

THE RAILWAY IN COMMUNIST SYMBOLISM (Some observations on Soviet and Polish art)

Wojciech Tomasiak

Casimir the Great Academy of Bydgoszcz

1. The railway as a symbol

My article will deal with the railway used as a symbol in the Soviet and Polish works of the Communist era. I must strongly insist that it is nothing but a preliminary draft, since a comprehensive discussion of the question would lead to a vast study. Meanwhile I will only sketch its contents as well as suggest the parts into which the whole study could be divided. But, first of all, I would like to point out the works which have to be carefully examined. The main focus of this work will be literary works, although some important paintings, posters, sculptures and films will also be taken into consideration.

It is convenient to start with a theoretical frame, explaining what the 'symbolic usage of railway' will mean here. Roughly speaking, the train (or a railway) can be used in a work of art both as a subject and as a means of presentation. For most men of letters in the early nineteenth century, the industrial landscape seemed to be hostile and ugly, unimportant or even incompatible with a piece of true art. John Ruskin, the chief opponent of technological progress, complained: 'you can't have art where you have smoke'. William Wordsworth thought that steamboats and trains were 'at war / With old poetic feeling'¹. For romantic artists the railway

¹ *The Industrial Muse. The Industrial Revolution in English Poetry. An Anthology* compiled, with introduction and comment, by Jeremy Warburg, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1958, pp. xxviii, xxvi.

was either a strange thing or – at best – a classic case of unpoetical subject matter. One of the strongest obstacles preventing poets from exploring industrial objects was a lack of language that could be applied for describing the factories, machines and trains. Those not afraid of the dehumanizing effects of industrial revolution tried increasingly to assimilate the railways into poetry. This process entailed a creation of figurative language, enabling the poet to deal with new things in terms of old ideas.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century a railway functioned mainly as a 'tenor' of poetical metaphors, that is – as the subject to which the metaphoric expression is referred to. There was a tendency in the tropes to associate the railways (as belonging to the artificial world made by man) with Nature and its familiar components. Hence, at first a train was described in the animalistic terms, being connected with a snake, steed or bird. The words just mentioned were used as the 'vehicles' in the metaphors, denoting the comparatively new and odd things. When people became more closely acquainted with the trains, the entities of railway vocabulary began to serve as the 'vehicles'. A greater degree of intimacy with the new mode of transport entailed the increasing frequency of railway metaphors. While in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century the common practice was to describe a train in terms of something else, a few decades later one can observe an artistic practice of describing something else in terms of a train². There were – of course – some predecessors of this modern style of writing. The most interesting of them would be Karl Marx who by 1850 coined a famous phrase: 'Revolutions are the locomotives of History'. This phrase, equalling the social and political changes with the locomotive, modelled a great deal of similar sequences of words and had an enormous impact on Communist language. I will hereafter discuss the 'symbolic usages' as a mode of describing the social (or political) reality in terms of the railway. So the 'symbolic uses' will refer to the tropes (the metaphors, similes and symbols), in which the 'vehicles' are made of the railway vocabulary (or images).

Although the notion of metaphor is primarily linked with literary works, there seems to be no reason to restrict figurativeness to the verbal mode of communication. Arguably one can deal with the metaphorical

² Ibidem, pp. xxviii-xxxiv.

images (sculptures, scenes of films etc.), showing the objects that signify something else, mostly abstract ideas or a higher realm. The meaning of such images may be strictly fixed by exploiting the traditional and widely shared connections that link the presented 'vehicles' to the expressed subject matter. The figurative (or symbolic) usage of an image can be signalled by a sort of incongruity, a structure that strikes with an unexpected arrangement of its components. It is worth mentioning that a title makes a special contribution to evoke a desirable interpretation of a work. The titles of Socialist Realist works usually convey the abstract meaning, opening the fictional events onto a broader ideological interpretation. But the decisive role in suggesting the symbolic interpretation is played by tradition that establishes a range of secondary meanings (connotations) associated with some objects.

As Nikolay Nekrasov's poem *The Iron Road* indicates, the introduction of railways in Russia was accompanied by human suffering. The men laying the tracks worked in conditions of incredible hardship and danger. For a long time the common connotations for a word 'train' were 'destruction' and 'death'. The literary history of the Russian railway begins with the following description: 'The road runs straight: narrow banks, / Narrow poles, rails and bridges. / All along it there are bones, Russian bones...'. The railway came from the West, eliminating the horse-powered transport that for the centuries reflected the hierarchy of society. The various kinds of *karety*, *koljaski*, *podvody*, *tarantasy* (being the visual signs of separation and distinction between social and economic positions) were replaced by a train's compartment that brought to the travelers an experience of equality. The introduction of the railway was perceived by Russian intellectuals as a continuance of reforms first began by Peter the Great, the first monarch who had tried to westernize Russia, challenging its xenophobia, backwardness and rural culture. Hence death, associated with the early images of the trains, was from the very outset combined with the notion of 'progress'. For the Russian radicals a death in the railway circumstances became a collective sacrifice, inseparably bound to a social progress. The blood-covered trains of Communist culture should be examined in the framework of the tradition just outlined.

