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Two to Achieve a Visible Alliance: On the Choreography of Stanisław Wyspiański's Vision

For a long time, art history would isolate a painting from its environment, pulling it out from the confines of church walls in order to create a scholarly narrative of the artistic schools, regions or masters for it. Reproductions would annul its setting, including the frame, leaving the bare "essence"; they levelled the diversity of visions and neutralised any connections with reality. Paintings hanging in museums were visited only now and then and thus could not serve as "assistance" in everyday life in the manner that had been proposed by the monastic frescoists, such as Fra Angelico. The art of Young Poland, and within it the oeuvre of one of the greatest artists of his time, Stanisław Wyspiański, constituted a *sui generis* return to the range of day-to-day contacts with paintings and to the diversity of ways of perceiving them. Wyspiański did much to reinstate the sense of "living together" with paintings, which, owing to the museum-oriented Academicism of the 19th century, had almost been forgotten. He brought back the feeling which Muratov, when referring to the Florentine Quattrocento, described as not being a guest on earth: "When a man casts his glance upon the world that surrounds him; when, heeding the call of the earthly things, he stretches his hand towards them and, not sparing the strength granted to him, gives them his heart – then he stops being a guest on this earth and casts upon it healthy seed for the harvest of future time. [...] Then the attitude to life and nature becomes more solid, more honest and more true".¹ And paintings turn into a part of everyday reciprocity.

Wyspiański's characteristic anti-historicism, or rather his Modernist mutation of historicism, would easily be seen as an element of an inter-generational rebellion: a turning away from the ideals of his master, Jan Matejko. This simple juxtaposition might actually be credible if not for the master and

1 Cf. P. Muratov, *Obrazy Italii* [Images of Italy], Polish translation: *Obrazy Włoch* by P. Hertz, vol. I, Warsaw, 1988, p. 137. The book has not been translated into English (translator's note).



Fig. 1. Two windows in cell no. 7 on the first floor of the San Marco monastery in Florence; on the left, a window giving onto the reality of *Christ Derided in the Presence of the Virgin Mary and St. Dominic* (*Cristo deriso alla presenza della Madonna e San Domenico*), a fresco by Giovanni da Fiesole, known as Fra Angelico, and assistants (ca. 1438–1445); on the right, a window giving outside the monastery and letting suffused light into the dormitory; photo by A. Markowska.

pupil's cooperation that was undertaken in the years 1889–1909 at the church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Cracow – a medieval church boasting the marvellous St. Mary's Altar by Veit Stoss (Wit Stwoszcz). Matejko produced the polychrome decoration of the church – one of his masterpieces. This decoration indicated his acceptance of the view that the past does not need to be resurrected through a masquerade of contemporary men and women impersonating the great heroes of the olden days; that their physical appearance and access to authentic props do not have to be treated as an indispensable component of this resurrection. Usually, Matejko's family and friends, who served as models for his paintings, enacted a sort of theatre, and the dress-ups were intended to revive the uplifting cores of the tales of bygone days. Matejko introduced his acquaintances and neighbours; the props, poses and costly fabrics made them seem to be kings and princes. But was it truly possible to forget that King Sigismund the Old, for instance, was a costumed and carefully posed parson from Tęczynek, that St. Kinga was Countess Katarzyna Potocka, and that Albrecht Hohenzollern was a local merchant? Looking as if they came straight from some theatre's costume storage, they all unwillingly became masquerade heroes, their identity no more than a carnival mask.

To Wyspiański, who, in contrast to Matejko, harboured theatrical ambitions, especially to be a dramatist, such an impersonation and manufacture of

images reminiscent of a masquerade must have presented a singular problem. He too used models (e.g. Mieczysław Rydel sat for the heroes' souls in the cartoon *Hermes Leading the Souls of Heroes into the Depths of Hades*); but even then he was far from Matejko's suggestive impersonation. And even when such an impersonation does appear in his art, it expresses an experience of his own fictitiousness and, as a result, his own theatricality, i.e. a peculiar critical self-assessment. Hence, for instance, when Wyspiański used altar boys as models for angels in the Franciscan church, he envisaged them as vagabonds in crooked shoes. Yet he decidedly preferred honesty: he depicted the actor Michał Tarasiewicz in the role of Protesilaus, or the actor Ludwik Solski in the role of the Old Soldier. Matejko's polychrome in the church of the Virgin Mary in Cracow (including Wyspiański's designs, which the older painter supervised) certainly did have a historicising aspect, and Wyspiański's inspirations with the art of the Quattrocento are easily discernible; after all, he had attended the lectures given at the Jagiellonian University by a distinguished and versatile specialist in European art – Professor Marian Sokołowski. His mode of measuring himself against the masterful retable by Veit Stoss relied on his treating it as a contemporary work, to which the polychrome decoration was added in such a way that the proximity would elicit a complex choreography of vision. Instead of a masterful spectacle typical of Matejko, whose possessive gestures and narratives categorically appropriated the entire available space, there evolved a space suited to being attentively scrutinised; one that provided unanticipated finds. Not everything was visible at first glance – the spectator needed to stay awhile among the images and to return again: the viewing needed to be protracted. Matejko was compelled to accept that “his” space was occupied by another masterpiece that drew all eyes. To his pupil, the eloquence of the further ground and the background must have been a revelation. What evolved was a consistent decorative scheme that entirely affected the pilgrim present in the space of the church.

In his book *Secesja*, Mieczysław Wallis proposed a distinction between ornamentality and decorativeness (in Polish: *dekoracyjność* and *dekoratywność*), the former denoting embellishments devoid of any deeper meaning and thus essentially pointless and the latter “a set of factors stimulating sensual perceptiveness”, which operate as “some arrangement of lines, contours, colour stains” regardless of what they represent.² Matejko's polychrome was not only decorative, but through its decorativeness it introduced a new understanding of historicism, which Wyspiański saw as a revelation. This was because this kind of decorativeness permits a peculiar *sacra conversazione* to take place: putting it metaphorically, Wyspiański's 19th-century angels conversed with the 15th-century angels of Veit Stoss, and putting it literally (although perhaps the literal and the metaphorical merge in this), due to close proximity the past came alive in the present with no need for the unfortunate masquerade.

2 M. Wallis, *Secesja* [Art Nouveau], Warsaw, 1974, p. 152.

We may say without taking too much risk that from then on Wyspiański's creativity relied not on the masquerade props, but on the principle of introducing an active relationship with the past into his works. This approach, however, resulted in his many doubts as to the realness of a painted image, which found their expression in, among others, the tragedy *Protesilaus and Laodamia* (1899; written from 1897 onwards³). From a purely thematic point of view, the topic of the play is tragic love: the story of a Hellene who left his bride home when he departed to take part in the Trojan War. On the meta-textual level, the play contemplates the role of images in human life, including images produced to console, strengthen and fortify the spirit and to mobilise one to an active life. It must be recalled at this point that Matejko was precisely the master of such fortifying images, produced to brace the Polish spirit in an era when the homeland was partitioned by foreign powers.

