Julian Tuwim, the Polish Heine

Antony Polonsky

Julian Tuwim (1894-1953) was one of the most accomplished of the writers of Jewish origin who established themselves on the Polish literary scene in the period between the two world wars. One of his associates, Kazimierz Wierzyński, has described a conversation with Tuwim in the early 1920s in which ‘I told him that he was the Polish Heine and that he would help to give the Jews new significance in Poland and would help bridge the deep divide...’¹ He was a key figure in the Skamander group², which emerged as the dominant literary clique in Poland in the optimistic years of the 1920s. As the first generation of writers to come to maturity in an independent Poland, they were eager to throw off the heavy burden of commitment to the Polish cause which had weighed down literature in the nineteenth century. In the words of one of their members, Jan Lechoń:

And in the spring let me see spring, not Poland.³

Tuwim himself put it more sharply. ‘I don’t want tombs, I don’t want a sad Orthodox chapel, the lamentations of crows, owls and other night birds’.⁴

Their artistic credo spelled out clearly their optimism and lightheartedness:

We believe deeply in the present, we feel we are all its children. We understand there is nothing easier than to hate this ‘today’ of ours, not acknowledged by anybody as his own. We do not wish to pretend that evil is non-existent, but our love is stronger than all evil: we love the present with a strong first love. We are and we want to be its children. And this day is not only a day of the seven plagues, it is also a day when a new world is being born. That new world has not yet emerged from the earth; its shape is still a guess, but the trembling we feel under our feet proves it is rising already...⁵

The group included number of poets and writers, most notably Jan Lechoń, Kazimierz Wierzyński and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz who were not Jewish. Writers of Jewish background were also important in its ranks, including Antoni Słonimski who, though the son of a socialist and baptized in infancy, had many distinguished Jewish

---

¹ J. Ratajczyk, Julian Tuwim (Poznań, 1995), 111.
² The name of the group was a reference to the river which flowed past Troy, which in Stanisław Wyśpiański’s play Acropolis was described as glittering ‘with a Vistula wave’.
⁴ Quoted in Ratajczyk, Julian Tuwim, 87.
forebears and who regarded himself as a ‘Jew of antisemitic antecedents’, Mieczysław Grydzewski, who, as editor of the influential literary *Wiadomości Literackie*, weekly was a key figure in propagating the group’s works and Tuwim himself. Indeed, with his cult of the modern city and its crowds of anonymous people seeking both a living and new diversions, which made him seem most akin to the American poet Walt Whitman, Tuwim embodied more than any of his contemporaries the Skamander aesthetic.

He was born into a middle-class Jewish family in the textile town of Łódź and had a remarkable gift for verse, writing not only serious poetry but for cabarets and for children. He was obsessed with verbal coinages and innovative rhymes and expressed in his poetry a sensual love of life and nature. In the poetry which he wrote in the 1920s, he explored a large number of different themes most of which reflected the artistic views of the Skamander group which combined a fairly conventional aesthetic with the exploration of different aspects of the urban experience. Some of the most impressive deal with the poet’s calling and the nature of poetry. Thus in his poem, ‘Theophany’ he wrote:

I feel you are coming, thunderous night,
Gigantic and red with a blazing hue.
You golden–strung vision, my holy light,
You are dawning, O Poetry New!

Though your face is yet unknown from which
Of ages hidden sense will gush with god,
I know, you will be mad, mysterious:
The soul to come, the future I laud.

Your name shall be the somber, grim – ‘I am!’
Embracing all, tyrannical with dread!
You shall reveal yourself in this Fiery Creed:
‘I am proudly come for the dream of the mad.’

In ‘Request for a Song’ he saw his mission as the exposure of injustice:

If, O God, I have Thy splendid gift, the Word,
Cause my heart to beat with the wrath of oceans;
Give me the ancient poets’ noble sword,
To strike at tyrants with raging emotions.

No need for hymns to throng my head
To sing the wasted man, of an empty heart,
Ready to supplicate for a bit of bread,
Who for the king must play his menial part.

---

6 From *Waiting for God* (Warsaw, 1918), reprinted in *Dzieła*, 5, volumes, (Warsaw, 1955), Volume 1, 44.
Give my angry words the flash of steel,
A fantasy and rhyme well–aimed and strong,
So that the targets I hit will feel
The sharp rapier of my glittering song.  

In another poem, ‘Draw Blood with the Word’, he wrote:

Your words are like drawing room lapdogs
And mine—are rabid dogs!
To heck with your arabesques and burlesques,
And—instead of placing dots and dashes,—
Slap faces in your poems,
Slam your fists into mugs!
Tear up, rip into bits
Your sonnets, tintinnabulation,
Fools!
Let the languid, flaxen–haired
And lustful maidens
Grow to hate all poetry!
Let the word draw blood—as a meatcleaver
Hits the head!
O, words! Sharp and golden!
Pouncing words of prey! Pouncing words of prey,
Like lions!
Like lions!  

Yet he was less interested in politics than in poetic creation. His obsession with
poetry is well described in ‘The Word and the Flesh’:

And the Word was made flesh,
And it has dwelt among us,
I feed the starving body
With words as if they were fruit;
I drink the words with my mouth,
Swallow them like cold water,
I breathe them like brilliant air,
Crush them like little young leaves,
I grind them with sweet odors.

The word is wine and honey,
The word is meat and it’s bread,
It’s the word that guides my eye
Along the starry sky.

---

7 From: Words in the Blood (Warsaw, 1926); Działa, Volume 1, 274.
8 From Words in the Blood (Warsaw, 1926); Działa, Volume 1, 274.
O joy of the sacred gift,
O eternal fondness!
O Lord, grant me today My daily word!

II

I have no occupation:
I’m only a hunter of words,
Watchful and attentive,
I’ve gone to hunt into the world.

With words the minutes flow,
And everything I love and feel
Buzzes around as the days go—
A swarm of sunny bees.

They caress me with their wings,
Their stings draw my blood.
I’m stung by poisoned words,
I feel so good!

Enclosed within my heart
The words are a-flutter.
That’s why the heart trembles so.
My head is drunk
On a charmed honey;
That’s why—the dreams.⁹

This intoxication with poetry was also the theme of the ‘The Czarnolas Material’, in which he reflects on the legacy of the Polish Renaissance poet Jan Kochanowski:

The Czarnolas¹⁰ heritage surges,
Surrounds, stirs with wonder him who
Is possessed. The word slowly emerges,
Changing in sound, is real, true.

From chaos emerges form and necessity,
Oneness of moment when the immensity
Itself of the creative frame
Finds its finality, calls its name.

---

⁹ From; Words in the Blood (Warsaw, 1926); Dzieła, Volume 1, 266.
¹⁰ Czarnolas (literally Darkwood)—a small estate of Jan Kochanowski (1530–84) greatest Polish Renaissance poet, where he composed his greatest masterpieces (e.g., Laments, Psalter); hence the symbol of poetic inspiration and excellence.
Deaf unreason, the limited understanding of Man,  
Shot through and through with the sharp ray,  
Wakened and released by the breath  
Of the great Renaissance lay. 

His indebtedness to Ovid is clearly evident in ‘My Theme’:

My theme—is transformation,  
Change and fermentation,  
Being consumed in a fiery flight,  
Coalescing into a drop of light,  
Into love’s elation.

My theme—the thing’s to reach zenith in strife,  
Neither death nor life.  
The last one, pure, the motherly fuss,  
It stays transparent as centuries pass,  
A dot upon the summit’s knife.

More romantic in inspiration is ‘The Gypsy Bible’ (p. 14)

What is the gypsy bible like?  
Unwritten, wandering, prophetic.  
Whispered to hags by the silver night,  
Illumined by midsummer moon.

It bears the aroma of crushed myrtle,  
The rustling of woods, the starred cabala,  
Graveyard’s shadow, deck of cards,  
Churchdoor beggar, white chimera.

Who found this book?  
We, the learned ones  
Who search the junkyard of remembrance,  
Driven by scent, and touched by portent,  
Gazing beneath the senses and thought.

Along the valleys of fallen knowledge  
The twisted myth flows river-like:  
Not in life nor death but in between,  
Witching for death, enchanting for life.

11 From: Czarnolas Material (Warsaw, 1929); Działa, Volume 2, 5.  
12 From: Czarnolas Material (Warsaw, 1929); Działa, Volume 2, 16.
Funeral tapers trickle waxen
Tears at night upon this volume.
In this book the dreams turn over
Like pages, moved by delusive guesses.

The flashing verses whirl about,
You won’t grasp what they conceal, as
It were: the poet’s martyrdom…
…something he must save…
The book melts away.

In ‘Poem’, he described how he produced his work:

When I know
that a poem
will arise,
I lock the world
in the bracket’s vise
and before the bracket place
a symbol
of factor, equation.

Then begins the calculation,
sonorous and quick contemplation
until the poem,
like the problem
of an algebraist
clearly follows on the blackboard.

Then
from the bracket I release
the imprisoned elements, remove
the calculation off the board.

I come home, seized
with joy, back from school,
but at home I die of love.\textsuperscript{14}

In ‘With the Crumbs of Youth\textsuperscript{15}’, he gave a different account of the artistic process:

\textsuperscript{13} From: \textit{The Gypsy Bible and other verses} (Warsaw, 1936); \textit{Dzieła}, Volume 2, 80.
\textsuperscript{14} From: \textit{The Gypsy Bible and other poems} (Warsaw, 1933); \textit{Dzieła}, Volume 2, 93.
With the crumbs of youth—what shall one do? Cast them to the birds?
One can both cast them to the birds and put them into words.
They will fly away, gladdened, to return for more,
Both words, and birds—with hope winged alike, will come as before.

And what will you tell them? There is no more! You’ll tell the poor ones, there’s no more.
Will they believe you? No, they won’t. They will wait
Behind the window till the cloudy night grows late,—
They’ll strike the panes with wings. They
Will fall, dead but faithful. Both birds and words.¹⁶

The process of writing is also the theme of ‘More About the Poet’:

My hands over closed eyes
--Like the poet of childish imagining—
Now I Am
A poet,
Myself almost holy,
Persist in non-remembrance,
Cut out of the youthful dream
As if from tissue paper,
Light am I,
Gently whisper words,
Drum my fingers on my forehead.

Thus it was in those loving, lazy mornings:
The lily-colored image throbbed in my eyes.
Like lovers’ letters meeting each other.
In a dark mailman’s bag

Do you really mean that?
Certainly:
This childish thought about the poet
With a bow of the poet’s graying head.¹⁷

Another of his themes at this time, one shared by his fellow Skamander poets was exaltation in life. In 1918 in his poem, ‘Life’, he wrote:

Life?
    Relaxing, my arms I shall spread,

---
¹⁵ This is a section of a longer poem entitled ‘Z wierszy o Państwie’ and is untitled in the original.
¹⁶ From: *Burning Content* (Warsaw, 1936); *Dzieła*, Volume 2, 179.
¹⁷ From: *Czarnolas Material* (Warsaw, 1929); *Dzieła*, Volume 2, 18.
And fill my lungs with the morning breeze;
I shall humbly bow to the azure sky,
And shall cry, joyously cry:
How glad I am that my blood is red!18

Similar views are expressed in the poem ‘Happiness’:

I take no interest in the world,
Nor in the great and beauteous cities.
They cannot tell me more than this
Humble roadside weed.

I take no interest in men who
Fathomed every lore.
I’m glad with the first one at my door.
Anybody will do.

About books I do not give a rap.
You may sneer at my looks,
I know a lot without those books,
And I know what it means to live.

I sat myself under a tree,
Alone I am, serene, in bliss,—
O God, O my happiness!
How shall I give my thanks to Thee?19

In ‘I’, he observed:

In June at five o’clock in the morning
In the rosy, sunny capital
I walk in the middle of the broadest street,
I walk in the middle of the broadest street!

How bright it is there, and how far
Beyond the bridge, shining across the river!
Ah, how bright it is—how far!