2. A body on a track

In Russian literary tradition the train is linked with death not only in the manner modeled by Nekrasov's poem. A famous work by Leo Tolstoy offers another usage of the railway, suggesting its destructive power aimed against the individual. Anna Karenina's death provides a symbolic commentary on a conflict depicted in the novel, namely – a conflict between the individual spontaneity and the social laws³. The scene with the heroine throwing herself beneath a train demonstrates the pressure of social order, the ultimate consequence that follows a breakout from the moral constraints. The suicidal death beneath the train's wheels belongs to the crucial symbols of the Communist culture. But it is hardly comparable with Anna's death.

The scene of suicidal death makes a climax of the story told in *Armored Train 14-69* by Vsevolod Ivanov. The Red guerillas have to stop the White train approaching Vladivostok, where the workers revolted against the czarist regime. The guerillas have no artillery; the terrain provides no material for building a barrier. The only solution is to throw oneself onto the track, making the locomotive crew stop. The sacrifice is done by a young Chinese. The scene of self-sacrificial death is prepared from the beginning of the story by passages describing the tracks in Nekrasov's manner. The events presented in the novel are situated along the embankment of the railway, resembling 'the one endless grave without crosses'⁴, 'a burial mound'⁵ or 'a huge coffin'⁶. The White train gets stopped by the body on the track; then it is overpowered by the peasants and hauled to Vladivostok as 'armored train "Polar" (...) under the red flag'⁷. The locomotive decorated with the red ribbon achieves in this context a very clear meaning. It visualizes History to whom one must offer one's blood in order to push it into a 'bright future'. What makes us understand this suicidal death metaphorically? Robert A. Maguire points to

³ G. R. J a h n, *The Image of Railroad in „Anna Karenina”*, „The Slavic and East European Journal”, vol. 25, 1981, no 2.

⁴ E. Z a m y a t i n, *The Islanders*, V. I v a n o v, *Armored-Train 14-69* [translated by Frank Miller], Trilogy Publishers: Ann Arbor 1978, p. 82.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 90.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 97.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 102.

the incongruity of the scene, stressing that a body-on-a track motif provides the heroic story with overtones of pulp-fiction and melodrama⁸.

The motif of a hero throwing himself beneath the train's wheels can be found in Polish culture of the Communist era. A figure of the young Chinese helping the Russian in their fight against the Whites has much in common with a young French girl, Raymonde Dien, a historical figure, who tried to stop a train carrying weapons for French soldiers in Vietnam. I will concern myself with her fictional portrait embedded in a poem by Wisława Szymborska and a painting by Andrzej Wróblewski from 1951.

Szymborska's poem entitled *The Shield*⁹ describes the heroic deed of Raymonde Dien, who 'laid herself on the railway tracks' becoming 'a strong shield for Vietnam's girls'. The work is based on two structural devices: parallelism and juxtaposition. The main idea is evoked by an opposition: the train of peace versus the train of death. The following passage shows this juxtaposition: 'I live in a country, where the trains are carrying bricks for the future houses, / while she [Raymonde Dien] in a country, where the trains are bringing the tanks for the future fallen'. A slight allusion to Anna Karenina appears in the refrain, reminding the reader that suicidal death on a railway track has always 'the great love' as its motivation. Szymborska argues that Raymonde Dien – like Anna Karenina – suffers of love, but contrary to Tolstoy's heroine her love is more valuable: it is not sexual love but a higher, sublime feeling directed towards the Vietnamese girls and – in general – toward world peace. While Anna's death is senseless from the social point of view, the suicide planned by Szymborska's heroine has constructive features. It functions as a 'shield' in the world struggle for peace.

Andrzej Wróblewski's work *Raymonde Dien – stopping a train transporting the weapons to Korea* [sic!] should be examined in a framework of iconographic tradition that comes from the French Revolution. The foreground of Wróblewski's painting is structured by juxtaposition of a girl and a steam engine. The female character is depicted as walking toward the locomotive's buffers, with the right hand raised in a despairing gesture. There is a group of male characters in the background. They seem to be

⁸ R. A. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil. Soviet Literature in the 1920's*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1987, pp. 140-141.

⁹ W. Szymborska, *Dłatego żyjemy. [Poezje]*, Czytelnik: Warszawa 1952.

running towards the train. The gesture of the girl may be understood in two ways: as stopping the locomotive or giving a signal to storm the immobilized train. The latter interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Wróblewski's depiction of the female figure bears strong resemblance to Delacroix's painting *Liberty leading the people at the barricades*.

Victoria E. Bonnell argues: 'The Bolsheviks paid close attention to French revolutionary tradition; it served as the key element in their master narrative of the world historical struggle for liberation and as a source of symbols and images for expressing new political ideas'¹⁰.

The key figure of French iconographic tradition was Marianne, the 'feminine Hercules', used many times to visualize the power and determination of the revolutionary movement. Wróblewski used Raymonde Dien as the new Marianne. The meaning of his work is very clear: a tribute to world peace should be paid anywhere; defence of peace requires the highest price. The important role in transforming the 'realistic' painting into a symbolic one is played by an ideological commentary attached as a title.

