

The Tatra Mountains and Zakopane through the eyes of two artists: Witkacy and Tetmajer

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Abstract: An author's and an artist's treatment of landscape reflects the categories of perception of the culture and what Thomas Hardy called the "idiosyncratic mode of regard." Thus, there are both culturally conditioned and personal (or idiosyncratic) aspects of an artist's mode of perception. We consider how two Polish artists/writers evaluate the Tatra-Podhale region through their perceptual filters. Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer and Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) provide colourful insights into their regional domain, an area which contrasts dramatically with the lowlands that cover most of the rest of Poland.

A writer's treatment of landscape reflects the categories of perception of the culture and what Thomas Hardy called 'the idiosyncratic mode of regard' (Hardy 1928). Thus, there are both culturally conditioned and personal (or idiosyncratic) aspects of an author's/artist's mode of perception. Geography has traditionally emphasized the former in its assessment of human/environment relationships. However, the artist's personal perception conditions his/her geographic evaluation. In the case of D. H. Lawrence, the general values and categories of English Romanticism are reflected in, for example, his rather conventional contrasts between agrarian and industrial landscapes. His most successful descriptions, however, reflect primarily his intensely personal mode of perception. Lawrence was a writer of extraordinarily diverse works, yet a coherent and very quirky personal view colours everything.

In other words, his pseudo philosophy provided a filter through which all is seen, and his sheer descriptive power derives to a great extent from the metaphorical energy provided by his personal view.

Central to Lawrence's mode of regard is a dualistic vision; that is to him everything that exists has two sides to its nature. Since our major focus is mountains we cite Lawrence's description of Etna to illustrate this:

She seems rather low, under heaven. But as one knows her better, oh, awe and wizardry. Remote, under heaven, aloof, so near, yet never with us. The painters try to paint her and the photographers to photograph her, in vain. Because why? Because the near ridges with their olives and white houses, these are with us. Because the riverbed and Naxos under the lemon groves – Etna's skirts and skirt-bottoms, these are still our world, our own world. Even the high villages among the oaks, on Etna... But Etna herself, Etna of the snow and secret changing winds, she is beyond a crystal wall. But when I look at her, low, white, witch-like under heaven, slowly rolling her orange smoke and giving sometimes a breath of rose-red flame, then I must look away from the earth into the ether, into the low empyrean. And there, in that remote region Etna is alone (Lawrence 1921).

John Moss, an English Literature professor, provides a delightful albeit idiosyncratic view of geography in this context:

Trying to define geography: the imposition of knowledge on experience in a specified landscape. That's what I mean to say, but it's so terse it seems evasive. Geography is essentially propiocentric; it does not exist outside our awareness, but is entirely separable both from us and our presence within it. The mind opens like an eye on the landscape, and defines what it sees in terms of itself. The eye measures light; distance and direction – geography articulates our solipsistic vision of the world

as knowable, as what we mean it to be...(Moss 1994, 1-2)

Our paper assesses how two Polish artists evaluate the Tatra-Podhale region through their perceptual filters. Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer and Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) provide colourful insights into their regional domain, a region that contrasts dramatically with the lowlands that cover the area of most of the rest of Poland.

Tetmajer was a poet and short story writer born on February 12, 1865, in Ludzmiery (a town in the Podhale region, which is next to the Tatra Mountains), and died on January 18, 1940, in Warsaw. He was one of the most popular members of the Young Poland movement, which was dominated by a desire to return to the expression of feeling and imagination in literature. Amongst his works are the nostalgic and pessimistic *Poezje* ("Poetry"), published in eight series between 1891 and 1924, his *Legenda Tatr* ("Legend of the Tatras"), the first attempt in Poland at historic setting as seen through the eyes of the working classes, and what is considered his best work, *Na Skalnych Podhalu* ("On the Rocky Podhale"), a story that depicts the landscape and people of the Tatra Mountains, where Tetmajer was born. *Na Skalnych Podhalu* is based, in part, on an ancient legend of the area, these colourful stories describe the mountaineers, their violent lives and intense love of freedom.

