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## ‘Słowisień’ by Karol Szymanowski. Between formal logic and illustration

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I am interested in analysis that concerns primarily aesthetic phenomena; that is, analysis that begins with what is actually given in the aural experience. In the case of songs, therefore, one also has to take into account the words of the poetry. Such analysis has a traditional aim: to trace the formal and semantic connections between the words and the music. In Karol Szymanowski’s song ‘Słowisień’, formal logic and illustration – two aspects often treated separately in analysis – create a close symbiosis.

I will begin with the formal issues. Szymanowski’s work displays the form ABA'+coda.<sup>1</sup> What about the caesurae and their hierarchy? Well, the strongest caesura, since it is preceded by a cadence and introduces the initial material, appears before the coda; a weaker caesura, not preceded by a cadence, appears before section B; the weakest caesura occurs in the smooth transition from B to A'. (Let us add that there is an even smoother caesura, related to the way that the voice is woven into the piano prelude of section A, but I will not be concerned here with that artistically exquisite but secondary effect).

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<sup>1</sup> A (bars 1–28), B (bars 29–34), A' (bars 35–42), coda (bars 42–45).

How does the form of the music relate to the form of the poem? Well, the poem consists of two quatrains:

W białodrzewiu jaśnie dźni słoneczno,  
miodzie złoci białopalem żyśnie,  
drzewia pełni pszczelą i pasieczną,  
a przez liście kraśnie pęk słowisnie.

A gdy sierpiec na niebłoczcu łyście,  
w cieniu ciemnie jeno niezaśpiwy:  
w białodrzewiu ćwirnie i srebliście  
słodzik słowi słowisieńkie ciewy.<sup>2</sup>

The first stanza, constituting one long sentence, falls on the musical section A. The second, in the original consisting of two sentences, falls on B and A'. Thus the musical caesurae (the relatively strong one between A and B, the weak one between B and A') reflect the poetic form: the weak articulation of the second caesura results from the need to retain the strophic integrity of the poem, which, when set to music, arrays itself in melismata, although always – including on a small scale – retaining its original form; that is, there are no repeats of words or poetic phrases. The smooth transition from B to A' is also ensured by the intricate blurring of the point of caesura itself: Tuwim's full stop which separates the two distichs of the second stanza is replaced by Szymanowski with a semicolon, a punctuation mark that ensures greater continuity. This adjustment of the formal division of the second stanza affects the music: the last two syllables ('śpie-wy') of the last word of the first distich ('nie-za-śpie-wy') already belong to A', that is, to the musical zone of the second distich of that stanza. This is the effect of poly-syntactic enjambement: the microcaesura in the music precedes the microcaesura of the poem. In other words, the semicolon of the poem appears after the new musical phrase has been initiated. The effect is all the more subtle because the fact that it belongs to section A' of the music is in bar 35 obvious only in the vocal part (undoubtedly the more important for the listener).<sup>3</sup> As for the piano part,

<sup>2</sup> The poem is reproduced here after the score of Karol Szymanowski's song 'Słowisień' (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1923/1951). There are other versions of the poem, differing slightly in lexis and punctuation (editor's note).

<sup>3</sup> However, describing this section as A', before the clearly recapitulated material is heard in the piano part in bar 36, is a simplification: in bar 35 the voice introduces melismata which – in spite

bar 35 is transitional: it already establishes the harmonic centre of section A', but rhythmically is half way between B and A'. Thematically, however, it is 'empty': while it no longer maintains the motivic material of section B, it does not as yet display that of section A'; the recapitulation of the theme will appear in bar 36.

The question arises as to why the two-stanza poem was set in a musical form that, while free, is a tripartite one (not bipartite, as one would expect, particularly when the full stop is replaced by a semicolon in the second stanza). In order to answer this question, we need to move on to semantic issues. Although Tuwim's linguistic imagination dissolves semantics in phonetics, the semantic centres are still clearly perceptible, and Szymanowski attuned them to the formal structure of the song.

In section A, corresponding to the first stanza, the semantic dominant is 'jaśnie' [brightly], 'słoneczno' [sunny] (i.e. 'słońce' [sun]); in section B, i.e. the first half of the second stanza, it is 'sierpiec' (i.e. 'księżyc' [moon], from 'sierp' [crescent]); in section A', i.e. the second half of the second stanza, it is 'słodzik' [association with sweetness] (i.e. 'słowik' [nightingale]). These words are the keys that create a clear constellation. The first two represent the opposition between day and night. And 'słodzik'? It should be associated with 'sierpiec', because the nightingale sings by moonlight. Yet the lexical setting for its trills is sunny; it is created by the recurring motifs of the first stanza: 'białodrzew' [associations with white trees] and 'słowisień' [associations with nightingale and cherries]. 'Słodzik' is... dialectical.