A body-on-a track motif can be elaborated in a way that does not involve death but the hero's physical or mental pain instead. A hero of Nikolay Ostrovsky's semi-autobiographical novel, *How Steel was Tempered*, exemplifies a perfect Communist, 'to whom personal interests are nothing compared to general interests'¹¹. Pavel Korchagin is the clearest incarnation of a new Soviet man whose activities lead to a devastation of his health: paralysis, blindness and ultimately death. He was seriously wounded during the Civil War, but he definitively ruins his health while clearing a railway line near the Soviet-Polish border. This job, resulting in illness, symbolizes a life led only for the sake of the collective interest. The crucial feature of this character seems to be ascetism. Korchagin's life is totally subordinated to the goals of the new society. Even love is treated only as a device helping a person become a good member of the Communist party. Ostrovsky's hero was welcomed by the young readers as a new saint. In a few later novels (*The Young Guard* by Fadeev, *Tale About a Real Man*

¹⁰ V. E. B o n n e l l, *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1999, p. 67.

¹¹ N. O s t r o v s k y, *How Steel was Tempered*, Co-Operative Publishing Society...: Moscow 1952, p. 325.

by Polevoj) the characters read *How Steel was Tempered*, being inspired to heroism by it¹².

Since a body-on-a track scene has a strong educational impact (as the reception to Ostrovsky's novel proves it), there is no surprise that Soviet children's literature abounds with images of locomotives and stories of heroic railwaymen. Evgeny Steiner, talking about books for young readers, comments that a locomotive is seen 'as a kind of magic carpet, iron horse, a Socialist *vahana*'¹³. This magical bearer carries the new people into Communist heaven. On the other hand, a train 'becomes a Juggernaut into whose path one must throw oneself'¹⁴. Thus a body-on-a track motif turns out to be a revitalization of the archaic stereotypes, supplied with new ideological content.

3. 'Transport returns to normal'

A body-on-a track suggests an extraordinary event in an extraordinary time. The works discussed above deal with trains in wartime circumstances. Ivanov's novel is about an 'armored train', operating in the early days after the October Revolution; Ostrovsky's hero ruins his health while reconstructing tracks destroyed by the Civil War; Raymonde Dien commits suicide in a climactic moment of the Cold War. In the Civil War following the revolution, the railway played an important role that exceeds its functions considered as normal in peacetime. Peter Kenez says: 'In the earliest period of the Civil War, much of the fighting occurred along the railroad lines. This was the so-called echelon warfare (...)'¹⁵. The trains carried not only military equipment, but were used to supply the Reds with propaganda material. The 'agittrains' ran across the embattled country, carrying books, newspapers, newsreels and special films. Each agittrain also had its own press, printing the latest news. In the biggest Russian cities there

¹² A. M. Van Der Eng - Liedmeier, *Soviet Literary Characters*, Mouton & Co: 'S-Gravenhage 1959, p. 116.

¹³ E. Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades. Revolutionary Artists and the Making of Early Soviet Children's Books*, translated from the Russian by Jane Ann Miller, University of Washington Press: Seattle 1999, p. 118.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 139.

¹⁵ P. Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1986, p. 58.

were the 'agittrams' that ran through the streets, decorated with portraits of heroic soldiers, Communist leaders and slogans. Armored and agitprop trains became a symbol of hard times, when everything had to be treated with military discipline. In the days of the Civil War, passenger traffic was irregular or even chaotic; people waited weeks for a train, and the railway journey did not respect any timetables.

A picture painted by Boris N. Yakovlev entitled *Transport returns to normal* (1933) is devoted to the period when railways were put into peacetime operation. It depicts the front of the locomotive depot with the steam engines standing in front of it. There are a number of tracks and sidings that disappear into the building in the rear. The nearest engine in the right foreground (bearing a red star on its smoke box door) belches great puffs of white and grey smoke. It is without a doubt ready to begin its duty. Two engines standing side by side at the centre have probably finished their service and are awaiting the next shift. The two sets of passenger cars are depicted in the left background; the third one is partly visible as parallel to the engine with a red star. The whole composition shows a busy railway station in peacetime.

The 'normal' from the title should be understood in many ways. First of all, it means the trains can carry people and goods instead of troops and military equipment. Wartime results in the rolling stock shortage and use of the locomotives beyond their normal ability. In the Yakovlev's painting a normalization is expressed by an abundance of steam engines in good maintenance. And finally, Yakovlev's return to ordinariness means that the trains can respect the traffic instructions and – last but not least – the timetable. It seems that the railway timetable was for Russian people a harbinger of life returning to its peacetime order. Many literary works from the twenties (especially the poems) make an allusion to the timetable that turns out to be a sign of desirable normality after the Civil War nightmare.

The postwar railway had a great impact on the Soviet economy. The wartime traffic was contrasted to peacetime conditions thus: chaos versus order, lack of control versus full control, improvisation versus calculation. The same opposition extended into Soviet industry and agriculture, which after the 1930s were subordinated to a specific timetable – the national economic plan. The plan outlined the tasks to be accomplished during a fixed period. It determined the division of income between in-

vestment and consumption, etc. There is a suitable metaphor for planning in a present-day description: it was 'a gigantic, comprehensive blueprint'¹⁶. It may be said that the Soviet economic plan was a kind of a timetable that determined 'traffic' in all spheres of social activity. In the thirties, the images of the railway (for example: a painting *Autumn Signals* by Georgi Nisski, 1932) were symbols of this new planned economy. These symbols are clearer when compared to the images of the 'gadabout engines' from the early twenties. A famous poem by Nikolay Gumilov *The Lost Tram* (1921) warns about the self-destructive power of individualism. The same may be said about Osip Mandelstam's children's book *Two Trams* (1925), where the title vehicles were in danger when changing their everyday routes¹⁷.

