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THE PORTRAIT OF WARSAW A WIN
SZCZEPAN TWARDOCH'S NOVELS *MORPHINE*
AND *THE KING*

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Abstract. The essay depicts the portrait of Warsaw as we see it unfolding in Szczepan Twardoch's hugely acclaimed novels *Morphine* and *The King*. The narrative revolves around strong male characters caught up not only in history but in social as well as national stereotypes. In both novels, Warsaw is a character in itself, having a life and a destiny of its own, reflecting the main characters' spiritual journeys through life. Readers are pleased to be acquainted with the artistic life of interwar Warsaw in *Morphine* as reflected by the literary cafes and restaurants frequented by the capital's upper class. Even though most of them did not survive the World War II, the author succeeded in describing them so vividly, it seems they are real and tangible.

Key words: interwar Warsaw, city landscape, national stereotypes

If we were to reduce the entire literary work of young Polish writer Szczepan Twardoch to a common denominator, be it *The Battle of Grunwald*, *Morphine*, *Drach* or *The King*, we would not exaggerate saying that all of them revolve around the identity theme as well as the delicate issue of demythologization of Polish national stereotypes. The vast majority of reviews and monographic studies that discuss individually or holistically Szczepan Twardoch's literary output refer to these two aforementioned aspects¹.

¹ The bibliography is long, I will specify here just a few examples: Justyna Sobolewska, *Mężczyzna w rękach kobiet*, onpolityka.pl, 4.12.2012, <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/ksiazki/1533239,1,recenzja-ksiazki-szczepan-twardoch-morfina.read>; Olga Majerska, *Szczepan Twardoch – Morfina* (recenzja), 23.12.2012, <http://www.kawerna.pl/recenzje/ksiazka/item/6211-szczepan-twardoch-morfina-recezya.html>; Morfina, onGranice.pl, <http://www.granice.pl/recenzja,morfina,6294>; Artur Nowrot, *Jestem tym, kim jestem*, on Poltergeist, 13.01.2013, <http://polter.pl/ksiazki/Morfina-Szczepan-Twardoch-c25203>; Tymoteusz Wronka, *Morfina*, 22.05.2012; <http://www.biblionetka.pl/art.aspx?id=664242>; Cocteau & Co, *Król Szczepana Twardocha*, 11.10.2016, <http://cocteauandco.pl/KROL-SZCZEPAN-TWARDPOCH/>; Paweł Rzewuski, *Szczepan Twardoch – Król – recenzja*, 17.10.2016, <https://histmag.org/Szczepan-Twardoch-Krol-recenzja-14118>

Among the above-mentioned titles, *Morphine* and *The King* are two of the most interesting, captivating as well as multi-layered novels of Szczepan Twardoch who draw the reader into a fascinating journey through the meanders of self-identity, during which the characters are constantly exposed to the dangers of national, ethnic, racial stereotypes manipulated for ideological purposes and personal gain. Regarded from this perspective as well as with a view to moral and spiritual transformation of man confronted with the strenuous trials of life, we can state that both novels are just a variation of one and the same theme. Written in an alert and captivating style², these novels reveal an extraordinary eye for the details, relevant especially in the thorough depictions of the city as well as the attention for painting the city landscape in true colours. In her review to *Morphine*, Justyna Sobolewska names Twardoch a true master of details, because „[...] he recreates with extreme attention and deliberation the reality of the beginning of the war, we accompany the hero along the streets of Warsaw, and we attend its restaurants” (SOBOLEWSKA 2012). In *Morphine*, we see the story unreel as we follow the complicated life story of the main character, Konstanty Willemann, the son of a German officer of aristocratic descent and a Silesian of German origin, turned to “Polishness” by his own choice. Who is at the outbreak of the II WW, when we meet the main character for the first time, and who proves to be Konstanty Willemann as the story unfolds, it is difficult to grasp in a few words, because his whole identity is defined by national and cultural stereotypes. For those who know him (his outer self), Kostek is Polish by choice, despite his pure German descent, sub-lieutenant in reserve in the 9 regiment of uhlans Małopolska. Before the war, he was just a *bonvivant*, an artist amateur, a womaniser, and morphine addict. Konstanty’s social identity is concrete, palpable, sanctioned by the role he plays in society: that of son, husband, father, officer in reserve, but Willemann feels he is a man without a face and merits, lost in a world whose hierarchy of values is but strange to him. Before the war, Konstanty Willemann did not have identity issues, he was content with his life and social condition, his easy careless life giving him a perpetual air of arrogance. The war proves to be the catalyst of all the transformations and metamorphoses that the hero will go through. In times of war, Konstanty Willemann does not know who he really is, and his evolution throughout the novel is defined by the quest of his own self-identity as well as the attempt to reckon with Polish national stereotypes: *Bóg. Honor. Ojczyzna*. (God. Honour. Motherland.). It is not a random detail that among Willemann’s acquaintances are the Skamanders, a group of Polish poets who believed, among other things, that literature should move away from the tight grip and long domination of patriotic, nationalist and militant subjects, especially in an epoch when the Polish nation was at last free and independent: „My motherland is free, free...

