

Pomarańcze na drutach

by Witolda Wirpsza.

Problems with understanding
a prose experiment in the light
of a pre-text

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In November 1964, when the printing of the novel *Pomarańcze na drutach* [Oranges on wires] was completed, Witold Wirpsza was mostly known as a poet. Every book of his poems, beginning with the debut *Sonata* (1949), was widely discussed in literary magazines. Suffice it to say that Jan Błoński¹ (who was then starting his career as a literary critic) was the first reviewer of that debut in *Twórczość* [Creativity] magazine. Other reviewers of subsequent volumes include: Jerzy Kwiatkowski, Jan Józef Lipski, Paweł Beylin, Jacek Trznadel, Ryszard Matuszewski, Zbigniew Żabicki, Julian Rogoziński, Alicja Lisiecka, Stanisław Barańczak, and others. In 1964 Wirpsza was also a famous essayist, theater critic and a beginner playwright (he wrote two plays published in *Dialog*), an esteemed translator (for example, he translated *Doctor Faustus* together with his wife, Maria Kurecka), editor and publicist of *Po prostu* [Simply] (dissolved by the government) and *Nowa Kultura* [New Culture], which in 1958 he left to protest government intervention in the magazine management, together with Leszek Kołakowski, Wiktor Woroszyński and Tadeusz Konwicki. From today's perspective, *Pomarańcze*

¹ Jan Błoński, "Dwaj poeci" [two poets], *Twórczość*, No 3 (1950): 113-123.

na drutach would be seen as his debut as a novelist, although back in 1964 the memory of his works' socialist realist beginnings, for example, the novel *Na granicy* [On the border] (1954) or the short story collection *Stary tramwaj* [An old tram] (1955) must have been fresh. The former tells the story of female forced laborers sent to Germany and the of Szczecin, whereas the latter transforms and fictionalizes autobiographical experiences from Stalag, with a clear concession for the contemporary dominating tendencies.

However, the reception of *Pomarańcze na drutach* did not refer to his socialist realist attempts at prose; in the eyes of critics, it was a modern, experimental poetic work. Especially from the early 1960s volumes such as *Mały gatunek* [Little species] (1960), *Don Juan* (1960), *Komentarze do fotografii: The Family of Man* [Comments to a photograph] (1962) created the natural context for his latest novel. A summary of opinions regarding the reception of Wirpsza's poetry, regardless of whether they were positive or negative, would be as follows: intellectualism, learnedness and hermetism, which tell the story of transgressing the borders of comprehensiveness and experiment by the poet. His son, Leszek Staruga, when asked how his father reacted to the reception of his works, said, "When it comes to my father's novels, here indeed, he may have thought that he would have some typical reader," but "*Pomarańcze na drutach* is too difficult for an average reader."² The same opinion can be found in the first two reviews of the novel from 1965. Rafał Marszałek wrote that it was "probably the weirdest prose that has been recently published in Poland," "a novel with no action in the vernacular meaning of the word and which was written in an exceptionally difficult form – one would say: resistant against the material – it deserves to be called experimental."³ Edward Balcerzan, by calling *Pomarańcze na drutach* "a literary phenomenon of European class" accepted it as "an innovative novel in every inch," "an invention," which "will be troublesome for readers," for they cannot rely on "any literary patterns."⁴

Where did those problems with comprehension originate? Rafał Marszałek saw "Wirpsza's failure in this respect" in "excessive formal complexity, predominantly based on detailed descriptions and contrived syntax," as evidenced by "eccentrically recorded dialogues," "long and complicated periods," and "synonymous repetitions," among other elements.⁵ Balcerzan starts his review with an analysis of the syntax, using quotations to illustrate its various "peculiarities," such as: "unnaturally detailed descriptions, emotionless brevity, registering words and gestures regardless of their importance," and "sensitivity to pauses in genuine speech."⁶ Based on the intentionality of those measures, Balcerzak drew a conclusion regarding Wirpsza's narrator, who is testing the cognitive value of the cybernetic myth, a narrator who pretends to be a machine. As a result, "Everything that the recipient could recognize as a stylistic peculiarity is actually a dramatic fight of a machine with language."⁷ The analysis of the syntactical key to understanding the novel leads the reviewer to the discovery of parallels with poetry, which

² "Istnieje porządek nieodgadniony" [there is an inscrutable order]. Karol Samsel and Leszek Szaruga discuss Witold Wirpsza, *Elewator* No 23 (2018): 45.