I feel handsome, young and strong!
I’ll walk the city, by calm waters
I’ll stride along,
In the green meadow will I appear,
I’ll walk into the distance,
As though drunk on clear, transparent alcohol.20

18 From: Waiting for God (Warsaw, 1918); Dzieła, Volume 1, 59.
19 From: Waiting for God (Warsaw, 1918); Dzieła, Volume 1, 51.
One of his best poems on this theme is ‘The Two Winds’:

One wind—in the field he blew,
Another wind—in the garden grew:
Quietly and very lightly
He caressed the leaves and rustled,
Swooned...

One wind—a mighty swell,
Somersaulted, flatly fell,
Leaped, and surged, soared up high,
Upwards whirled into the sky,
Overturned and dropped pell-mell
Upon a soughing, drowsy garden,
Where so quietly and lightly
Now caressed the leaves and rustled
The other wind.

Off the cherry blossoms flew,
Laughter spread throughout the garden,
Brother took his twin for friend,
Now they cruise over the land
Chasing clouds and birds in flight,
Rush into the windmill’s stance,
And confuse its stupid arms,
Right and left they whistle, dance,
Blow their lungs with all their might,
Clowning in a frenzied riot!
The garden is so quiet... quiet...

Tuwim was, above all, a sensual poet. He gloried in the depiction of nature, described his poetic creativity in almost physical terms and vividly depicted the joys of sexual love (He even wrote a poem describing sexual union). In his poem ‘Spring – a dithyramb’ (Wiosna), written in 1915 and published in 1918 in the student magazine Pro Arte et Studio, a poem which owes a great deal to both Whitman and to Rimbaud, above all his ‘Paris s’eveille, he gave fervent, if ironic, expression to this sense of physicality. This poem with its exaltation of the physical world and of sexuality, was the first to draw attention to Tuwim and to make him the bete-noire of the Nationalist and Catholic Right. They took literally this basically ironic hymn to the lustful emotions provoked by Spring in the city. Read in this way, the poem was certainly shocking. Its opening two verses read:

Today they praise the Mass

20 From: Waiting for God (Warsaw, 1918); Dziela, Volume 1, 56.
21 From: Dancing Socrates (Warsaw, 1920); Dziela, Volume 1, 176.
The Crowd is praised
And the City.
In the squares they kindle pyres
And a throng pours out on to the streets,
The crawl out of their corners, the dash out of their lairs
To celebrate spring in the city,
To celebrate the lustful holiday.
And they praise You,
With your belly above broad loins
Woman!

It rocks – it bursts forth – and it flows –
Little feet shuffle on the ground, hips rock,
Noise, noise, noise, giggling,
Noise, noise, noise squealing,
Polished mouths joke,
The countless, gaudy mob pours out,
Little feet shuffle, hips rock
Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle, noise, noise, noise
Thousands of unrestrained couples glide
– and further! Further! Further!
To the dark greenery, to the alleys,
On a bench, you rascals, on the grass,
Create little brats for Poland,
Writhe, you rascals, writhe,
Drink in corner bars,
Discard more of those ‘bachelors’ illnesses!’
O! Later why will writhe with shame,
Those factory tarts, those big-bellied mares,
Those deformed kids, those lustful trollops!
Violate them! Let all partake of a meal
In your coloured shirts
And your paper collars!
Crowd, be savage!
Crowd! RIGHT is on your side!!!

Linked with this poem are those in which he reflected on the ‘eternal feminine’ and on the sexual urge. Among them is ‘Woman’:

1

A power, creatively imagining starry tempests
A genius, a hurricane of the spirit, a monstrous power
Who retains the smallest details of the most trifling memories
And goes back to past days with pain and bitter shame

The advocate of God’s word, the apostle who in song
Praises the Divine Revelation to a pious shepherd,
Scrabbles like a pickpocket in the purses of others
And steals small change; so she can buy candy.

The rough hoodlum, the untaught yokel, the worst thief,
Those who are despised by the lowest of the low
They cry softly and sweetly in the presence of her silent loneliness
And fervently pray for her faint smile…

2.

At times she will in rigid numbness freeze,
Horrid, immovable in thoughtless thought;
Dull apathy upon her soul will seize,
And fear, as if she saw a dead mouse rot.

With agony her glassy eyes are blind,
Of chaos full, and sad infinitude,
And crumpled thoughts come thick upon her mind,
And fields in madness throng, and deserts brood.

Wake her, and drunk with chaos she will start,
As though she had returned: yet hides much more,
For when she hoarsely speaks, her words impart
She has remained a savage, as of yore

3.

And when she becomes holy by the will of the Disciples
Which can even make logs into gods,
When the power of command which issues from the miracle of revelation
Transforms her remains into dust but deifies her spirit.

She – will begin to struggle with the giant Command,
Feeling how a church is growing around her on earth
And she will fall like a rock, suffocated by divinity
And will curse her Disciples with hate-filled words

But he, concentrated on eternity, blinded by faith
Does not know that the burden of God has turned her into dust
And will pray, fixated on a divine vision
Not realizing that he is standing – only before a tomb.22

---

22 From: Waiting for God (Warsaw, 1918); Dzieła, Volume 1, 100.
Some of his best poems express his love for his wife. A good example is ‘You’:

You keep me on this earth,
And to the heaven draw near,
You are all to me on this earth,
Why go so far from here?

Today I know but you,
And only you have learned;
I understand no more,
I brushed aside the world.

Each step reveals new roads,
Each thought’s a boiling abyss.
You alone reply
In words or a silent kiss.

I hear the blood of your heart,
I feel your misty breath,
And mad with love go on
In this life so full of death.  

A similar poem is ‘I’m Nobody’s:

I’m nobody’s in the world,
Nobody’s, like a spring or grass;
I’m only yours and God’s,
I’m Yours.

I’m only Yours and God’s,
Each day I go far off,
Confess to radiant God
My grief.

And I confess in silence,
And silent are my tears,
My God is great silence,
and You...

Each day I await the Coming.
Again to speak of my lament.
And sadly the talk flows
Without words...

---

23 From; *Seventh Spring* (Warsaw, 1922); *Dzieła*, Volume 1, 193.
My day ends with a prayer;
I recall my radiant dreams...
The remembrance of my God—
—It’s You...  

Another such poem is ‘Pursuit’:

I rush to your dwelling
With storm in my blood;
With thunders impelling
On the portals I thud.

A tempest blows through me,
It tears at the sills.
Come, open! Endue me
With calm; there pursue me
A legion of hills.

The plains in commotion
Like lions seek meat;
For me, a blind Ocean
Now roars in the street.

The universe rages
To catch me. Ah, stay!
For nothing engages
My life, save your sway.

Come, open and save me
And fence me about!
From the world you may crave me
As yours beyond doubt!

Vast powers are giving
My soul to the pit—
But Mother of Living,
Yea, Mother of Living,
-- In a corner, I kneel humbly before you…

At the same time, he seems also to have felt a revulsion from these pleasures of
the flesh, which led him both into misanthropy and misogyny. This disgust with the
material world is clearly reflected in a number of Tuwim’s poems. A good example is the
poem with its title taken from Horace *Et Arceo*

---

24 From: *Seventh Spring* (Warsaw, 1922); *Dzieła*, Volume 1, 192
25 From: *Words in the Blood* (Warsaw, 1926); *Dzieła*, Volume 1, 296.
I hate the vulgar multitude [profanum vulgus]. Church or café
Republic or cinema, a meeting of shoemakers or an army
The nation, the community, family, school, reading-hall –
All are but chaos and terror and deadly emptiness.  

Linked with this was a sense of the transitoriness of life In ‘Death’, he observed:

Like a razor cutting butter, a flash
Through the brain, a stone in water – quiet—splash...  

Politically he was a liberal and a bitter opponent of antisemitism and savagely castigates the nationalist right, whom he addressed thus in a poem he wrote after the assassination of President Narutowicz in December 1922: ‘You have a Cross around your necks and a Browning in your pockets’. He had a rather naive attitude to politics and probably never went deeper than a facile sympathy for the common man, a hatred of oppression and a rather simple-minded pacifism which saw war as a result of capitalist machinations. In an early poem dated July 1918, he gave a graphic account of search conducted by unidentified members of a secret police force, either Russian or German:

Three men—smiling and calm. Polite.
‘Oh, yes... And here? They ferret and feel...
(The corners of their mouths—what fright,
And their eyes—the points of faithless steel).

One, uniformed, reads on his knee.
Faded, as if dully sad—but lies—
The other. Through the fearful glass you see
The third one’s eyes, a sleuth’s rat eyes.

This? Move that? Please! (Deep inside
Something falls moaning—lasting pain...)
Cold fear reels... A little word has died—
He’s found it! ‘Hm... So... Explain...’

He never seems to have been attracted by communism in the period before 1939, in spite of his love for Russian literature. As he was to write later, ‘Politics is not my profession. It is a function of my conscience and temperament.’ In response to a questionnaire in Wiadomości in October 1933 he replied that he had no opinion about the communist experiment, he had no opinion. ‘In order to know about it,’ he wrote, ‘I would have to spend five years in Russia: the first as a child, the second—as a peasant, the

---

26 From: Burning Content (Warsaw, 1936); Not reprinted in Dzieła
27 From: Fourth Volume of Verses (Warsaw, 1923); Dzieła, Volume 1, 241.
28 From: Dancing Socrates (Warsaw, 1920); Dzieła, Volume 1, 164.
29 Ehrenburg, 28
third--as a worker, the fourth--as a ‘bourgeois intelligent' and the fifth--as a Russian. At the same time he could not resist attacking what the critic Artur Sandauer has described as ‘traditional sanctities: private property, the family, the army, maidenly virtue.'

Thus in his poem ‘To the Common Man’ (Do Prostego Człowieka) he expressed strongly pacifist views:

```
When they begin to plaster the walls
With freshly printed proclamations,
When black print sounds alarm
Calling ‘To the People’ and ‘To Soldiers’
And ruffians and adolescents
Are taken in by their recurring lies
And believe that you should start firing cannons
Murder, poison, burn and plunder…
It means that somewhere they have struck oil
Which will bring them riches;
That something has gone wrong in the banks they own
That they scent cash somewhere
Or that those bloated rascals have now thought up
A higher duty on cotton.
Throw down your rifle on the pavement!
The blood is yours, and the oil theirs!
And from one capital city to another
Cry out in defence of your hard-earned bread:
‘Gentlemen – peddle your lies somewhere else!’
```

His hatred of war was expressed even more strongly in another poem, ‘Bang! Bang!
The sensation of the Universal Amusement Park’:

```
The famous American mechanical
Electric shooting gallery!
Try it! This amusement
Is both stimulating and harmless.
If you fire a well-aimed shot
You will get a pleasant surprise.
See the dancer.
If you hit her
Straight in the heart
She will gracefully kick up her legs.
```

---

30 Julian Tuwim, response to the questionnaire ‘Pisarze polscy a Rosja sowiecka,’ Wiadomości Literackie no. 44 (8 October 1933): 3.
31 A. Sandauer, O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku, (Warsaw, 1982), 27.
32 From The Gypsy Bible and other verses (Warsaw, 1933); Dzieła, Volume 2, 127.
The music will play cheerfully in accompaniment
Friend, shoot and hit.
Bang! Bang!

Come one, come all.
Twenty groszy for a shot.
Surely one of you
Will prove a champion shot.
Come one, come all.
Fifty groszy for three shots.
Who will venture, who will venture
Again, I ask you, who will venture?

If you hit the drummer in the middle of his shield
His drum will set up a rattle.
If you hit the Angel between the eyes
His wings will fly off.
The dog will bark, the cock will crow
And the musical box will play a waltz.
Skill is what counts. There are no miracles.
If at first you don't succeed
For fifty groszy you can have
Three more chances to experience this delight
Friend, shoot and hit
Bang! Bang!

Come one, come all.
Twenty groszy for a shot.
Surely one of you
Will prove a champion shot.
Come one, come all.
Fifty groszy for three shots.
Who will venture, who will venture
Again, I ask you, who will venture?

But look! Beyond the amusements
A spectre from the other world comes into view
His breast picturesquely rent.
What a fine target - this great wound.
This man, covered in bloody rust
Comes from beyond the amusements at Verdun.
Something has occurred to him
A fine clockwork mechanism
Such toys are again in demand
Because war is just great!
Friend, shoot and hit Bang! Bang!
Come one, come all
Twenty groszy for a life.
Perhaps we will again get the chance
To let fly with shrapnel, bullets, gas.
Come one, come all.
For fifty groszy millions of corpses.
Who will venture, who will venture,
Again, I ask you, who will venture?

