

ALL THAT JAZZ! On Tyrmand's Challenge to Stalinism

Wojciech Tomasik

Kazimierz Wielki Academy, Bydgoszcz

When Poland fell under the dominance of Stalinist Russia, jazz was forbidden as the 'music of rotten capitalists'. Listening to or playing jazz was understood by the Party authorities as a manifestation of sympathy for Communism's biggest enemy, the United States. In the Soviet Union, in the immediate post-war era, Western-style jazz was sternly condemned. The slogan was propagated: 'Today you will play jazz, tomorrow you will betray your country'. Even in the more relaxed 'thaw' years Soviet jazz enthusiasts had only limited opportunities to listen to jazz from smuggled phonograph records or from "Voice of America" broadcasts¹. In Stalinist Poland jazz music functioned as a symbol of rotten culture, the same as Coca-Cola or blue jeans. As in the Soviet Union, the so called 'mass song' became a crucial component of official music, and as such it was subject to the same restrictions as any other work of Communist art.

The function of the mass song was rather simple; it was meant to promulgate a set of slogans taken from Communist ideology. The music was based on a single tempo, the imagery was extremely abstract, avoiding anything concrete or specific, and the language was restricted to a limited vocabulary. The hero of the mass song was presented as one of a collective rather than as a single individual and the voice was almost anonymous. The hero optimistically looks forward and praises the ultimate goal of his efforts, that is, a future life in Communism². The mass songs were supposed to be

¹ See: S. F. Starr, *Red and Hot. The Fate Of Jazz in the Soviet Union 1917-1991, With a New Chapter on the Final Years*, New York: Limelight Editions 1994.

sung by young people while marching toward construction sites or coming back after their shift. Let us remember that production was perceived, in the context of Communist propaganda, as the most valuable of all human activities, and the factory and the construction site were set in opposition to the private home and leisure time. The public, outside spaces were symbolically associated with a perfectly organized and carefully controlled march, undertaken in order to reach mankind's happiness.

Leopold Tyrmand loved jazz. He claimed that jazz songs had helped him to survive the war. In Poland in the early fifties jazz could be played and listened to unofficially, in private homes and at private parties. After Stalin's death the situation changed. In the late fifties jazz fans had the first opportunity to listen to foreign jazz bands. In 1958 the first international jazz festival was held in Warsaw. Tyrmand contributed to its organisation and created its name: Jazz Jamboree. It should be added that jazz performed in Poland from the late fifties onward was based on improvisation, which resulted in the creation of a very sophisticated musical genre, the so called 'studio session jazz'. It stemmed not from the classical form of New Orleans jazz, but rather from later modifications.

The artistic space of *Zły* (1956; published in the United States three years later as *The Man with the White Eyes*³) is one of the most striking features of the novel: the plot takes place in Warsaw, not – as it might be expected – in a factory or on a construction site, but mostly in the coffee shops, private homes or cellars of ruined buildings. Generally speaking, in his work Tyrmand uses the spaces that are not associated with productiveness and collectiveness, but with leisure and intimacy instead. The characters like jazz. They listen to various genres of music, but prefer jazz or – at least – Western jazz-style songs.

Jazz plays a major role in *Zły*. It is used in three ways: literally, as a kind of music listened to and preferred by the characters, metaphorically, in order to represent more general qualities, and structurally, as the principle adopted by

² For example: 'Beautiful as birds, all in a row / Songs fly above the Soviet land. / The happy refrain of the cities and fields: / 'Life's getting better / And happier too!"; V. Lebedev-Kumach, *Life's Getting Better*, in: *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia. Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays and Folklore 1917-1953*, ed. J. von Geldern, R. Stites, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995, p. 237.

³ See: L. Tyrmand, *The Man with the White Eyes*, trans. from the Polish by D. Welsh, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1959.

the author to compose his book. The literal function of jazz in the novel is quite obvious. The description of life in Warsaw would be incomplete if its colorful, extraordinary musical climate was omitted. The titles of many jazz tunes can be found in *Zły*. Moreover, there are numerous specific terms, spread throughout the text, that form what might be labeled as Tyrmand's jazz vocabulary. The metaphorical use of American jazz requires detailed treatment. Let us begin with the general statement that for young people living in the Sovietized countries, jazz was more than music. Because of its improvisatory syncopated nature, it was experienced as a perfect form of free expression, enabling all performers to reveal their individuality.