Witkacy, as he called himself, a combination of his first name Ignacy and last name Witkiewicz, was born February 24, 1885, in Warsaw, where he lived until 1890, when his parents moved to Zakopane in the hopes of curing his father's tuberculosis with the fresh mountain air. He was a prolific painter, writer, art critic, and dramatist, despite his rather turbulent life, owing to his experimentation with the effects of narcotics, such as cocaine, on creativity, which ultimately culminated in his suicide on September 18, 1939, in the Dabrowice Lakes area, in the Polesie region. He painted many portraits using the Polish Formist style, a style about which he wrote a theoretical tract, *New Forms in Painting*. He describes the process of painting as an abstract vision in the artist's imagination with more or less precise directional tensions of

particular masses, which at the moment of their objectification are determined by the psyche of the artist (Kirkland 1996, 16-18). Amongst his novels written in his most productive era, 1918 to 1927, are *662 Upadków Bunga* (“662 Falls of Bung”), *Nienasycenia* (“Insatiations”) and *Pożegnanie Jesieni* (“Good-bye to Fall”), and two examples of plays are *Pragmatyści* (“Pragmatists”) and *Maciej Korobowa i Bellatrix* (“Mathew Korobowa and Bellatrix”), amongst many others.

Tetmajer and Witkacy led very different lives but the one thing that they had in common was their love and awe of the mountains that inspired them, the Tatra Mountains. Living in the region left an indelible stamp on their work. Mountains seem to inspire contemplative, spiritual and religious feelings in people, thereby stimulating both religious and secular literature. It can be claimed they symbolize the characteristics of God, which include awesomeness, mystery, transcendence, inaccessibility, eternity and immovability, (Kissoon, and Simpson-Housley, 1999, 90). This metaphor is rendered explicitly in the Psalms:

Those who trust in the Lord
are like Mount Zion which cannot be moved,
but abides forever.
As the mountains are
round about Jerusalem,
so the Lord is round about his people,
from this time forth and forever more. (Psalm 125, 1-2)

There are many other references in the Bible to God appearing on mountains, or in fact God living on a mountain:

God is well known in Judah,
and famous in Israel.
He has his home in Jerusalem;
he lives on Mount Zion. (Psalm 76, 1-2)

Other religions also see mountains as dwelling places of the gods. For example, the Greek gods lived on Mount Olympus. Secular writers also celebrated mountains. One such episode in

the English Lake poet, William Wordsworth's autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*, revolves around a sacred or mystical experience on Mount Snowdon in north-west Wales:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Has pass'd away, and it appear'd to me
The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
Of one that feeds upon infinity,
That is exalted by an underpresence,
The sense of God, or whatso-er is dim
Or vast in its own being, above all
One function of such mind had Nature there
Exhibited by putting forth, and that
With circumstances most awful and sublime,
That domination which she oftentimes
Exerts upon the outward face of things...

Similarly, the pagan religion of the local inhabitants of the Tatra-Podhale region considered mountains to be sacred. They, in fact, worshipped the mountains themselves as one of the gods (prior to the coming of Christianity).

The Polish Tatra Mountains stretch for 64 kilometres along the Slovak-Polish frontier, in the southernmost region of the country (Figure 1). The average elevation of the Tatras is 700 metres above sea level, with the highest peak, Rysy, reaching an elevation 2500 metres. This contrasts starkly with the rest of Poland, which is largely composed of lowlands, with an average elevation of 200 metres above sea level. This fact gives the region an even greater aura of uniqueness. Some, in fact, venture that the Tatras are the spiritual capital of Poland (Pinkwart, 1998, 3-35). All of these factors contribute to the popularity of the Tatras as a theme, as an inspirational force, for Polish artists.

Tetmajer, in his book *Legend of the Tatras*, shows how Maryna, a young Goral woman (that is what the mountain people of the region are called), falls back on worshipping the mountain gods when she tries to exorcise the love that she feels for a nobleman, whom she would rather hate because he is fighting against her



Figure 1: Location of Zakopane and the Tatra Mountains.

people. She turns to the pagan gods since to her the Christian faith is the faith of the nobility. After sacrificing a bull and throwing it into the fire, she prays:

Mountain pasture, you who freezes in the winter and melts each spring, almighty God, light of creation, the word of the father of gods and people, you who heralds manifestations. I am here! Mountain pasture, almighty

God, you who destroys and creates again the world, in you is time, in you is eternity!

Halu, ty, co w zimie marźnies, a odtajes na kazdom wiesne, boze wsehmogoncy, światło stworzenia, słowo ojca bogów i ludzi, ty, co zwiestujes objawienie. Jestem! Halu, boze wsehmogoncy, ty, co wniwec obracas i zaś odnawias świat, w tobie cas, w tobie wieczność! (Tetmajer 1997, 119).

This anthropomorphic treatment of the mountains is seen reflected, albeit more subtly, elsewhere in Tetmajer's description of the Tatras. He does not go as far as to call the mountains gods, but he describes them in such glowing terms, that they would be worthy of being gods or their dwelling place:

Up high, glittering in the sun and bathed in a translucent glow, still covered in snow, hanging in the distance high above ethereal emerald green mists and dark forests, the mountains glowed like sapphires, cut into the joyous expanse of the heavens, so light and airy as if they were carried by the wind.