³ Rafał Marszałek, "Eksperyment Wirpszy" [Wirpsza's experiment], *Nowe Książki*, No 9 (1965): 402.

⁴ Edward Balcerzan, "Człowiek Witolda Wirpszy" [Witold Wirpsza's man], *Nurt*, No 2 (1965): 48-49.

⁵ Marszałek, "Eksperyment Wirpszy", 403.

⁶ Balcerzan, "Człowiek Witolda Wirpszy", 48.

⁷ Balcerzan, "Człowiek Witolda Wirpszy", 48.

he catalogues with great precision: dialogues which are cut “against the established rules of syntax” are seen by him as a solution analogous to the rules of a free verse, whereas elsewhere he finds “the laws of the accentual-syllabic verse” or “traces of hexameter.”⁸ According to Rafał Marszałek, the language of the novel “plays an independent role as the subject of grotesque transformations.” These linguistic transformations, at the cost of other elements of the whole system, are “something especially important and attractive”⁹ for the author. From such a thesis it is not far to the conclusion that “ultimately the most significant meaning of the titular experiment is the fact that it was a poet who wrote that hermetic prose, yet so rich in terms of meanings.”¹⁰ Arnold Słucki emphasizes the proximity (in terms of the publishing process) of Wirpsza’s book of poems *Drugi opór* [Second resistance] (1965), which contains his poems written between 1960 and 1964, with “an experimental novel,” which he sees as “a thing not insignificant in terms of forming the poetics of the author of *Drugi opór*.”¹¹ According to Słucki, “The relationship between this prose and the mature form of Wirpsza’s poems requires a separate analysis.” He also pointed out the syntax of the novel, its “rhythmical element,” and “the process of shattering the traditionally understood poetic picture, a disintegrational measure for which the poet later wants to find an explanation in contemporary quantum theory.”¹² According to Tadeusz Nyczek, Wirpsza “writes poetry like prose, and prose like poetry.”¹³

The early reception of *Pomarańcze na drutach* was dominated by the question of its form. The answer was to refer the readers to the poetic form as an indicator of value and guarantee of the sense of Wirpsza’s whole prose project. It led Balcerzan to acknowledge the narration as subordinate to the rules of a cybernetic game, which ends in a failure: “the machine” precisely describes the world, but it could stop there. The plot, limited by the capabilities of the machine-narrator, cannot answer philosophical questions, which “lie beyond the competences of cybernetics.”¹⁴ Marszałek demonstrates how the prose of the poet, with the language as the dominating agent, operates within the category of grotesque, superordinate to the novel on two levels: of language and the represented world. By situating the plot in a POW camp, Wirpsza makes the existential category of freedom the subject of his grotesque novel, arranging a “mosaic” of problems: “It contains existential motifs together with complexes of the intelligentsia, the issue of Polishness presented in such varied contexts as the heritage of tradition and the psychology of action.”¹⁵ However, language treated as an independent subject of grotesque, not subordinate to the compositional function, makes the novel bizarre, overly complicated in its reception, and in a way forces us to read it in the way one would read poetry. Artur Strumiłowski calls it “complicationism”; for him, Wirpsza writes “a variational novel in which he exhausts all of its huge inventiveness in stylistic-technical-compositional measures, whose aim is to make a work of literature closer to music, and does not have enough

⁸ Balcerzan, “Człowiek Witolda Wirpszy”, 48.

⁹ Marszałek, “Eksperyment Wirpszy”, 403.

¹⁰ Marszałek, “Eksperyment Wirpszy”, 403.

¹¹ Arnold Słucki, “Od *Sonaty* do *Drugiego oporu*”, *Twórczość*, No 1 (1966): 118.

¹² A. Słucki, “Od *Sonaty* do *Drugiego oporu*”, 118.

¹³ Tadeusz Nyczek, “Śladem wzruszenia”, *Poezja*, No 3 (1971): 24.

¹⁴ Balcerzan, “Człowiek Witolda Wirpszy”, 49.

