician” and many other banal oxymorons, I considered the thought long enough to notice that I have fallen into a net of opposites. I know the loops of this net well, the loops which are sometimes cut by a seemingly conciliatory gesture: Tuwim was a personification of opposites. To these words one might sometimes want to reply with the voice of his critics: therefore he was not present at all. This judgement was made most emphatically by Jerzy Poradecki in the book *Prophets and Performers*:

He knew that the power of life is not that which is truly creative, and not that which is impressive. At the same time, he knew that he himself can be a medium at most, but the gods did not want to speak through him. Everything was corroded by an engulfing hollowness and vagueness. And this fight, where the hollowness and vagueness win, is what Tuwim put down in writing<sup>9</sup>.

The medium, which wrote the history of mystification into poetry – this is how I understand the words of Poradecki, the critic who believed that poetry signifies an emanation of an Orphic world, and not a parody of demiurge, and that this emanation may still become the modern poet’s contribution. I see a paradox in the judgement of a harsh critic: a vagueness specific to the period speaks through the poet, although only the “lyrical self” speaks out. It is a demonic story – instead of spirits, the demons of modernity speak through the artist. The poet does not put us in touch with a lost world, but with ourselves, our modern “vagueness”. The dark humour of this scene suits me: through Tuwim’s medium speak the voices of those participating in the session, they who themselves cannot realize that they do not actually exist. The poet stages a theatre of pretend initiation – impressively and non-creatively, according to Poradecki. The conversation with oneself is just a theatrical gimmick, an actor’s recitation, a scene trick which means to turn attention away from the engulfing hollowness. But when in the prophet – so defended by Poradecki – one sees a medium imitating the voices of

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<sup>9</sup> J. Poradecki, *Prorocy i sztukmistrze. Eseje o poezji polskiej XX wieku*, PWN, Warsaw 1999, p. 131.

the past, he or she can come to the conclusion that the criticism aimed at Tuwim is a result of praising regression and logos. Poradecki suggests that logos speaks through prophecy, but nothing more than logorrhea speaks through profession. And what if contemporary vagueness, the contemporary ordinary, is closer to the extraordinary than the languages of the past, imitated and paraphrased? I defend Tuwim because his “superficial” lyric undergoes the trial of time better than many rhetorical depths. Poradecki is still more gentle on Tuwim than Miłosz in his *Treatise on Poetry*:

But his thought is conventional  
 And used like rhyme and assonance.  
 With it, he covered the thoughts he became ashamed of<sup>10</sup>.

This awkward cover of thoughts described by Miłosz, the cover built with rhyme, assonance and conventional thought suggests a falsification of poetry that denies vision in lieu of banality and seductive melodiousness. These sentences were written – let us be unfair – by a poet of pompous thoughts, and coarse melodies. And yet they are there, covered with “rhyme and assonance” – the visions are there, I defended the poet with words from none other than Miłosz himself, I defended him like Matywiecki, for Piotr Matywiecki, when interpreting Tuwim's poetry, decided to go down the path of vision, which is the poetic path. Instead of researching bad poetry that resonates truths, he found formal wisdom in Tuwim's imagery. I heard the downfall of small nations in Miłosz's words, nations which do not believe in subtle lyrical forms and want to speak to universal history with a language of philosophy, historiosophy, ethics or religion for them to be heard. These terrible depths, these criticism of a clever, bright surface, these barbaric initiations unavailable to cultured nations, these conversations with great spirits of the past are a part of the Polish immanence. One would jokingly say: God, how superficial of Tuwim, in spite of his being a Polish poet.

What does the modern “vagueness” mean when juxtaposed with creativity? In Matywiecki's book, “vagueness” takes on the form of “modern demonism”<sup>11</sup>. According to the monographer, Tuwim's poetry visualizes the presence of satanic powers, which appear in the “trashiness which frightens the world”. In short, modernity's devil is “banality itself”. When paraphrasing Matywiecki, one should write, that banality is a mechanism which can imperceptibly change the poet into a puppet, and poetry into verse-making. Unlike Poradecki, the

<sup>10</sup> Poradecki also mentions Miłosz's opinion – see J. Poradecki, *op. cit.*, p. 131. See Cz. Miłosz, *Traktat poetycki. Z moim komentarzem*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow 2001, p. 39. In his comment to *Traktat* Miłosz emphasis in a way peculiar to him the manicheic “conflict” of Tuwim: between left-wing inclinations and the feeling of metaphysical horror”.

