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A Body of Poetics

critics:
Adam Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* (Plan for a Somatic Criticism), Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, Warszawa 2014

The new book by Adam Dziadek displays all of the dilemmas and aspirations of contemporary poetics. The title *Plan for a Somatic Criticism* (Projekt krytyki somatycznej)[1] has a somewhat familiar ring: in the early 1990s, Maria Janion announced her *Plan for a Phantasmatic Criticism* (Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej[2]), a study of ghosts (in literature and culture). Dziadek is concerned with the body rather than the spirit. Moreover, he is working with Western (chiefly Anglo-American) currents in literary scholarship such as the New Criticism and the New Historicism. The title should be understood in an epistemological context. In using the term "criticism," Dziadek is being careful, defining himself in a more traditional humanities paradigm relative to the crisis in scholarly thought. In so doing, he gives priority to philological "interpretation" over literary studies "scrutiny."

At a first glance, it may appear that Dziadek's book simply presents a set of interpretations of contemporary Polish poets' work (specifically that of Aleksander Wat, Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, Joanna Pollakówna, Edward Pasewicz, Stefan and Franciszka Themerson), using literary studies' interpretative tools. This is not the case, however. *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* is essentially a proposal for a new kind of poetics—but not limited to the kind suggested in the title. Successive chapters in the book work present the classical, tectonic conception of the literary work, composed of sound, lexical elements, style, genre, and iconography of the word. What, then, does Dziadek find in the work of these poets?

Let's start with the chapter on Joanna Pollakówna. First, we should note that Dziadek's interpretation of her poems is to some extent based on a remark by Jan Zieliński, author of a preface to Pollakówna's collected works. Dziadek does not polemicize with his fellow literary historian; instead, he capitalizes on Zieliński's concept, incorporating it into his own poetics and simultaneously expanding it. Dziadek's focus is modern poetry, here seen as registering sound, rhythm, and voice. He quotes Paul Valéry's remark that poetry is an "extended hesitation between sound and sense" (p. 102). His analyses, in this and other chapters, confirm the validity of the French poet's formulation.

Throughout the book, Dziadek presents his poetics of the body. His conception consists not of one all-embracing poetics for the entire body, but rather a diverse multiplicity of poetics for the senses, presented using various poems. It is not a poetics of synaesthesia, tracing how the poetic word records sense impressions. Instead, Dziadek connects the categories of the body with formal concepts, such as rhythm correlating with the rhythm of the pulse. Instead of simply counting syllables, Dziadek investigates how rhythm in a poem is related to the rhythm of the heart, or more precisely, how the sound of speech is related to the pulse of the blood. In connection with this, he touches on a different set of problems, concerning the poetics of illness.

[1] A. Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej*, Warszawa 2014.

[2] M. Janion, *Projektu krytyki fantazmatycznej. Szkice o egzystencji ludzi i duchów* (Plan for a Phantasmatic Criticism. Sketches on the Existence of People and Ghosts), Warszawa 1991.

In the course of developing his poetics of the body, Dziadek also introduces another thread to follow. He tentatively considers some correspondences between poetry and modern music (such as that of Tadeusz Baird). It goes without saying that Dziadek insists on presenting meter and meaning in the context of subjectivity and genre (including short poems or, as he calls them, "micro-poems").

In the chapter on Pollakówna, Dziadek presents the sense of touch (he refers at one point to "reading with one's fingers"), and in the chapter on to Edward Pasewicz he takes up questions of sight and looking. In order to extract the theme of (homosexual) lust from the poem "Czerwony autobus" (The Red Bus), he must examine how intertextual references (to a song from the era of Communism, Jan Twardowski's *Supplications*, and many other texts) function in that poem. Dziadek shows how the poet works at employing and uniting these other voices while recreating the emotions experienced by people riding public transport. Pasewicz presents a "beautiful boy" on the red bus whose looks attract attention to him. The gazes of others (including inanimate parts of the bus) serve to mask the yearning gaze of the subject. The most intriguing aspect of the poem is how Pasewicz fills it with musical forms. As a result, an interpretation that highlights the subtleties of the poem in fact argues in favor of the proposition that poetry comes into being not while being read with the eyes but when read out loud (or even sung). Dziadek reaches the following conclusion: "Listening as a bodily experience is a general formula that can help us move closer to the richness of meanings contained in such complex polyphonic poetry. This is poetry that experiences the world and bears witness as much to the world's being as to its own singular, unrepeatable existence. It is impossible not to listen to this poetry, because only through listening can we grasp that single, solitary, unique rhythm, designating the remnants of identity that they preserve in writing so that they can come alive in reading (p. 135)."