¹⁵ Marszałek, “Eksperyment Wirpszy”, 403.

time to also take care of the plot.”¹⁶ Similar comments can also be found in later reviews. Piotr Kuncewicz, who claims that *Pomarańcze na drutach* was written in a “counterpoint-variational way,” notices that “various formal ideas made that prose,” whereas “everything drowns in digressions, making the plot a marginal aspect of the book.”¹⁷ Maciej Byliniak treats the novel as the most visible example of “antirealism” in Wirpsza: “Where some dialogues are ‘apparent dialogues,’ in which one statement was divided into arbitrary parts (from the perspective of formal composition) assigned to individual characters.”¹⁸ According to Zbigniew Chojnowski, the novel “is about expounding, analysis, artistic discourse, stretching, multiplying, defining, and devastating meanings, multiplying doubts, conceptualizing the topic in various ways, ‘sailing’ in the language and the narrative.”¹⁹ Interestingly, in one of the latest interpretations of the novel (which one scholar believes to be precursory and perfect), the question of the formal screen and linguistic derealization does not appear at all. In his 2018 draft, Maciej Libich observed “intriguing relationships, which connect *Pomarańcze na drutach* with *Discipline and Punish* by Foucault,” as well as with “other works by post-structuralist and post-modernist philosophers, which tried to describe multidimensional relations of society, government, punishment, as well as control and penitentiary systems.”²⁰ The scholar also proposes to read the novel using Krzysztof Pomian’s time theory, according to which: “Time should be conceived as a network of hierarchical instances controlling the lives of societies.”²¹ Both *Discipline and Punish* and *Porządek czasu* [The order of time] by Pomian were written after *Pomarańcze na drutach*, hence Libich’s thesis regarding the precursory character of Wirpsza’s prose. Many years before that Stanisław Barańczak classified the novel as myth-exposing, a characteristic feature of Wirpsza’s works. In the case of *Pomarańcze na drutach*, which considers the notions of freedom, coincidence and necessity, it is about “eternal existential myths.”²² A question emerges, especially against the background of the other documents of reception referred to before, whether such interpretative suggestions made somewhat from the side or above the linguistic and “poetic” tissue of the text are possible and justified. Or maybe the key to understanding the novel, “too difficult” even 50 years after it was first published, is hidden (like the first reviewers wanted it to be) in the formal methods, cybernetic game of the narrator, bizarre description technique, unnaturalness, and eventually, in the focus on the language, or even “picturing the language” typical for poetry, especially in its linguistic current?

A reader of *Pomarańcze na drutach*, even one who is interested in Wirpsza’s poetic achievements among the most important tendencies in Polish poetry in the second half of the 20th century, probably could not accept attempts at controlling problems with understanding his novel beyond its “linguistic” context. The most far-reaching conclusions from that attitude

¹⁶Artur Strumiłowski, “Nowości prozy” [prose news], *Życie Literackie*, No 44 (1965): 11.

¹⁷Piotr Kuncewicz, “Wirpsza i pozostali” [Wirpsza and others], *Przegląd Tygodniowy*, No 7 (1986).

¹⁸Maciej Byliniak, “Krytyka obrazu w poezji i eseistyce Witolda Wirpszy” [picture criticism in Witold Wirpsza’s poetry and essays], *Twórczość*, No 8 (2009): 75.

¹⁹Zbigniew Chojnowski, “Zegar i uwięzienie w powieści Witolda Wirpszy *Pomarańcze na drutach*” [clock and captivity in Wirpsza’s novel], in: “W rytmie zegara...”. *Wokół zagadnień chronozoficznych*, red. Zbigniew Chojnowski, Beata Kurządkowska, Anna Rzymyska (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo UWM, 2015), 231.

²⁰Maciej Libich, “Epistolograficzny nośnik poezji. Osiem notatek o *Listach z oflagu* Witolda Wirpszy” [epistolographic means of poetry. Eight notes on *Listy z Oflagu* by Wirpsza], *Elewator* nr 23 (2018): 27.

²¹M. Libich, “Epistolograficzny nośnik poezji. Osiem notatek o *Listach z oflagu* Witolda Wirpszy”, 27.