Similar sentiments were expressed in his poems ‘To the Generals’ (Do generałów) ‘Litany’(Litany), ‘Quatorze juillet’ and ‘The Funeral of President Narutowicz’ (Pogrzeb Prezydenta Natutowicza). In To the Generals, he wrote:

They scowl, menace, threateningly raise their eyebrows
These former Generals, covered with stars.
– Gentlemen! Stop pretending to be lions!
You should know finally that now – we,
Thoughtful passersby
We are the Generals here!…

None of you has risen
To the rank of – Free Poet!
I gentleman have power, indeed I do!
– The whole world belongs to me!

Tuwim seems to have been a pantheist, believing in an immanent force in nature and, like Whitman, he had a strong sense of awe and religiosity. This is well expressed in his poem ‘A Prayer’:

I pray Thee O Lord
From all my heart,
O Lord! I pray to Thee.
With fervor and zeal,
For the sufferings of the humiliated,
For the uncertainty of those who wait;
For the non-return of the dead;
For the helplessness of the dying;
For the sadness of the misunderstood,
For those who request in vain;
For all those abused, scorned and disdained;
For the silly, the wicked, the miserable;
For those who hurry in pain
To the nearest physician;
Those who return from work
With trembling and anguished hearts to their homes;
For those who are roughly treated and pushed aside,
For those who are hissed on the stage;
For all who are clumsy, ugly, tiresome and dull,
For the weak, the beaten, the oppressed,
For those who cannot find rest
During long sleepless nights;
For those who are afraid of Death,
For those who wait in pharmacies;
For those who have missed the train;
—For all the inhabitants of our earth
And all their pains and troubles,
Their worries, sufferings, disappointments,
All their griefs, afflictions, sorrows,
Longings, failures, defeats;
For everything which is not joy,
Comfort, happiness, bliss—. . .
Let these shine forever upon them
With tender love and brightness,
I pray Thee O Lord most fervently—
I pray Thee O Lord from the depths of my heart.33

Similar sentiments are expressed in his poem, ‘Our wisdom’:

How shall I teach you this wisdom then?
We’re quiet men, we’re simple men.

We’re simple men, untaught,
Born out of word-fire, by word-fire wrought.

Our tangled words grasp mystery in tuneful rhyme.
The flower’s called sun, flower is sun’s name.

But in our speech, in this most wondrous wonder, this
Our world is called as it really is.

Without books, without learning we sit
In dumb thought. We alone know a little bit:

About those nightly minutes, running, never caught,
When we see the shadows of we know not what

We always remain young on the earth,
A bright Herald walks our garden paths.

And till our death we render humbly

33 From: Dancing Socrates (Warsaw, 1920); Działa, Volume 1, 127.
Unto God what’s Caesar’s, unto God what’s godly.\textsuperscript{34}

Like a number of Jewish artists at this time, he was also attracted by the personality of Jesus, whom he may have seen as a Jewish figure. In an early poem ‘Manifesto’(1914), he described his pantheon, which culminated in the line,‘A rosebud dawn spoke to me – Christ’. He included a number of poems in which Christ figured in his first collection of poems, \textit{Czyhanie na Boga} (In wait for God). In one poem he has Jesus address God, explaining that he will not complain of the sufferings he has to undergo provide only that God ‘soon, in a miracle, makes the good, quiet people understand me’:

\begin{quote}
I do not complain, my Father, I do not complain my Lord,
That you imbued my heart with this painful love

I do not complain, my Father, that I go on such a solitary path,
That I have so worn myself out on my thorny way.

I approach huts with the news: ‘It is coming, by the grace of heaven’.
And people reply: ‘With God’s will…’ and give me a crumb of bread.

Are my words so difficult to understand
Do they not see that Your Kingdom is approaching?

Do they not see that the nations have outraged the heavens,
They do not believe, although I bring them tidings of joy and hope…

But I do not complain, my Lord, that I go on my path so dejected,
That there is no end to my thorny way.

Birds have nests, little foxes have their dens
And only the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

But I do not complain, Lord….But soon, in a miracle,
Make these good, quiet people understand me.\textsuperscript{35}

In another poem, ‘The Christ of the City’, the only person to recognise Jesus is Mary Magdelen:

They danced on the bridge,
They danced the whole night.

Cutthroats, executioners, outcasts,
Gallow-fodder, prostitutes,
Syphilitics, gangsters,

\textsuperscript{34} From; \textit{Dancing Socrates} (Warsaw, 1920); \textit{Dziela}, Volume 1, 127.
\textsuperscript{35} From; \textit{Lying in Wait for God} (Warsaw, 1918); \textit{Dziela}, Volume 1, 68.
Rascals, thieves, slurpers of vodka.

They danced on the bridge,
They danced till dawn.

Beggars, harlots,
Madmen, cunning spies,
They danced in the streets,
Under the streetlamps and gallows,
Dogcatchers also danced.

They danced on the bridge
Distinguished guests;
Bastards!

Old libertines, pimps
Ashamed masturbators.
They took each other by the hand
They tapped their feet,
The played harmonies on a harmonica
They played till dawn.
They danced their savage dance:
More! More!
They guzzled. They drank. They danced.

There was one who stood aside.
One who nobody knew,
They scowled at him,
They shrugged their shoulders
They spat.

They took him to one side:
They spoke to him, they asked
He was silent.

Rudy, a red-head;
- Who are you?
  He was silent.

A second came, without a nose
Covered in boils:
- Who are you?
  He was silent.
A drunkard asked drawlingly
- Who are you?
  He was silent.
Magdalen came
She knew him, she told …
    She cried…

It became silent. They whispered something
They fell to the earth. They cried.  

Tuwim felt deeply rooted in Poland and above all in Polish literature. This in his poem Polishness:

There is no country whence I shall not yearn
In grieving anguish for the old, grey streets.
All cries of victory to sobbing turn,
And earth’s wide wonder into nothing fleets.

There is no land where I have visited
Unhaunted by the old, grey memories.
No matter what the highway that I tread,
My inner eye the same horizon sees.

Nothing can solace to my heart provide;
Joyless is every vista I have scann’d;
Eternally above me opens wide
The old, grey welkin of my native land.

No travel helps, no road that I have trod,
Nor human crowds nor oceans bring relief;
Even upon the streets I pray to God,
While people gaze and listen to my grief.

No help in any wealth of language lies;
Nor savage hymns nor races foil despair.
For what it may avail, I face the skies
And raise anew my plain, old daily prayer.

I wail, I cry out in most desperate straits:
‘Hearken, Jehovah, flash Thy sword to view!’
But yonder, in the streets, the Father waits:
The old, grey God my Polish boyhood knew.  

---

36 From: *Lying in Wait for God* (Warsaw, 1918)
*Dziela*, Volume 1, 71.

37 From: *Words in the Blood* (Warsaw, 1926); *Dziela*, Volume 1, 281.
He was also a civic patriot, glorying in his links with Łódź, often with a touch of irony: (p. 24):

When some day my brow attains the stars –
And I receive the adulation of my age
When several hundred towns vie over me
As over Homer

When, in Poland, there are more statues of me
Than mushrooms after rain
And in each city is raised the cry,
‘I gave you forth, o bard!’

Let those who come after
Not speculate on the ‘Tuwim affair’,
For I myself declare: my town is Łódź
It is my childhood home.

Let other poets sing the praises
Of Ganges, Sorrento, Crimea.
Give me Łódź. Her dirt and smoke
Are happiness and joy to me.38

During the war, when he was living in New York, he wrote to the Polish-Jewish writer Stanisław Wygodzki, explaining ‘Do you know what New York is?’ he said later to Stanisław Wygodzki, ‘Łódź, but ill with elephantiasis.’39

Jewish themes were a central part of his oeuvre. He was very conscious of his double identity as a Pole and Jew. This he expressed in a number of his early poems. In ‘Under the Impetus of the Ages’, he wrote:

There flows in me semitic blood
Hot blood, passionate blood
From somewhere beyond the Nile I draw my heritage
From the tropics I am!
Perhaps my ancestor, the father of Jews,
A Nubian dancer took to bed
And by the mysterious glow of the stars
Found desirous frenzy in his arms!
From the tropics I am,
Where the pallor of the sun bakes the sands
And now, when ages have passed, my song resounds:

38 From Jarmark rymu: zbiór satyr, parodii i humerosek (Warsaw 1934), 110.
Aj, lado-lado-luli-lel!

Oh Aria! how I love you!
Oh sun-Poland! My land!
The eternal mighty giant, time, has brought me,
From the desert, where the lascivious toil
Of supple tigresses blazes the blood
To You, Poland... And into your myth
I weave marvelous Slavic song:
Aj, lado-lado-luli-did!
Although I draw my birthright from beyond the Nile
The hop of Slavs froths in me
And through it I sing the People of the Piasts
Aj, lado-lado-luli-lel

He described his dilemma in a somewhat ironic fashion in ‘Tragedy’

My greatest tragedy—is that I am a Jew,
And have come to love the Aryans’ Christian soul!
That at times by some inner gesture something bursts
And recalls the ancient heritage of the Race

That at times with a sudden, primal reflex something
Rebels in my blood, wildly, unconsciously
And semitic blood battles with an other Spirit,
In the gales of future ages and in the enormity of thought!

And then I am proud—I, an aristocrat,
Son of the oldest people—of the embryo of messianism!
And I am shamed, that I am the blood brother
of a vile, enslaved nation of cowards with no home!

He was well aware of the provocative nature of his situation. In ‘A Song about a
Beating’, which he wrote in 1914 but only published in 1945 and which he omitted from
his Collected Works, he wrote:

Poles, Russians are beating
Yes, yes, sunny Slavs
They also want to beat ME!
And what do you think, sir?
A beating is a beating
Ha, ha, ha! For my derangement
That I wanted to dream my deepest
Love through Poland.
They will beat me – and very thoroughly!
He believed that antisemitism was one of the many ridiculous superstitions of the petit-bourgeoisie which could be destroyed by mockery. This in his poem ‘The Anonymous Power’ he provided a grotesque interpretation of the antisemitic view of the world:

Already large stores of gold have been accumulated in synagogue basements. 
Black smugglers have brought ammunition
Berlin bankers are conferring in secret
A hidden telephone rings in a Warsaw temple

In London, in the great lodge, all is already decided
The masons place seven seals on the decree.
Yellow candles shed light on a blood-spattered Talmud
Everything is wrapped up in canvas and the secret is sworn

And suddenly the jews in the Kremlin receive a telegram
The lines crackle! The editorial offices boil!
The Paris Rothschild rubs his hands with pleasure
Shares are bought in Amsterdam and Rome.

A huge dragon flies in the heavens
At night it is seen by the boldest aviators
It flaps its wings darkly over the cities and spreads panic
As a signal, a rocket is fired from over the Prussian border

…And in our small towns, on a stiflingly hot holiday
Whispered rumours come forth from halls in which people are gasping for breath
‘A Kike with peyes stole into a Church
And has butchered a young girl in a brick yard to make matzah’.\(^\text{40}\)

At the same time, he attacked what he described as the ‘materialism’ and ‘philistinism’ of the Jewish bourgeoisie. His poems on this topic, although intended ironically, have a hollow ring today after the Holocaust. Thus in ‘Bank’ he wrote:

Like black hairy balls
Sruleks roll around the bank

They jump, jump onto the counters
One Srulek bargains with another

One Srulek submits to another
A Srulek runs to the cash box

He counts with trembling fingers

\(^\text{40}\) From *Jarmark rymu*, 54
And then runs away from the other Sruleks

In armchairs far from the cash box
Sit the corpulent big Sruls

A Srulek with a fawning smile
Bows to the fat Sruls

And in the depths – in a quiet place – great like a king
Ponders
alone
the head
Sru. 41

The same criticism could be levelled against his poem ‘Jews’:

Dark, cunning, bearded
With demented eyes
In which there is an eternal fear,
In which is the inheritance of centuries
People
Who do not know what a fatherland is
Because they have lived everywhere
Tragic, nervous people
Who have grown pale.