Both the opposition of 'sun' and 'moon' and the dialectical quality of the 'nightingale' can be found in the music: not only in the architectonic formal division already outlined and in the hierarchy of the caesurae, but also in the musical semantics.

I will focus mainly on its harmonic aspect. The song is based on only two sound centres, ascribed to sections A and B. They are very stable: centre B is totally unchanging, centre A is somewhat modified in the recapitulation. *Nota bene*, the only place where there is real harmonic movement is the archaising cadence before the coda, and that explains the power of its effect.

The centre of section A (bars 1–28) is based on an A<sup>7</sup> chord in an open (not closed by the octave between the bass and the top note), 'spectral' harmony (see Example 1). As the music develops, the root of the chord becomes more indistinct

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of being contrasted with section B – are in a way its continuation and crowning. These melismata are a new element in this song and refer to section A only indirectly (as a distant variant of the initial phrase of the voice). More on this subject further into the article.

(it is articulated increasingly seldom, transposed an octave upwards and becomes a grace note, something like an imaginary value), thus subtly preparing for the change of harmonic centre.<sup>4</sup> The A<sup>7</sup> chord has been enriched by two (post-Wagnerian or post-Scriabinian) variant elements: a major ninth, which turns into an augmented ninth (in the second voice of the right hand), and an augmented fifth, preceded by a quasi-Chopinian sixth, at the end of the piano's melodic phrase, which clearly aims towards an harmonically structural note. In addition, there is figurative enrichment, within which there appear chromatic variants of the modalisms of the piano's melodic line. (The voice line is omitted from this abbreviated analysis: in spite of its considerable independence in relation to the accompaniment, they share scale parallels and similarities of melodic contour.)

Example 1. Section A. The central chord based on A<sup>7</sup> and the scales on which the piano melody is based. Unstable notes are marked in red. In the border: the notes E# and F#, which, as the shared part of the harmonic and scale set, are the attractors of the teleological orientation of the melody.

The musical notation consists of five staves. The first four staves are in treble clef and show a melodic line. The first staff has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The second staff has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The third staff has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The fourth staff has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The fifth staff is in bass clef and shows a chord structure with notes A3, C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5. The letter 'A' is centered below the staves.

Referring to the metaphor of the temperature of intervals, sometimes used by Lutosławski (e.g. in his authorial commentaries to *Mi-parti*), one might say

<sup>4</sup> However, it should be noted that these grace notes (bars 20, 22 and 23) appear before the chord that falls on the strong part of the bar, while the earlier appearances of the root were placed on weak positions in the bar. The increased metric significance is to some extent balanced by the diminished rhythmic significance.

that the 'sunny' section A is based on 'warm' harmonies. In turn, the centre of the 'moon' section B (bars 29–34[35]) has 'icy' harmonies: its intervals, counting from the bottom, are minor ninth, tritone and fifth (see Example 2). A traditional skeleton can be discerned in this chord too: it is something like a B $\flat$  minor six-four chord with non-chord tones. This chord displays inner symmetries (this feature can also be regarded as 'cold'), and its outer notes create an octave; its nature is therefore (in contrast to the previous harmonic centre) closed, crystalline, non-vibrating. It is only warmed by the repetition of the root in the bass register: this is the only element of continuity between A and B. The pentatonics of the voice are also of a cool, objective nature; its three pitches are also repeated in the piano, although they never double the voice (we will not find such a strong degree of bonding between the melodic lines of voice and piano in sections A and A' – with the significant exception of the melismatic piano figure in bar 39).

Example 2. Section B. Central chord based on B $\flat$  minor in second inversion and pentatonic scale on which the melody of the piano and the voice is based.

B

And one more harmonic issue: between the A major and B $\flat$  minor centres, there is a specific kinship of a semitone shift while the shared note in the form of an enharmonically transformed third is preserved.<sup>5</sup> In respect of the rhetoric, such a shift is a kind of reversal of Picardy third, and it often introduces a tragic moment. In the Arcadian world of this song, there can be no suggestion of tragedy (at least not directly), therefore the shift from A major to B $\flat$  minor is simply another factor in the construction of the opposition between sun and moon. Char-

<sup>5</sup> A very specific effect used, for example, by Beethoven in his 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, Op. 106 No. 29, and particularly favoured by Schubert. In neo-Riemannian theory, this type of transformation is known as a 'slide'.

acteristically, after the note C# was strongly mined in the piano part in section A, in section B its counterpart, Db, was totally omitted from the piano part and appears only in passing in the voice: Szymanowski does not want the implied Bb minor to sound too serious.