²²Stanisław Barańczak, “Na 60-lecie Witolda Wirpszy”, *Kultura*, No 1 (1979): 107.

were probably drawn by Edward Balcerzan. Meanwhile, in the opening *From the Author* section there is an intriguing clue regarding the novel's origins, which is also important for understanding the novel's very form:

When, in the 1940s, not long after the liberation, I sat down to write prose that would somehow process my camp experiences, I did not know what final artistic form that prose would take; I understood only one thing immediately: it had to contain an element of grotesque. In the final phase of writing my inclination towards grotesque started to dominate, becoming almost an artistic principle.

Several dozens of the first edition was done in the fall of 1946; it was still – formally – traditional, 19th-century style prose. However, I was missing two crucial elements: distance and philosophical concepts which could make it fun.

[...]

That grotesque discredit and self-discredit required a specific form. Prose in its traditional form stemmed from the veristic 19th-century practice seemed to me – after many attempts – inadequate; that made me look for some ways of combining words and meanings that would create an artistically effective linguistic network; such a network would be a consequent and systematic entanglement of various absurdities of the flagged raw material; absurdities that come from authenticity, its deformities and variants, thus elevated to the status of a concise system; such a system that would have a chance to become a generalization.²³

Thanks to the materials from Wirpsza's archive from Książnica Pomorska in Szczecin we can verify this interpretative clue. There are 65 pages of typescript with the Polish text²⁴ of *Pomarańcze na drutach*, including 39 of the "first editing" from the fall of 1946. It is hard to say whether those are the pages Wirpsza writes about above. The remaining surviving pages made of different paper and typed on a different typewriter (as indicated by many peculiarities, such as the diacritic above "n" which is absent from the older pages) contain various fragments of the text in the same form as we know them from the PIW edition. The final page with the fragment marked as "3" in the book edition (pp. 23-33)²⁵ have a pencil-written date: "20/VI 60." In print the date was placed at the very end of the novel, in a more extended form: "Warsaw, November 1946 – June 1960." A comparison of the two typescripts in both material and textual dimensions excludes the suggestion from the author's note that he had worked on the text for over a dozen years. According to the author, in the fall of 1946 Wirpsza finished the first edition, only to write it again, as if from scratch, and definitely completely

²³Witold Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, (Warszawa: PIW, 1964), 5-7.

²⁴There are five additional pages of the typescript in German: three with the "From the Author" text, and two with an opinion of someone for the Hanser publishing house (unsigned), probably by Lutz Adler. See: Witold Wirpsza, Heinrich Kunstmann, "Salut Henri! Don Witoldo!". *Witold Wirpsza – Heinrich Kunstmann. Listy 1960-1983*. Introduction, edition and translation by Dorota Cygan, Marek Zybura, (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 72.

²⁵In the printed version, apart from *From the Author*, there are 21 thus numbered subchapters. In the 1946 version, apart from the *Foreword*, we can find both numbered and entitled chapters. Chapter I *Wieczór Trzech Króli* [the eve of three wisemen], Chapter II *Co się dzieje w baraku oficerskim* [what happens in the officers' barracks], Chapter III *Na spacerze* [on a walk], Chapter IV *Wyższa szkoła jazdy* [tricky business], Chapter V *Jak wyrastają pomarańcze* [how oranges grow], Chapter VI *Café intermezzo*.

differently. In the short biographical note enclosed by Wirpsza to his letter from Feb. 12, 1961 to Heinrich Kunstmann, the manuscript of *Pomarańcze na drutach* was referred to as his 1960 achievement.²⁶ Hence Arnold Ślucki was right to point out the need to see the new, linguistic, experimental Wirpsza-poet from his 1960s books of poetry in connection with the formation of that poetics when he was working on the novel.

When writing to Kunstmann, Wirpsza was convinced that his novel would be published in 1961. The author, taking advantage of the interest he believed Kunstmann had in his novel, successfully tried to contact German publishers.²⁷ He revealed that only in January 1965. Before that, in his letter to Kunstmann from Dec. 28, 1962 he wrote: "I would like to thank you for your efforts regarding *Pomarańcze na drutach*. I am completely aware, given the features of the text, that finding a publisher is not easy. Here in Poland I have been trying to publish the book for over two years (and it is not because of politics!), and it is only now that I can see the light at the end of the tunnel."²⁸ The latter information is especially crucial for understanding the new shape of the novel, for it points out the direct involvement of censorship in the formation of the final text. It is confirmed by the comparison of the surviving typescript of the new version of the novel with the book: there are no differences. The question regarding the role of self-censorship remains open. In the 1960 version there are no potentially politically incorrect language from 1946, such as: inconsequential usage of the word "Bolsheviks" or the mention of the 1920 "baptism of fire."