<sup>11</sup> P. Matywiecki, *Twarcz Tuwima*, W.A.B., Warsaw 2007, p. 712.

monographer defends Tuwim, the puppet-poet similar to other puppets and living corpses populating modernity. In a pompous, modernist interpretation, Matywiecki proves that a poet undergoing death, understood mainly as the process of withering while alive, can lift this “trivial mechanism to a level of great poetic theatre”<sup>12</sup>. And so, in this ironic story, we come upon the term “auto-puppet”, which, in a monography practically devoid of humour, seems to be a sign of involuntary joking. The “auto-puppet” poet, a poet who writes down his lost battle with “vagueness”, and a poet who covers his visions with “rhyme and assonance” meet up like a modern Światowidz – in one person, straight from the modern examination of conscience.

These three faces visualize three levels of the fight against the sin of banality: the lowest circle – poetry and the poet fall; middle circle (still hell) – the degenerated poet, he prefers sinning to getting out with the help of poetry: limbo – thanks to poetry, the writer shows himself and other sinners what it means to be possessed by demons. Not even Matywiecki managed to dig Tuwim out of the abyss of modernist interpretation. I see the invented “auto-puppet” as is sits in the limbo waiting room, next to other actors (not only those it is exchanged for), next to the puppet of a dead Witkacy (the author himself is sent above) or Baudelaire’s mannequin that is reading a popular version of his own biography, and even next to Jasiński, who becomes the director of the puppet factory. Perhaps the change of poetry into banality, and the poet into a banality producer, is indeed a demonic story, but how could a change of language and a switch to writing about a talk with vagueness hurt? Death during life could also be a comedy scene.

Tuwim’s collections from the beginning and end of the interwar period are different in many ways, such as the way words are imagined. In *Burning Contents* and *The Vagabond Bible* we find verses and entire poems on the topic of “babble” and “banality”. Tuwim also wins many cadences in *Ball at the Opera* with banality. I’d say that the form of degraded speech drums its rhythm in Tuwim’s ripe creativity, and that the temperament of banality is something that the poet argues:

I spent a quarter of an hour in one office today,  
I listened – wonderfully unconscious – to Assyrian quote,  
Cuneiform typewriting drummed from the director’s throat,  
And I do nothing but cloud up in dismay.  
Cloudy, I’m covered in storms today.

The director throated rhythmically,  
Pouring over rough-edged pebbles:  
“Option, share, endorsement, guarantee, ”...

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 597.

“mas-ter-ca-pi-tal” – He poured a mound out of these syllables  
The gravel choked me.

Listening,  
Churning a storm,  
I screened Assyria off with smoke,  
an intoxicating harvest,  
And on your rubble, like a prophet I called:  
Woe onto you, Nineveh!<sup>13</sup>

The absurd rhyme that is formed between “harvest” and “Nineveh” (“śniwem – Niniwe”) yelled out by a pure-nonsensical prophet sounds upon the rhythm of contemporary music, which the modern, mechanical “Assyria” is giving itself away to. “And on the keys of letters / jumping, agile typists danced / Sonatas of others’ fortune, with torn rhythms were battered”<sup>14</sup>. One may notice a hidden, comic dialogue: a clerk sings out “option, share, endorsement, guarantee”, the narrator: “Woe onto you, Niniveh”. Of course, the clerk could be singing “Woe onto you, Babylon”, and the director would shout: “vision, grant, project, loan”. I do not mean to run off to the future, I only regress, this time to *Lurking for God*. In the third part of the poem *Poetry*, the poet repeats “did not lose” like a spell: “the romantic downer did not lose its charm”, “Achilles and Piast did not lose their power”; A spell drowned out by “the rush of life” and “the great mass”<sup>15</sup>. The magic gesture – as the poet felt – already belonged to the past, it already fitted among “old props”<sup>16</sup>. It could have been expected that the “abyss of electric cities”<sup>17</sup> needs a more powerful spell, and this is how I read the title of *Blooded Words*. In the poem *Body and Word*, I find a declination: “I’ve not any occupation: / I am but a word hunter”<sup>18</sup>, but I understand this statement to be one voice belonging to the past, which is more and more difficult to protect. In two other poems from this collection, the poet demands stronger remedies. In the well-known apostrophe, he asks the Creator for a song: “If I am, oh Creator, in possession of the Word, your excellent gift, / please let my heart beat with the anger of oceans”<sup>19</sup>. In *Till the Word draws blood*, he offends the audience like Aristide Bruant: “Your words are like pet doggies, / And mine – like vicious hounds!” and several verses down:

<sup>13</sup> J. Tuwim, *Asyria*, in: *Wiersze wybrane*, compiled by M. Głowiński, edition 4 extended, Osolineum, Wrocław 1986, pp. 178–179.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 179.