While the railway network could be used to represent the planned Soviet economy, a steam engine seemed suitable to stand for the perfect factory. In the locomotive no part is self-sufficient; each item must work in cooperation, enabling the machine to run smoothly and safely. A passage taken from V. Ilyenkov's novel *Driving Axle* (1931) is an illustration of this kind of metaphor: 'Take an engine, for example: it has a boiler, and wheels, and a driving mechanism, and all sort of bolts - everything in its own place. And every part is equally important - the nut, the whistle, the smoke pipes (...)'¹⁸.

In other words: the normal factory means that all its workers are becoming the 'wheels' and 'cogs' in a great locomotive-like object.

In Polish Communist culture, the railway was used to symbolize normalization after WWII and the introduction of a planned economy. Polish territory was substantially changed after WWII: the eastern provinces (with their cultural centres of Lvov and Vilnius) were taken by the Red Army in 1939 and as a result of the Yalta Conference became parts of Soviet republics. In the early postwar years, millions of Poles were removed from the East to the so-called "recovered territory" which had formerly belonged to Germany. The official propaganda described this

¹⁶ McGraw-Hill *Encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union*, editor Michael T. Florinsky, A Donat Publication: New York 1961, p. 430.

¹⁷ E. Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 124-126.

¹⁸ V. Ilyenkov, *Driving Axle. A Novel of Socialist Construction*, Co-Operative Publishing Society...: Moscow 1955, p. 41.

movement in terms of 'repatriation', suggesting that the Polish people were simply sent back to their own country. There was no official information on the dramatic fate of the German population, which had been removed by force from their homes in Breslau, Stettin or Danzig.

A poster by A. Werka *Going to the West* (1945) may be treated as a suppression of the information concerning the great movement forced by the Communist regime. Migration in Werka's composition proves to be the normal railway journey. Describing the poster, James Aulich and Marta Sylvestrova say that it 'cloaks transportation of Poles (...) in an image of progress'¹⁹. The poster shows a steam engine, hauling a normal passenger train. Since the train is depicted out of the axis of symmetry, the direction of its run is seen as leading to the left side. The left on geographic maps conventionally signifies the West. This correlation is visualized by a schematic compass, superimposed on the train, with an arrow strictly indicating a letter Z (a Polish abbreviation of 'Zachód', the West). It seems to me that the interpretation by Aulich and Sylvestrova (stressing the 'progress' evoked by Werka's poster) can be enriched with a notion of 'normalization'. First, the poster has 'the normal' as its connotation due to the grammar structure of the slogan. 'Going to the west' replaces the sentence that would have been expected as more suitable: 'Go to the west!'. The imperative form would suggest something that must be done by reluctant addressees, while the indicative one suggests that the words in question are uttered by people who voluntarily do what is wanted from them by the authorities. Secondly, it is important to notice a resemblance between Werka's work and the railway posters, issued by the railway companies to promote their services. These posters have to attract the attention of the potential customers, appealing to those who like adventures, and promising them new experiences in the territory accessible by the newly-opened line. So Werka's work was to function as an advertisement, issued by the Polish State Railway (PKP) in order to announce its new western routes. Thirdly, there is another resemblance that should be taken into consideration, namely the similarities between Werka's composition and the covers of railway guide-books. Slight changes could

¹⁹ J. Aulich, M. Sylvestrova, *Political Posters in Central and Eastern Europe 1949-1995*, Manchester University Press: Manchester 1999, p. 137.

transform the poster into a conventional image, used to decorate the public timetable, a publication that is strongly associated with peacetime.

The railway journey, used as a symbol of postwar normalization, makes a structural kernel of *The First Days*, a novel written by Marian Ruth-Buczowski (1951). The story begins with a train departing from Warsaw and ends with its arrival in Wrocław. The journey lasts a few days; the train moves very slowly, often stopping unexpectedly. The timetable is presumably tentative; no one knows when the train will reach Wrocław. The increased normalization does not mean that the train respects punctuality, but rather that it can get to its scheduled destination. In Polish Communist culture – like in its Soviet counterpart – a national economic plan was described in terms of a timetable. The trains with coal, running across the country, the semaphors with raised arms or green lights, the railway guards controlling the railway traffic – all these comprise a framework for the symbols of the national plan (see for example *Locomotive*, a short story by Tadeusz Borowski, 1951; an anonymous sculpture of a trainman in Warsaw's housing district MDM, 1952; *Railwayman's Word*, a short film made by Andrzej Munk, 1953). Normal work in a Polish city was depicted with the help of railway accessories in a famous poem by Adam Ważyk, *A Postcard from a Socialist City* (1950).