The constantly jabber among themselves
Waving their long hands
They tell each other alarming things
And smile cunningly
They have long sat down in secret
Over millions of dark crooked letters
These sick demented people
The Chosen Race of humanity
God’s anointed.

They stroke their damp beards
And discuss and discuss…
- One takes another aside
Others call someone to a corner
They tremble… their eyes are full of fear
They look about to make sure
That no-one is listening…

The centuries have engraved on their faces

41 From Jarmark rymu, 53
The painful lines of suffering
They bear in their souls the memory
Of the walls of Jerusalem
Of some dark funeral
Of cries in the cemetery

…Some Satanic Mass
Some hidden crime
(…Under the windows… on Friday… Passersby…
Goyim…are looking in the window….Quiet! Shh..!). \textsuperscript{42}

Yet his sense of identification with the Jews was strong. In 1924 he wrote:

With me the Jewish question lies in my blood, it is a fundamental element in my psyche. It is like a powerful wedge cutting into my view of the world, affecting my deepest personal experiences…For me the ‘Jewish problem’ is a tragedy, in which I myself am one of the anonymous actors. What will be the end of this tragedy and when it will occur, I cannot at present predict’. \textsuperscript{43}

He expressed his Jewish feelings even more clearly in his poem, ‘Jewboy’ (Żydek).

He sings in the courtyard, clad in rags
A small, poor chap, a crazed Jew.

People drive him away, God has muddled his wits
Ages and exile have confused his tongue

He wails and he dances, weeps and laments
That he is lost, is dependent on alms.

The gent on the first floor looks down on the madman.
Look my poor brother at your sad brother.

How did we come to this? How did we lose ourselves
In this vast world, strange and hostile to us?

You on the first floor, your unhinged brother
With his burning head dances through the world

The first floor gent fancies himself a poet
He wraps up his heart, like a coin, in paper

And throws it out from the window, so that it will break
And be trampled and cease to be

\textsuperscript{42} From: \textit{Lying in Wait for God} (Warsaw, 1918); Dzieła, Volume 1, 85.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 105-6
And we will both go on our way
A path sad and crazed
And we will never find peace or rest
Singing Jews, lost Jews.

Tuwim was devoted to children (he had none of his own) and wrote fine children’s poetry, for which he is best known today. In one poem he describes a train leaving on a journey:

A locomotive stands at the station,
Heavy, enormous, drips perspiration:
Greasy oil.

She stands, gasping, panting and blowing,
The heat from her boiling belly glowing:
BANG how hot it is!
CLANG how hot it is!
PUFF how hot it is!
HUFF how hot it is!
She barely puffs and holds her soul,
But the stoker still fills her with coal;
They hitched to her railroad cars,
Big and heavy, of iron bars,
And lots of people here and farther,
In one stand horses—cows in another;
Fat men only sit in the third;
They eat thick sausage without a word.
The fourth one carries a load of bananas,
In the fifth there stand six grand pianos.
In the sixth a cannon, of heavy steel,
An iron beam beneath each wheel.
In the seventh oaken tables, a chest and chair,
An elephant in the eighth, giraffes, a bear.
The ninth has only fattened pigs,
In the tenth are parcels, boxes and rigs,
And forty cars are in the train,
I cannot tell what else they contain.
But even though a thousand athletes came,
Each having had a thousands steaks on the road,
And each engaged his mighty frame,
They could not budge the heavy load.

---

44 From; Words in the Blood (Warsaw, 1926); Dzieła, Volume 1, 283.
Then—a hiss!
Then—a whizz!
The steam—bang!
The wheels—clang!
At first she’s slow
    like a turtle,
    and fettered,
She moves on the rails
    with a sluggish
    clatter.
She tugs at the cars and pulling with strain,
She’s turning and turning the wheels of the train.
She gathers some speed and she goes now much faster,
She echoes, she rattles, and speed is her master.
On the rails, on the rails, on the bridge she sped;
Through tunnels and mountains and woods she must climb.
She hurries and hurries to get there on time.
She clatters and raps click—clickety—clickety,
Clickety—clickety—clickety—clickety.
Smoothly so, slightly so, does she now roll,
As if she were merely a tiniest ball.
It’s not an exhausted and panting machine
But rather a plaything, a toy made of tin.

And where is she speeding so, why such a rush?
And who is it pushing and why all this rush?
Why does she hurtle and boom, bang, bang!?!?
It’s steam that’s hot, that has set her to clang,
The steam from the boiler to piston is piped,
And pistons then activate wheels on two sides,
They run and they push and they keep the train rolling,
The steam is still pumping the pistons, not stalling
And wheels are a-clatter, and rapping click-clickety,
Clickety-clack, click, clickety-clickety

Tuwim was bitterly attacked by Polish cultural conservatives and antisemites, who denounced him for ‘debasing’ the Polish language and for his ‘semitic’ sensuality. Thus Józef Mackiewicz, the Vilna journalist, asserted bluntly that Tuwim was not a Polish poet, while the Kraków writer and critic Karol Hubert Rostworowski described him as a ‘Jewish poet writing in Polish’. The right-wing journalist Adolf Nowaczyński referred to him as ‘Jozue’ Tuwim. When a Yiddish translation of a Tuwim poem appeared, Gazeta Literacka crowed that Tuwim had finally decided to write in Yiddish. The right-wing literary weekly Prosto z mostu abounded in headlines like ‘Tuwim and Słonimski are one hundred percent Jews’, ‘A new centre of Masonry has been established
in Warsaw’, ‘The Literary Ghetto’ and ‘Jewish Poetry in the Polish Language’. He glorified in the attacks on him, seeing himself as the scourge of the nationalist right. As he put it in one of his poems:

    History gave a crash – and there jumped out
    From his alchemist’s retort
    Rubbing his eyes in astonishment
    The poet – very political.

He turned his scorn on his detractors in a series of deadly ripostes. This is one of his responses to the nationalist critic Stanisław Pieńkowski:

    Spitting poison and froth from his mouth
    He spits, snorts and splutters
    And writes that I am a butcher
    A yid and bolshevik
    Jewboy, bacillus
    A baboon and a Skamandrite
    That I sell out the Fatherland
    That I deform the Polish language
    That I provoke and profane
    And the Devil knows what else.

    And to think that from all
    The fine activity
    Of this gentleman - from the spittle
    Wheezing, screaming, scribbling,
    Spewing, kicking and wailing
    On which he has lost half his life
    From the books and articles
    From the words, sentences and titles
    From the reviews, from the sneering paragraphs
    In a word from that whole
    Journalistic mess
    Will remain...one poem
    And that will be - mine, not his.
    Indeed this very poem...O stern revenge
    Inspired by a Jewish God.
    Here is a phrase, a few words with which I toy
    To immortalize my enemy.  

45 For these and other attacks on Tuwim, see J. Ratajeczyk, Julian Tuwim, Poznań, 1995, 102-3.
46 From Jarmark rymu, 68.
He could also be devastating in his attacks on conventional pieties. His poem ‘Protest’, written shortly after the May coup reads:

About this Poland, about our Fatherland
Most painfully afflicted
(O Thou Merciful God,
What will happen, O Our Lady?)
Seeing her appallingy shamed,
Alarmed about her fate
Thinking of those who suffered for her in the tajga
Those exiled in Siberia and in the heavens;
And those Bards, those Prophets
Who sang of her in their poems,
And those children who in Września
And that Drzymała, and so on;
And that Silesia, and our own access
And because miasma are constantly
Poisoning us from the East.
And because the Spirit of the Nation is dying;
And because of the passivity, and especially
Because of the revolutionary elements
Who are thoroughly depraved,
Because of the wearing of low-cut dresses;
Because respect for order is dying
And not words but action is needed
(O Thou Merciful God!
Look down, Kościuszko on us from Heaven!)
And the destructive party spirit
And these personal governments
And the lack of respect
Also in relation to the Pastoral Letter;
Moreover that there is blasphemy
And those who perpetrate it are undiscovered
That the Sanacja runs wild,
A disgrace – bandits.
- Because of all these conditions and reasons
(What will happen, O Our Lady!)
All we who append our signatures
Solemnly protest:
[There follows a grotesque list of names and places full of puns which defy translation]47

47 Ładwinowicz z Czerbichowa,
Kłyś z Podwodzisk, Szurguń z Wierpska,
Z Białych Mogil Hacelkowa
I z Czerwiny Kwasisierska.
The right was also shocked by his open exaltation of physicality and sexuality. Writing about the poem ‘Spring’, *Myśl Narodowa* asserted that far from condemning debauchery, it extolled it and, in addition, praised those things which ‘Henryk Sienkiewicz condemned in literature as rutting and bestialization’. Another right-wing weekly *Gontec* described the poem as made up of ‘the sewage of pornographic and debauched experiences, full of depictions of licentiousness and sadism’. Father Marian Pirożyński drew attention to the Jewish character of this provocation:

> Julian Tuwim who has been widely touted as the poet who will revitalise [Polish] poetry…has placed himself on a footing of equality with the Lord God. In this there is no lack of racial insolence. It is no accident that this sort of poet also involves himself with Satanism.\(^{48}\)

The aesthetic of the Skamander was not particularly radical and the group was regarded by the exponents of modern poetry in Poland as excessively conservative. But what marked it above all was its desire to appeal to a wider audience, ‘to bring poetry to the street’. Tuwim in particular wrote extensively for the cabaret and his desire to bridge the gap between high and popular culture was deeply suspect to the Right, brought up on the concept of the poet as Prophet (*Wieszcz*) expounding weighty truths to the Nation.

Finally the Right saw him as a blasphemer. They were incensed by his attempt to appropriate Jesus and by his use of religious and Christian language in a new and deliberately shocking way as in first section of his poem ‘The Word and the Flesh’:

> And the Word was made flesh
> And it has dwelt among us,
> I feed the starving body
> With words as if they were fruit...

In addition, as Artur Sandauer has argued, he seems to have responded to his ‘demonization’ by his opponents by ‘self-demonization’.\(^{49}\) This is probably also the origin of his fascination with the devil, who appears in many of his poems, as was noted by Father Pirożyński. The obsession was strengthened by the large strawberry mark he

---

\(^{48}\) Ratajczyk, 35

had on his face, which contributed to his sense of being an outsider and which he sometimes referred to as a consequence of an encounter with the Devil.

Tuwim seemed to the right to embody everything they hated about the intellectual culture of the big city. In opposition to the literary aesthetic of the Skamander group and also of the Modernists in Poland, their literary ideologues called for an art which would stress national, Catholic and rural values and would sustain group solidarity. They admired in an uncritical way the great Polish romantic poets, whose work was effectively bowdlerized by them. Among more recent writers, they favoured Sienkiewicz and to a lesser extent Reymont. They admired above all the poetry of Jan Kasprowicz, a metaphysical and nature poet of peasant origins, whose later work had a strongly Catholic character.

Tuwim’s mood darkened in the 1930s with Nazism and Stalinism on Poland’s borders and intensifying antisemitism in Poland. He identified strongly with the urban ordinary man, yet in Poland this very petty-bourgeois element for whom he wished to produce was strongly affected by antisemitism. ‘I am going down, it is very difficult, it is awful for me in this country’, he wrote in the 1930s. On another occasion he wrote, ‘It is difficult to be a stepson with a stepmother.’

He responded by writing Bal w Operze (A Ball at the Opera), one of the most remarkable of the apocalyptic visions which were produced in the doom-laden years prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, which, because of its strongly anti-government and possibly blasphemous character, could not be published in full until after the war. ‘A Ball at the Opera’ is a savage description of a corrupt fascist dictatorship written by an individual in despair. Unlike some other Polish ‘catastrophist’ writers of the 1930s, such as Konstanty Ildefons Galczyński and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Tuwim clearly situates this fascist dystopia in Poland.