Dziadek's approach changes significantly in the chapter on the sonnet. Where the previous chapters dealt with the poetic systems of individual poets, here he addresses genre and a particular strophic form, whose origins in Polish and European literature reach back many centuries, but which continues to thrive in our day. Dziadek provides a solid history of the genre, showing the varied forms, types, and mutations, until at a certain point the reader questions the purpose of this particular section, suspecting that it is probably meant to introduce a broad selection of contemporary sonnets (broadened by the long exposition), or that Dziadek is attempting to write a history of Polish poetry through the prism of this genre, as others have done using, for example, the ode.[3] We are encouraged to read the chapter that way since Dziadek treats the sonnet as an exceptional genre both in terms of its size (14 lines) and with regard to formal rules (which have changed over time). In fact, his narrative about the sonnet is both an account of literary history and an analysis of literature as literature, and to some extent the phenomenon of literariness. Also, given that the sonnet has lasted this long as an active literary genre, it provides abundant material for a comparative study. The genre of the sonnet can be held up as an elementary unit in European and world literary history. What is more, as a result of the "democratization" of literature, the sonnet has entered pop culture. In view of that fact, the story of this poetic genre enables us to explore the intersection of high and low literature, and also to discuss graphomania. All of this is true. But those are not chief among Dziadek's concerns. In this chapter as in previous ones, what stand out for me are the beginning and the conclusion. In the first paragraph of the chapter, Dziadek reminds readers of the Latin meaning of the word "corpus" ("body"). Thus in discussing a particular genre (or corpus), we are examining the body of literature. In the conclusion, Dziadek considers the "multimedia sonnet," to use Balcerzan's term: "The corpus of sonnets is not limited to literary texts, because it extends into other artistic practices, into other bodily practices, into other areas of sensual experience" (p. 165). Here we once again return to rhythm, to the way sonnets sound and the voice of literature.

[3] T. Kostkiewiczowa, *Oda w poezji polskiej. Dzieje gatunku* (The Ode in Polish Poetry. History of a Genre), Wrocław 1996.

Dziadek's book superficially appears to be concerned with, above all, poetry. But that is another misconception, because contemporary poetics cannot limit itself to dealing exclusively with one textual field. In perhaps the book's key chapter, Dziadek analyzes the work of Aleksander Wat, discussing both his poetry and his prose. Dziadek attempts an interpretation of Wat's autobiography, quoting from the fragment published in London in 1968 as "News" ("Wiadomości"): "For as long as I can remember, there was a mechanical clock across from my bed. The clock's face with its mysterious symbols, and the movement of its two hands, were my first experience of stillness and the riddle of motion. The difference in the speed of the two hands was my first intuition of relativism and the abruptness with which they shifted was a demonstration of the play of continuity and change. More important was the pendulum, a copper disk with a sharp spindle at the end and sharp edges. The very regularity of its movements was menacing for me. I don't know, now, by what process my infant mind determined from the invariability and regularity of the pendulum's back and forth that it needed to be violated. I'm sure I wasn't yet thinking of how I would do so, but I saw it with certitude and waited for that moment, with a fear, impenetrable in its strength, singularity, and contradiction, that the pendulum would reach across the distance of a few meters toward me, like the arm of my older brother, and cut my throat with its sharp disk, whose weakness, softness, vulnérabilité, and frailty I knew inside-out, and throats have fascinated me ever since (p. 54)."