The total lack of specificity with reference to singers and musicians is the central feature of mass songs, best exhibited in the march-style pieces. They were composed by professional, well-educated composers, in cooperation with eminent poets who wrote lyrics according to the so-called 'Party-mindedness' principle. Thousands of copies were usually published, to be gathered in collections and obligatorily acquired by libraries. The march-style songs were performed by professional or amateur singers, always in the same, fully authorized manner. Jazz, meanwhile, is composed in opposition to any academic style. It requires authenticity, spontaneity, and ordinariness. Its main source of inspiration is American urban folklore. The lyrics are simple and often reflect the problems shared by people of all races who either may be poor, or simply have never had access to the opportunities available to those who are better educated.

Tyrmand was perfectly aware of jazz's inseparability from American popular culture. He fully appreciated its 'dirty' origins, the fact that jazz achieved its original taste as a result of mixing African tunes with European, Jewish and Indian ingredients. In 1983 Tyrmand explained what jazz was for him. It seems to me that the passage quoted below clearly elucidates the metaphor of jazz, used in *Zły* in 1955. He assumed that jazz meant a perfect balance between authority and freedom:

Jazz was for us a system of latitudes subject to a freely accepted discipline of integral bonds between an individual and a group. As such it became perhaps the best metaphor for liberty that any culture has ever come up with. It conveyed a message that there is a central authority – usually with a trumpet in hand – to which one is responsible for holding the proper key and beat and who is entitled to a proper share of expression – and this is exactly what constitutes the principles from which a genuine order of freedom emerges. It became the quintessential allegory for the pluralism of opportunities within

which anyone who knows how to use an instrument and contribute to a common sound can make a statement about what he believes is beautiful and true⁴.

Jazz, or more accurately – jazz performance, is used by Tyrmand as the model for the composition of *Zfy*. Many literary critics complain that the novel is too long and even if shortened by a third could still convey the same ideas. Indeed it was Tyrmand's longest work, but one may ask - why did he decide to compose such a vast novel, or, more specifically, why did he include so many tangential threads, characters and scenes? In the Introduction to his book on Soviet jazz, William Minor uses the term 'gargantuan syndrome' in order to name the practices of some Soviet jazz musicians⁵. The 'gargantuan syndrome' appears when a huge concert set is felt to be too short for a musician, who, hungry for jazz, tries to express himself in a single performance.

The term coined by Minor calls to mind a theory of Mikhail Bakhtin⁶. Describing the emergence of popular culture, as opposed to official culture, Bakhtin said that the former stems from collective ridicule of officialdom, inversion of hierarchy, violations of proportions, blur of distinctions between what was thought 'good' or 'bad', 'high' or 'low'. Popular culture involves 'dirty' and mixed forms, hence Rabelais' novel presents itself as an anthology of various genres, with a combination of religious language and scatological imagery. Tyrmand alludes directly to Rabelais' work many times. In many respects *Zfy* might be called a gargantuan novel. Its multiplicity of genres, styles and modes closely resembles what was described by Bakhtin as the 'carnavalesque'. But at the same time Tyrmand's writing practice is similar to the practice labeled by Minor as the 'gargantuan syndrome'. The huge volume of *Zfy* presents the same richness and diversity as – let us say – Warsaw's Jazz Jamboree. I would label *Zfy* as a jazz-form novel.

In early postwar Poland there is no literary work comparable to Tyrmand's in terms of its ability to depict both the dynamism and the beauty of the individual automobile. Tyrmand was attracted to cars, regarding them as true objects

⁴ L. Tyrmand, *On Freedom*; see M. Zwerin, *Swing under the Nazis. Jazz as a Metaphor for Freedom*, New York: Cooper Square Press 2000, p. 86.

⁵ See: W. Minor, *Introduction*, in: *Unzipped Souls. A Jazz Journey through the Soviet Union*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1995.