When Tuwim began to write ‘A Ball at the Opera’ the optimism which had characterized the 1920s had long been dissipated. Hitler had come to power in Germany, Stalin ruled in the Soviet Union. The death of Piłsudski had unleashed a struggle for power within the government camp (the Sanacja) in which one of the participating groups hoped to establish its power by coming to terms with the nationalist right by adopting nationalist, corporatist and antisemitic policies. The establishment by Adam Koc in 1936 of the Camp of National Unity (Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego – OZON) marked an important stage in this process. According to Koc’s chief of staff, Colonel Jan Kowalewski, Jews, even those who had fought in the Polish struggle for independence could not be members of the organization any more than ‘Poles can belong to a Zionist organization.’ The party became still more explicit in the last year before the war; in December, General Stanisław Skwarczyński, who had succeeded Koc as head of OZON and 116 of his parliamentary colleagues addressed a question to the Prime Minister on the Jewish question in which they stressed that they regarded as a necessity ‘the radical reduction of the number of Jews in Poland by means of massive emigration.’

---

50 Quoted in Ratajczyk, 95.
51 Quoted in Ratajczyk, 96.
52 Gazeta Polska, 22 April 1937.
53 Ibid., 22 December 1938.
The worsening political climate was particularly painfully felt by Tuwim. In the first place, he was extraordinarily sensitive to the surrounding atmosphere. Miłosz has written of him; ‘One might almost say that he was like someone without a skin, protected by nothing from impulses from without, whether feelings, images or ideas.’ In addition, as someone who considered himself both Polish and Jewish the pervasive climate of antisemitism, stimulated as it was by Hitler’s coming the power in Germany, the persistence of the depression and the willingness of a section of the government camp to adopt an antisemitic platfrom was extremely painful to experience. To quote Miłosz again:

Tuwim, in love with Polish literature, felt himself Polish through-and-through. But he also felt himself Jewish through-and-through. In the first decade of the Second Republic, it might have seemed that there was in Poland place for polonized Jews and for Poles of Jewish origin. In the second decade, the voices of the majority of the press and those of the mass of Poles denied them this place. And this was the dilemma faced by all those Jews who felt themselves to be Poles. It was in a particularly acutely felt by Tuwim, who idolized the Polish language and made it the centre and goal of his life and was now rejected by those whom he wished to serve. His sensitivity, that of a man without a skin, exposed him to sharp pain every time he opened a morning newspaper.

The controversial character of the poem is also reflected in its publication history. It was written in the summer of 1936, but because of its strongly anti-government and possibly blasphemous character could not then be published in full. Some of its less provocative sections did appear before the war (most of section I and all of section III in the Christmas number of Robotnik and Naprzód, the whole of section VI in Skamander nos. 87-9, 1937 and the first half of section VIII in the 1938 yearbook of Dziennik Ludowy.) Tuwim’s copy of the manuscript was destroyed along with almost his entire archive in Warsaw during the Uprising of 1944, but a copy of the poem was located by him after his return to Warsaw in June 1946. He was eager to publish the poem and persuaded the Polish-Jewish painter Bronisław Linke, who had furnished a drawing to illustrate the section printed in Dziennik Ludowy, to provide illustrations, writing to him on 4 July 1946, ‘I enclose a copy of “The Ball at the Opera” – and very strongly appeal to you to begin work if you still are willing to agree to my request’. The whole work was published in the humorous weekly Szpilki in five successive numbers (nos. 30-34, starting on 23 July 1946. Apart from some stylistic corrections the published version differed in two respects from the pre-war version. The first section included three fragments which Tuwim later excluded, but which do not add anything special to the poem and, much more significantly the prologue and epilogue from The Revelation of Saint John the Divine were excluded.

---

54 Julian Tuwim, Bal w Operze, Lekcja Literatury z Czeslaw Miloszem, 6
55 Ibid., 9-10
56 Tuwim, Bal w Operze, Warsaw, 1982, Editorial note, 44
The publication in Szpilki was intended to be followed by the appearance of the poem in book form, but this proved impossible. Tuwim explained the situation in a letter to his sister in Washington on 18 September 1946:

‘The Ball at the Opera’ was also to appear but the publishing house Czytelnik took fright because of the scandal (‘pornography and blasphemy’) created by Gazeta Ludowa and for the moment they have postponed the publication of this little poem. The scandal was typical: base, witch-hunting, consciously and cynically without foundation. ‘It was held’ that to print plenis litteris ‘K…mać’ (whoreson) constitutes…pornography, and that to put this ‘pornography’ side-by-side with a quotation from the Holy Scriptures constitutes… blasphemy. The reactionary scoundrels attempted to make of this a great campaign against me, but their efforts were frustrated by the censorship, which greatly softened the article in Gazeta Ludowa and quite simply did not allow the publication of some others. Quite right…The commotion around ‘The Ball at the Opera’ (‘The Ball at the Ope-pera’ as Borejsza pronounces it) has now gone quiet. I thought that some of my writer colleagues would call and would speak out in my defence, but they ‘preferred not to’, because it was in some degree ‘inconvenient’. 58

With this letter to his sister, Tuwim enclosed the article from Gazeta Ludowa (by Stanisław Dzikowski), which also contained an attack on Galczyński, who had made his peace with the communists. There were indeed a number of articles attacking the publication of the poem, primarily in the Catholic press. Tuwim also preserved in his archive the leading article prepared by Witold Bieńkowski for Dziś i Jutro of 1 September 1946 entitled ‘Po prostu – świństwo (Quite simply – swinishness) which the censorship did not allow to be printed.

The poem was printed twice in Tuwim’s life first in the volume Pióro i piórkiem (1951) and then in Nowy wybór wierszy (1953), on both occasions without the preface from Revelation or section XII. It was also reproduced in this form in Tuwim’s collected works. Only in 1982 was Czytelnik able to publish, in small edition, a complete version of the poem, with the nine illustrations prepared by Linke. This edition was reprinted in 1991 and in 1999, the poem was also published, with an introduction by Czesław Miłosz, by Wydawnictwo Literackie of Kraków.

The poem is an apocalyptic vision where Tuwim’s horror of a corrupt society’s filthy doings fuses with a foreboding of the destruction of that society. As has already been mentioned, the poem starts and ends with a series of quotations from the Revelation of Saint John and it is, in fact, a description of the end of the world. Tuwim uses for these quotations the Protestant translation of the Bible produced in 1632 (the so-called Biblia Gdańska) rather than the late sixteenth century Catholic translation of the Bible of Jan Wujek. The quotations at the beginning of the poem read (using the King James version):

57 At this time, this was headed by Jerzy Borejsza, himself a communist of Jewish background, who was the person responsible for controlling the press and the regime’s propaganda.
58 Ibid., 46.
And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him (12, verse 9)

Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgement of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness; and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy…And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornications…And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus; and when I saw her I wondered with great admiration…(17, verses 1-6)

And after these things I heard a loud voice of much people in heaven saying, Alleluia; Salvation and glory and honour and power unto the Lord our God; For true and righteous are his judgements; for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. (19, verses 1-2)

The poem ends with the penultimate verse of the Revelation (22, verse 20). In Tuwim’s Polish version, the verse is given (all in capitals) as:

TAK MÓWI TEN, KTÓRY ŚWIADECTWO DAJE O TYCH RZECZACH:
ZAISTE, PRZYDĘ RYCHŁO, AMEN
I OWSZEM, PRZYDŹ, PANIE JESUSIE

This is rendered by the King James version as ‘He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus’ and in the Revised standard version as ‘He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.”’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.’

The use of ‘owszem’ in the translation, which does not seem to be justified by the original Greek and which may be what led Tuwim to use the Gdańsk version rather than that of Wujek, modifies the meaning of the verse in complex and ambiguous ways which are central to the meaning of the poem and which will be discussed later.

As its title implies, the poem is a description of a ball held in honour of the fascist dictator Pantokrator (Ruler of All) at the Opera (Linke’s illustration of the first section shows the Warsaw Opera House, soon to be destroyed by the Nazis). The motif of the ball echoes a number of central pieces in world and Polish literature, most notably the Feast of Belshazzar, as described in the biblical Book of Daniel and by Heinrich Heine, one of Tuwim’s literary idols, the Ball at the Senator’s in Adam Mickiewicz’s Dziady and the apocalyptic poem Bal u Salomona (The Ball at Solomon’s), written in 1931 by the right-wing poet Galczyński, who was also a friend of Tuwim’s. (After viciously attacking Tuwim in the antisemitic literary weekly Prosto z mostu, Galczyński would drunkenly seek his friend’s forgiveness). The opening section is a brilliant tour de force and draws on Tuwim’s cabaret experience.
Today’s the Grand Opera Ball.
The omnipotent Pantokrator
Gave his supreme protectorate;
All the tarts wash their panties
And buy their clothes on credit,
Throngs and traffic jams in the street,
Soldiers muster for the parade,
Pancer cavalry helmets glow,
Polished officer boots glisten,
Horses foam and neigh,
Cars roar, crowds surge.
In the corps de garde troops like ants,
State of readiness everywhere,
Impatient wines sparkle,
At the hairdressers’ people faint
Waiting for their turn.
Tarts’ calves tremble sweetly.

The unprincipled pursuit of pleasure and the political corruption on earth is paralleled by the disruption of order in the heavenly spheres. The creatures of the Zodiac have been replaced by monkeys, symbols of disorder and chaos, unpredictable and sensual animals without discernment or intelligence.

From their towers the astronomers,
Their eyes upon the starry expanse,
Saw a miracle in their telescopes:
Apes ran across the firmament!
In the zodiacal merry-go-round
Reigns apocalyptic turmoil.
At the stands of earlier beasts
Twelve ugly apes took their seats,
And began to plant ape misrule
Amidst the planetary voids.
The wicked monkeys spun the wheel
Of heavens into a mad dance;
They leap, they run about and prance as
Behind the metal bars of their cage
They display the plump reddish bottoms to
The earth. No more celestial portents!
The ape now orbits in the zodiac!
And like a weighty nightmare he now
Hangs over this awesome starry night,
Orders the constellations to dance
When the devils take the monkeys,
The devils take, the devils shall take!
The last line, which recurs a number of times in the poem, is a conscious imitation of Mickiewicz’s account in *Dziady* of the ball organized by the Senator (Nikolai Novosilostov, the key figure in the administration of the autonomous Kingdom of Poland in the 1820s), where the unwitting guests are also about to be consumed by the infernal powers.

Several features of the poem need to be emphasized. One is that Tuwim clearly sets his apocalyptic vision in Warsaw. As we have mentioned Tuwim had a rather naive attitude to politics. He never seems to have been attracted by communism, in spite of his love for Russian literature. Indeed, as he himself admitted in an interview with *Robotnik* in 1928, he sympathy with the common man could not even be described as socialist:

> I was born in Łódź, in that city of factory chimneys, where the misery of the conditions of the workers was most apparent. I know the worker and his life. I know how early he has to rise to go to exhausting work and how he returns home in the evening tired and worn-out. As a young boy, I witnessed the 1905 revolution in Łódź. To me, what is most important is the awareness of the injury to which people are subjected. …Pain, injury and human misery always arouse the most vigorous response from me. Whether I am writing about a poor clerk, a hunch back or an old maid, my point of departure is general human sympathy, without any clearly socialist concept. ⁵⁹

He was, however, strongly aware of the dangerous and aggressive character of German nationalism. In response to the German bombardment of Kalisz at the outset of the First World War, he wrote:

> The Teutonic Knight
> Proclaims the law of laws
> That Force is Right
> And Right is Force

His bitter resentment at the close links which Beck’s foreign policy had established with Nazi Germany is reflected in the description of the guests at the ball:

> Generals and Vikings
> Admirals and goerings
> German farmers, boyars
> Deterdings ⁶⁰
> Am!
> Ba!
> Sa!
> Dors!

(Generały i wikingi
Admirały i goeringi

⁵⁹ Quoted in Ratajczyk, 82.
⁶⁰ Henry Deterding, (1866-1939), founder of Royal Dutch Shell.
Yet at the same time, as someone who had supported Piłsudski’s coup and who had close personal ties with some of the Marshal’s closest associates, most notably Colonel Wieniawa Długoszowski and Bronisław Miediński, he had a very clear understanding of the enormous gap between the patriotic phraseology employed by the Marshal’s third rate acolytes, most notably Adam Koc and the others who created OZON and who probably wanted to introduce into Poland some variant of the right-radical dictatorships which sprouted like mushrooms in the Europe of the 1930s, and the everyday reality of Poland as a weak, largely agrarian and vulnerable country. As someone who had supported the May coup, he was further affronted by what he saw as the betrayal of the ideals of Piłsudski’s Legions. Certainly, Koc in his youth had held strongly left-wing views. In the event, the ‘night of the long knives’ planned by Koc and his confederates did not materialize (Poland has always been a country of half-measures), but for Tuwim, because of his personal links with the inner circle of Piłsudski-ites, the descent of the Sanacja after the Marshal’s death into what he saw as a de facto alliance with Hitler and an attempt to take over the fascist and antisemitic policies of the right-wing splinter-groups of the Endecja was a bitter blow.