4. 'On the general line'

A drawing *On the General Line*, lauding the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, at first sight follows the iconographic pattern described as a body-on-a track motif. The composition by G. Roze embraces the crucial components of this motif, that is, a train at full speed versus a group of people trying to block its track. However, there are some important differences that exclude an interpretation of the image in terms of heroism and sacrifice. First, the train shown at the centre of the composition is not an old-fashioned locomotive but a modern vehicle powered by an electric current. Secondly, the people on the track are shown as unable to stop or even slow down the speeding train. Thirdly, there is a sharp distinction between the Stalin-like driver and the people who represent the 'class enemies' or 'wreckers'. Moreover, a figure at the right, trying aimlessly to change the train route, has the features of Bukharin. The train, like a city tram, bears its route number – XVI, and a destination board – 'To catch

and overtake'. The abbreviations written beneath the driver's window refer to the Central Committee and to the Communist Party.

The drawing by G. Roze uses one of the most popular 'directional' metaphors of Communism, that is – 'the general (straight) line'²⁰. It was to create an image of History taken under control by the Communist Party and directed towards the 'bright' future. It had to argue that in order to approach the final goals one must follow the Party line, crushing all obstacles and opponents. The 'line' means the only true line, traced by the Central Committee and personally by Comrade Stalin. A body-on-a track motif explains History's turning point, while the general line symbolizes brand new History as an unchangeable movement toward common happiness. Thus the general line motif can be linked with the symbolic usages of train in nineteenth century art. Travel by train, being hauled by a steam engine, was perceived in the nineteenth century as participation in progress, both in the technological and social spheres of human life. This function of the train symbol is epitomised in Zola's famous novel *La Bête Humaine*. Describing Zola's symbolic trains, a contemporary critic insists that 'ils expriment l'humanité qui va vers son destin, insensible aux accidents qui frappent les hommes personnellement'²¹.

Whereas *La Bête Humaine* tends to associate progress as a struggle against human determinism, heredity and atavism, Communist culture replaces the biological constraints with ideological ones. So those trying to stop the train (or slow down its run) are defined as 'the class enemies' or 'wreckers' from the old regime. There are numerous railway compositions showing a conflict between the progressive forces and defenders of the hostile past. In the twenties and early thirties the role of the defender was often played by an Orthodox priest. Modern vehicles (a train among others) were used in posters featuring the war against religion and especially against the Church and its authorities. Richard Stites comments: 'Before the Revolution, the antimodernist [Konstantin] Leontiev's parable of a long black train blocking a religious procession had been a metaphor for modern evil. After the Revolution, agit-

²⁰ J. Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!. Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 2000, pp. 136-138.

²¹ M. Baroli, *Le train dans la littérature française*, préface de P. Gaxotte, Paris: Editions N. M. 1964, p. 267

trains sped into the vastness of Russia with their "good news" of a godless universe. One of them was actually called "The Godless Express"²².

The more drastic anti-religious activity – arresting or shooting priests and the struggle against believers – was shown as the 'anti-religious express of the Five-Year plan'. A poster issued in about 1930 depicts a group of people (mainly the *kulaks* and priests) trying to immobilize a train. It is a hopeless task, since the locomotive will certainly break the weak threads held across the track.

The role of a defender trying to block a train of progress could be played by Nature. The first Five-Year plan was conceived – in general – as a struggle with Nature. Katherine Clark argues: 'The great hydroelectric stations (...) were built to tame the arbitrary and destructive powers of the rivers. Collectivized, modernized agriculture would not be slave to the whims of climate. (...) The machine would triumph over elemental forces'²³.

The tractor becomes a symbol of progress defeating backwardness and Nature. Many Soviet posters relating to agriculture include images of the tractor, driven by young smiling men or women. The modern machine symbolizes the rapid transformation of rural life (as subordinated and controlled by Nature) into collective-farm prosperity. But the leading role in all the works featuring the victory over Nature is played by a train. There is a great antecedent of this symbol of Communist culture. I am referring to Alexei Gastev's utopian poem, written shortly before the October Revolution and titled *Express – a Siberian Fantasy*. It is structured by a travel motif, namely the voyage of the express train 'Panorama' across Siberia that underwent an industrial transformation. Stites comments on the poem as follows: 'Nature is assaulted not only by the physical upheaval of the environment but by a symbolic assault on natural shapes, lines, and curves which are now replaced or concealed by geometric forms and symmetrical lines, by cubes, parallels, magistral of agonizing straightness and squares'²⁴.

²² R. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1989, p. 108.

²³ K. Clark, *The Soviet Novel. History as Ritual*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington 2000, pp. 100-101.

²⁴ R. Stites, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

The theme of 'the horrors of the past' was superimposed by 'the victory-over-Nature' motif in a documentary film *Turksib* (1930), which told the story of the Turkestan-Siberia railway project. The film depicts enthusiasm of the young builders as well as the reluctance of the old inhabitants of Central Asia. An 'iron horse' versus the camels, straightness of the railway versus a directionless desert, creative steel versus destructive sands – all these oppositions form a symbolic pattern in *Turksib*.