² The style of *Morphine* was seldom deemed psychedelic and hallucinatory, see Justyna Sobolewska, Polska, męskość, ciemność – „Morfina” Szczepana Twardocha, „Polityka”, 14.09.2013, idem, Mężczyzna w rękach kobiet, „Polityka”, 4.12.2012; Damian Piwowarczyk, Szczepan Twardoch „Morfina” on culture.pl (<http://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/szczepan-twardoch-morfina>), December 2012etc.

I can now throw Conrad's coat off my shoulders³", writes Antoni Słonimski in his poem *Czarna wiosna* (Black spring).

In *The King*, the action precedes and in a way prefigures the events in *Morphine*, being set in the inter-war period. As in *Morphine*, the plot and the characters' evolution have a certain historical background that influence their behaviour and destiny. *The King* is the Jew Jakub Szapiro, a man of thirty-seven years old as charismatic, as handsome, elegant and fascinating as Willemann in *Morphine*, but contrary to him, Szapiro is not torn apart by identity dilemmas. He knows who he is and who he wants himself to be. He considers himself a Warsawer, pugilist of The Makabi Club as well as Jan Kaplica's right hand, the gangster for whom he collects protection money. „I am a Jew. [...] I am Szapiro. And Warsaw is my city, we belong to Warsaw" (TWARDOCH 2016: 62), he tells his partner, Emilia, who dreams of moving together to Palestine. But Szapiro wants to be himself in his own town, he wants to become „the King of the city". On the other hand, for Mojsze Inbar Bernsztajn, that is the young narrator of the story, Jakub Szapiro is not the man who dragged his father out of the house by the beard as he had been ordered by the gangster Jan Kaplica, he is not a criminal nor an outlaw, he is a man loved and respected by his peers, charismatic, generous, strong yet sensitive, brief he is the protective father figure he hasn't had in life, a role-model to admire and follow.

Even though the thread we wish to pursue in our exegesis doesn't imply discussing the whole array of characters thoroughly outlined by the author in both novels nor does it involve tackling their identity dilemmas, the analysis of the city landscape in both works cannot be properly done in the absence of those who are going to be our guides during our wandering through inter-war Warsaw. We get acquainted with the city and we perceive it through the filter of their own sensibilities, and we get about the urban areas that have deep meaning for them. In *Morphine*, the attention for detail shows itself plainly especially in the perfect and accurate account of Warsaw in the year of 1939, but Konstanty Willemann often calls forth in his memories the city's time of glory in the pre-war period. In *Morphine*, Warsaw is not just a mere background for the plot of the novel, it is a character in itself with its own destiny tainted by calamity. In the history of Polish literature, Warsaw has been a literary *topos* often exploited by writers in their works. The first mention of the city is a portrayal of a bridge over the river Vistula, in an epigram of Renaissance poet Jan Kochanowski. The image of XVII century Warsaw emerges fully in Adam Jarzębski's poem *Gościniec, albo krótkie opisanie Warszawy* (The road that is a brief depiction of Warsaw). Throughout the centuries up to the present moment, Warsaw has been depicted and immortalized in several states by the representatives

³ Słonimski's as well as the Skamanders' suggestion hints to the liberation of literature from the pressure of being the shaper of Polish national and social awareness, set by the example of romantic literature, represented by the literary symbol of Konrad Wallerond, the hero of the homonym work of national bard Adam Mickiewicz.

of all the literary trends⁴, its image varying from that of a flourishing cultural, industrial as well as artistic centre, to that of a place destroyed by war.