⁶ See: M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by H. Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1984.

of art. Communism appreciates dynamism and vitality. The underlying assumption of the Communist doctrine is the idea that progress always has a positive value and that the movement of history has an ultimate purpose. Some time ago the well-known Russian writer, Andrei Sinyavsky, said with heavy irony:

There are periods of history when the presence of Purpose is evident (...) And now we have entered the era of a new world-wide system – that of socialist purpose-fulness. (...) And so it rises before us, the sole Purpose of all Creation, as splendid as eternal life and as compulsory as death. And we fling ourselves toward it, breaking all barriers and rejecting anything that might hamper our frantic course⁷.

Travelling is one of the most powerful allegories of Communist culture. It helps to visualize the idea of development. Travel means breaking space and, at the same time, the continuous progress of the human being who, absorbing all the best that has been created by world culture, will achieve the highest stage of physical and mental perfection. In 1850 Karl Marx coined the famous phrase: 'Revolutions are the locomotives of History', which served as the model for a number of similar images. In 1939, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, Stalin was called 'the great driver of the locomotive of History'. There are numerous paintings, posters, cartoons, and literary works, depicting travel toward Communism in the form of a railway journey⁸. Compositions using the image of the train have the same meaning as those showing a tractor being driven by smiling young people (usually women). Both machines (train and tractor) symbolize the victory over Nature. Their movement is highly purposeful and strictly controlled. To move means to work hard. In *Zfy* Tyrmand replaces the train and the tractor with the private car. The act of driving a car forms an opposition to traveling on a commuter train or a city bus. Firstly, the car helps to reveal individuality. Secondly, driving a car – just like playing jazz – compromises authority and independence. The driver is obliged to follow the road signs but, nevertheless, the decision about where, when and with whom to go is made exclusively by him.

⁷ A. Tertz [Andrei Sinyavsky], *The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism*, Introduction by Cz. Miłosz, Berkeley: University of California Press 1982, pp. 152, 160.

⁸ For extensive analysis of railway symbolism, see my article *The Railway in Communist Symbolism. (Some Observations on Soviet and Polish art)*, "Blok" 2002 vol. 1.

One of the main characters in *Zły* is the city-bus driver, Eugeniusz Smigło. His duty seems to be routine and dull, particularly since he serves a bus route circling the center of Warsaw and moving down the same streets many times a day. Smigło (literally propeller⁹) breaks free from monotony by abandoning his daily route in order to take part in a dramatic car chase. Similarly, Jonasz Drobniak, who helps the Warsaw authorities to overcome the most powerful gang in the city, usually uses his own old-fashioned car. He has the same charm as his automobile. It is worth mentioning that Drobniak's charm partly comes from his style of dress, a fashion which functioned both in the novel, and in the reality of Warsaw during the fifties, as a symbol. In the Stalin period everyone in Russia wore mass-produced coats, suits and dresses, and gray was the dominant color. Poles have always had a more individualistic approach to fashion than Soviet people. Western trends had a great influence in postwar Poland, particularly from the 'thaw' period onwards. Tyrmand loved to be well-dressed and to surprise his friends by, for example, wearing colorful socks. Drobniak's style of dressing shocks readers too. He looks like Professor Filutek, the hero of the cartoons that appeared in "Przekrój" and that were meant to ridicule the sentimental Polish love of tradition.

Zły begins like a film, with the characters listed as a cast, and the author's statement issued in order to let readers know that all characters and events 'appearing on the pages of the story (...) are fictional'⁹. Other structural elements, typically associated with film rather than literature, can be found throughout the entire novel. Moreover, the characters of *Zły* appreciate cinema, or, more accurately, love early American movies and the stars who acted in them: Douglas Fairbanks, Eddie Polo, Tom Mix. What explains the popularity of American films, in Tyrmand's novel, as well as in Poland itself during the fifties? The American pre-sound production appealed to notions of individual success, self-improvement and independence. It is highly probable that Tyrmand, while writing his novel, saw the Polish film entitled *Five Boys from Barska Street* or at least read Koźniewski's book from which it was adapted. *Five Boys from Barska Street* is thematically related to *Zły*. Both Koźniewski and Tyrmand depict the youth of Warsaw who steal, rob and even kill because they have been deprived by the experience of war and because the new Polish society cannot help them.

⁹ The passage in question does not appear in Welsh's translation.