During WWII a 'general line' was transformed into the 'road to Berlin'. The opponents were redefined too: the Nazi invaders took the place of class enemies. A cartoon from *Red Star* (1945) features a locomotive, marked with the American, British and Soviet flags, and surrounded by huge puffs of steam. The locomotive approaches a board with some people behind it; the board reads: 'the way is blocked'. The composition expresses the war effort of the Soviet Union and its Western partners.

In the works discussed above, there is a clear trend of bridging the gap between Nature and the class enemies. The substitution of nonhuman creatures for human beings can be associated with an allegory, an artistic form in which animals represent human types. The enemies were portrayed both as fauna and flora: frogs, snakes, spiders or weeds. During WWII the efforts to dehumanize enemies were extended onto the German fascists. 'The glorious path to Berlin' was depicted as dealing a death blow to the 'fascist reptile'²⁵. After the war, the animal image retained its function in Soviet art. In the early period of the Cold War the nonhuman creatures become more and more popular in the Polish works depicting the 'struggle for peace'.

A drawing by Bronisław Wojciech Linke (1948), for example, features a locomotive bearing the word 'peace!' on its boiler. A frontal part of the steam engine is replaced by a huge fist, while the boiler looks like a forearm supported by the locomotive's chassis. The two distinct images interfere with each other: the locomotive at full speed and a punch. The drawing's figures of the 'war-mongers' falls into the allegorical tradition: they are depicted as snakes and lizards escaping from the track. Since the escapees are relatively small, they are hardly visible. The composition appears on a cover of Linke's book entitled *We say: no! to the war-*

²⁵ V. E. Bonnell, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

mongers; the word 'no' is underlined. It is evident that the 'war-mongers' are defined by Linke as belonging to Nature. Moreover, the composition brings to mind the 'sweeping' motif, very popular in early Soviet art. From the outset, enemies of Communism (saboteurs, priests, *kulaks*, etc.) equal waste.

The image of enemies that should be thrown into the 'dumpster of History' appears frequently in Polish post-war art. It is highly popular in the works dealing with the Nowa Huta's birthday. An important part of the 'first socialist city' project was a new track that would be incorporated into the existing railway network. The track was traced across Mogiła village (near Cracow), intersecting the private farms and orchards. Tadeusz Konwicki's short novel *By the Building Site* (1950) tells about a collective laying the tracks to Nowa Huta. The task is rather difficult, since 'on the 22 of July the first train has to pass by this way'²⁶. In order to fulfill the plan the Party undertakes the process of 'enlightening' the workers and the 'elimination' of saboteurs. Thus building of a railway proves to be a reconstruction of the collective and a 'reshaping' of man. The novel ends in spring: there is no doubt that the railway line will be opened on time, and 'a new, beautiful man will emerge'²⁷, while 'the rusted nails and the other swinish stuff will be thrown aside as useless'²⁸.

The film *Cement* (the first part of *The Three Stories* production in 1953) chooses Nowa Huta's building plant to demonstrate that a class enemy can disrupt the closest collective, perfectly masking his hostile actions. Although the train motifs are used many times, one scene is especially interesting. During a conversation between two positive characters, one of them (a Party secretary) complains that a stick was put in the wheel. 'To put a stick in the wheel' is a well known Polish proverb, expressing an act of destruction or disturbance. People listening to this dialogue could recall the proverbial advice, 'do not put your fingers in the wheel'. No one can stop a train with a stick or bare hands. Moreover, fingers put in the path of a wheel in motion symbolize the severe punishment for disturbing of the 'socialist building', suffering destined exclu-

²⁶ T. Konwicki, W. Woroszyński, W. Zalewski, *Budujemy*, Czytelnik: Warszawa 1950, p. 131.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

sively for the 'enemies of the people'. In Konwicki's short novel the six-year plan is compared to a huge crushing machine²⁹; in *Cement* the wheel metaphor is used in the same function. The idea standing behind these expressions is very clear: socialist progress (following 'the general line' traced by the Communist Party) carries death or pain for those who do not participate in it for ideological reasons.

5. 'The great driver of the locomotive of history'

In the nineteenth century, the railway was conceived by specialists as 'one machine', consisting of steam engines, carriages, wheels and tracks³⁰. But this idea contradicts the common experience: a non-professional observer notices an 'ensemble of machines', a set of separable things, controlled by the railwaymen. The greatest attention was usually paid to the train that seemed to be wholly independent from the immobile equipment: stations, depots, signal boxes or semaphores. The running train was in turn perceived as a chain of isolated units with a locomotive hauling a set of cars. Finally, the engine driver won the respect of everyone who travelled by train. The danger and responsibility of his job brought him into the same class as a soldier or a sailor. Thus in public opinion the machine-like railway became a multi-layered structure. The technical image of the railway (a set of units depending on each other) was counterbalanced by the popular view, considering the railway as a hierarchical order: immobile machinery → train → steam engine → locomotive's crew → engine driver. In Communist culture the symbolic portraits of the railway exploit both types of connotations. They can suggest that in Soviet society all citizens are parts working together or, on the contrary, that there is a 'guiding force', the most important component of the new reality. In the twenties, works of art praised trains that respected the timetable; the railway becomes a symbol of socialist society organized in an egalitarian fashion. In the thirties the railway images appear in order to juxtapose a train (society) to its locomotive

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ W. Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey. Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*, translated from German by Anselm Hollo, Basil Blackwell: Oxford 1980, pp. 19-40.