However, it is the question of form highlighted by the author in the 1964 foreword that constitutes the significant difference between the two versions. The surviving one-page foreword to the original version is devoted to the issues of artistic convention:

I am writing those few words for those readers who had spent years in captivity. Perhaps some characters and situations will remind them of people they used to know or situations they experienced. Hence I would like to ask them: gentlemen, for the love of Zeus – do not identify yourselves! Just like I did not use any names, I do not want to point any fingers.

Pomarańcze na drutach is a novel about Oflag – but it is a fantasy Oflag that has never existed. Besides, the novel does not try to be a faithful picture of experiences or observed facts, but their caricature, a caricature of the average state of affairs in POW camps in the Reich. When constructing my characters I was relying on the 'synthetic' method. I simply took some characteristics from

²⁶Witold Wirpsza, Heinrich Kunstmann, "Salut Henri! Don Witoldo!". *Witold Wirpsza – Heinrich Kunstmann. Listy 1960-1983*, (Kraków: Universitas): 45.

²⁷Understood not only as the publication of the novel in Maria Kurecka's translation: *Orangen im Stacheldraht* (Monachium: Hanser, 1967). Of course it was not a commercial success, but it may be speculated that the reception of the novel in Germany was the reason why Wirpsza was invited to give a speech at the opening of International Book Fairs in Frankfurt on 11 October 1967. See Peter Urban, "Die Stacheldrahtfrüchte. Ein Roman des Polen Witold Wirpsza", *Die Zeit* (4.08.1967); Valentin Polcuch, "Freiheit und Zeit. Witold Wirpsza. Orangen im Stacheldraht", *Die Welt der Literatur* (8.06.1967); German Werth, "Früchte, die zu hoch hängen", *Der Tagesspiegel* (5.11.1967). On the first German edition see: Daniel Pietrek, "Pomarańcze na drutach – Witold Wirpsza w monachijskim wydawnictwie Carla Hansera", in *Filologia trudnego sąsiedztwa. Tom studiów dedykowany Profesorowi Markowi Zyburze w 60-lecie urodzin*, edited by Krzysztofa Ruchniewiczza with Piotrem Przybyła and Dariusz Wojtaszyn (Wrocław: Quaestio, 2017), 125-137. The second German edition was published after Wirpsza's death: Berlin: Westberliner Oberbaumverlag, 1987.

²⁸Witold Wirpsza, Heinrich Kunstmann, "Salut Henri! Don Witoldo!". *Witold Wirpsza – Heinrich Kunstmann. Listy 1960-1983*, 70.

a number of people I remembered and mixed them together, thus getting new, paper characters. Anyway, I am under an impression that after reading the whole book, everyone will agree that the caricature was not meant to be a lampoon.

Here is the other side of the coin. Lampoon has its requirements. If in the general picture of a novel the judgment of some groups from the camp seems negative – there is no avoiding it. It is the right of a satirist to redirect the attack. It is also their right to exaggerate some facts, and I have no intention to relinquish those rights (...).

The author defined his work using the following terms: the story of Oflag, fantasy, caricature, satire and, indirectly, typicality and probability (“the synthetic method”). The elements, which are already connected by the grotesque category in the introduction, are mixed with a typically realistic attitude, which will be admitted years later in a self-commentary saying that it was “traditional, 19th-century style prose.” Its character is best conveyed by the sentences that open the 1946 version: “The Polish commander of the third battalion was short, fat and bald. He was a bit scrawny, so the skin on his stomach was folding – but the stomach itself remained impressive, like in the good times.” The 1964 version obviously lacks this sentence, just like it lacks any of the sentence forms found in the first version. The new opening is a string of transformations of the initial picture: “The right eye is awake, and the left eye is asleep,”: “The right eye is awake, and the left eye is asleep. Who is asleep, and who is awake?”, “Right (left) eye is awake, left (right) eye is asleep.”²⁹ However, even with the stylistic differences between the two versions, they share the Oflag realism, as explained by Wirpsza in his first idea for the foreword. The represented world in both versions is constructed from the same, unmistakably identifiable elements: barracks, wooden cots, wires, roll-calls, guards and, naturally, prisoners, here referred to in German as “gefangenam.” Both versions use the same motifs (planning a prison break, “focused” walking, illegal demolition of a huge latrine, cooking potatoes, bribing the German guards with cigarettes), and they describe the same places, although with extremely different language discipline.