The story of Protesilaus and Laodamia, mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad*, was later cited by Pausanias, Gaius Julius Hyginus and others, and above all by Ovid in his *Heroides*. A lost tragedy by Euripides had focused on the same tale. After Wyspiański, the topic was undertaken by, among others, Innokentiy Annenskiy (who, incidentally, held Wyspiański's play in very high regard), Fyodor Sologub and Valery Bryusov, which Tomas Venclova considers an indication of the exceptional popularity of this myth in the countries of Eastern Europe.⁴ The details of the story are presented differently by the different authors, but all of the versions recall the prayer of the pining wife, begging for the favour of seeing her husband return. In Wyspiański's text:

From out her chamber now in sadness she
Draws nigh. The longings of her heart command
Her movements and with hateful memory
Nourish and tend that source of endless tears-
Thus, though she lives, and few are yet her years,
She bends her youthful life in torture slow,
In lamentation and eternal woe.⁵

According to some versions, Laodamia yearned for Protesilaus and "missed him so sadly that as soon as he sailed for Troy she made a brazen, or wax, statue of him and laid it in her bed".⁶ In Ovid, the wax *imago* – which answers

3 A. Morawińska, "Wyspiański: 'nieśmiertelność strasznie samotna'" [Wyspiański: "a terribly lonely immortality"], in: *Stanisław Wyspiański Opus Magnum*, ed. B. Piotrowska, National Museum in Cracow, Cracow, 2000, p. 43.

4 Cf. T. Venclova, "A Comparative Analysis of Fedor Sologub and Innokentii Annenskii", *Russian Review*, 1994, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 10–11.

5 S. Wyspiański, "Protesilaus and Laodamia. A Tragedy", part I, translated by E. Munk Clark and G. R. Noyes, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 1933, vol. 11, no. 32 (January), pp. 249–263; this is the introduction of the Chorus which opens the play.

6 R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Penguin Books, 1992, p. 658.

to Jean-Pierre Vernant's definition of a doppelganger with a link to the underworld⁷ – appears while Protesilaus is still alive and staying in Aulis; thus the young couple and the statue are bound together by magic. In her study on (un)sympathetic magic in *Heroides 13* (*Epistula XIII*), Laurel Fulkerson argues: "Laodamia's case is peculiar because her statue is (perhaps) both a funerary monument and a reminder of someone absent but expected home".⁸ Fulkerson argues convincingly that in Ovid the superstitious Laodamia imperfectly understands the amorous, poetic and magical *carmen*, and as a result of the wrong power of the wrong words brings about the very misfortune she fears the most. She controls neither the sense of some words nor the manner of saying them, and thus, owing to her paranoia, obsession and incompetence – and to the (un)sympathetic magic – she actually causes her husband's death. For example, her husband is still alive (sic!) when she says she envies Trojan women for their being able to attend their husbands' funerals. It is a bitter irony that her words and deeds cause the very misfortunes from which she would protect her husband to happen to him. In Fulkerson's interpretation, both her decision that during her husband's absence she would live like him (for instance not heeding her personal appearance; this is the so-called sympathetic magic, *similia similibus*, described by Frazer) and her misguided use of the words of *carmen* in order to reverse sinister auguries referring to Protesilaus' fate are magical.

What happened later depends on the author. Some say that Zeus animated the statue with Protesilaus' spirit for a few hours; others that the true spirit appeared side by side with the false effigy, and yet Laodamia preferred the lifeless doppelganger. Even in Sologub's play, *The Gift of the Wise Bees* (1907), which was written later than Wyspiański's tragedy, Hades grants Protesilaus a few hours' respite, but it turns out that Laodamia does not wish to see her husband return: she prefers her doppelganger.⁹ In Ovid, Laodamia confesses: "I start from my sleep, and adore the nightly powers"¹⁰ (v. 111: "Excitior somno simulacraque noctis adoro"); so she first wakes up and then worships the *simulacra noctis*. Yet she immediately adds that she is as ardent in her daytime prayers: "The Thessalian altars cease not to smoke with sacrifices" (v. 112: "nulla caret fumo Thessalis ara meo").

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Wyspiański was inspired by Ovid's irony. He had received excellent grounding in the classics at St. Anne Gymnasium (one of the oldest secondary schools in Poland, today still among the best), and his comprehensive education in this respect seems to have had

7 J.-P. Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, London, 1985.

8 L. Fulkerson, "(Un)Sympathetic Magic: A Study of *Heroides 13*", *The American Journal of Philology*, 2002, vol. 123, no. 1 (Spring), p. 81.

9 A. Field, "The Theatre of Two Wills: Sologub's Plays", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 1962, vol. 41, no. 96 (December), p. 83.

10 Ov. Ep. Sapph. 13. P. Ovidius Naso, *The Epistles of Ovid, translated into English prose...*, London, 1813.

a considerable impact on his later artistic choices. In this school, Ovid was on the compulsory reading list; the teacher involved was the excellent classical philologist Wojciech Rypel.¹¹ Yet Tadeusz Sinko suggested that already one of the funeral elegies by Jan Kochanowski had been inspired by the story of Protesilaus and Laodamia,¹² so it may be argued that Wyspiański may have known the tale not necessarily from his Latin course, but from elsewhere. Yet perhaps Wyspiański intended to ridicule Matejko, to suggest that he did not differ from a shaman trying to work his sympathetic magic – a “convincing analogy” – based on similarities and illusions and just as ineffective as Laodamia’s *imago*. In Matejko’s approach, Poland’s future triumph could be based on images conjuring up bygone achievements, by implanting them in Poles’ souls and establishing a mysterious kinship. After all, it was owing to Matejko that Polish kings, past events and forgotten triumphs came alive again. And it was the contemporary citizens who assisted in reviving them; this meant that the nation’s potential was rooted in the magic of similarity. Yet, according to Ovid, the magic that linked Laodamia with the wax simulacrum of Protesilaus at the time when Protesilaus was still alive in Aulis meant she had sentenced herself to death; she would have to die when her husband died, or even earlier, when the statue became damaged. Making such “identical”, illusionistic images is therefore extremely dangerous to those who yearn for their adored one – not only to Laodamia, but also to Poles dreaming of a proud Poland peopled by marvellous heroes. What is more, considering that Laodamia had practically stopped awaiting her husband’s return and transferred all her feelings on the statue, whereas theoretically he could still come back – perhaps the Polish people had invested their sentiments in an equally false way? Perhaps art as viewed by Matejko was a deceptively “instead” thing: a wretched, if spectacular, substitute, perhaps even a harmful one? In Ovid’s text Laodamia says: “Surely it must be so: this image is more than what it seems” (v. 155: “Crede mihi, plus est, quam quod videatur, imago”). She speaks to it tenderly, as she should to her husband, and the statue accepts her embraces: “I take a pleasure in contemplating the wax which exhibits your likeness. As if you were present, I make use of the softest expressions, and address it in words due only to [you]” (v. 152–154: “Quae referat vultus est mihi cera tuos: Illi blanditias, illi tibi debita verba dicimus, amplexus accipit illa meos”). But most importantly, in Ovid’s interpretation Laodamia produces her husband’s image WHILE HE IS STILL ALIVE. The Polish anthem provides an obvious parallel: Poland lives “while we are alive”, so the deceptive images of its past may turn out to be more appealing than the imperfect contemporary Poland. The *imago* and *carmen* make Laodamia fully satisfied, even though with *gaudia falsa*, a deceptive delight, which does not

