

ANNA BARANOWA

Intertwining. Zbigniew Makowski's Search for the Whole

*“To see the whole is the most difficult
and most fundamental thing for the painter.
This kind of perception is apparently
impossible to reconcile with love.”*

Zbigniew Makowski

For several months I had the pleasure of corresponding with Zbigniew Makowski, who participates in this form of exchange – quite rare today – with great generosity. What makes the correspondence exceptional is that the letters from Warsaw, which I have been receiving since the painter's exhibition in the Fine Arts Academy Museum in Kraków, are written calligraphically on handmade paper and often illustrated.

Makowski can be referred to as *homo pingens et scribens* – not only in the sense that as a painter and poet he uses the paintbrush and the fountain pen (never the biro or the computer), but primarily because his paintings and unique books are painted, drawn and written to an equal extent. The artist treats the word and picture as two complementary forms of expression, two orders of things which cannot exist without each other (colour images 14-17, see colour plates).

Zbigniew Makowski, born in 1930 in Warsaw, belongs to the generation of masters or contemporary classics. His own style was formed after 1960. He had attempted surrealism of the Carlo Carrà variety, Informel and lyrical abstraction. While staying in Paris in 1962 he mixed with the international Phases group and participated in several of their exhibitions. There he also encountered André Breton, who wished to see the young Pole among his acolytes. Makowski is considered part of the

international surrealist circle (Passeron, 1993, pp. 241-42), although he himself and some other researchers are likely to consider his approach entirely original. The erudite-painter, entrenched in the whole of culture (particularly Mediterranean culture), operates with a language elaborate in form and rich in symbolism, sometimes hermetic in reception, which draws on esoteric traditions of Europe and the Orient. A characteristic feature of his style is the multiple presence of writing in the imagery area – Latin sayings, quotations from literature, his own calligraphic notes. The works of the artist, which he exhibited many times in Poland and abroad, are stored in the art collections of important museums across the world. In 1991, his painting entitled *Mirabilitas secundum diversos modos exire potest a rebus* was donated to the UN Office in Geneva as a gift of the Polish government.

Makowski read and absorbed paintings with equal passion. In his autobiography he remembers his return to the ruins of Warsaw: “in the early spring of 1945, with a bundle on his back, which included several potatoes and onions as well as 1) several dozen colour reproductions, particularly of works by seventeenth century Dutch painters, but also Turner and Pre-Raphaelites, 2) several books: Rudolf Steiner, Madame Blavatsky, Ruskin. ... 3) a notebook with his poems, 4) loose sheets of paper with drawings – copies of Leonardo da Vinci, Hans Baldung Grien, drawings of nature, initials, ornaments.” (Makowski, 1978, pp. 15-16) This was spiritual nourishment for the 15-year old, already well beyond his years. The 15-year-old Central European, hungry without doubt, returns to the ruins of his home town – the capital city of Poland, which had been almost completely burnt down by the Nazis. He knows, although he may not have read Paul Valéry yet, that civilizations are mortal. He also suspects that he can reconstruct his own world only through art. “All art gives us is an experience freed from the disturbing conditions of actual life,” he noted from the article by Roger Fry on William Blake (Fry, 1904). Makowski was never an escapist. In one of his most recent letters he wrote of himself that he is “in search of simplicity” (from a letter dated August 11, 2009). He searches for the principle of the world, pushing his way through the thicket of signs.

Somebody like this would not be able to exist in the desert. The artist hates emptiness – he has strong symptoms of *horror vacui*. This is why he could not bear the avant-garde dictate to start afresh. The empty

canvas, the *tabula rasa*, scared him and put him off. In his autobiography he remembers the borderline year 1960, when he painted a work that was a metaphorical desert for him: "the painting, completely white with a small vertical red line and remains of the texture obtained by spreading sand on part of the canvas." (Makowski, 1978, p. 29) He saw only two solutions before him: "1. to walk back the way I came (who likes it?); 2. to build on the spot (out of what?). The panicky retreat, known as Passivism, was out of the question."