We have a glimpse of Warsaw as seen through the eyes of Konstanty Willemann in October 1939 almost from the beginning of the novel:

I went out into the city, a city that is no longer mine. The windows were mostly glassless, but those which still had their glass intact, were glued with strips of paper in the form of a cross, Saint Andreaw's crosses in the windows, and on those crosses our crucified life, though most of the times, instead of window panes you could see ordinary plywood and the dark sockets left behind by the plucked out casements and the broken glass. The shops were closed, with the doors planked or the windows shattered, instead of inside the shops, people traded straight in the streets, selling absolutely everything you could imagine: horse riding English boots, combs, lamps and food at prices that made you want to shoot them.

The Germans had taken over the city after only a short siege. Besieged, bombed, destroyed, with the stones of the pavement pulled out by the Warsawers in order to erect barricades, with tramway tracks plucked out, with its ministries and cultural institutions closed, Warsaw is far from being the glamorous city full of fancy restaurants, nightclubs and literary cafes where Konstanty Willemann used to hang out. In Konstanty's eyes, Warsaw becomes the personification of a war casualty. His words, repeated as a mantra throughout the novel – *This is not my Warsaw. Not my Warsaw...* – are the outer reflection of the character's inner shattered world. The inner structure of the novel revolves around two major recurrent questions: *who am I?* – keeps wondering the main character and *who (and not what) is Warsaw at the end of 1939?* The emptiness he feels inside as well as Konstanty's loss of self-awareness are in key with the downfall of Warsaw and with the loss of the city's own identity, which is that of a glamorous capital of an independent state.

In a style sometimes close to narrative journalism, Szczepan Twardoch introduces his readers into the topography of the city, re-enacting with noteworthy carefulness, in a language imbued with lyricism and sensitivity, sequential hallucinatory and chaotic images of the city that come in waves, precisely like the hero's states of mind, re-creating with accuracy an authentic atmosphere and appearance of old Warsaw. We can feel the rhythm of Warsaw streets, the pain of its inhabitants, the destructions left behind by the bombings like huge and open injuries on the "almost lifeless" body of Warsaw. „A city half dead, and yet alive", says the hero. In any case, a metaphor often called forth by Konstanty Willemann during his wanderings through ravaged Warsaw is that of a raped woman.

⁴ Here are just several authors who have exploited this theme in their works from Romanticism up to nowadays: Juliusz Słowacki, Adam Mickiewicz, Adolf Dygasiński, Bolesław Prus, Stefan Żeromski, Stanisław Wyspiański, Wiktor Gomulicki, Antoni Słonimski, Julian Tuwim, Jan Lehoń, Czesław Miłosz, Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, Leopold Tyrmand, Miron Białoszewski, Adolf Rudnicki, Tadeusz Konwicki, Andrzej Stasiuk and others.

Warsaw is not mine, it is not mine anymore, it is not his, Warsaw is riddled, Warsaw is now wrapped in cold, mud and slush, Warsaw is raped, Warsaw is a cemetery, [...] Warsaw is like my Salome, slapped, lying on the ground, with legs wide open and the thicket of her dark rough hair. [...] the earth is lifting up and down in the rhythm of Warsaw's breath, in Vistula Warsaw washes her sore cunt.

By impersonating Warsaw, Twardoch grants it potency and makes it a separate character endowed with its own destiny and history.

Konstanty's itinerary through Warsaw outlines several landmarks that we can pinpoint in downtown Warsaw (KOLEBUK, ed. 2014: 65-69): the chocolate house, where he used to live with his family, symbolizing the lost paradise, the damp, squalid and cold flat of sensual Salome in Dobra street, the conspiratorial nest in a partisan's dwelling in Redeemer Square, the house of Konstanty's father-in-law in Powiśle street, The House of the Generals or the German Club, and within this perimeter the main character's existential drama as well as his trance-like monologues unfold:

Warsaw, a city which was no longer mine.

Destroyed, the city was no longer mine.