11 M. Romanowska, *Stanisław Wyspiański*, Cracow, 2004, pp. 9–10.

12 Cf. T. Sinko, *Antyk w literaturze polskiej. Prace komparatystyczne* [Antiquity in Polish Literature. Comparative Works], ed. T. Bieńkowski, Warsaw, 1988, p. 83.

allay longing. If we translate this into a social diagnosis, we shall see *Protesilaus and Laodamia* as a foreshadowing of the torpor in *The Wedding* [Wesele]. In the circumstances, the naked truth is more fitting: not the triumphant kings, but their actual cadavers (like those from the designs for the stained glass windows for the presbytery of the Cracow cathedral), because the former are no more than “seemingly genuine” counterfeits. As in Fulkerson’s interpretation, the death of the young couple is caused by Laodamia’s wrong use of *carmen* and the *imago*. Stanisław Brzozowski wrote:

Laodamia stretches her arms towards the bygone world: that’s where I desire to live! My soul dwells there, with you, and Charon’s boat – the boat of death – sails towards there through the silent sea (...). To whom art is not the creation of life, but escape from it; who seeks in it a country where an inert psyche is an end unto itself, has already died or has chosen what is worse than death: a death-in-life, a forfeiture of the soul because of a lie.¹³

In Wyspiański’s text, Laodamia’s loneliness in her melancholy house is all the more painful since, as Wyspiański puts it, caresses were to enfold the couple and unite them “with bonds of affection”.¹⁴ Songs provide relief; the Bard visits the widow and “each day a well-turned strophe adds”; in Laodamia “there wakens different a song than before”.¹⁵ But this does not help either; Ennui descends upon her every evening. In Wyspiański’s interpretation this statuesque figure clad in black is a strange apparition that mirrors Laodamia’s gestures and is thus closer to her than a sister: “I look upon thy figure, as if myself were repeated before me”.¹⁶ Presently, there comes Sleep, greeted by Laodamia: “my world – my better world”.¹⁷ In practice, therefore, Wyspiański introduced two doppelgangers: the effigy of the husband animated by the song and an image of the wife under the guise of Ennui. Was this the way he perceived spectators eager for a spectacle? Ennui, in turn, summons Nightmare (Oneiros) “with a great moth mask on his head”,¹⁸ who makes visions appear upon a curtain: a ship seen against the sapphire sea and Protesilaus himself. Yet as Laodamia awakens the apparition of her husband vanishes; Hermes comes instead and the widow announces her wish to him: “[F]rom the underworld thou thyself shalt lead him, for whom I yearn, to me, who yearn for him”.¹⁹ She happily orders the house to be decorated and says:

13 S. Brzozowski, *Legenda Młodej Polski* [The Legend of Young Poland], wolne lektury, Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska, s. d., p. 203.

14 Wyspiański, “Protesilaus and Laodamia. A Tragedy”, part I, p. 251.

15 Ibid., pp. 252–253.

16 Ibid., p. 261.

17 Ibid. p. 263.

18 S. Wyspiański, “Protesilaus and Laodamia. A Tragedy”, part II, translated by E. M. Clark and G. R. Noyes, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 1993, vol. 11, no. 33 (April), pp. 667–690.

19 Ibid., p. 669.

For the pangs that start
 From my aching heart
 The day of freedom hath begun to shine.
 (...)
 The sweet scent of the misty steam
 Will softly float, and charms invoke
 Of visions in a dream.²⁰

Soon she joyously exclaims: "My visions thus with songs thy harp invest; 'Tis Eros' might!" and summons the Old Man versed in charms and spells, wishing to offer a sacrifice of milk, honey, wine, white flour and two lambs, a white and a black one. The Chorus, however, notes Laodamia's enthusiasm with quite a different attitude: "Her dreamy visions thus disturb her rest, Shadows and Night!";²¹ and the Old Man himself adds: "The fire of hellish flames now seizeth thee".²² Nevertheless, the widow's plan is successful, Hermes exits the tomb, leading Protesilaus behind him, and joins the couple's hands. Laodamia recognises her husband only by his accoutrements and armour: "Thy coat-of-mail glitters, And gleams thy helmet, thy girdle, and sword".²³ She puts her hands on his breastplate, saying: "This is thy coat-of-mail, thickly studded with golden nails in zigzags and circles. The gorgeous tufts of hair on thy helmet are dipped in red resin; the hair of the steed that thou thyself captured on the broad meadows of Ptelea, on the meadows rustling with luxuriantly growing grass. – This is thy cunningly wrought girdle, proof against the most powerful blows and not yielding even to the darts of Apollo; a gift of my father. Warrior, behold thou art before me in Glory and Fame";²⁴ she continues to speak to her husband, although his hand is cold and bloodless, his face is pale: "From thy heart, a chill hath touched me; my arms are still with cold".²⁵ The irony of Laodamia's detailed comments on her husband's armour, ending with the impassioned: "Fame nestles in the gleams of thy helmet, of thy corselet",²⁶ is clear practically only in the context of Matejko's historicism, his predilection for collecting antique artefacts, pieces of armour and various details of weaponry. No wonder that when Protesilaus embraces her, she awakens suddenly and complains that the breastplate sounds hollow, as if it did not hide a warrior's breast, and words dissolve into empty sounds. She asks: "Art thou living?",²⁷ she tries to charm reality, but such spells resemble the illusions of those who gazed at Matejko's paintings and took contemporary men dressed in historical costumes for Sigismond the Old, Jan III Sobieski or Rejtan. But

20 Ibid., pp. 670–671.

21 Ibid., p. 671.

22 Ibid., p. 675.

23 Ibid., p. 679.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 680.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

a kiss from a pale and cold lover – even though one perfectly dressed from the point of view of the history of costume – is lethal; ultimately, it kills. Laodamia recalls that once she used to invigorate her husband with song, not spells: “I myself was wont to hum such songs, and my serving maids and companions would accompany me on strings made of the entrails of lambs, which were stretched across the skull of a black-horned bull”.²⁸ But then she realises: “[B]ehold the time of dreams is ended now for me, And I have passed into reality, unchanging”;²⁹ the Chorus comments: “Thy vainly striving hand doth grope around; Thou findest nothing there”.³⁰ This truth finally dawns on Laodamia: “A strangling weakness now hath fallen on my heart”³¹ – “He will no longer clasp me in embrace, My ardent lover-husband. See, His spirit now Before mine eyes hath floated off in mists”.³² When the magical, hypnotic illusion has dissolved, her loneliness and unhappiness grow deeper; they are so unbearable that death proves to be the only solution.