Tuwim, in masterly fashion, sets the extravagant luxury of the Ball against the everyday life of the Polish capital, with its inhabitants struggling to make a poor living. This contrast culminates in at dawn, when, as the ball reaches its height, the scene moves to the outskirts of the city where peasant carts carrying fresh produce to town pass carts on their way to dispose of sewage in the country. These scenes highlight the tawdry nature of the slogans of Polish fascism:

- Carts bringing supplies
- Come from the villages
- Sanitary carts
- Go to the villages
- They pass at the turnpike
- At the barrier
- Like a wedding coach with a caravan
- Vegetables come to market
- Fertilizer goes to the fields
- And a new day begins for the Fatherland
- In which it can fulfil its designated mission
- And play its historical
- Role.

The violence at the heart of the society is set against the meaningless patriotic phrases which make up the ideology of Polish fascism, its ‘ideolo’ in Tuwim’s phrase:
Thinking deeply about their role
Journalists write quickly;
- ideolo – ideolo – ideolo-
And the dancers in the noisy hall
Still the devils take
  the devils take
  the devils take
And already people have awakened to work
In the abattoirs, they slaughter cattle
They load rifles
They clinch interests
The knock out the teeth of their enemies
The smash the skulls of their enemies
The nail to the cross
They impale on steel poles
The bring one grosz together with another
And print bank notes
Print, print –
Away with poverty! Away with poverty!
Abandon mediocrity! Take flight and soar
It is time to strike with deeds of steel!
Ideolo – ideolo –
By deed! With spirit! Faith! Will!
To arms! Destroy poverty!
All together to power
By deed! By deed! No more words!
By spirit! By spirit! Let them have it in the head
With clubs and with rifle
Sal
Vos!


Tuwim was a man of polarities. In his creative work he played on the antithesis of his Polish and Jewish identities. But there were also other polarities that were important to him. One was that between the Polish and Russian literary traditions. Tuwim, who had been educated in a Russian gymnasium in Łódź, was completely at home in Russian literature and admired particularly the poetry of Pushkin and Mayakovsky. Indeed, both Barańczak and Miłosz criticise him rather old-maidishly for introducing Russian forms of prosody (in particular the strong iambic stress) into his poetry. This was also the view of one of the principal members of the Skamander group. Jan Lechoń. After he broke with Tuwim during the Second World War when Tuwim criticized the rigid anti-communism and anti-Russian prejudice which pervaded the Polish emigration, he wrote maliciously:
Tuwim’s evolution is normal, but is that of a Russian writer – from symbolism to romanticism, but in their Russian form… Tuwim praises Mickiewicz, loves the Polish countryside – but at heart Mickiewicz is alien to him, for he is a follower and pupil of Pushkin.61

One polarity which is particularly important in ‘The Ball at the Opera’ is that between Tuwim’s delight in the senses and his hatred of the material world. This disgust with the physical world comes out very clearly in ‘The Ball at the Opera’, in the quotations from the Revelation of Saint John and in the frenzied descriptions of eating, drinking and fornicating with which the poem is filled. The eating and drinking at the ball is depicted in grossly animal terms.

At the buffet, the guests feed as at a trough,  
They snort, they smack their lips…

(Przy bufecie - żłopanina  
Parskanina, mlaskanina…)

This animal yielding to physical appetite, is accompanied by sexual license of all sorts. Tuwim’s description of this sexual depravity which is filled with disgust, is what led to the poem being attacked as pornographic.

In the local little hotels  
The whole night is given over to savage work  
A sexual contredanse  
For a moment, a quarter of an hour.

Much of the writing, in harmony with the Revelation with its references to the ‘Whore of Babylon’ is deeply misogynistic, from phrases like ‘All the tarts wash their panties’ and ‘Tarts’ calves tremble sweetly’ to the several times repeated (and almost untranslatable);

I już - wziąć, i już udami,  
I już - da mi, da mi, da mi.

(And quickly – grasp and quickly, by the thighs,  
And quickly – he’ll give me, give me, give me.

The one specific reference to the Devil is to ‘Satanella’, who has established herself in the heavens with the Apes of the Zodiac.

And in this scene, Satanella  
Seizes the stars in her tambourine  
Tarantella, tarantella  
A streamer of meteorites

61 Ratajczyk, 86.
Satanella – a mill of mercury
Satanella circles the heavens
A nebulous vertical stain,
Satanella – a strip of light
All covered in silver lame
A centrifuge of swift loins.

At the root of the political and social crisis is the pursuit of money. This was a motif which had earlier occurred in Tuwim’s work, as in his poem *Do prostego człowieka* (To the common man). In the Ball it takes on a new form. The whole of section VIII is given over to a savage description of the circulation of money, which is described as ‘foaming’, ‘worm-like’, ‘rat-like’, ‘leprous’ and ‘scab-covered’. It culminates in an evocation of the physical embodiment of money as an evil monster:

The evil gold Leviathan twists
And twisting turns into silver rats
Contracts into coins of fleas and lice
And again the lice grow into rats
Pennies and lice become silver in pockets
And again crawl out as grey rats
In front of us, behind us they run over the world
And rustle and scratch like dry paper
And again dissolve into a gold monster
Which spreads itself though villages and towns
Spreads itself rapidly, dissolves and grows
And circulates, increasing by the million, from devil to devil
From devil to devil, by eager breeding
And behind it, its leprous escort
Leaps and frolics, a scab-covered convoy.

All of these themes are brought together in the overwhelming and brilliant climax of the last section of the poem (section XII), where ‘the great dragon… that old serpent’ appears with the Whore of Babylon on its back.

Look! Look! What a sensation!
Bravo the management! What an attraction!
A caterpillar the size of a hippopotamus
A Worm of pre-flood dimensions,
A swollen Lizard crawls into the hall
A reptile of molten gold, the great, great grandfather of all money:
Shedding rats and lice and fleas in fine fashion,
The Prince of the Carnival enters the hall!
Secret policemen behind, secret policemen in front
With a smacking of its lips, with a flopping motion, winding from side to side
The Monster moves, and crawls – and on it astraddle
Naked, in stockings, with a top hat aslant
With purple nails
With painted dugs
With an emerald monocle in her eye
With a neon advertisement as she advances
Bawling out a hit song:
   ‘To whom do I give it today?’
   ‘To whom do I give it today?’
   ‘To whom do I give it today?’
The beaming Mother of all Whores
Kicks up her legs over the thick flood of money
And suddenly – in a seething press
Throws herself into the hall, with a cry and a shriek
Yellow foam spouts from her mouth
She kicks, pulls, throws the chairs
Tramples, bites with her terrible fangs
Knives flash, clubs smash
They roll, splash, choke and are crushed
As on the bloodied slippery parquet
Death and stench take their place
While the monster tears with its claws
Dripping blood
Seething with the rats and lice of money
And chews and gobbles up the pieces which have been torn apart,
Until it, the Great Abdomen roars with laughter
And writhes and continues to grow fat
And nonchalantly swishes its tail
The greatest attraction of the Ball!
And continues to sing ‘To whom do I give it today?’
   ‘To whom do I give it today?’
   ‘To whom do I give it today?’
The promenading Mother of all Whores
   The Mother of all Having
   The Mother of all Taking!
‘What a Ball, what a Ball! Bravo Maestro!
The Fat One is now on his own!
O, IDEOL! O, IDEAL!
What a small sweet IDEOLO!’

And while the fizz of the champagne hit the ceiling
And the metallic flourish of the band continued
The secret policeman winking to the secret policeman
Did not see or perceive from the large chandelier
How in a lighting flash
A photo-flash, a blaze of light
All are taken by all the devils
taken by all the devils
So that the apes, overtaken by laughter, fell
From the heavenly carousel.

This nightmarish vision is followed by the penultimate verse of *Revelation*, with which the poem concludes. The version quoted by Tuwim diverges from the original Greek and is highly ambiguous. I would suggest that the meaning intended by Tuwim should be rendered in English is as follows:

Thus says He who has given testimony of these things:
Indeed, I will come quickly. Amen!
And if you *do* indeed have the power to bring an end to these abominations, come Lord Jesus!

Explicitly Jewish motifs seem almost completely absent from the poem. One exception might he the quotations from *Revelation*. These should be seen as part of the attempt by some Jews in the modern period to appropriate Jesus and his early followers. They have however a more complex character, since the apocalyptic character of *Revelation* is very similar to the apocalyptic books of the Hebrew Bible, in particular the Book of Daniel and the writings of the exilic prophet Ezekiel, which clearly struck a deep chord with Tuwim. One might also speculate that the belief that Jesus was a well-meaning and noble but ultimately unsuccessful prophet, whose claim that his revelation would lead to universal brotherhood had clearly failed has a long history in Jewish understandings of both Jesus and Christianity. It may also be that Tuwim derived the concept of a powerless and absent God from another Polish-Jewish writer whom he greatly admired, Bolesław Leśmian and probably owes something to Leśmian’s Jewish roots. The use of the term ‘Owszem’ also echoes the notorious statement by the Polish Prime Minister Felicjan Sławoj Śratchkowski in parliament in 1936. After a series of violent anti-Jewish incidents in June 1936 he asserted ‘My government considers that nobody in Poland should be injured. An honest host does not allow anybody to be harmed in his house. An economic struggle? That’s different (*Owszem*).”

‘The Ball at the Opera’ is a remarkable poem. Jadwiga Sawicka has written of it that it ‘undoubtedly synthesizes the most important achievements of Tuwim, has uncommon skill in versification, the many voices he is able to employ, his astonishing ability to record ‘the language of others’, his satirical exploitation of the vocabulary of popular culture and speech’. In her view, written perhaps in the slightly coded language necessary in the early 1970s, ‘The ‘Ball’ creates its own closed vocabulary, which exposes in a short space all the evils typical of the modern world: power (the army), ideology (the press), sex and money. Over the whole image of the ball watches the bored, yawning secret policeman, above the secret policeman there is only the circle of the heavens.” Unquestionably the poem is one of the great artistic achievements of what Auden has referred to as the ‘low and dirty decade’ of the 1930s.

---

62 Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne Sejm Rzeczypospolitej, 4 June 1936, col. 7.
'The Ball at the Opera' was the last significant poem which Tuwim wrote before the outbreak of the war. In September 1939, he made his way with his wife through Romania and France and from there, after the fall of France, via Portugal to Brazil and ultimately to the United States, where he spent the bulk of the war. After his arrival in Brazil in August 1940, Tuwim’s poetic inspiration returned, in spite of his sense of guilt at being in such an idyllic spot at such a tragic time. In response to a request from the editor of Wiadomości Literackie which had re-established itself in exile in London to write about his childhood memories, he began a long narrative poem entitled Kwiaty Polskie (Polish Flowers). He wrote to his sister explaining the end of his creative block:

How do I explain, dear Irena, that in Poland in the past five years I was able to write practically nothing whereas here I have been writing non-stop. I think that 1) the atmosphere in Poland was so unbearable that it seeped into my subconscious and blocked my ‘poetic orifices’ 2) that here – I feel compelled to rebuild in some measure that unbearable, but, above all, most beloved Poland.  

In exile he sought to evoke his beloved but remote Poland in his long poem Kwiaty polskie (Polish Flowers). He described his goal as follows:

My song born in defeat and anguish,
Huge serpent reared beyond the seas,
You rose from flowers, motley, twisted,
You will turn into flowers again.