<sup>15</sup> J. Tuwim, *Poezja*, in: *Wiersze zebrane*, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1975, vol. I, pp. 106–107.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> J. Tuwim, *Słowo i ciało*, in: *Wiersze wybrane*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, *Prośba o piosenkę*, in: *Wiersze wybrane*, p. 62.

Let them get to loathe poetry  
 dim and insipid  
 women, salacious!  
 Straight to blood with the word – like an axe to the head!  
 Oh, words! Words sharp, words of gold!  
 Supple words, words predacious,  
 Like lions! Like lions!<sup>20</sup>

However, in the ending of *The Plea for a Song*, he plans yet another poetic crime:

But to my anger's words, a flash of sharp steel  
 Bravery, imagination, rhyme – and accurate and strong  
 So that those that I hit, right in their head will feel  
 The bullet of a six-shooter, shiny song!<sup>21</sup>

It is funny how the pacifist poet shouts, silly how he is seized.

Unaware, he desires the language of violence. He may hyperbolize, because this black humour has yet to gain its gravity through becoming mass reality. “To shoot in the head” from a “six-shooter, shiny song” still sounds like the parody of a romantic gesture, with a helplessness raised to the level of a rule. But whose head is it that the axe of poetry falls onto, whose head is shot through with the bullet of a song? It is a head with no blood, although used – one may answer enigmatically. It is hard to manage the phrase “the head of the living”, for the life of a head is very problematic, as is the life of the rest of the body. The heads of contemporary people are dominated by words other than creative words, words which do not come from the Creator, mechanical words, repeated words, empty words, bloodless words. The poet wants to dominate himself, which is why he finds radical means, and humours us with declarativeness. Tuwim searches violently for the one responsible for modern emptiness, for he must turn the attention away from himself – the partner in crime.

First, he finds his victim, a group of people blamed for a lot of things during the interwar period – the artists of young Poland. In the satire *The decade*, he bullies those that are barely alive: “with a fist between the eyes”, “chase off the fools in capes”, “pound these idiots”, “with a hail of winged arrows set their tapestries afire”, “mount on these arrows, joyously whistling / blades of fiery words”<sup>22</sup>. *The*

<sup>20</sup> Idem, *Słowem do krwi!*, in: *Wiersze zebrane*, vol. I, p. 327.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, *Prośba o piosenkę*, p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, *Dziesięciolecie*, in: *Wiersze wybrane*, pp. 114–115.



*Decade* is the poetic version of Świętochowski's *We and You all* enriched with a note of modern, sadistic hooliganism. Later on, or rather simultaneously, Tuwim finds other culprits – the empty man, fame, modern civilization. I shall skip fame, and neglect to align two versions: Tuwim – authority's pet, and Tuwim – the martyred conformist. The empty man is best described in *The Residents*:

They take newspapers into their fingers like cake  
 And chew, and chew it into a plump pulp  
 Until, bloated with the paper flatcake  
 Their stuffed heads are swollen and thick-sculped<sup>23</sup>.

Rimbaud-like radicalism can be heard in *The Residents*<sup>24</sup>, but no suggestion of rivalry with the banality makers is apparent, it is more likely one suggestive aggression aimed at “terrible existence”, in swollen, bloated heads, in babble, in “monstrous drivel”<sup>25</sup>. Modernist art turns away many more epithets defining existence, also ones used by Tuwim, in order to inversely oppose the powers which endanger individuality. The “terrible bourgeoisie” require terrible experiences – this is the agenda of many modern regression artists: Breton, Artaud, Witkacy... “Monstrous drivel” requires monstrous experiences. Tuwim only rarely nears the masters of black humour, for his bloody concepts, always shown as conventional outbursts of anger, as conventional exultations, for him seem to be an entirely adequate remedy. He does not subject poetry itself to inversion, a place of perfect asylum.