Dziadek supplements this excerpt with another one that he found in the Beinecke Library's Wat archive, and then offers his interpretation. He shows the difference between what has been published and what remains in the archive, investigating the logic of omission. Could the London émigré press have published the fragment of the autobiography in which Wat's birthday, May 1, plays such a significant role, and which is interpreted through its associations with workers' demonstrations? However, this observation serves merely as a prelude to what Dziadek has to say about the text he discovered in the archive. Though theoretically writing about poetry, here he lays down guidelines for interpreting autobiographical prose. His probing commentary continues: "Wat's decision to change his name from Chwat was more than simply a change of name, or even a break with and rejection of the "Name of the Father." The transformation from Chwat to Wat was anything but a simple, ordinary rhetorical gesture of Futurist iconoclasm ("watt" as a unit of mechanical or electric power, a symbol of the power of an electric current; see Miliard kilowatów śpiew Adamów i Ew [The Billion-Kilowatt Song of the Adams and Eves] and its dedication: "To Ola this billion kilowatts plus one Wat[t]"), but on a deeper level, it is also connected with the initiation of a completely new discourse between the sign and the body, between consciousness and desire. Given Wat's rebellious tendency, this second explication is much more persuasive, and the surname itself can also be read anagrammatically, uncovering the meaning of the radical gesture he made at the beginning of his creative trajectory. All of the consonants in the surname "Chwat" are unvoiced, but in "Wat" the w becomes voiced or vocalized. This process of vocalization–even if unconscious–moves in the opposite direction from the words' semantic values, since "chwat" means a "strapping fellow," "no slouch," "a brave one," bearer of the phallus; at the same time, the un-voicing of consonants signifies a kind of castration. The change of surname makes the unvoiced [h] disappear and changes unvoiced [f] to voiced [v]. To continue our psychoanalytical reading, since the name Wat belonged to someone before Aleksandr Chwat appropriated it, and appears to be related to the name of the Scottish engineer and inventor James Watt, in cutting off the letters ch and the sound [h] and thereby symbolically castrating his own father, Wat simultaneously takes on the name of this Other. It is a meaningful gesture of revolt, fitting with the writer's life choices. Transforming one's name in this case is no game or mere phonetic amusement– it is something much deeper, what Saussure defined as the "anagrammatic activity" of the poet, who Saussure defines as "above all a specialist in phonemes." In Wat's case, as we shall see, that definition is exceptionally applicable, both in relation to his earlier poetic texts, and to those written in the 1950s and 1960s. (p. 54)."

This fragment by itself should earn Dziadek a membership in the Polish Biographical Society. I am unable to

devote much space to this excerpt, so I will simply direct the reader's attention to three questions. Firstly, the passage's trenchant biographical interpretation leads into a discussion of the properties of Wat's poetry. Secondly, Dziadek undertakes an interpretation of Wat's biography using the same tools that he uses in explicating Wat's poetry, a decision with far-reaching cognitive consequences (both for the analysis of Wat's biography, and for the methodology of Dziadek's poetics). Thirdly, in analyzing Wat's self-construction, he approaches an area of scholarship whose influence is growing, namely ethnopoetics; and it is worth noting that ethnopoetics can provide some interesting perspectives on Wat as well.[4]

In passing, I will add that Wat's autobiographical prose and Dziadek's commentary both help illuminate why Wat needed an interlocutor—in the figure of Czesław Miłosz—in order to tell his life story in detail (in Mój wiek [My Century]).[5] The texts Dziadek examined in the archive provide material for poems, even longer narrative poems, but not for a comprehensive autobiography.

The separate chapters thus merge with each other to some degree, since they all deal with the problematic of the body (in numerous interpretations) and the topic of rhythm. There is another element, too, that unites the different parts of Dziadek's study. Two sequences devoted to sound illustrate the motif. The first one deals with the tick-tock of the mechanical clock from Wat's autobiography. The second is the "cuckoo" in a poem by Pollakówna, which Dziadek interprets in various ways. These words, their sound and symbolism, give a glimpse of a poetics of rhythm, a poetics of the body, and a poetics of time. They show the theoretical framework in which the analyses in *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* are being conducted. On the one hand there is "tick tock" as a measure of a basic unit of narration, on the other hand "cuckoo" as a unit of sound, a form of onomatopoeia. In this space a poetics of the poem and the body develops. If we remember the meaning that Frank Kermode attached to a clock's "tick-tock" sound, the matter is far from trivial. For Kermode, the phrase not only presents a model of storytelling, since its parts signify a beginning and an end, but also offers a minimalist version of both genesis and the apocalypse, and, finally, refers to chronos and kairos.[6] Thus, in his reading, poetics engages with both mythology and theology. But that is another story.