(the Party) and the engine driver (Stalin). These hierarchical compositions have their roots in religion. Not surprisingly, the word 'cult' is used frequently in descriptions of 'high Stalinist culture'.

When analysing the metaphors in which Stalin is featured as an engine driver, one should mention their antecedents. The very first agittrain, dispatched from Moscow in 1918 and bearing communist slogans on its cars was called the 'Lenin Train'³¹.

In 1919 the first 'subbotnik' took place: workers of the Moscow-Kazan railway spent their Saturday repairing the old steam engines. One of the renewed machines, U-127, was a gift to Lenin, who became its 'honourable driver'. In January 1924 the U-127 did its last service, hauling a funeral train with Lenin's body. The legendary locomotive was then transformed into a monument standing in Moscow's Paveletsky Station (which was proposed to be renamed as the Lenin Station). But the story of Lenin's locomotive does not end there. The letter U stands for the Russian word 'usilenny', meaning 'strengthened'. Since the early twenties there had been a practice of using Bolshevik leaders' initials for identifying new locomotive types. For example, the FD and the SO, the heavy freight-locomotive classes, were taken from Feliks Dzerzhinsky (also called 'Iron Feliks') and Grigory (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze. It is highly possible that after Lenin's death the letter U was associated with Ulianov, Lenin's true name. The U class locomotives, working both in freight and passenger services until the late seventies, furnished the hardest evidence that 'Lenin lives'.

During a period spent in a Tiflis seminary, the young Iosif Djughashvili joined the Russian Social Democratic Party and entered the revolutionary circle at the railway workshop. An official biography underlines that as leader of the Soviet Union, Stalin often visited factories and collective farms, meeting the workers and talking to them. There are numerous paintings (as well as literary texts) that show these 'unforgettable meetings' and depict Stalin as a quintessential *vozhd* (leader). Stalin's relationship to the masses was usually described in terms of teacher, helmsman or father. The *vozhd* was presented as much taller than the

³¹ N. T u m a r k i n, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge (Mass.) 1997, p. 68.

people surrounding him. The Irakli Toidze's painting *Comrade Stalin with Railway Craftsmen in Tbilisi* (1926) is a good example of the magnification of Stalin. The leader is placed in the centre of the composition, in front of a huge steam engine. Since the name 'Stalin' comes from *stal* (steel), and means 'made of steel', the relationship between the man and the locomotive must have been unmistakable for his contemporaries: Stalin has superhuman power, hence his leadership guarantees that Soviet society will reach the 'Communism Station' destination as quickly as possible. In the early thirties, Soviet factories began to produce the new IS class of steam engines, designed exclusively for fast passenger service. The letters IS stood for Iosif Stalin. The locomotives symbolized Stalin's leadership in the most palpable way: they were the fastest Soviet steam engines built before WWII. Moreover, like the FD and the SO types, the IS locomotives bore the full patron's name on their boilers. The artistic metaphor equalling Stalin with the steam engine was thus transformed into reality.

The 'cult of personality' reached its climax in December 1949, on the occasion of Stalin's seventieth birthday. As Jeffrey Brooks observes, 'never had Stalin appeared more powerful or divine'³². Both Soviet and Polish men of letters felt obliged to write works that would contribute to the celebration. By the end of December a collection of poems entitled *Stanzas on Stalin* was published, giving another opportunity to praise 'the great leader'. Władysław Broniewski's contribution may be regarded as the most interesting, since his *A Word on Stalin* transforms a real biography into a kind of myth. Stalin portrayed by Broniewski is not a simple man, but a hero resembling the heroes of Russian folk tales. At the same time the poem closely follows the official version of Stalin's biography, intending to legitimize the 'man of steel' as Lenin's only successor. Thus, Broniewski's Stalin combines the features of the folk tales' hero with the portrait established by the Communist propaganda. It is widely known that the latter abundantly exploited the symbols of leadership, the most popular of which seems to be a helmsman or an engine driver.

In 1939 (on his sixtieth birthday) Stalin was labeled as 'the great driver of the locomotive of history'³³. This phrase is something more than

³² J. Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

a repetition of Marx's famous dictum: 'revolutions are the locomotives of History'. The crucial difference lies in the grammatical forms: the plural (Marx's 'locomotives') is substituted by the singular ('locomotive'). The reason for this change is strictly ideological. Marx's theory of progress was based on the notion of 'permanent revolution', that is, the 'chain of revolutions', leading to the final victory of the workers. In the thirties this Marxist theory was revised by Stalin himself, who maintained that there was only one decisive revolution, pushing the history of mankind forward; thus the events of October 1917 had definitely reshaped the world. In *A Word on Stalin* the railway metaphor plays a role of a key trope. The poem develops the image sketched by Marx and remodelled by Stalin. The figure of thought 'revolution equals a locomotive' is supplied with a complementary one: 'a leader equals an engine driver'. One revolution means one leader. Who is he? Who is the engine driver of the locomotive of History? Broniewski's answer cannot be a surprise: it is the 'comrade, leader, communist - / Stalin - the word like a bell!'³⁴.