My city and yet no longer mine, riddled by bullets, I'm walking along Krakowskie Przedmieście [...] I'm walking along Nowy Świat, a place where not so long ago I could still see [...] volunteers fighting for Warsaw, they were gathering to dig ditches, but now in those places where formerly it was the road there is nothing but holes left, peasant wagons instead of tramways, there are no tramways, there are no buses, there are only wagons, right now one is passing by, in it sit carelessly fifteen Warsawers in their coats and hats, holding their briefcases on their laps, [...] and one is even reading the newspaper that is „Wiadomości”, as if he was riding a cab to the Atheneum, to the opening night of Szaniawski's latest play. On the city walls instead of posters – notes.

On one hand, we can read *Morphine* as a work of fiction – and in a certain manner it is mostly pure literary fiction – and the plot will prevail, because the story is very well structured, the main character extremely complex and the narrative style stunningly dynamic. On the other hand, a rude and uninitiated reader can lose a lot from the novel's savoury if he is not properly introduced into the deeper layers of the novel, because every place mentioned in passing or thoroughly described in it not only existed in reality, but it is rich in history. Almost all of them are cult places in the cultural awareness of Warsaw. We can dare say that both *Morphine*, as well as *The King* are live testimonials of the most representative sights or edifices in the Polish capital of inter-war period. Some of them no longer exist presently, having not survived the war, but their memory has stayed alive: the modern Plants for Distilling and Purification of Vodka „Koneser”, an interesting example of European industrial architecture of red brick combined with elements of the New Gothic; the cinema Femina, Kercelak Market⁵, the Engineering

⁵ In the pre-war period, Kercelak was the biggest market in Warsaw, stretching over one and a half hectare that covered many streets on the East-West axis of the city. It was considered a city in itself with its own life and specific atmosphere, a place where both illegal and legal transactions were conducted.

Company Lilpop, Rau & Loewenstein, Pawiak prison, The Brühl Palace are just a few examples.

When we first meet Konstanty Willemann, he goes out to visit his best friend, Jacek Rostański, his main supplier with morphine, who is a doctor at Ujazdowski Hospital. Today the hospital no longer exists, but it has been a landmark of Warsaw city life since its opening in 1794 on the premises of Ujazdowski Castle and its surrounding domain. By the end of II WW, the hospital was heavily bombed, and after the war, it was no longer re-opened. The presence of the hospital is nowadays commemorated by a number of plates in Leon Strehl Square.

Leaving the hospital, Konstanty Willemann goes to see his wife and son who live in the house of chocolate. It is the tenement house of chocolate manufacturer Wedel, a building in modernist style in the Mokotów district, at the corner of Madaliński and Puławska streets, whose gable looks like a ship adrift in the city landscape. Built in 1935-1936 based on Juliusz Żórawski's design, the building is presently considered a perfect example of Warsaw functionalism, as it observes the five principles of moderne architecture laid down by Le Corbusier.

More interesting than the streets or cultural and administrative institutions are in both novels the cafes and restaurants as symbols of pre-war Warsaw and true urban legends: Lours, Oaza, Paradiso, Ziemiańska, Lardelli, Adria and Pod Wróblem. After I WW, when Poland regained its independence, the country undergoes a great transformation, and the Polish society is very open and enthusiastic to social, economic, technical and cultural metamorphoses brought forth by the modern epoch: automobiles, motorcycles, telephones, radios, architectural innovations etc.

From Konstanty Willemann's evocations emerges the image of inter-war Warsaw as a very dynamic and flourishing city, that after 1918 has undergone a major economic, political and social growth, turning from a city rather provincial in comparison to other European capitals of the time into a city dubbed The Northern Pearl or the Paris of the North. The postcards, films or photographs of the period prove this comparison to be true and reveal a city with a beautiful architecture, clean and spruce streets and squares. However many inhabitants of the city as well as most foreign travellers had a different outlook on the city. Warsaw was considered by some „utterly ugly”, a bleak grey miserable city, the ugliest capital in the world with a scarce infrastructure and slums, which is not that far from the truth, taken into consideration the great gap between social classes at that time. If someone from the Soviet Union came to Warsaw, he might have thought it was as pretty as Paris, but for travellers from the western world, Warsaw was nothing more than a smaller Asia (LESZCZYŃSKI 2015)⁶. A similar rather negative image of Warsaw we can find in Julian Tuwim's poem *Mieszkańcy* (The Inhabitants): „*Dreadful dwellings. In dreadful dwellings / in dreadful conditions live dreadful inhabitants*” (TUWIM, ed. 1951: 135).