Tuwim does not doubt art itself, because he is under the impression that artistic means are enough to defend oneself from the intrusion of the pervasive, modernist drivel. The poet defends himself against nonsense, treating it as an alien voice, a voice which is repulsive and monstrous, and not a tone of his own voice. This is an unusual ability in an artist who praised commonness, and – as he thought – did not allow himself to be carried away by commonness. Actually, the idea that the demonic history of modernity was somehow partially his doing, and that he too – in spite of his creative ability – must become a victim of the change of common speech into “monstrous drivel”, meaning that non-poetic banality would speak through him, this idea did not enter his mind. It is therefore difficult for me to agree with Matywiecki, who finds a “recognition of modernist demonism” in Tuwim's work, for the monographer uses the epithet “modernist” as meaning “modern-day”. It is true that Tuwim recognizes banality an

<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Mieszkańcy*, in: *Wiersze wybrane*, p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> *Mieszkańcy* owes a lot to *Zasiedziali (Les assis)* Rimbauda, translated by Tuwim – see A. Rimbaud, *Wiersze. Sezon w piekle. Iluminacje. Listy*, translated by J. Czechowicz, compiled by A. Międzyrzeczki, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow 1993, pp. 48–51.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

trashiness as a form of seduction, but unlike many modern artists, he does not paint the lost fight with the demon of triviality. Even in *Ball At The Opera*, the terrifying voice of banality which triumphs at the end, announces the end of the world, and not a slow, boring, tedious triumph of drivel. If the poet admits the catastrophe of pseudomorphosis, then only as the personal failure of a words man, who cannot morph the ordinary into the poetic, the exceptional. If Tuwim talks with banality, then it is only ironic, for he pushes away the thought that banality also speaks through him. In this sense, poetry protects him from the heterogeneity, monstrousness and shapelessness of modern speech and the modern world. The *Six-bullet Song* does not leave the safe boundaries of the poetic punchline, and does not encourage surrealist gesture, just to shoot any pedestrian that happens to walk by. This is the way one may understand the piercing words Wittlin used to describe Tuwim: “He was also a poet of poetry”. Tuwim listened intently to the poetry within him, against the banality that wanted to tear away his illusions, and he believed in poetry which digs the terrible bourgeoisie from their drivel. The empty audience, meaning an extinction of dialogue with the public, frightened him more than the widespread stupidity of the audience. *Events from Rehearsals*, a poem describing a babbling of “monetary words”<sup>26</sup> to an empty hall, is a piece which is more moving than *The Fact with the Editor*, which portrays the dialogue of the poet with banality.

“How he bored me!”<sup>27</sup> – this is how the poet starts his poem with the terrible (what a composition: the common “fact” and a boring “editor”) title *The Fact with The Editor*. He is bored by the conversation about clichés, about unprocessed clichés, about established clichés, clichés served mercilessly (my apologies for the pleonasm). The poet must listen to banalities, and he must do so with banalities served in the form of a “hopeless glaze”, “perpetual talk”, “a tower of piled-up topics”<sup>28</sup>. Let us ask: what was the topic of the conversation between the poet and the editor? It was the most boring of topics, apologies: the most interesting – literature. It was just that the editor remade literature into a fact of service: into “a magazine’s design”, “foreign contacts”, “an exchange of thoughts”, “establishing relations” and “an endangered culture”<sup>29</sup>. The poet defends himself against the boring man’s remake with an act of poetic audacity:

I literally translated all of contemporary literature into light,  
I shot a bullet off into space,  
and sprayed the perplexed editor with an otherworldly splash<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> J. Tuwim, *Zdarzenie na próbie*, in: *Wiersze wybrane*, p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> Idem, *Fakt z redaktorem*, in: *Wiersze zebrane*, vol. II, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

The editor's character does not express any symbolic content, he is not the synecdoche of the world – the institution or the announcement of the world – of ideology, he is more of a representative of an eternal society of bores, anti-alchemists, who manage to change the philosopher's stone into a stone.