It may be assumed that the tragedy *Protesilaus and Laodamia* constitutes Wyspiański’s elucidation of historicism in art and of a lethal image. The tragic aspect of such an attractive apparition must have grown all the clearer in 1903, when the role of Laodamia was taken on by Helena Modrzejewska, one of the greatest actresses of the era. Wyspiański determinedly associated the status of an image with the human condition and just as clearly differentiated between the power of the song, i.e. art, and the power of empty enchantments, considering illusionism to be of service only to the latter. In the notes to *Bolesław Śmiały* [Boleslav the Bold], he ridiculed the Academies granting bonuses for meticulously rendering the “shape of a bishop’s mitre”, asserting that scholars must learn to accept the fact that historical accuracy is a measure of mediocrity; only art and unfettered thought caused the “protagonists to play upon my imagination”.³³ His determined avoidance of any spectacle of illusion would lead Wyspiański to search for inspirations in the micro-scale, for instance in the botany of the modest flowers of Polish meadows. In his approach, this meant looking into the essence of things without spectacular shows and the impressive yet ultimately suspect tours de force. Space would become equally important; Wyspiański would assert that an artist ought to paint practically the first thing available, “without searching”, because it is the manner that matters: “So that there is air, there is space”.³⁴ No less importantly, this space was a created space (literally, as in his design for the

28 Ibid., p. 683.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 684.

31 Ibid., p. 685.

32 Ibid., p. 687.

33 *Jak meteor... Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907). Artyście w setną rocznicę śmierci* [Like a Meteor... To the Artist on the 100th Anniversary of his Death], National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 2007, p. 199.

34 Romanowska, op. cit., p. 16.

Bóg Ojciec – Stań się [God the Father – Let There Be] stained glass window and in the evident dynamic relation between the polychrome decoration and the stained glass windows in the Franciscan church in Cracow) – a performative space, as we would say today, which I understand in the simplest terms, following Wyspiański himself, who in his *Veni Creator* implored: “Let us with the Faith of the ages undertake ACTION”.³⁵ Occasionally, Wyspiański would balance his drive towards showing spatial depth with a foreground conceived in such a way that it veiled or even obscured the “essence” – the crucial thing shown in the further ground.

Such a prop-bearing masquerade, presided over by the grim Oneiros with “a great moth mask on his head”, like a reveller in a Venetian carnival (or a Cracow carnival, one painted by Matejko, but also by Siemiradzki), is like the kiss of a dead lover: it drains the vital forces, it causes a “strangling weakness”. Tadeusz Zieliński wrote that with the wax doppelganger “the similarity was striking but for the inertia [...]”.³⁶ Stanisław Brzozowski described a similar inertia as “inactive existence”.³⁷ This – when all the yearning woman wanted were the husband’s caresses to bind her to him with “bonds of affection”. Perhaps such bonds could be shown; perhaps this could justify the image created by the vast and wonderful *carmen*. Hence, since it has been established that a lethal image constitutes the topic of *Protesilaos and Laodamia*, it is necessary to inquire by what means Wyspiański assured himself that his own images were not such. This brings us to the image perceived as a derivative of the life that is dedicated to it; an image which aids the *conversio morum* as it does at a monastery.³⁸ Certainly, Wyspiański considered images which incited one to action to be an antidote to the disturbing and harmful “dreamy visions [...], Shadows and Night”. In fact, it has been noted that Wyspiański’s paintings “exploded with a convulsive power”,³⁹ in contrast to his theatrical works, which were static and, according to Zdzisław Kępiński, stiff, especially in some of his historical dramas: “[T]hese projections are characterised by insufferable grandiloquence and pompous posturing, with the heroes choosing to stand in a monumental immobility, akin to singers pulling off hour-long arias in the operas of Wagner”.⁴⁰ This essay is not the place to discuss the theatrical image, but, briefly, the hieratic quality that was so harshly criticised by Kępiński was most probably another result of Wyspiański’s reflections concerning the toxicity of excessive illusiveness. His search for means of expression

35 S. Wyspiański, “Hymn”, in: idem, *Rapsody*; Klasyka literatury, e-tekst.pl, p. 44.

36 T. Zieliński, *Starożytność bajeczna* [The Fabulous Antiquity], Warsaw, 1956; reprint of a passage from the chapter “Protesilaos”, after the programme of Teatr Polski in Wrocław (season 1968/1969) *Stanisław Wyspiański, Protesilaos i Laodamia*, Wrocław, 1969, p. 12.

37 Brzozowski, op. cit., p. 198.

38 Cf. W. Hood, “Saint Dominic’s Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico’s Cell Frescoes at S. Marco”, *The Art Bulletin*, 1986, vol. 68, no. 2 (June), p. 197.

39 Morawińska, *Wyspiański...*, p. 21.

40 Z. Kępiński, *Stanisław Wyspiański*, Warsaw, 1984, p. 162.



Fig. 2. Two windows in cell no. 28 on the first floor of the San Marco monastery in Florence: on the left, a window giving onto the reality of *Christ Carrying the Cross, with the Virgin Mary and St. Dominic* (*Cristo portacroce con la Vergine e San Domenico*), fresco by Giovanni da Fiesole, known as Fra Angelico, and assistants (ca. 1439–1445); on the right, a window giving onto the garth, the bustle of monastery life and the sunlit sky; photo by A. Markowska.

that would make the image an active, not an imitative, one is perfectly elucidated by *Protesilaus and Laodamia*. To return to the painted images: firstly, the purpose of the line, which is ubiquitous in Wyspiański's works, seems to be to impart a purely visual dynamism, not a dynamism deriving from topic or decorum. Secondly, his device of hindering the perception of these images, e.g. by obscuring the foreground, seems to serve the same purpose. Thirdly, a similar principle governs Wyspiański's play with scale, for instance, his enlargement of small objects (such as weeds), i.e. the process of increasing the visibility of what is nearly invisible. And, fourthly, equally important is his attempt to transpose images into an actual space, e.g. by means of the applied art – art requiring bodily movement and resulting in the fact that the image is apprehended in many different ways, it is inhabited, so to speak, as was proposed some centuries earlier by, to give just one example, Fra Angelico at the San Marco monastery.