Alongside the harmonies, a significant role in outlining the opposition between day and night is played by the rhythm and meter. Section A adheres to an irregularly changing metre, alternately 3/8 and 2/8, while towards the end the odd metres disappear. This paves the way for section B, whose mechanical rhythm (in 4/8) corresponds to the 'icy' harmonies.

After outlining the harmonic meaning of the day–night opposition, it still remains to demonstrate the 'dialectic quality' of the nightingale in section A' (bars 35[36]–45; see Example 3). First, it is signalled by the recapitulation of the modified material of section A in the piano part. Let us start with the harmonies: in the middle layer of the left-hand part, we have the return of the A<sup>7</sup> chord, although texturally it is now more spacious, dialectically 'cooled down'; more importantly from that dialectical point of view, however, is that section A', in spite of its clearly recapitulatory nature, maintains the continuity of the pedal note F from section B (the higher, three-note chord subgroup is also continued with a modification: E5–Bb5–F6 in section B; B5–Ab6–D7 in section A'); moreover, in the middle layer, there appears, alongside the A<sup>7</sup> chord, also C<sup>7</sup> (bars 38–39), and this addition links in an obvious way to the pedal note F (independently of this, it would be possible to derive the sound material of these chords from an octatonic scale); the pedal note A in the deep bass does not return until the coda (bar 43), although it is heralded in the higher bass register already in the cadence which opens the coda. As for the 'mazurka-like'<sup>6</sup> melodic phrase of the piano, this time it starts not on C#, as at the beginning, but on D; to some extent, this is the consequence of all those adventures with the implied Bb minor triad without a third (which appears 'too late' in the form of a major third), which contribute to the effect of strong continuity, that is, to the blurring of the caesura between B and A'.

Secondly, the voice part also creates a dialectical synthesis of earlier elements. The rhythm and the tritone frame refer to A, while the pentatonic motif (bar 41) is borrowed from section B (bar 30): although it is just one motif, it is very strongly exposed, as it falls on the cadence before *Tempo I* (see Example 4). The element that draws most attention consists of the melismata, partly because

<sup>6</sup> Its 'mazurka-like' quality seems beyond question, but more as an impression than a fact established by analysis: that classification is opposed not only by the polymetre mentioned earlier, but also by the placing of the characteristic dotted rhythm in the upbeat position.

it is a new component and thus strongly marked (even though it was already announced towards the end of section A, where the melodic idea of the voice was to make a gradual transition from 'mechanical' recitative to free melopoia). The melismata represent the third of the key words: the nightingale (this is in fact a self-quotation, since almost identical nightingale figures appeared previously in *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess]). The dialectical quality of the nightingale manifests itself in the fact that it is accompanied in the piano by the already described musical formulae that link the elements of the 'sunny' section A and the 'moonlit' section B.

Example 3. Section A and coda. Central chord and scales.

The musical score for Example 3 is divided into two sections: A' and CODA. It consists of four staves: a vocal line, a piano right hand part, a piano left hand part, and a figured bass part. The piano right hand part features a melodic line with a green oval highlighting a specific phrase. The piano left hand part features a chordal accompaniment with a green oval highlighting a specific chord. The figured bass part shows the harmonic structure with red circles highlighting specific notes.

Example 4. Section A'. The melodic cadential phrase that leads to the coda (bar 41) is a variant of the melodic phrase from section B (bar 35).

The musical score for Example 4 shows two melodic phrases. The first phrase is labeled 'b. 30' and the second phrase is labeled 'b. 41'. Both phrases are in 4/4 time and feature a melodic line with a cadential phrase.

There is still a separate comment to be made about *Tempo I* (bar 42). In the introduction, I claimed that it was the strongest caesura of the whole composition. But the power of that caesura is weakened by elision: *Tempo I* is at once both the last bar of A' and the first bar of the coda. This is also one of the quasi-dialectical effects of this song.