Another version of the dialogue can be found in Tuwim's auto-ironic prose titled *From the History of a Certain Career*. A young poet from the city of Lodz, a provincial with no awareness of the most current trends in literature, shows up at a meeting with a demonic editor named Miecio, holding his sentimental poem called *Spring*. Our friend Mietek initially rejects the naive, childish poem, and later lectures the artist on modern poetry:

New times require a new way of framing the topic. First of all, you must take the action out into the site of a big city. The world's audience is now filled with masses, my friend! The great collective demands a dithyramb in its praise! You show us the spring of the masses, the spring of a group, in all its realistic atrocity of sexual desire! [...] Give us the springtime flaming sex and collective eroticism!<sup>31</sup>

The poet protests, because these ideas are “alien, revolting even, the editor must dictate to him the ideas and imagery, the artist will add rhymes and throw in a few of his own words. The wonderful story of how Miecio and Julek wrote *Spring* together came into being in the thirties. In the ironic story about a poet who succumbs to the cynical and ruthless power of an editor, the parodied anti-Semitic stereotypes draw attention: “A fat, sweaty, dirty Jew shook with laughter”<sup>32</sup>. The oppressive solemnity, which uses common representations, may take this fragment seriously. Tuwim slips in a banality for the reader, one about the sneaky role of a Jewish editor, similarly as Witkacy did in his *Farewell to Autumn*. The ironically served stereotype is a trap set for the reader devoted to thoughtless commonness. I use the term “commonness” purposefully, in order to draw out the threat of banality, which often took on the form of an anti-Semitic stereotype in the thirties. In this story, the poet is a naive Polish artist, who is degraded by a Jewish cynic. Similarly to other Skamandrites, who were degraded by the editor:

These foul things took place in the “office” of Mister Gr. – in that “terrifying apartment”, which later served me as a pattern for the known, wonderful poem of mine about the “terrible bourgeoisie”. A typical “parlour”, year 1900: [...] the nauseating scent of cheap perfume, which was supposed to drown out the stuffiness of this unventilated hole, inhabited by an unbathed skunk – this is the office of Sir editor. He

<sup>31</sup> A. Słonimski, J. Tuwim, *W oparach absurdu*, Wydawnictwo Iskry, Warsaw 2008, pp. 153–154.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 154.

lies on the sofa in a dishevelled, old bathrobe, from which wisps of dirty cotton peek as he stuffs himself full of kosher sausage. And on the floor, two poets crawl, wearing monstrous grimaces, mumbling some pathetic, seemingly humorous absurdities<sup>33</sup>.

The wonderful scene from the parodied humiliation could have been found amongst Bruno Schulz's prints. Poetry humiliated by a stereotype defends itself by showing the absurdity and stupidity of violence, one must add: banal violence.

In the thirties, Tuwim foresees what the spreading of banality may signify. His intuition suggests that blaming the press or the bourgeoisie would be naivety. Banal, service-like talk of art, talk that morphs the unusual into the obvious and boring, leads to existence being turned banal. And the most severe show of this banal existence is the stereotype. In order to turn babble, or the repetition of pre-made topics, into dialogue, one must constantly reform language.

Absurdity, *pure nonsense*, black humour and irony treat banality as a quote of common stupidity, which gains the slow and convenience-oriented minds of "the residents". It is the real residents of language, domesticated in the vagueness of speech. A road leads from the vagueness of speech to the banality of evil, a road which at times reveals itself to Tuwim, and one he does not actually want to believe in. When he quotes the absurd fragments of Witkacy and his friends' *Litmus Paper*<sup>34</sup>, he does not consider the fact that in parodies, authors defend themselves as much against pretentious art, as they do against the trivialization of speaking. Tuwim and other Skamandrites treat Witkacy's dark prophecies as a shameful inheritance from the decadent movement, until the ghoulish banality of the period turns to them as well.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 10.

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### **Tuwim's Dialogues with Banality**

(Summary)

The article examines the relation between Tuwim's poetry and modern colloquial language. The avant-garde artists for whom in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century art was an elite occupation, treated every-day speech as a mass form of communication. Tuwim's poetry was frequently criticised for banality. Matywiecki presents the poet as a hero fighting with the demon of commonness. The crucial thesis of the article is that banality which is modified in a creative way says more about the epoch than elitist visions. In his poetry, satire and cabaret work Tuwim transformed triviality into dialog and a common human being into a creative person. Transition of the street talk into original speech is the defence against reducing individual being to cliché which means the fear of 20<sup>th</sup>-century killing ideologies.

Keywords: Julian Tuwim, Tuwim's poetry, 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature, avant-garde