Let us begin by considering the first three elements. When writing about Wyspiański's penchant for the line, for figures surrounded with a contour "as if they were made of a thin wire hanging in space",⁴¹ Agnieszka Morawińska calls attention to the fact that earlier John Flaxman had rejected oil painting in favour of drawing, which "did not imitate and did not deceive", and that the tendency towards linear art was linked with manifesting

41 Morawińska, op. cit., p. 28.

anti-materialism and idealism.⁴² Wyspiański's line, which sometimes resembled the pre-Romanesque interlace ornaments at Wawel and sometimes, as has recently been demonstrated by Katarzyna Nowakowska-Sito, ornaments characteristic of Mycenaean art,⁴³ is contemporary, much in the spirit of Art Nouveau; yet it seems possible to demonstrate its derivation from his attempts to understand an ornament that would concurrently relate to choreography and to writing. Wyspiański's line is expansive, sometimes flame-like, sometimes fluid, sometimes nervous, drunken or rugged; but it is always full of vitality. It can be an abstract alphabet and a representing form, on the borderline between writing and image. In this manner we participate in the workings of memory; the illusive image transforms into a sign, an image can be read from a symbol to an illusive representation and back again, all in a single painting. Irena Kossowska wrote about Wyspiański's line: "At times entirely freed from the task of rendering the contours of objects, it became the main carrier of expression [...]"⁴⁴ This is perhaps what Cezary Jellenta had in mind when he wrote that Wyspiański's line "bores through and transfixes all – from the past to the present. [...] eats through the rounded form of ordinary human beauty and gnaws at its edges like a worm".⁴⁵ His signature, an initial, rendered with a sweeping gesture of his hands, most often constitutes an element of a complex linear arabesque which – in keeping with the derivation of the word 'initial' from the Latin *initium* – points to the beginning of the vision he had created, a beginning located in the gesture, and thus the body, of the artist. It signifies an unbreakable bond with the universe, which is defined not by an occasional studied tour de force, but by a constant affinity of rhythm. The vivacity of Wyspiański's twisting line, suggestive of a serpentine sprout or swirling stem, implies his particular association with plants, which is reminiscent of Ovid's metamorphoses of people into plants. The initial often gently transforms into the contour of a concrete figure; thus, the artist marks his

42 Ibid., pp. 17 and 18.

43 K. Nowakowska-Sito, *Między Wawelem a Akroplem. Antyk i mit w sztuce polskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku* [Between Wawel and Acropolis. Antiquity and Mythology in Polish Art of the Late 19th/Early 20th Century], Warsaw, 1996, from Fig. 130 passim.

44 I. Dżurkowska-Kossowska, "Serie 'widoków na kopiec Kościuszki'" [The Views of Kościuszko Mound Series], *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 1990, no. 1–2, p. 126; further on she writes that the line became "a graphic record of the inner movements of the author's psyche", which means she perceives duality as an oscillation between the inner and the outer spheres; while not wishing to discredit this interpretation, in my continuation of the reflections of this outstanding expert on Modernism I attempt to put emphasis elsewhere and I perceive the duality of image as two ways of presenting the world; two ways of approaching the image. At the same time, I agree with Kossowska that "the trembling of the artist's hand" (Ibid., p. 126) plays an important role in this binary nature.

45 C. Jellenta, "Sztuka" [Art], *Ateneum*, 1903, part 3, quoted after: W. Juszcak, *Teksty o malarzach. Antologia polskiej krytyki artystycznej 1890–1918* [Texts about Painters. An Anthology of Polish Art Criticism 1890–1918], Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk, 1976, p. 396.

presence in the represented world and shows concern for its destiny. As he wrote to Rydel: "I am sorry for you when I see you like a plant (it perishes on the same field on which it sprouted)".⁴⁶ In this approach, the proud and visible initial is therefore a mark of the acceptance of Fate, of *vis maior*, of the peculiar synergy between the artist and his environment, including the nation. In Wyspiański's art, lines emphasise the edges of objects and the volume of figures, turning realness into a function of the sense of touch as well as the sense of sight, in a defence against the effects of deceitful and lifeless illusiveness. At the same time, his line is always sweeping, full of inner energy and a redemptive potential for metamorphosis. It is a proof of animation and life as represented by rhythm. This rhythm and vigorousness must stand above the striving for illusion and spectacle. This is my understanding of Wyspiański's impression of the landscapes along the Rudawa River, which he related in a letter to Karol Maszkowski (1890): "I shook a branch... pearls and diamonds fell and settled upon my face with the coldness of snow [...]".⁴⁷ Wyspiański shook off the pearls and diamonds of Matejko and Siemiradzki, and although the attendant emotion, as he confessed himself, was sadness, it was a sadness related to honesty and the attainment of truth. Yet since this line is very quick, flexible and vigorous, its deep blackness is all the more surprising; it is like a chasm in the material reality, with eternity seeping through the fissure.

The device of the obscured foreground was noted by, among others, Wojciech Bałus: a tree "obscures the Mound with its branches; in the 'thaw' version from Warsaw, it protects the grave of the Commander as if with the palm of the hand".⁴⁸ Also, Bałus noted the dominant element in the motif of the hills and the Mound "with a road and trees directed towards it, which is sometimes revealed and sometimes obscured".⁴⁹ He links this process of revealing and obscuring with the dignity of discovering the truth: "After all, the visibility of the Mound is governed by something that does not depend on the viewer; something obscures it or reveals it to him, bending a tree, lowering (or, respectively, raising) the curtain of a cloud and a blizzard".⁵⁰ Among the landscapes with revealed access to the core image are, for instance, *A View of Wawel* [Widok na Wawel], 1984 or 1985, National Museum in Warsaw, *Planty Park with a View of Wawel* [Planty z Widokiem na Wawel], 1984, private collection, *A View of the City Theatre from Zacisze Street* [Widok na Teatr miejski z ulicy Zacisze], 1984,

46 *Jak meteor...*, p. 167.

47 Quoted after: W. Trojanowski, *Wyspiański, artysta-człowiek-życie* [Wyspiański. The Artist, the Man, the Life], Warsaw, 1972, p. 15; also I. Dżurkowska-Kossowska points to this passage, cf. "Serie 'widoków na kopiec Kościuszki'", p. 127.

48 W. Bałus, "Stanisława Wyspiańskiego 'Widoki z okna pracowni na kopiec Kościuszki'. Spór o interpretację" [Stanisław Wyspiański's "Views from the Atelier Window towards the Kościuszko Mound". A Debate on the Interpretation], *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 1993, vol. XXIX, p. 181.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