For example, the description of the camp café in the original:

The camp café was an oddity of a sort. No Warsaw café would be ashamed of the premises. Large windows, cut out in the barrack’s wall over which there was an almost six months long fight with the German command of the camp, let in plenty of light and created an impression of luxury – especially compared to the dark, smoky rooms where most prisoners would spend most of their time. The stream of light highlighted the beautiful paper-mâché sculptures covering the walls and pillars supporting the ceiling. (...) The interior was decorated in an antique style, a skillful composition of Egyptian and Roman exuberances (...).

And the same café in the book version:

(...) barracks with a brick floor, once upon a time some warehouse, tables, benches, a furnace with dioxies full of boiling water, instant coffee served in mugs for five American cigarettes.³⁰

²⁹Witold Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, 8-9.

³⁰Witold Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, s. 17.

Let us also compare the description of a scene in which the imprisoned officers are discussing war strategies over the map of France. In the original version:

All the tables were pushed together and the map of France was laid on that new, huge table. It was handmade and at first sight it resembled a template map. A few people were leaning over it, while some short and skinny lieutenant colonel was holding a flag on a pin, painted like the US flag. The whole map was speckled with such flags – with the colors of the French, English, American, and German flags.

And in the book version:

A certified major:

According to the opinion of those who were assigned (wide, semicircular gesture over the table) to do that; here, gentlemen, we have a map of France; it is, of course, quite; the principles of the plan, quite (a smaller gesture) accurate; they have been sufficiently worked out; but it should for the general (a circle above the table), that is, with appropriate precision; of orientation (finger punching the map) it should suffice. The plan is, in principal; I believe that cartography-wise; unusually (flat, vertical cut by an open hand) simple; there shall be no doubts.³¹

Let us also trace what the same characters said in the “military staff conference” scene. First, the original version:

‘Do you understand the significance of that decisive move, gentlemen?’ he asked with emphasis. ‘Do you realize that this maneuver is not only a factor that will allow us to conclude the fate of the war in its most important theater, France, in the west – but also, and first of all, it is the rebirth of the Polish strategic thought, the rules of attack for the armored banner against the strongest forces of the enemy. This maneuver repeats Kircholm and Vienna, a triumph of the Polish military school!’”

And the final version:

‘Gentlemen, the proposed by us, so that (a semicircle over the map); plan of campaign is a variant; please look at; of the Kircholm battle; the major (flat cut with a hand) arrow. The Polish military doctrine assumes.’³²

Ellipticity and the parastenographical attempts at recreating real speech which result in an expression typical for modern poetry make the final version of the novel difficult to follow and understand. The need to capture the meaning of an ambiguous picture from the title, believed by some to be surreal, is a similar matter.³³ In the final version the narrator develops that picture in part “13”:

³¹Witold Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, 40.

³²Witold Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, 40.

³³Zbigniew Chojnowski, “Zegar i uwięzienie w powieści Witolda Wirpszy *Pomarańcze na drutach*”, 230.

(...) And meanwhile that greenhouse, an orangery surrounded by wires, and fruit ripens there in a strange way, in that peculiar orangery, protected and guarded (so that nothing bad happens, according to the wishes of the excellent contractors, who are trying to harm each other in any possible way), the fruit ripens, one should insist, the most unbelievable, and yet actual, real and palpable, so that one could believe that gold oranges grow on barbwire, chevaux de frise and wires, and the barbwire, chevaux de frise and wires were constructed so that the oranges could grow and the golden glow (what? shed? propagate? spread?).³⁴