A wysoko lśniły sie w słońcu obfite w óar przezroczystry, śniegiem jeszcze osypane, zawisłe w przestrzeni wysoko na zwiewnych mgłach seledynowych nad ciemnymi lasami, szafirowopromienne skały, tak lekkie i lotne, jakby wiatrem niesione, w radosny niezmiar nieba wcięte (Tetmajer *ibid.*, 26-27).

The painter/dramatist/writer Witkacy depicted the mountains in a spiritual or mystical manner in some of his portraits. In one portrait of Nena Stachurska (Oct. 12, 1929), he paints her head floating above the mountains and above a crescent moon. He repeats this motif in a painting of Eugeniusz Lorek (May 1937), this time replacing the moon with a bright star. The large size of the heads in comparison to the landscape and their placement in the composition gives the impression that the landscape is an

internalized, spiritual landscape, rather than an actual setting (Kirkland, op. cit., plates 88 and 217). The people whom he depicted in this manner were people, who, much like himself, lived in Zakopane, the main town in the Polish Tatras. Witkacy describes the infatuation that people get with Zakopane, after they have stayed for a while, as a drug:

In the atmosphere of Zakopane, so deadly for the tuberculosis bacteria, so full of forceful encouragement to the sleepy phagocytes, there exists a subtle drug, a hundred times worse than the smoke of opium or the hashish paste, a drug that causes artists to fall into total omphalopsychism, in other words, into an unbridled contemplation of their metaphysical navels... They used to call Zakopane 'a spiritual capital of Poland'. We would call it something else: a producer of a specific, a purely Polish drug, 'zakopianiny', its psycho-chemical composition we are trying, it seems for the first time, to analyze.

W atmosferze Zakopanego, tak zabójczej dla tuberkulicznych bakcyli, tak pełnej wściekłego dopingu dla ospałych fagocytów, unosi się subtelny narkotyk, stokroć gorszy od dymów opium i haszyszowej marmelady, narkotyk, którym omamieni twórcy wszelkich dziedzin pogrążają się w zupełny omphalopsychizm, czyli nieokieżonaną kontemplację swych metafizycznych pępków... Nazywano niegdyś Zakopane 'duchową stolicą Polski'. My nazwalibyśmy je inaczej: generalną wytwórnią specyficznego, zresztą czysto polskiego narkotyku, zakopianiny, której skład psycho-chemiczny staramy się tu, zdaje się po raz pierwszy w ogóle zanalizować. (Pinkwart op. cit., 214-215)

Thus, Zakopane is seen as a special town, unlike any other Polish town, owing to its location in the Tatra Mountains. It survived, practically unscathed, the devastating effects of the

socialist regime, which plunged so many of the other Polish cities into poverty, grimy with the pollution spewed out by monstrous industrial factories. It will not need any 'place promotion', like some of the other Polish cities, such as Łódź:

Place promotion involves the re-evaluation and re-representation of place to create and market a new image for localities to enhance their competitive position in attracting and retaining resources (Young and Kaczmarek 1999, 183-191).

In fact, Zakopane has to figure out how to deal with the millions of tourists who are crowding its streets in increasing numbers every year and how to solve the chronic traffic problem on the one road leading into town (Pinkwart op. cit., 5) Therefore, the mountains, with their magnetic force to artists and tourists alike have ensured the economic survival of this city... but can the city and the Tatras handle the price, the environmental stress, of their success? It seems that for now they are still coping and inspiring, because away from the crowded trails...

... it is possible to see the real Tatras and to come into contact with their indescribable beauty, exotic scenery and still untamed nature, to get choked up by metaphysical experiences and to allow ourselves – as the great composer and mountaineer, Mieczysław Karłowicz, wrote – to be filled with the *eternal breath of existence*, which manifests itself in this way only in high mountains and large oceans.

... można zobaczyć prawdziwe Tatry i wejść w bezpośredni kontakt z ich niepowtarzalnym pięknem, egzotyczną scenerią i ciagle jeszcze dziką przyrodą, można zachłysnąć się metafizycznymi przeżyciami i pozwolić by – jak pisał wielki kompozytor i taternik, Mieczysław Karłowicz – ogarnął nas wiekuisty oddech wszechbytu, tak właśnie manifestujący się tylko w wielkich górach i na wielkich oceanach (Pinkwart op. cit., 5-6).

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