50 *Ibid.*

National Museum in Cracow, and *A View of the Church of the Virgin Mary from Planty Park* [Widok z Plant na kościół Mariacki], ca. 1900, private collection. A counterargument might be offered that such were the true views – trees and shrubs obscuring the panorama appeared in the foregrounds of photographs, for instance, in those by Ignacy Krieger. This may be followed by the observation that this is only a confirmation of the influence of photography. And yet, for instance, Degas' paintings, which were based on photographs, illustrate the peculiar momentary quality of perception, the suddenness with which the view is frozen in a frame, the abrupt unexpectedness of an epiphany... Bisected figures going off-frame and an empty central field: a similar arrangement, at times, but with Wyspiański the accent is nevertheless different, since the great monuments of the past are permanent, lasting, though invisible. The important things are a great mystery, impossible to visualise or express in a language. It is not enough to show them, even clearly, because looking is not tantamount to seeing; looking means feeding on illusions, phantasms and apparitions. *Straw Rose-Cones* [Chochóły], 1898–1899, National Museum in Warsaw, are, to use a later term by Tadeusz Kantor, *emballages* – packages that hide the contents. The terror of not seeing is underscored by the shadows of the straw rose-bush cones: shadows of the undiscovered. In one of the vertical *Views from the Atelier Window towards the Kościuszko Mound*, the one dated 26 January 1905 (Royal Castle in Warsaw), the dry, stick-like tree branches obscure the top of the Mound, thanks to which the sweeping gesture used to draw the branches may seem a crossing-out or a cancellation of the famous hill consecrated to the national hero, even though it is indeed the topic of the work. In fact, Wyspiański himself wrote about how difficult the “blue-grey mound outside the window” was to discern, and in her commentary to his observation Morawińska noted that “the permanent structure is overlaid with temporal changes; it is sometimes a delicate lace, and sometimes a black, harsh net of lines of shrubs, shadows upon the snow, ruts on the road and thawing puddles; mist, hoarfrost or blizzard make an occasional appearance”. She concludes that not all is thus visible and “even the title motif vanishes”.⁵¹ In *Planty Park at Night* [Planty w nocy], 1900, private collection, a different hill and a church tower are seen dimly in the background, but in the foreground the light of a will-o'-the-wisp or a lonely lamp draws the eye, and the golden halo almost begs the spectator not to gaze deeper. In *Planty Park with a View of Wawel*, 1894, private collection, the little light assumes the shape of a golden Eye of Providence, a cruel mockery of those who take illusions for reality. Occasionally, the composition includes a screen, a veil of a kind, as in *A View of the City Theatre from Zacisze Street*, ca. 1894, National Museum in Cracow,

51 A. Morawińska, “Widok z okna” [A View from the Window], in: *Curia maior. Studia z dziejów kultury ofiarowane Andrzejowi Ciechanowieckiemu* [Studies in the History of Culture Presented to Andrzej Ciechanowiecki], Royal Castle in Warsaw, Warsaw, 1990, p. 206 and 202.

where the view is obscured by potted plants, a window frame and hoarfrost on the pane of glass. An image appears even behind the ice, although frozen. In the flame-like sapphire *Flowers* [Kwiaty], 1904, National Museum in Warsaw, there is also a suggestion of a floral veil – a net curtain, a spectacular cloaking decoration which probably conceals something or someone but is so dense that the spectator may only guess what is behind it. In *Blizzard, a View of the Kościuszko Mound* [Zadymka, widok na Kopiec Kościuszki], 1905, National Museum in Cracow, the mound has vanished. Nor is it visible in the earlier, horizontal *View from the Atelier Window towards the Kościuszko Mound*, 1904, National Museum in Warsaw. A variation of this group are paintings in which the foreground does not obscure the background, but draws the eye with its almost embarrassing plainness: the miserable sticks of naked shrubs, which are crippled and wretched and surprisingly reminiscent of Wyspiański's signature. In *The Bitter Cup of Gethsemane* [Kielich goryczy w Ogroju], 1896, National Museum in Warsaw, a pen-and-ink design for a relief, Christ is seen in the foreground, but he is entwined in the lines of trees, branches and roots; this work brings to mind a children's puzzle: find the contour of the Saviour in this lattice of shrub-like lines. The grid of offshoots in *Treasures of Sesame* [Skarby Sezamu], 1897, National Museum in Kielce, is even more metamorphic. When we think about the "bonds of affection", these wretched sticks of shrubs serve as nodes in the space of the painting; the tangle of lines creates a mysterious knot that conjoins the space and the artist, linking with it in a sacramental bond. Wyspiański may have got the idea of obscuring the view from designing stained glass windows, where the crisscross of the frame literally creates blind spots in the field of vision. Such a lattice separates the living from the dead, makes it impossible to look into the past, and instead of creating an easily accessible spectacle, it generates difficulties and barriers in the foreground of awareness. Matejko's *Wernyhora*, 1883–1884, National Museum in Cracow, is just about to exit from the painting's frame; persuasion is transposed into the expressiveness of an almost-direct communication. In Wyspiański's *Wernyhora*, which was a sketch for the design for a stained glass window in the Cracow cathedral, the aged seer seems to be behind prison bars and, worse still, he is mute, with closed eyes; he does not stretch his arms out or make dramatic gestures from which a message might be deciphered. He is only a phantom, perhaps just as deceitful as the *imago* of Protesilaus; and even if he truly is a corpse returned from the abyss for a while, what a troublesome, taxing and importunate guest he is! Oh, the impertinence of truth! An uninvited and tactless guest in an alluring world of illusion, with artefacts chosen with discernment... Is this not a reminiscence from Wyspiański's childhood, too? In the studio of his sculptor father he was, after all, brought up among a multitude of the "figures of the dead".⁵²

52 M. Romanowska, "Katedra i Zamek Królewski na Wawelu" [The Cathedral and Royal Castle on Wawel Hill], in: *Stanisław Wyspiański. Opus Magnum*, p. 148.

The “bonds of affection”, this unsightly mesh of little lines, is most ambivalent: the world is made coherent by a sheer act of will, by means of *élan vital*, with a sweeping gesture of the hand; the underlying ground can be boggy, watery and barren, frozen in a fatal limbo. The black, bushy line in the foreground provides a link to a secret alliance focused on the invisible: on the system of values, on imagination and responsibility. The mysterious link to the world is as much an apotropaic jumble of lattices as a hinge and a bond. It most often appears in the *Views from the Atelier Window towards the Kościuszko Mound* series. Here, the less sweeping, subdued and thinned initial is referred to by the expressive, over-large, thick yet dry stem of a plant which imitates the initial’s line; this seems to change the “bonds of affection” into bonds of bitterness and sarcasm, into a sense of defeat. In another take on obscuring the view, in a large group of landscapes the viewer’s eye is directed from the leafless stubs in the foreground towards a boggy track, or in fact water, further back. Cases in point are *A Rudawa Landscape* [Krajobraz z Rudawy], 1905, National Museum in Cracow, and *The Vistula near Cracow* [Wisła pod Krakowem], 1905. The latter is exceptionally tragic in its expression. In the foreground, the flourish of the initial has a counterpart in the tangle of withered weeds by the flooding river. The act of fastening with a bond of union is deeply ironic indeed. Further back, a vast surface of water mirrors shapes and deceptively combines reality with hallucination. In addition, the furthest ground with the sketchy hill is also separated by a dark line of tangled shrubbery, which causes almost the entire field of the painting to consist of the watery waste that imitates a mirror – closed, separated by an almost prison-like space. In *A View of Skatka* [Widok na Skatkę], ca. 1905, in turn, a flood of water rolls endlessly to the left and right, the boundaries are gone. Huge stick-like withes grow from a patch of land in the foreground, resembling a monstrous arachnid. A closer look reveals, on the black ground to the right, a counterpart to it in the micro-scale: the pathetic swirl of Wyspiański’s initial. The Pauline church and monastery on the distant horizon seem to be a mirage. These dry, dead stems are all that is real, tangible and approachable. Their size suggests the existence of a fissure – a flaw of space, not an embellishment. It was once said, with more than a hint of mockery, that the public wants to receive forms ready to eat like a beefsteak; Wyspiański’s insinuations made “a tremendous impression, which a most pedantic, strict display of forms would never have achieved [...] [b]ecause then a concrete, strict form would have been a falsity and a contradiction”.⁵³

As to the third element, i.e. the scale and proportion, it was already Wallis who noticed that in the designs for the Franciscan church the roses and lilies were larger than the human figures.⁵⁴ The exaggerated scale had been noted

53 E. Niewiadomski, “Sztuka” [Art], *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 1903, no. 10, quoted after: Juszczak, *Teksty o malarzach...*, p. 385.