Affected by the spirit of time – apparently against his better judgment –, the painter, who had rejected figuration, was assisted by the word. Initially, these were even surrealistic games in the spirit of the "Lettrist" Informel. Nonetheless, Makowski primarily drew on the letter as an elementary building block through which language materializes. "We could thus build from letters, if we wanted some coherent, non-contradictory arrangement of non-mimetic forms. It was naivety for somebody to state that I used letters to describe the world literally when I stopped painting it literally," he wrote years later. It soon turned out that the alphabet may give a sense of control over the whole. He discovered that letters have a mystical dimension, they are "roots of the universe." This reflected the influence of the ideas of the Spanish Cabalist and Jewish prophet of the thirteenth century, Abraham Ben Samuel Abulafia, who "found the Archimedean point in twenty-two Hebrew letters." What was not insignificant for the painter was the visual aspect of the Lettrism he practiced – the "drawing texture," which came into being when Latin, Gothic, and Hebrew letters, runic rites, hieroglyphs, cuneiform writing, Japanese and Arabic calligraphy, and early musical notation were used.

In time, parchments of Opicinus de Canistris, the inspired Italian cartographer from the turn of the thirteenth century who created anthropomorphic maps of the world, grew into an equally important source of inspiration. For the painter, who lived with the image and the word, it was an impulse to reconcile the two orders. In spite of the limitless formal possibilities offered by art freed from the mimetic, it is not by any means obvious how to go about reconciling the represented and the written on one plane. Image and the word coexist on the basis of permanent paradox, because the image becomes manifest immediately, while the word requires reading and develops in time (Bowman, 1985).

Artists who produced illuminated volumes in the past managed to tackle this double code well. Among countless successful examples of such symbiosis, it is worth recalling a page from the anonymous fourteenth-century incunabulum called *The Life of Ramon Lull*. Even more so, given that Lullus constituted another important model of universal science for Makowski, that of *ars magna*, which served to describe the entire world. The Blessed Raimundus Lullus, the medieval patron of today's computer users, developed a system of signs which yielded to automatic ordering and which Makowski decided to apply to art. If this elaborate "alphabet" is designed to be ordered in various ways which allow us to survey all possible wholes consisting of its elements, then what happens when we assume that the basic set of elements is the entire world? Makowski formulated this question following the Polish logician Tadeusz Kotarbiński (Kotarbiński, 1957). The imagination of surrealist origin, supported at the same time by age-old tradition, suggested the answer. What occurred to him was "constructions both artificial and infinitely odd, archi-heterogenic: the amusement park of all mythologies, old book stores hovering above the waters, underground birds, cloudy minerals." (Makowski, 1978, p. 37). Returning to figuration in the mid-1960s, Makowski built his own labyrinth of impossible spaces, filled with symbolic signs, hybrid shapes and writing.

Concerning methodology, in the case of Makowski's works, somebody who would attempt to decipher them using the iconographic key would quickly become dizzy. His art is fertile terrain for iconology, though, and more broadly hermeneutics, i.e. the art of reading, understanding and interpreting signs. Józef Życiński, in his collection of essays entitled *Język i metoda (Language and Method)* inspired by the ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer, wrote of the virtues of hermeneutics, which he called the "methodical interpretation which reveals meaning": "A hermeneut does not stop at the superficial level of formulations, he does not confine himself to a register of symbols and signs. Entering the world of meanings, he presents their multiple combinations, which create a rich spectrum of shades of meaning. As a result of his hermeneutic interpretations, the subjects of our intellectual reflections start to point at a different reality and, as in Goethe, everything becomes a symbol. For this reason, the philosopher who employs hermeneutics resembles an archaeologist. Both discover a new reality, present but concealed. They are