Moreover, in section A', the dialectical metric process is completed: the piano part is in 6/8 (which brings associations with section A, where at least at the beginning 3/8 is dominant), while the voice continues to sing (as in section B) in 4/8. The aligning of this polymetre (which in itself is not striking, since it is actually ordinary polyrhythm with the simultaneous use of bipartite and tripartite divisions) takes place before *Tempo I*: first 3/4 appears in both parts (bar 42), then 4/8 (bar 43). (In the coda, the initial successive polymetre 3/8 + 2/8 is recalled in a gentler form.)

These were the main theses. If I were to analyse this song in more detail, I would focus in particular on two other issues: first, on the polysyntactic effects, closely linked to the polymetre of section A and its later disappearance – and here one can find truly amazing things, even though Szymanowski's calligraphies, unlike Lutosławski's,<sup>7</sup> are not supported by openwork mathematical scaffolding. It is my impression that this polysyntactic aspect to the musical logic of 'Słowisień' also serves clearly illustrative purposes and could easily be introduced into the dialectical schema outlined above. Secondly, I would be interested in the question of borrowings and influences, and not only the obvious, Sabala–oriental ones. Didier van Moere has noted<sup>8</sup> that in *Słopiewnie* one can hear echoes of Stravinsky's *The Wedding*, fragments of which were apparently known to Szymanowski even before the premiere (in addition, while writing *Słopiewnie*, he was at the same time writing an article about Stravinsky<sup>9</sup>). These echoes sound most clearly in the fourth song of the cycle, 'Kalinowe dwory', but are also perceptible in 'Słowisień', where they appear in two ways: in the characteristic grace notes of the soprano in section A (also noted by van Moere) and in the

<sup>7</sup> See my article 'Chain or polysyntax: formal punctuation in the music of Witold Lutosławski, based on the example of the *Bucolics* and Postlude No. 1', in this volume, pp. 127–143.

<sup>8</sup> D. van Moere, *Karol Szymanowski* (Paris, 2008), 323–324. Van Moere also draws attention to parallels with the spirit of *Pribaoutki*, 'which, even shorter and composed after the fashion of a "form of very archaic folk poetry, consisting in a succession of words almost devoid of meaning and linked by associations of images and sounds"', represent in Russia, at least from this point of view, what *Słopiewnie* represent in Poland.

<sup>9</sup> K. Szymanowski, 'Igor Stravinsky', in *Szymanowski on Music: Selected Writings of Karol Szymanowski*, ed. and tr. A. Wightman (London, 1999), 223–227.

pentatonic elements of section B. It is also not impossible that the nightingale's melismata have some connection with Stravinsky's opera *The Nightingale*, which Szymanowski heard in London a few days before the start of the Great War. Who knows, perhaps even the contrast between the middle part of 'Słowisień', with its dehumanised mechanical style, where the voice surrenders to the dictates of the piano, and the ecstatic-organic section A', where in turn the piano allows itself to be seduced by the voice, repeating once, just before the cadence, the sung melismata, is modelled on the opposition between the mechanical nightingale and the live nightingale in Stravinsky's opera.

Whatever ideas, conceptions and guesses we might gather while pursuing these deliberations, it would be well to keep some critical punchline up our sleeve, such as Adam Zagajewski's comment about the professors who counted all the syllables in Homer's hexameters: 'They study fire, but can only describe the ashes'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A. Zagajewski, *Obrona żarliwości* [A defence of ardor] (Kraków, 2002), 57.

## ABSTRACT

Julian Tuwim's poem 'Słowisień' consists of two stanzas. Szymanowski's song displays the form ABA'+coda. The non-obvious choice of a ternary form seems to be motivated by Szymanowski's particular reading of Tuwim's poetry. I put forward the thesis that the key to this puzzle is the dialectical opposition between day (A) and night (B), reconciled with the song of the nightingale, which has both solar and lunar attributes (A'). In this light, the hierarchy of the caesurae becomes clear: a relatively sharp cut separates section A from section B (day from night), while the transition from B to A' (towards the nightingale) is soft, smooth, because the earlier opposites combine in the recapitulation. This division of the form and the related dialectics also organise other parameters of the work: the harmony (the 'warm' centre of quasi-A<sup>7</sup> in section A, the 'cold' centre of quasi-B flat minor in section B, the synthesis of both centres in A'); the melody of the vocal part (the rhythmic features of section A and pentatonic motif of section B coming together in A'); the metre (successive polymetre, with section A dominated by 3/8 and section B by 4/8, the imposition of 4/8 in the voice part and 6/8 in the piano part in section A').

KEYWORDS: Szymanowski, 'Słowisień', analysis, song, hermeneutics

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