The image of an engine driver cannot express all the meanings pertinent to an ancient helmsman metaphor. The engine driver is wholly dependent on the railway signals, ordering him to stop or go, and informing him which way the train is to go. The helmsman is given complete freedom in his decision to choose his way. The railway portrait of Stalin, depicting him as the engine driver, was supplied with the features of a signalman and pointsman, both symbolizing responsibility for safe and smooth traffic. In some Polish poems Stalin is presented as the signalman who in Andrzej Braun's words 'for our freedom / raised a semaphore twice'³⁵. But the signaling symbol is rather ambivalent, since a signalman (or pointsman) has to follow faithfully the instructions given 'from above'. He is no more than a 'hand of Revolution'³⁶, or a tool helping to achieve the planned goals. The pointsman metaphor turned out to be very useful during the early de-Stalinization period, following the so-called 'Polish October' (1956). Hubert Hilscher's poster ('Direction - democratization, sovereignty, socialism'; 1956) and Ryszard Chachulski's sculpture (1959;

³⁴ *Strofy o Stalinie*, Czytelnik: Warszawa 1949.

³⁵ A. B r a u n, *Reportaż serdeczny. [Poezje]*, KiW: Warszawa 1951.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

the work standing in front of the Szczecin Main Station) may be regarded as compositions in which the railway symbolism serves to overcome the legacy of the Stalinist past and to promote the new policy declared by the Communist Party. Both works use the pointsman metaphor in order to stress that after Stalin's distortions of the 'general line' the Party itself is able to set up a route to the 'bright future' anew.

6. Bam, bam, bam...

The construction of the Baykal-Amur railway (BAM) was the Soviet last effort to galvanise enthusiasm for a great project³⁷. The poems devoted to it were designed to show national pride stemming from the fact that before the BAM, 'building history knew nothing so grandiose'. From the seventies onwards the BAM project became a symbol, but one quite different from the symbol intended by the Communist Party. Svetlana Boym writes: 'In our ironic rendering BAM was not so much a "heartbeat of Russia", or a "heartbeat of the young", but an onomatopoeic sound, completely devoid of meaning. Bam, Bam, Bam – the noise of familiar clichés of the era of stagnation; it gave an enticing rhythm to the quintessential song of totalitarian decadence'³⁸.

There is no doubt that the railway plays an important role in anti-communist symbolism. The last one certainly should be a theme for another investigation.

Kolej w symbolice komunistycznej (Parę obserwacji o sztuce radzieckiej i polskiej)

Praca dotyczy funkcjonowania kolei w symbolice komunizmu. Przedmiotem obserwacji są dzieła sztuki radzieckiej i polskiej: teksty literackie, filmy, kompozycje plastyczne i rzeźbiarskie. Początek symbolicznego wykorzystania kolei przez komunizm wyznacza formuła

³⁷ Ch. J. Ward, *Selling the „Project of the Century”: Perceptions of the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway (BAM) in the Soviet Press, 1974-1984*, „Canadian Slavonic Papers” 2001, no 1.

³⁸ S. Boym, *Common Places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge (Mass.) 1994, p. 118.

użyta przez Marksa w 1850: „rewolucje są parowozami historii”. Po zwycięstwie rewolucji bolszewickiej w 1917 (a nawet jeszcze przed) kolej stała się środkiem do mówienia o rozmaitych zjawiskach i procesach społeczno-politycznych. W latach wojny domowej dużą popularnością cieszył się motyw „ciała na torze” (w sztuce polskiej za gościł on wraz z wybuchem wojny koreańskiej). Drugi wariant symbolicznego zastosowania kolei nazwany został – za tytułem obrazu J. Jakowlewa – „Transport wraca do normalności”. Pociąg kojarzony jest tu z normalnością, a ruch kolejowy staje się modelem scentralizowanego, planowo działającego państwa. „Na generalnej linii” – to motyw, który pozwalał mówić o zdecydowaniu i bezkompromisowości działań komunistycznego kierownictwa. Charakterystyczny był tu obraz pociągu, który – pomimo prób zatrzymania – pędzi ku „światlanej przyszłości”. Przekształceniem tej metafory „liniowej” (i akcentującej wspólny wysiłek kolektywu) jest zrównanie wodza z maszynistą, obraz (słowny i plastyczny), który ma zakomunikować wyraźną hierarchię ważności. Stalin jawi się w tym wariacie jako „wielki maszynista parowozu dziejów”. Po śmierci Stalina, w okresie „odwilży”, popularnością zaczynają się cieszyć kompozycje pokazujące przestawienie zwrotnicy (wyrażające symbolicznie powrót do leninowskich, kolektywnych metod sprawowania władzy). W latach 70. przez Związek Radziecki przetoczyła się wielka kampania propagująca „budowę stulecia” – „Bajkalsko-Amurską Magistralę Kolejową” (BAM). Artystyczne przedstawienia BAMu miały wyrażać podbój natury, współpracę przedstawicieli różnych narodowości, nową pozycję kobiety. Symboliczne zastosowanie kolei okazało się w tym wypadku „łabędzim śpiewem” komunizmu.