not satisfied with a superficial description, but going deep inside, they ask for *arché*. ... In the world of hermeneutics, one should avoid both the Scylla of superficiality and the Charibda of elaborate technical analyses, where the full, synthetic approach is supplanted by a mosaic-like collection of details." (Życiński, 1983, p. 96.) Gadamer himself, the co-author of the philosophical foundations of hermeneutics, in his treatise *The Relevance of the Beautiful* emphasized the role of memory, which allows us to move simultaneously between the present, the past and the future. The description of spiritual space, which, thanks to this, becomes accessible to us, could be a commentary on Makowski's art. In the mid 1970s, the author of *Wahrheit und Methode* wrote: "The essence of what is called spirit lies in the ability to move within the horizon of an open future and an unrepeatable past. Mnemosyne, the muse of memory and recollective appropriation, rules here as the Muse of spiritual freedom. The same activity of spirit finds expression in memory and recollection, which incorporates the art of the past along with our own artistic tradition, as well as in recent daring experiments with their unprecedented deformation of form." (Gadamer, 1986, p. 10.)

Zbigniew Makowski is reluctant to talk about any methodology. The theological hermeneutics in the form which it obtained in the thought of Giordano Bruno seems closest to him. The Italian Dominican, an expert in reading and commenting on the Bible who was burned at stake, wrote (I quote Makowski's citation): "the Holy Scriptures have the infinite number of meanings (*infinite significans*), out of which I provide nine." These are: historical, scientific, metaphysical, ethical, legal, anagogic, prophetic, mystical, and tropological meanings (Makowski, 1978, p. 37). Let us add that it was the philosopher Bruno whom Makowski had in mind when he confessed: "I owe it to him that I live and have the courage to think." (Makowski, 1978, p. 37.)

Makowski, who is an agnostic, creates the world of his own mythology, which is dense in meanings, strongly culture-specific, and auto-thematic. The symbols, which take the form of abstract signs or three-dimensional figures, and the quotations, which solemnly frame the imagery area or penetrate space with a network of intricate calligraphy, draw on his experiences and reflections. Their iterativeness is almost neurotic. Metamorphoses of the same motifs stem from one source and lead to it. It is the mind and heart of the artist. Makowski searches for simplicity

within the confines of the labyrinth. In 1970 he wrote on the essence of his artistic path: “The individual creative path of the artist, resembling in close-up a frenetic, paroxysmal-heterogenic labyrinth (particularly for himself!), with its rock faces and shallows, forests of symbols and meadows grown over with the grass of memories, with its escapes and returns, attacks and defences, loves and fears, appears from far away (who knows from how far away?) to be driven by NECESSITY, which the artist either realizes ... or perhaps does not realize, but he lives it, like a sentence, with his entire life” (Makowski, 1978, p. 16. From a letter dated May 6, 2009). Makowski’s labyrinths either open up from the bird’s-eye view or in a shortcut perspective or through formally contradictory but internally coherent clashes and intertwining of various spaces. The same symbols of initiation and spiritual path keep appearing: the well, chalice, sword, ladder, key, bird, sphere, dice etc. The same figures keep returning as guides: Dante and Beatrice, Muses and Charities, Eurydice, Ariadne, Mary Magdalene, Circe, often in the form of quotations from the masters: Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio, Rossetti, Gauguin, Picasso. The alternating words, sentences, sayings, the whole portions of classical texts and notes from his own autobiography keep growing back too as a tissue made out of letters, as erudite “metastasis.”