Calling up images from the past, he wrote:

And then –
Then divide all this and me by the
Atlantic of yearning. Afterwards
Multiply by this Atlantic and
The yearning a hundred times! A thousand!
No, a thousand-and-one! There will be
Folktales of Scheherazade which once
Sustained our daily life, which we breathed,
Unaware that every moment we
Breathed the air of myths! That Łódź
Is legendary Baghdad city
Or Manchester-like La-Mancha,
Tomaszów, oh, ageless Toboso,
That Warsaw is heroic Troy, and
Jerusalem before whose walls two
Peoples now lament, and sing a
Gloomy song of one misfortune...
Who then could know that Kraków would turn
Into a distant, holy Mecca,

64 Ratajczyk, 115.
Mount Giewont—turned the Seventh Mountain,
And Vistula—the Seventh River?
My country is my home. 65 Fatherland
Is my home. My lot was to receive
A Polish home. This—is fatherland,
And other countries are hotels.
My home. Apartment. Room. A desk,
In it (remember?) that drawer
Where over the years one put away
Old wallets no longer in use,
Dated receipts and calling cards, the
Remains of a bulb, quarter pencils
The drawer contains a cuff link, pipe,
Screw, an empty Syndeticone tube,
Some tweezer or an eye dropper,
And aged, tattered money purse,
Gambling dice, a little cork of glass,
A cancelled railway ticket stub,
A little chamois case, a dried IOU
Tiny brush, a small medallion,
Sealing wax, a lizard letter weight
Without its tail, expired pass;
A brown fountain pen engraved in white
‘Zakopane,’ a crank for something,
A key to something—both items good
For nothing. In short, you know this drawer
When you examine its inside well,
You’ll find there your little fossilized
Heart which you lost amidst old rubbish
Hence don’t throw out a thing, don’t clear...
Useful or not—leave it alone.
Spare the rubbish when you arrange
Such drawers and nooks, for you have shared
A bit of your life with every thing.
You last,—not knowing, with all this junk...
This drawer is like your fatherland:
You can throw out nothing. You cannot
Ransack the storehouse of affection
And remove ‘the needless,’ ‘the unused.’
Let it remain with you. You say this
Is but superstition? Yes, indeed
The learned men call it—a myth
And from this daily mythology
Of sudden, back-street apparitions,

65 Tuwim uses the original English here.
Dazzlements, from color, line and tune
A moment will become fatherland.
It will appear indubitable,
So exclusive, not to be faked,
That you will know it from the echo,
Will sense it from its very shadow:
This is it—this is your own, alive.

In a section of the first part of the poem, he addresses a former fascist whom he encounters in Rio and who has now become a democrat, even conceding that ‘Jews are also human’, launching into a savage denunciation of the Poland of the late 1930s, which makes explicit all that is implied between the lines in ‘The Ball at the Opera’:

Do you remember…but a few short years ago
When the Iron Wolf66 disintegrated
Into hundreds of little dogs of the hitler breed
When like leprosy or black smallpox
Poland was covered by savage student corporations
Of stormtroopers, readers of Der Stürmer, ‘intellectuals’
When Generals from drinking too much coffee
Caught the fascist infection:
The First Cohort and the Falanga
Of the last dregs and scum;
When a milksop leader, a whipper-snapper ‘enlightened’
By a mystic mission straight from Munich
Wrote upon the walls
The epitaph of frightened ministers
When the street was ruled by petty middle-class scoundrels
Excellent ‘Catholics’
Except that they had not yet become Christian…
When the rampant braggarts so beat the Jews
That I felt more shame for my fatherland
Than pity for my beaten brethren…
When in the worm-like press
There was nothing but roars and flashes:
The Jew, Jews, Jews, Jews, Jews
Mangy and scabby Kikes
The Jew is our greatest enemy
The Jew waits with a knife at your threshold
The Jew causes hunger, the Jew causes misery
The Jew steals, the Jews insults the priest
The Jew tramples on the White Eagle
The Jew laps up the blood of infants
The Jew poisons, violates, betrays, denounces

66 A reference to Vilna (an iron wolf appeared in a dream to its founder Gedymin) where the fascist offshoots of the Endecja were particularly strong
The Jew bestializes, defiles, corrupts
And again; the Jew, the Jew, the Jew…

The attentive reader will notice that Tuwim does seem to have some guilt over his failure to confront antisemitism directly in ‘The Ball at the Opera’. He was convinced that the new Poland would be free of the vices of the past, purged by the wartime experience:

We are modest men, we’re simple men,
No supermen, nor any giants.
We ask our God for a different might,
For another road to greatness:

Kindle the clouds into a glare, and
Strike at our hearts with a bell of gold,
Open our Poland as with a bolt
You clear up the overcast heavens.
Allow us to rid our fathers’ home
Of our cinders, and holy ruins:
Let our house be poor but also clean,
Our house, raised from the cemetery.
To the land, when it stirs from the dead,
And is gilded by freedom’s luster,
Give the rule of wise and righteous men,
Mighty in wisdom and in goodness.
And when the people rise to their feet,
Let them raise their veiny, calloused fists:
Give the toilers ownership, the fruit
Of their labor in villages and
Cities. Chase away the bankers, Lord,
Stop the growth of money from money.
Let the vain be armed with humbleness,
To the humble give an angry pride.
Teach us that under Your sunny sky
‘There is no more Greek and no more Jew.’
Knock the stupid crown from the heads of
Puffed up men and the supercilious.
And set up the skull of a dead man
On the desk of a growling ruler.
Strike with your bolt when in glory’s name
A haughty man seizes his weapon,
Do not permit an unjust sword to
Have for a handle the cross of Your

---

Agony. Let good-will be done, of
Noble hearts which grew up in defeat
Give us back the bread of Polish fields,
Return the coffins of Polish pine,
But above all give our words, altered
Craftily by wheelers and dealers,
Their uniqueness and their truthfulness:
Let the law always denote law, and
Let justice mean nothing but justice.
Let more of Your name resound in deeds
Of men than in their song; take away
The gift of dreaming from the stupid,
Realize the dreams of noble men.

Cause us to bless the conflagration
That destroyed our property, if it
Proves to be a purifying fire
For our souls touched with decay.
Any Size of Poland—let her have greatness:
To the sons of her spirit or her
Body give a greatness of hearts if
She’s great, and a greatness of hearts
If she’s small. Wedged between the German
Barbarian and the new nation of
A hundred nations—give a friendly
Frontier on the east, an eternal
Abyss on the west. Tear off the cross
Your hands that bleed, together with nails,
And cover, cover Your eyes with them
When the time of vengeance draws near us,
Give us leave to break Your commandment,
When we wade toward Warsaw across
The Tatra Mountains of dead Germans,
The Baltic of enemy’s damned blood. ...

At the same time, the crimes of the Germans were so appalling that even dogs would seek revenge:

And you, Warsaw dogs, on judgment day
Fulfill your canine duty—
Howl yourselves into a running pack
To wreak fierce vengeance for your victims.
For dogs torn by exploding bombs,
That perished under the shattered home,
For those which howled over their master,
As they scratched his lifeless hands; and for
Dogs that exercised a hopeless charm
To curry favor with dead bodies;
For the death of puppies still at play
In their basket in the basement;
And for dogs desperately running,
For those deserted in apartments,
Gasping for breath in smoke, half alive,
Remembering their kindly ladies;
For growling dogs, and those believing
In man’s return since dogs were waiting.
And thus, the trusting dog sat upon
A man’s grave in a waiting pose;
For the imploring look in the eyes
Scared by the tumult, crash and fires,
For the dogs which tore the ground with nails
Digging their shelters in the gardens,—
For all the miseries and troubles,
Suffered by you and those who loved you
Amidst these common walls and ruins,
Howl, o my brothers, come to Dog’s Field!
Let rabid foam rise in your muzzles,
Loose the breathless pack in hot pursuit
Of the German trail, when they scuttle
From Poland, with only their breeches!
Sharpen your fangs on bricks of rubble,
And on the whitened human bones;
And when you get them—leap at their throats,
You mastiffs, leap at their gullets,
Sink your sharp fangs and tear away
Before the rascals’ final rattle!
To their Adam’s apples, she-wolves! Claws
Into their eyes, before they twinkle!
Let the armies of the lesser dog
Avengers fall on them when they’re down,
Tear them to bits so that even their
Mothers never shall know where to look
For their parts, scattered over the earth…!

For ours could not find them either,
Their babies’ heads, little legs and fists…

At the same time, he felt enormous guilt that he was living comfortably in Buenos Aires:

When we approach O Necropolis
Your suburbs, in a quarantine we
Will kneel in the field, full of hope and
Anguish: hope—that friends shall come to meet
Us from the City of the Crosses,
Bearing forgiveness in their eyes and
Tears of happiness not a reproach.
Anguish—that these tears, this kindness and
These greetings shall be of no avail...
THE SILENT THING between us shall rise—
A dreadful phantom.

He concluded with another of his evocations of the poetic muse:

Poetry! What’s your name. Creative?
What do you create? Yourself. You are
A tinder-box—a fire—and a smoke—
Your golden crop shines in the sowing,
Of seed cast into the darkness—a
Fallout of shooting stars. Thus I run
Into the night to gather the stars.
They aren’t there. Only a glowing trail
Will remain in my eyes—the falling:
You are a star and its very trail.
O goblet which in its being is
Wine already, intoxication,
And drunken song as well, thereafter
Returns to its own shape in a dream.
Then—it’s a memory of this dream.
I raise you high my secret goblet,
My fire, bountiful sowing of stars,
You, who are a goal and a reason,
You, the firstness and finality!
Drinking wine in a toast to wine,
I extol through you my eternity.

O Poetry! This toast is for my Jubilee.
It is thirty years now
Since you brought to me the first news, on
That radiant night—misty today. And
Since that time, Adam and Orpheus,
In Eden or in hell—in your grip—
I visit heights and precipices...
Ten thousand days and ten thousand nights
Or, let us be precise: eleven.
For to whom shall I give—a thousand?
I cannot spare a single hour,
A minute—not even a minute:
Thus I believe in you, when I kiss,
Thus I sweetly suffer when in doubt.
As the magician draws from the depths
Of his top hat many-colored scarves,
Roses which he throws to the ladies,
A pair of rabbits or white pigeons,
A glass of wine—so in this manner
Enchanted by word’s magic oath I
Draw the flowered ribbons of the days
From my memory’s double bottom,
From the Lethean depth of my heart. . .

He was increasingly preoccupied with the fate of Polish Jewry and of his beloved mother who had had a nervous breakdown under the war and had withdrawn to a sanatorium in Otwock near Warsaw. In 1941 he moved to New York Tuwim where he became convinced him that only the Soviet Union could defeat the Nazis. This led to a breach with another Skamander poet, Lechoń who had also made his way to New York and who wrote to him in May 1942 severing all relations because of Tuwim’s ‘blind love for the Bolsheviks.’ Of the Skamander poets, only Słonimski, now in London shared his view that without the Bolsheviks victory was impossible. Tuwim wrote to him:

Thank you, my dearest Toleczek--more beloved than at any other time in life--and in a certain sense the only one! Other friendships have utterly boiled to death in the kettle of war, while my feelings for you, attachment to our shared past, a similar--so I think--view of the future, attitude in the present--have grown and (forgive this little word) ‘fortified’ themselves. Believe me, that I, on American soil, am equally as alone as you are in London (as far as old friendships are concerned). . . But do not judge that this solitude is painful to me. On the contrary: it gladdens me and rather solidifies the fact that finally, finally a distinct ‘line of partition’ has emerged. In the past you didn’t want to believe that ‘the barricade has only two sides.’ Do you believe it now?

He became much more conscious of his Jewish identity, writing to his mother in Poland, ‘So with pride with mournful pride we will bear that rank, eclipsing all others--the rank of the Polish Jew--we, who miraculously and arbitrarily have remained alive. With pride? Let us say rather; with contrite and biting shame. Because it fell to us for your suffering, for your glory.’

---

He now produced his last great work, the prose-poem, ‘We, Polish Jews...’. Suspecting the fate of his mother, who had already been murdered by the Germans, he dedicated it ‘To my Mother in Poland/ or to her beloved Shadow’. He began by explaining why he now identified with the Jews of Poland:

. . . And immediately I can hear the question: ‘What do you mean—WE?’ The question, I grant you, is natural enough. Jews to whom I am wont to explain that I am a Pole have asked it. So will the Poles to the overwhelming majority of whom I am and shall remain a Jew. Here is my answer to both.