54 Wallis, op. cit., p. 186.

even earlier by Adam Łada-Cybulski; in 1902, a Lvov newspaper published his description of the Blessed Salomea “on the background of the huge stylised delphiniums” and the “giant flowers” that “almost exude the scent of native fields”.⁵⁵ Vast pansies embellish the Franciscan polychrome. To render weeds monumental seems to be an exercise in ethics. Also, this idea seems to have originated from Wyspiański’s hope to derive his art from his own sources, from the here and now. After all, acanthus is a weed, too, only not in Poland. In the design for the *Polonia* stained glass window (1894) the stems are huge and terrifying, almost man-eating, a thing from a horror film. Even the plants are histrionic; even they are playing a role, they are theatrical, exaggerated; they hint at being real while deceptively drawing attention to physical attractiveness. Self-creative and dramatic, oscillating between style and stylisation, they are theatrical in their self-awareness. To render the gigantic snowflakes in the chandelier at the Medical Association House, Wyspiański used micro-photography; their exaggerated scale is a manifestation of insight into the essence of reality, also through the function of this particular object, which is to provide light – “as if his eyes were outfitted with mysterious spectacles that show the hidden nature of things”,⁵⁶ as Waleria Marrené-Morzkowska wrote in the year 1901. The strange, disturbing affinity between Wyspiański’s sweeping signature initial and the monstrous, exaggerated dry stalk in the foreground of the Kościuszko Mound panoramas has already been mentioned. Here, the tender and empathic rapport with the botanic world hints at a tragic irony, at unfulfilled dreams and a wild mockery of himself: a man who had reached for the unattainable, who had conversed with Homer, and who was dying in quite a different way than the Greek heroes he had brought back to life: by rotting alive like refuse on a compost heap. A truly trivial kinship awaited the man who had desired an Ovidian connection with the natural world: “faith in a shrub that does not bloom belongs to the same range of symbols as the alchemical notion of the square circle and the living stone that grants eternal life and happiness to the man who wins it and at the same time is the source of power and wisdom acquired while winning it”.⁵⁷ At risk of being sarcastic, one might say that in his battle with Academicism, Wyspiański preferred trivial, plain and blunt colloquialness to bombastic decorativeness, and that his *carmen* had turned out to be truly effective.

Finally, the fourth element, i.e. attention to processes, is crucial to Wyspiański’s approach to space. Describing his predilection for the line, I suggested that his paintings contain the history of representation, from the symbolic linear and character-like signs to the illusion of *mimesis*; hence that each

55 A. Łada-Cybulski, “Z Aten Polskich” [From the “Polish Athens”], *Tydzień* (Lvov), 1902, no. 7, quoted after: W. Juszcak, *Teksty o malarzach...*, pp. 392–393.

56 W. Marrené-Morzkowska, “Stanisław Wyspiański (I)”, *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, 1901, no. 8, quoted after: W. Juszcak, *Teksty o malarzach...*, p. 390.

57 Kępiński, op. cit., p. 88.

of his paintings is self-aware of its own history. If so, this self-awareness illustrates the history of representation, the manner of noting it, as an important part of the significance, which is discovered over time, in a long process of meditation, not in a sudden revelation. As has already been pointed out, Wyspiański hints at his kinship and rapport with space in the painting by means of a peculiar “affectionate bond”, which usually is a sort of labyrinth of leafless stalks, a lattice of sweeping lines in the foreground, a marked *correspondance* of lines and colour stains that surround and describe extremely different things. Space perceived as a part of mundanity and the prose of life is also evident in his designs for the “Boleslav hall” – the common room at the Association of Polish Artists in the TPSP Palace, as well as in the apartment owned by Tadeusz and Zofia Żeleński, in his own apartment, and in the interiors of the Medical Association House. It is also a component of the ordinariness of everyday religious rituals, as in the designs for the Franciscan church. The rapport with actual space also relies on the non-aestheticisation of life, on the preference for realness; on refraining from summoning “spectres through whose eyes we desire to look at the world to see beauty” – an approach which ultimately leads to suicide, to the destruction of a free soul’s natural structure; because when one wishes to speak in the name of life, the voice “resonates with enslavement, falsity and hysteria”.⁵⁸

It seems that Wyspiański never visited San Marco in Florence, so he could not have seen the two windows in each of the dormitory cells, or, more correctly, the window and the fresco, endlessly projecting two dissimilar images: one serving the *conversio morum* and the other that establishes reality as simply the view outside. In 1890, during his first trip abroad, Wyspiański made a tour around northern Italy in order to finally end up in Paris; in later years he only visited the capital of France. Yet when I consider the role of image in human life – the image that inquires about the power generated inside a person and the will to rely on oneself alone, but on oneself in a form developed through willpower and humility in everyday contact with a particular image – I cannot help but think about Fra Angelico. The monk managed to evade both the artiness and the attractiveness of the Quattrocento just as Wyspiański managed to evade the virtuosity and the decorativeness of Art Nouveau. Pavel Muratov, who has already been cited here, wrote that “a direct visual perception or the unconscious bodily sensation” was more important in the Italian 15th century than the judgement of reason. “When we approach the Quattrocento, we always hear a thunderous beat of a heart filled with the noblest and purest blood”, wrote Muratov, and added: “The essence of the Quattrocento is distilled to a notion as simple as living in the world”.⁵⁹ Although the comparison is ahistorical, we might risk the assumption that both Fra Angelico and Wyspiański aimed to produce images that would grow from and encompass