These elements are often arranged in a kaleidoscopic mix or are revealed in a flash of illumination. That is why I intended to apply Breton’s concept of *l’écriture automatique* to the analysis of Makowski’s paintings. Are the words of Paul Éluard from 1936 on automatism perhaps fitting here? I quote: “One could think that automatic writing would undermine the need to write poems. Far from it! It only expands, develops the experiential field of poetic awareness, enriching it considerably. If awareness is perfect, the elements which the automatic writing brings out of the internal world and the elements of the external world balance out. Reduced to equality, they mix and merge in order to form a poetic unity.” (Éluard, 1936. From a letter of mine dated April 27-28, 2009). Maestro Makowski, who is unenthusiastic about Breton’s ideas, replied with a sentence which paraphrased an automatic linguistic “lump”, and for the sake of elevation copied the poetic extract from his autobiography entitled “Mount Parnassus – Description.” To sum up: four streams have their sources under Mount Parnassus; Reason, Emotion, Perception and Intuition. Around the sacred mountain runs the circular road, on the sides

of which lie immense rocks with the inscriptions: Ecstasy, Inspiration, Peace, Heavenly Tranquillity. These inscriptions announce the entrance to the labyrinth located under Mount Parnassus (From a letter dated May 6, 2009). Is there no room for the automatism of the subconscious here?

When Makowski was very young, 17 years of age, just after the war, he read the freshly published treatise by Marian Morelowski entitled "Abstractionism and Naturalism in Art." This was an introductory course in the history of art conceived as part of *Geisteswissenschaften*, and it made a considerable impression on the young Makowski, in particular the following sentence: "However, neither the extremely abstract nor the radically naturalistic tendency have ever been as fertile as their most diverse intertwining." (Morelowski, 1947, pp. 46-47. From a letter dated March 31, 2009). Morelowski approached the creative act "not so much 'subconsciously'... as *superconsciously* in 'clairvoyance'." The creative act thus turns into "embracing all factors of inspiration with one's entire being," into a state "in which everything that is the past, present and future of plastic art – one's own or national, acquired or inherited by blood, 'racial' or human in general – is transfigured as embodiment into plastic signs, into lines, into chords of colour and into arrangements of spatial figures, into one's own constellation of forms." (Morelowski, 1947, p. 51.) Makowski, today nearly an octogenarian, eager – like many old masters – to find and see "the whole," constantly confirms the validity of such an approach to creativity – against the recent dictates of art perceived as production of artefacts, commercial, politically correct, logistic, anti-individualistic, anonymous, formally bland and nondescript. Makowski's art is the "fertile intertwining" of abstractionism and naturalism, experiment and canon, intuition and reason, body and mind, image and text.

References

- BOWMAN, R., 1985. Words and Images: Persistent Paradox. *Art Journal*, 4, pp. 335-343.
- ÉLUARD, P., 1936. Definicja. In: Ważyk, Adam, ed. and transl. 1973. *Surrealizm. Teoria i praktyka literacka. Antologia*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, pp. 169-170.

- FRY, R., 1904. Three pictures in tempera by William Blake. *Burlington Magazine*. In: Makowski, Z., 1978, p. 16.
- GADAMER, H-G., 1987. *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays*, trans. by N. Walker; ed. with an introduction by R. Bernasconi, Cambridge-New York-New Rochelle-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge University Press.
- KOTARBIŃSKI, T., 1957. Wykłady z dziejów logiki, Łódź. In: Makowski, Z., 1978, p. 37.
- PASSERON, R., 1993. *Encyklopedia surrealizmu*, transl. Krystyna Janicka, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe.
- MAKOWSKI, Z., 1978. Autobiografia. In: *Zbigniew Makowski*, [exhibition catalogue] Wrocław National Museum, Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych Łódź.
- MORELowski, M., 1947. *Abstrakcjonizm i naturalizm w sztuce. Uwagi wstępne do kursu powszechnej historii sztuki, uzupełnione wiadomościami o początkach tej nauki w Polsce*. Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL.
- ŻYCIŃSKI, J., 1983. *Język i metoda*, Kraków: Znak.