I am a Pole because I want to be. It’s nobody’s business but my own. I certainly have not the slightest intention of rendering account, explaining, or justifying it to anyone. I do not divide Poles into pure-stock Poles and alien-stock Poles. I leave such classification to pure and alien-stock advocates of racialism, to domestic and foreign Nazis. I divide Poles just as I divide Jews and all other nations into the intelligent and the fools, the honest and the dishonest, the brilliant and the dull-witted, the exploited and the exploiters, gentlemen and cads. I also divide Poles into Fascists and anti-Fascists. Neither of these groups is of course homogeneous; each shimmers with a variety of hues and shades. But a dividing line certainly does exist, and soon will become quite apparent. Shades may remain, but the color of the dividing line itself will both brighten and deepen to a marked degree.

I can say that in the realm of politics I divide Poles into anti-Semites and anti-Fascists. For Fascism means always anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is the international language of Fascism.

He went on:

If, however, it comes to explaining my nationality, or rather my sense of national belonging, then I am a Pole for the most simple, almost primitive reasons. Mostly rational, partly irrational, but devoid of any ‘mystical’ flourishes. To be a Pole is neither an honor nor a glory nor a privilege. It is like breathing. I have not yet met a man who is proud of breathing.

I am a Pole because it was in Poland that I was born and bred, that I grew up and learned; because it was in Poland that I was happy and unhappy; because from exile it is to Poland that I want to return, even though I were promised the joys of paradise elsewhere…

Above all a Pole - because I want to be.

He then went on to explain his Jewish allegiance:
‘All right,’ someone will say, ‘granted you are a Pole. But in that case, why ‘we JEWS’?’ To which I answer: BECAUSE OF BLOOD ‘Then racialism again?’ No, not racialism at all. Quite the contrary.

There are two kinds of blood: that inside of veins, and that which spurts from them. The first is the sap of the body, and as such comes under the realm of physiologists. Whoever attributes to this blood any other than biological characteristics and powers will in consequence, as we have seen, turn towns into smoking ruins, will slaughter millions of people, and at last, as we shall yet see, bring carnage upon his own kin.

The other kind of blood is the same blood but spilled by this gang leader of international Fascism to testify to the triumph of his gore over mine, the blood of millions of murdered innocents, a blood not hidden in arteries but revealed to the world. Never since the dawn of mankind has there been such a flood of martyr blood, and the blood of Jews (not Jewish blood, mind you) flows in widest and deepest streams. Already its blackening rivulets are flowing together into a tempestuous river. AND IT IS IN THIS NEW JORDAN THAT I BEG TO RECEIVE THE BAPTISM OF BAPTISMS; THE BLOODY, BURNING, MARTYRED BROTHERHOOD OF JEWS.

Take me, my brethren, into that glorious bond of Innocently Shed Blood. To that community, to that church I want to belong from now on.

Let that high rank - the rank of the Jew Doloris Causa—be bestowed upon a Polish poet by the nation which produced him. Not for my merit, for I can claim none in your eyes. I will consider it a promotion and the highest award for those few Polish poems which may survive me and will be connected with the memory of my name—the name of a Polish Jew.

Perhaps naively, he believed that the sufferings of Polish Jews would so arouse the sympathy of their compatriots that antisemitism would disappear.

Upon the armbands which you wore in the ghetto the star of David was painted. I believe in a future Poland in which that star of your armbands will become the highest order bestowed upon the bravest among Polish officers and soldiers. They will wear it proudly upon their breasts next to the old Virtuti Militari. There also will be a Cross of the Ghetto - a deeply symbolic name. There will be the Order of the Yellow Patch, denoting more merit than many a present tinsel. And there shall be in Warsaw and in every other Polish city some fragment of the ghetto left standing and preserved in its present form in all its horror of ruin and destruction. We shall surround that monument to the ignominy of our foes and to the glory of our tortured heroes with chains wrought from captured Hitler’s guns, and every day we shall twine fresh live flowers into its iron links, so that the memory of the massacred people shall remain forever fresh in the minds of the generations to come, and also as a sign of our undying sorrow for them.
Thus a new monument will be added to the national shrine.

There we will lead our children, and tell them of the most monstrous martyrdom of people known to the history of mankind. And in the center of this monument, its tragedy enhanced by the rebuilt magnificence of the surrounding city, there will burn an eternal fire. Passersby will uncover their heads before it.

And those who are Christians will cross themselves.

Thus it will be with pride, mournful pride, that we shall count ourselves of that glorious rank which will outshine all others - the rank of the Polish Jew, we who by miracle or by chance have remained alive. With pride? Let us rather say: with contrition and gnawing shame. For it was bestowed upon us for the sake of your torment, your glory, Redeemers!

….And so perhaps I should not say ‘we Polish Jews,’ but ‘we ghosts, we shadows of our slaughtered brethren, the Polish Jews.’

He then proclaimed his solidarity with this Jewish brethren evoking a series of images of their suffering:

We Polish Jews. . . We, everliving, who have perished in the ghettos and camps, and we ghosts who, from across seas and oceans, will some day return to the homeland and haunt the ruins in our unscarred bodies and our wretched, presumably spared souls.

We, the truth of the graves, and we, the illusion of living; we, millions of corpses and we, a few, perhaps a score of thousands of quasi non-corpses; we, that boundless brotherly tomb, we, a Jewish burial ground such as was never seen before and will never be seen again.

We, suffocated in gas-chambers and turned into soap—a soap that will not wash clean the stains of our blood nor the stigma of the sin the world has perpetrated upon us.

We, whose brains spattered upon the walls of our miserable dwellings and the walls under which we were stood for mass execution solely because we were Jews.

We, the Golgotha upon which an endless forest of crosses could be raised. We, who two thousand years ago gave humanity a Son of Man slaughtered by the Roman Empire, and this one innocent death was enough to make Him God. What religion will arise from millions of deaths, tortures, degradations and arms stretched wide in the last agony of despair?
We Abies, we Kikes, we Sheenies\textsuperscript{71} whose names and nick-names will some day exceed in dignity those of Achilles, Boleslaus the Brave, and Richard Coeur-de-Lion.

We, once more in the catacombs, in the manholes under Warsaw pavements, splashing in the stink of sewers to the surprise of our companions - the rats.

We, rifle in hand upon barricades, amidst the ruins of our homes bombed from the sky above; we—soldiers of honor and freedom.

‘Kike, go and fight!’\textsuperscript{72} He did, Gentlemen, and laid down his life for Poland.

We, who made a fortress of every threshold while house after house crashed about us.

We, Polish Jews growing wild in forests, feeding our terrified children on roots and grass; we crawling, crouching, bedraggled and unkempt, armed with an antique shotgun obtained by some miraculous feat of begging and bribing.

‘Have you heard the one about the Jewish game-keeper? It’s a riot. The Jew fired; and by golly if he didn’t wet his pants from fright! Ha! Ha!’

We, Jobs, we Niobes, mourning the loss of hundreds of thousands of our Jewish Urszulkas…\textsuperscript{73}

We, deep pits of broken, crushed bones and twisted, welted bodies;

We - the scream of pain! A scream so shrill that the most distant ages shall hear it. We - the Lament, the Howl, we—the Choir chanting a sepulchral El Mole Rachamim whose echo will be passed from one century to the next.

We - history’s most glorious heap of bloody manure with which we have fertilized the Polish soil so that the bread of freedom may be sweeter for those who will survive us.

We, the macabre remnants, we—the last of the Mohicans, the pitiful survivors of slaughter whom some new Barnum may well exhibit throughout the world,

\textsuperscript{71} The original here consists of a string of names and nicknames for Jews which were common in Polish.

\textsuperscript{72} In the original: ‘Jojne, idź na wojnę!’ – ‘Jonah, go to war!’ – a well-known Polish rhyme which mocks the Jews for their lack of military aptitude.

\textsuperscript{73} Urszulka - the daughter of the famous Polish poet Jan Kochanowski (1530-1584) who died in her youth. Her father’s collection of elegies upon her death Treny (1580 - ‘Dirges’) is very famous in the literary and cultural traditions of Poland. In the original English translation ‘Jewish Urszulkas’ was rendered as ‘little ones.’
proclaiming upon multi-colored billboards: ‘Super Show! The biggest sensation of the World! Genuine Polish Jews. Alive!’ We, the Chamber of Horrors, Schreckenskammer, Chambre des Tourtures! ‘Nervous persons better leave the audience!’

We, who sit and weep upon the shores of distant rivers, as once we sat on the banks of Babylon. All over the world does Rachel bewail her children, and they are no more. On the banks of the Hudson, of the Thames, of the Euphrates and the Nile, of the Ganges and Jordan we wander, scattered and forlorn, crying: ‘Vistula! Vistula! Vistula! Mother of ours! Grey Vistula turned rosy not with the rosiness of dawn but that of blood!’

We, who will not even find the graves of our mothers and children, so deep are the layers, so widely spread all over the country in one huge burial ground. There will be no one sacred plot upon which to lay our flowers; but even as a sower sows grain so shall we fling them in a wide gesture. And, one maybe will find the spot.

We, Polish Jews. . . We, the legend dripping with tears and blood. A legend, perhaps, fit only to be told in Biblical verses…

He concluded:

A huge and still growing ghost-skeleton looms over Europe. From his empty eyesockets blazes the fire of dangerous wrath, and his fingers are clutched in a bony fist. It is He—our Leader, our Dictator who shall dictate our rights and our demands.  

The new Poland to which Tuwim returned and pledged his complete support must have been a terrible disappointment to him. Antisemitism persisted and in the aftermath of the war, perhaps 1,500 Jews died in anti-Jewish violence, the worst incident being in Kielce. He was determined to ally himself with the new order writing in 1950 to the poet Mieczysław Jastrun that they needed to talk about ‘the unimportance of lyricism in the project of the socialization of minds and in general about the exceedingly limited influence of poetry on transformations of historical significance in humanity’s history.’ Yet he must have found the new political orthodoxy suffocating although he did compose a sterile ‘Ode to Stalin’ in which he spoke of the Revolution as an eternal beauty, and of Stalin as an immortal hero. His muse dried up and he devoted himself to translation, editing and writing children’s stories. He wrote one poem in which he described the death of his mother:

74 Translated by Mrs. Langer, first published in Free World, New York, July 1944.  
I

At the cemetery in Łódź
The Jewish cemetery, stands
The Polish grave of my mother,
My Jewish mother’s tomb.

The grave of my Mother, the Pole,
Of my Mother the Jewess;
I brought her from land over Vistula
To the bank of industrial Łódź.

A rock fell on the tombstone,
Upon the face of the pale rock
A few laurel leaves
Shed by a birch tree.

And when a sunny breeze
Plays with them a golden game,
The leaves are patterned into
The Order of Polonia.

II

A fascist shot my mother
When she was thinking of me;
A fascist shot my mother
When she was longing for me.

He loaded—killed the longing,
Again began to load,
So that later... but later
There was nothing left to kill.

He shot through my mother’s world:
Two tender syllables;
Threw the corpse out the window
Upon the holy pavement.

Remember well, little daughter!
Recall this, future grandson!
The word has come true:
‘The ideal reached the pavement’

I took her from the field of glory,  
Returned to mother-earth...  
But the corpse of my name  
Still lies buried there.

He died in December 1953 aged 59. On the day following his death, his former friend Jan Lechoń wrote in his diary: ‘Tuwim has died…And now I cannot forget about these past seven years--but I remember still twenty more years --the gallivanting about, the silences, the jokes, but above all his poems. . .Everyone who came after him and many of his contemporaries should say now: “We are all from him”’. Tuwim’s poetry is almost unknown in the Jewish world. Yet his work can be compare to that Heine, with its irony, sense of the fragility of love and complex view of his Jewish roots. He deserves to be better known. His last words are reported to have been, ‘On grounds of economy, please extinguish the eternal light that once illuminated me.’ That light is still there for us, if we would only seek it out.

---

77 A reference to a poem by the nineteenth century Polish poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid in which the poet describes the sacking by Russian soldiers during the 1830-31 Uprising of Chopin’s piano in Warsaw. In the course of this, Chopin’s piano was thrown out of a window and smashed.
78 Tuwim, Listy do przyjaćół-pisarzy, 62.
79 Ibid., 147.