Five Boys from Barska Street (I mean the film and the novel as well) might be treated as models of Socialist Realism. Step by step the protagonists overcome their anarchic spontaneity and replace it by fully integrating into the new society. Spontaneous selves are subordinated to strict, military-style discipline. Education implies organization and hence self-surrender to the sameness of Communist ideology. In *Zty* Tyrmand comes closer to the films of Douglas Fairbanks than to the pattern described above. The educational message of the novel is hardly discernable as education seems to be only one of the by-products of entertainment. The novel is designed to help readers to relax, to forget about their usual chores, to enjoy leisure time. Tyrmand does not treat his readers as pupils in a classroom. He does not exercise his talent as an educator. On the contrary, he wants to become a showman, providing people with as much amusement as possible.

Let us recall that the scheme of the production novel is based partly on the detective story, and uses investigation as an important structural device. *Zty* is organized around an investigation motif as well, but Tyrmand inverts the format in his work: this time an amateur helps the professionals in fighting against a gang of hooligans. It is old Jonasz Drobniak who resolves the 'Warsaw mystery', and not young inspector Michal Dziarski, who for a long time tries to identify and catch a 'man with the white eyes'. Dziarski's approach turns out to be 'automatic', whereas Drobniak, drawing upon his knowledge of popular fiction, deals with the problem more flexibly. At the very end of the novel Drobniak refuses any award, proudly insisting that his holiday is just over.

Tyrmand might be called a 'Renaissance man', since he was an outstanding writer as well as a skillful journalist, jazz critic, and sports enthusiast. He was also interested in architecture, fashion, and foreign cuisine, and spoke a number of foreign languages. But it would be better to label him a 'carnival man', because his activities had above all a negative aspect: they were aimed at destabilising the official way of life under the (post-) Stalinist regime. He challenged life – to use Bakhtin's words – 'monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety'¹⁰. Tyrmand replaced the 'one-dimensional man', inherent in Stalinist Communism, with the multi-dimensional individual, of which he was himself the best example. Both his life and work express the same need to manifest himself in various types of activities and enjoy his individualism. *Zty* is the highest point of Tyrmand's challenge to Stalinism. It perfectly depicts the set of values respected and promoted by the writer. Tyrmand's most prized value was

a combination of individualism and materialism, the foundations of 'jazz culture' and 'car culture', respectively. The American post-war culture was believed by him to be their synthesis.

Cały ten zgiełk!

O potyczkach Tyrmanda ze stalinizmem

Szkic dotyczy powieści Tyrmanda *Zły* i roli, jaką pełni w niej muzyka jazzowa. „Jazzowość” powieści może być ujęta w trzech aspektach. Po pierwsze, jazz jest składnikiem świata przedstawionego utworu. Tyrmand sportretował bowiem Warszawę z połowy lat 50., pokazując stolicę także od strony fonicznej (ważnym rysem dźwiękowego obrazu miasta jest fascynacja młodego pokolenia muzyką amerykańską). Po drugie, jazz funkcjonuje w *Złym* (i w całej twórczości Tyrmanda) na prawach metafory. Jej sens wyłania się z przeciwstawienia muzyki jazzowej najbardziej popularnemu gatunkowi okresu stalinizmu, tj. pieśni masowej. Jazz jest formą, która dla Tyrmanda symbolizuje tęsknotę za swobodą ekspresji artystycznej, a w szerszej perspektywie – potrzebę wolności (pieśń masowa kojarzyć się ma zaś z anonimowością i militarnym drylem). Po trzecie, o powinowactwach *Złego* z jazzem można mówić, mając na uwadze przyjętą przez pisarza strategię kompozycyjną. W powieści dochodzi do głosu „syndrom gargantuiczny” (określenie Williama Minora), tzn. dążenie do tego, by w utworze (podobnie jak w koncertach jazzowych z czasów politycznej „odwilży”) zamknąć jak największą różnorodność form, stylów, tonacji estetycznych. *Zły* jest kulminacyjnym punktem Tyrmandowych potyczek ze stalinizmem. Powieść przynosi pochwałę wartości, których ucieleśnienie stanowiła dla pisarza kultura amerykańska.

¹⁰ M. Bakhtin, op. cit., pp. 129-130.