11. Lajos Gulácsy, *Gyxyilp*, c. 1910, watercolour, pen on cardboard, 11.2 × 9.2 cm. Private Collection, Budapest (photo: First Hungarian Art & Artifact Repository Foundation)



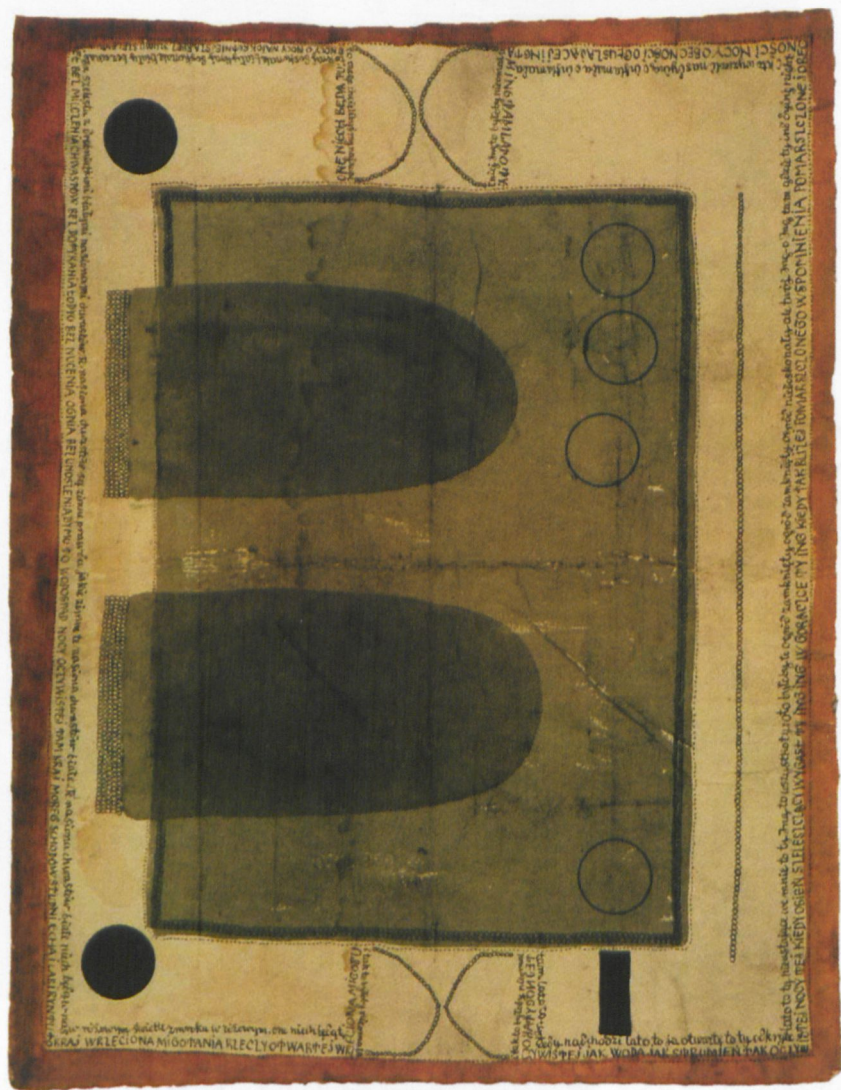
12. Lajos Gulácsy, *Bam, the Caretaker*, c. 1910, pen on paper, 14 × 20 cm. Budapest, National Széchenyi Library, Manuscript Collection, Fond 124/282. (photo: National Széchenyi Library)



13. Lajos Gulácsy, *Doctor Huttertonn*, c. 1910, pen on paper, 7.8 × 6.3 cm. Budapest, National Széchenyi Library, Manuscript Collection, Fond 124/282. (photo: National Széchenyi Library)

ANNA BARANOWA

Intertwining. Zbigniew Makowski's Search for the Whole



14. Zbigniew Makowski, *With Two Symmetric, Dark Forms*, 1962, ink, paper, 48.5 × 61 cm.
 Cracow Fine Arts Academy Museum Collection M 1396 (photo: MASP, Cracow)



15. Zbigniew Makowski, *O saisons, o chateaux*, 1966, ink, paper, 45.5 × 57.5 cm. Cracow Fine Arts Academy Museum Collection M 1398 (photo: MASP, Cracow)