The description of the Oflag space, detached from reality, half-oneiric, half-fantastical, implicates the understanding of the title in terms of a symbol. One can suppose that the title tries to convey the contradictions in the life of a prisoner of war: captivity, with barbwire as its visible sign, versus the safety of the “orange existence” guaranteed by international agreements, which lead to the illusion of freedom. In the archived pre-text the titular motif appears in a more extended version in the chapter *Jak wyrastają pomarańcze* [How oranges grow]. It begins with the words of one of privates:

But for such oranges to bloom, like they do here in your heads, gentlemen, it is impossible. For they are fighting Germans there, and you have to be on the ball to do that. And here? Give someone a CKM, and he will be so terrified that he won't know what to do. It is the end for them. They weren't worth much before the war, and the wires have completely finished them...

That view provoked a further exchange in the privates' barrack with one of the officers, who coincidentally heard everything.

I think that most officers are 'crazy', because they have nothing to do. A man who is working has no time for such ideas as courses for voivodes, like the one some gentlemen organized – and they think that they will really become voivodes once they return to Poland!

Zagórski smiled:

This is not the first time I've heard about the course for voivodes. Indeed, it may offend someone who is doing something more serious. But notice that there are people in the camp who – due to their pre-war situation – were on the best way to have a career. The war destroyed that. Moreover, they know that the international relations will change completely after the war, and especially so in Poland. And there are also wires – the 'barbwire sickness.' Each one of us – and officers to a far greater extent, exactly because they are not working – lives in an unreal world, in a fantasy world. And in that fantasy world, like in an orangery, oranges, as you call them, bloom. They are the final dreams of power.

'But it would mean, lieutenant, that these oranges bloom on wires, not in heads', said Kowalski the cobbler.

'Indeed,' said Lieutenant Zagórski, leaned forward even further, and smiled to himself.

The class motif is eliminated from the final version, hence it is difficult to incorporate the “dream of power” into the interpretation of the titular pictures. All the other meanings, so clearly stated

³⁴Witold Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, 91.

in the pre-text, are useful in explaining the title of the novel: oranges symbolize the unreal world of dreams which stems from the greenhouse conditions of the Oflag existence. They are a fantastic element confronted with the real wires surrounding the camp, but are of a suspicious provenance which can be commonly defined in the idiomatic expressions naming any detachment from reality.

A review of origins documents allows us to add one more, perhaps key element, to the attempt at understanding the novel. The first, 1946 version makes us ask the question about “the beginning of the beginning,” makes us try to find the “actually existing clue of the first trace,” as Pierre-Marc De Biassi would put it.³⁵ It seems that this lead takes us to the letters sent by Wirpsza from the Gross Born Oflag to his future wife, Maria Kurecka. Original hand-written letters written on the stationary for prisoners of war survive in Książnica Pomorska in Szczecin. The reader of *Pomarańcze na drutach* should pay attention to one fragment of a letter from Aug. 20, 1943:

I am going to organize a bizarre mass; I am sending a basket of oranges, grapes and chocolate to Okolska street (after all, Marylka is 10), and I am looking through the keyhole at what is going on. The resolute girl is launching an attack, the tinfoil is scrunching, the chocolate bar is leaving a brown mark on her lips. I open the door, enter the room on tiptoes, turn off the light and cover Marylka's eyes. And she says: 'Leave me alone, or I'll run to Mrs Szulc-Rembowska!' I behave now, I turn on the light and I start eating an orange, which is big, full and round, like a huge moon. Then I move my magic wand, and the basket of dried fruit turns into a beautiful vase with red flowers and we – we are looking at each other, laughing, kindly and for a long time.³⁶

The letter was sent to Okolska street in Warsaw, where the addressee was living at the time. However, it refers to the space and people from the time when the writer and his future wife were meeting in Gdynia and Gdańsk when they were children. The reminiscence is mixed with a prospective approach, in which the need to move outside the camp, the magic moment of teleportation and time travel all play a key role. In that dream the orange is just one of many equivalent elements. Its picture will return in one of the subsequent letters (undated, the post stamp is from April 25, 1944) as the dominating element, almost like an obsessive motif:

(...) Until finally you; using your teeth, bite into the skin of a big red orange – and you lift your upper lip so that I can see your pink, delicate gums. I believe that now you know what I meant. We feel that the summer and the sun are coming, like a huge, orange clock showing a scorching afternoon.³⁷

The sensuality of that vision is strengthened in its next version in the same letter:

And if it makes you angry and you feel like biting and scratching – do it; nothing would make me happier. I would be happy to turn into an orange, so that I could feel the touch of a pink, fresh, moist gum.³⁸

³⁵Pierre-Marc De Biassi, *Genetyka tekstów*, translated by Filip Kwiatek and Maria Prussak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2015), 202.