⁶ Hints to the Asian atmosphere of Warsaw we can find both in *The King as in Morphine*, from which we bring forth a vivid example: „I wandered in the streets of Kassa, a small Central-European town like any other, so much different from the Asian Warsaw, everything was different, the churches, the houses”.

The image of Warsaw in *The King* is closer to the aesthetics of ugliness we know from Tuwim's poem, offering a double perspective upon the life of the city as a result of the clash between the Polish and the Jewish world. The cover of the novel itself informs the readers that Warsaw in the 1930's of the XX century is a „multicultural, heterogeneous city, segregated and torn apart as a result of national, political, social and religious conflicts”, rather the battlefield of gangsters, nationalists or fascists than the image of modern Warsaw in *Morphine*. Politically, things were tensed, the group that is advocating for marshal Rydz-Śmigły, backed up by the National Radical Camp⁷, prepares a *coup d'état* that is meant to push Poland in the direction of fascism. The Jews, and generally speaking all minorities, are not welcomed. As a result of political turmoil, the chancellors of many Polish universities adopted a discriminatory form of education based on students segregation according to their race – Jews were compelled to sit at the back of the lecture rooms (ZALEWSKA 1996: 311). In the first pages of the novel, we are acquainted with Warsaw as seen by a young Jew, one of the many people who had come to see the boxing match between Jakub Szapiro and his opponent, the representative of the club Legion of Warsaw, as well as a well-known member of the political radical camp Falanga:

Around the ring have gathered two foreign Warsaws. [...] two Warsaws that speak two different languages, and live in two different worlds, two Warsaws that read different newspapers and treat one another at best with indifference, at worst with hatred, but, usually, simply with an icily loathing, as if they didn't live in neighbouring streets, but they had an ocean between them.

Maybe the way the narrator reduces Warsaw of the 1930's to these two anti-thetic facets – *one that belongs to the Poles and the other that belongs to the Jews* – is rather too simplistic and naive, but this dichotomy is vital to the inner structure of the plot. The Polish quarters are clean, paved, rich (see *Morphine*), whereas the Jews live in poor wretched districts, with streets covered in mud and gravel. In *The King* “the little Jerusalem” is brought into focus. It occupies the Northern District of Warsaw, and displays a filthy landscape, the air is full of feter, most of the dwellings are unsanitary and lack basic utilities. It is a place where the Polish language is as rare as a bird as the Poles. The provinciality of Warsaw, especially visible when set on the background of war destructions becomes obvious for Konstanty Willemann when he goes on mission to Budapest only to discover a sparkling European city, a former imperial capital, in comparison to which Warsaw is but marginal and provincial:

⁷ The National Radical Camp (in Polish Obóz Narodowo Radykalny) was a Polish extreme right, nationalist political party, influenced by the ideas of Italian fascism. It aimed to put into practice the ideas of totalitarianism with limited parliamentarism and pluralism. Because the Camp openly encouraged anti-Jewish pogroms, and was actively involved in boycott of Jewish-owned stores, it was outlawed after three months of existence, in July 1934. The National Radical Camp then split in two groups, one of which being The Falanga National Radical Camp (generally known as Falanga), formed in the spring of 1935.

[...] everywhere streetlamps are lit [...] but why are the buildings here bigger than in Warsaw? [...] my Warsaw is just a small provincial, Jewish and Russian city that has been out of the blue declared capital of the country, God knows why, because it is big? Here [in Budapest] it is not pitch dark, the streetlamps are not smashed by the bombs, the asphalt is smooth, cars ride on that asphalt, so do the tramways [...].

Whereas in Warsaw it is pitch dark and freezing, [...] you can see no one in the streets at night, no night trams, no wine houses [...].

The portrait of Warsaw in both novels is masterfully rendered by the author. It is far from being motionless, it rather has the liveliness of a motion picture that comes alive as we read the books. It is often punctuated by a stylistics of rhythmic repetitions, frequently used by the author in both novels, as well as by frenetic monologues that shape the atmosphere of the novel and potentiate the apocalyptic setting (in *Morphine*) and the Jews' district in *The King*.

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