58 Brzozowski, op. cit., p. 204.

59 Muratov, *Obrazy Włoch*, p. 135.

all of life. Another aspect they have in common is a fact which is difficult to comprehend in this world of overabundant reproductions: that their works can be understood solely in direct contact; they summon the spectator to approach them and hence cause him to undertake an action instead of just looking. Even the fact that some of Wyspiański's works are not entirely successful does not offend us. We are dealing with a different quantity here, with the measure of meaning that exceeds artiness and aesthetic values. Paraphrasing Stanisław Brzozowski's declaration that refers to Żeromski, we might say that Wyspiański is viewed with an awakened soul or not at all, adding that this is a soul within a national historical horizon, a soul here and now, as local as the artist himself was local. Agnieszka Morawińska noted that for his most important works, Wyspiański selected techniques that ruled out making their reproductions and, in addition, many works are entirely non-photographable due to their format.⁶⁰ This "localness" means that a given work may be understood only within the created space. Wyspiański understood localness as even the act of selecting specific foodstuffs; when at Bad Hall, for instance, he would drink an infusion of willow leaves that kept his organism "in touch with a native plant, without an admixture of exotics grown overseas on far-away plantations".⁶¹ Since at Bad Hall he was surrounded by "German dragonflies, German butterflies, German grasshoppers and flies" and stated that *Die Sonne* was not as bright as the *słońce* over Cracow, he was happy not to create art when removed from Cracow. When Tadeusz Estreicher and Stanisław Eliaż Radzikowski visited him there, they brought him specially gathered branches of mountain pine from the Tatra Mountains.⁶² A special place in this localness was ascribed to Wawel Hill, an Acropolis, which Wyspiański perceived as a barrow and an Olympus in one. When art is spatially restricted and included in the rhythm of life, it makes it a "here and now" process and a fiction of everyday activity instead of a false mirage of Matejko's masquerades, which offered only a deceptive spectacle of almost-life. When closely linked with the everyday, art becomes, as Brzozowski put it, a "self-lynch", an "inner massacre", but also a guarantee of integrity and a test, because "Wyspiański stands alone on the stage, practically from the beginning to the very end".⁶³ This was because Wyspiański, having won his independence from Matejko, "sensed himself",⁶⁴ as Lucjan Rydel put it, and desired to rework this sense into the sense of himself in a synergic collective with the society. To achieve this, he needed to develop a style. In his *Teksty o malarzach. Antologia polskiej krytyki artystycznej 1890–1918*, Wiesław Juszczak

60 Stanisław Wyspiański *Opus Magnum*, ed. B. Piotrowska, National Museum in Cracow, Cracow, 2000, pp. 15–16.

61 T. Boy-Żeleński o Wyspiańskim, ed. S. W. Balicki, Cracow, 1973, p. 161.

62 Ibid., p. 362.

63 Brzozowski, op. cit., p. 199.

64 L. Rydel, "Ze sztuki" [From Art], *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 1896, no. 37–40, quoted after: Juszczak, *Teksty o malarzach...*, p. 387.

placed Wyspiański in the chapter entitled *Stylizacja i styl* [Stylisation and style], and the critics included therein generally appreciated his efforts to develop styles that were not borrowed but, as Stanisław Lack wrote, “grown from the personal soil”.⁶⁵ Zdzisław Kępiński’s charge of an “absence of a stylistic decision”⁶⁶ in many of Wyspiański’s works seems ungrounded in this context because such rational decisions would, in fact, constitute a stylisation. Complaints that he used an “impenetrably hermetic language”⁶⁷ are equally surprising, considering that Wyspiański expressed himself in the simplest way possible when it comes to the image of self-awareness at a given stage of history. Yet Kępiński was obviously much bothered by the question of style, as only slightly later he repeated his assertion: “He neither achieved a coherent personal style nor developed the foundations for a style that we might call national”.⁶⁸

Let us, therefore, elucidate the issue of the windows – Fra Angelico’s “double” window and Wyspiański’s window that vanishes because, according to Wojciech Bałus, the onlooker does not rule nature: “He is more of a voyeur, wishing to penetrate it by force and by looking overcome the distance that separates him from the horizon”.⁶⁹ In general, we may agree with Bałus that the goal was not to create a voyeuristic observer of a spectacle, but to reveal a synergy with the environment – a synergy that encompassed the potential for action – and that “striving for the Mound” and complicating this ardent hope are equally important aspects of the *Views towards the Kościuszko Mound*. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to assert what Wyspiański’s goal had been as definitively and authoritatively as Bałus does. In fact, already by drawing the comparison between Wyspiański’s series and the works of Fra Angelico, with which Wyspiański was not familiar, I relate my own perception of his work rather than claim to understand his goal. May the outstanding expert on Wyspiański’s output forgive me for writing about this artist in the first place, and for relating my personal path towards understanding the paintings of this unmistakably Cracovian painter and dramatist. From the point of view of Wyspiański’s conception of image, which he outlined in *Protesilaus and Laodamia* and which has been analysed in this essay, the frame of the window became pointless, because the duality of the image itself – the attempt to present a spectacle and to obscure it with a “curtain”, as Bałus inspiringly put it – has been accentuated strongly enough in the very structure of the landscape.

Paintings in the cells of the San Marco dormitory accompanied the monks as they awakened and fell asleep. Hence a fresco paired with a window, both on the same wall opposite the doorway, were manifestly present not only during exalted meditations. The interrelation between the painted image and

65 S. Lack, “O malarskich dziełach Wyspiańskiego” [On Wyspiański’s Paintings], *Krytyka*, 1904, z. 8/9, quoted after: W. Juszcak, *Teksty o malarzach...*, op. cit., p. 406.

66 Kępiński, op. cit., p. 94.

67 Ibid., p. 95.

68 Ibid., p. 101.

69 Bałus, op. cit., p. 182.

the image seen through an opening in the wall created a special node in the everyday bustle. The adjacency and mutual relation between the two “windows” is crucial, because this supportive relation, seen not as a conflict, but as a path, makes it possible to deeply affirm the world as it is. Only his rejection of the deceptive mirages, the “dreamy visions”, the spectacles of illusion conceived by Matejko and Laodamia as a consolation, allowed Wyspiański to boldly assert his own vision of image. He created the conception of a self-aware image, in which the desire for adoration is constantly confronted with the temptations of idolatry and want of criticism, with the falsity of a substitute. The “bonds of affection” are central to this oscillation as proof of a true connection with the universe. Adam Mickiewicz, who was Wyspiański’s favourite poet (at the very outset of his career Wyspiański had designed a pageant celebrating the unveiling of the Romantic poet’s monument in Cracow on 27 June 1898, during which images of Polish flowers were shown as paying a tribute to Mickiewicz) – was just as ardent in his request for the “bonds of affection”: “Who has never touched the ground can never enter Heaven”. When, “heeding the call of the earthly things”, we stretch our hand towards them, they cancel the standpoint of a guest, as it was described by Muratov.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

Abstract

Stanisław Wyspiański’s tragedy, *Protesilaus and Laodamia* (1899), is about the toxicity of excessive illusiveness and constitutes the artist’s elucidation of a lethal image. The magic that linked Laodamia with the wax simulacrum of Protesilaus sentenced both lovers to death; she would have to die when her husband died or even earlier, when the statue became damaged. Making such “identical”, illusionistic images is therefore extremely dangerous for those who yearn for their adored one – not only for Laodamia, but also for Poles dreaming of a proud Poland peopled by marvellous heroes. As Jan Matejko’s apprentice, Wyspiański saw his master introduce models who looked as if they had come straight from some theatre’s costume storage to illusionistic scenes resurrecting bygone events of Polish military glory. Perhaps Matejko’s historicism is just as ineffective as Laodamia’s *imago*, and his art was a deceptively “instead” thing: perhaps a wretched and harmful substitute? Wyspiański determined that the avoidance of any spectacle of illusion would bring us to the artist’s dream – to an image perceived as a derivative of the life that is dedicated to it; an image which aids the *conversio morum*, inciting action to be an antidote to the disturbing and harmful “dreamy visions”.