³⁶Witold Wirpsza, *Listy z oflagu*, Edited by Dariusz Pawelec (Szczecin: Zaulek Wydawniczy Pomyłka, 2015), 56-57.

³⁷Witold Wirpsza, *Listy z oflagu*, 84.

³⁸Witold Wirpsza, *Listy z oflagu*, 85.

In the description of that dream the orange is the synonym of anything that is imaginable and inaccessible, but it is also the carrier of an unambiguously positive value. Eroticism mixed with exoticism expresses the longing for freedom, and the orange symbolizes transgressing the limitations of the real space. Its picture is also present in Wirpsza's poetry, which – importantly – was written in the camp. In the text opening the poem *Don Juan*, whose first version was written in the fall of 1942, there is a comparison of the sky to a “dark skinned orange,” an oxymoron.³⁹ The first letter to Maria Kurecka is dated Nov. 17, 1942 – that is the “dark area of origins”⁴⁰ of *Pomarańcze na drutach*. In the letters and poems written in a camp barrack, in a space surrounded by a double palisade of barbed wire, the “mysterious picture” appears for the first time, containing “the seed of the novel.”⁴¹ Understanding it with an awareness of “what the beginning is made of”⁴² can definitely make it more complete. When writing the novel Wirpsza entered the condensed picture, from which the first idea emerged, later developed in a traditional narrative, which can be traced in the surviving pre-text. He wrote a novel which is clear in its satirical intentions and comprehensive within the framework of the convention. After many years the artistic pendulum took him back to the poetic starting point. The first version of the narrative was cut and transformed, subjected to the “variation technique” according to which each part of the original returns as its reworked variants. The clear intention consistent with the clear convention is replaced with “formal overcomplexity” and linguistic “peculiarities.” The traditional prose gave in to poetry, from which it originated.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

³⁹Witold Wirpsza, *Don Juan* (Warszawa: PIW, 1960), 6.

⁴⁰Pierre-Marc De Biasi, *Genetyka tekstów*, 202.

⁴¹Pierre-Marc De Biasi, *Genetyka tekstów*, 202.

⁴²Pierre-Marc De Biasi, *Genetyka tekstów*, 202.

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KEYWORDS

pre-text

Witold Wirpsza

Listy z oflagu

ABSTRACT:

The paper offers a new interpretation of Witold Wirpsza's novel *Pomarańcze na drutach* (1964) possible thanks to the microanalysis of pre-texts. Those are first of all materials from the author's archive preserved in Książnica Pomorska in Szczecin, including 39 pages of typescript with the Polish text of the first edition of the novel from the fall of 1946 and letters sent by Wirpsza from the Gross Born Oflag to his future wife, Maria Kurecka. The early reception of *Pomarańcze na drutach* was dominated by the question of its form, accepting the poetic form as a quality determinant and a guarantee of the sense of that prose enterprise. The analysis starts from the question of whether interpretative suggestions regarding the linguistic and "poetic" tissue of the text is justified given other documents of reception, whether it is justifiable to indicate a key to understanding the novel beyond its focus on the language itself and beyond properties typical for the linguistic trend in poetry associated with Wirpsza. Interpretation referring to traces left in "pre-texts" stems from understanding the title of the novel as a symbol, connected to the unreal, oneiric, half-fantastical description of the represented world of an Oflag. A review of the genesis documents allows us to incorporate Wirpsza's letters written in a direct relation to the novel's time and space, in order to better understand the novel and the title. According to that interpretative proposal, they answer the question regarding "the beginning of the beginning," for they contain the actual clues regarding the first trace (according to the terminology proposed by Pierre-Marc De Biasi).

POMARAŃCZE NA DRUTACH

grotesque

POETIC LANGUAGE

experimental novel

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