Dziadek's book, as we have indicated above, is less a work of criticism than of poetics. A poetics in which rhythm, as a property of poetry and of the world, plays an important role. His approach brings to mind one of Bolesław Leśmian's sketches, "Rytm jako światopogląd" (Rhythm as Worldview), or, also from 1915, "U źródeł rytmu," (At the Sources of Rhythm), where we find the following phrases which, paraphrased, would fit perfectly in Dziadek's book: "A song sung once more, a poem recited once more–they take place again from beginning to end and dying on our lips, preserve their capacity for resurrection. Because thanks to rhythm we repeat not only their sound and words, but the entire course of their existence hidden within them."[7]

Projekt krytyki somatycznej gives us opportunities to present other aspects of contemporary poetics. It is important to grasp how Dziadek arrived at his "new criticism," how he came from writing a work devoted to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz[8] to writing a book about ekphrasis[9] and beyond. His work on Wat's poetry for the Biblioteka Narodowa (Polish National Library) is also noteworthy.[10] But we should also give particular attention to

[4] E. Kuźma, "'Nieświęty bełkot' we wczesnej twórczości Aleksandra Wata" (The "Unholy Murmur" in the Early Work of Aleksandr Wat), in: *Elementy do portretu. Szkice o twórczości Aleksandra Wata* (Elements in a Portrait. Sketches on the Work of Aleksandr Wat), ed. A Czyżak and Z. Kopeć, Poznań 2001.

[5] A. Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony* (My Century. A Spoken Memoir), ed. R. Habielski, Kraków 2011.

[6] F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in The Theory of Fiction*, Oxford 2000.

[7] B. Leśmian, "U źródeł rytmu. Studium poetyckie" (At the Sources of Rhythm. A Study in Poetry) in *Leśmian, Szkice literackie* (Literary Sketches), ed. with an introduction by J. Trznadel, Warszawa 1959, p. 74.

[8] A. Dziadek, *Rytm i podmiot w liryce Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza i Aleksandra Wata* (Rhythm and the Subject in the Lyric Poetry of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and Aleksandr Wat), Katowice 1999.

[9] A. Dziadek, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z Zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej* (Images and Poems. Some Problems of Artistic Interference in Contemporary Polish Poetry), Katowice 2004.

[10] A. Wat, *Wybór wierszy* (Selected Poems), Wrocław 2008.

Dziadek's research in the literary archive,[11] and finally, we would be remiss to leave out his translations of important works of semiology and deconstruction.[12] All of these previous projects fit harmoniously together within his poetics of the body.

But Dziadek's book also typifies a certain kind of Silesian approach to Polish Studies. This school of thought is distinguished by an emphasis on the memory of one's predecessors. In Dziadek's focus on understanding genre, it is not hard to see a continuation of Ireneusz Opacki's genetic studies of literary forms. But even more so, Dziadek's poetics is marked by the influence of the Silesian art of interpretation (as practiced by Krzysztof Kłosiński, Aleksander Nawarecki, Stefan Szymutko, and many others).

In the introduction to his book, Dziadek mentions Maria Peszek and quotes the song "Kobiety pistolety" (Women Weapons) from the album *Maria Awaria*. He considers her lyrics to be poetry. The only thing I find regrettable in his making such a bold declaration is his failure to develop the idea further. To express his fascination with Peszek more decisively, he would have to develop his poetics in a new direction, toward a poetics of the word in song. Though we have Anna Barańczak's poetological study of literary songs,[13] we still do not have a poetics of contemporary concert-hall (including hip-hop) songs. It would not be easy to write such a work, which would require describing the position of the bard in contemporary pop culture—and finding a feminine equivalent for the term "bard."

[11] A. Dziadek, "Aleksander Wat w Beinecke Library" (Aleksandr Wat in the Beinecke Library), *Teksty Drugie* (Alternate Texts) 2009, 6, pp. 251-258.

[12] R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard, New York 2013; J. Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, New Haven 1984.

[13] A. Barańczak, *Słowo w piosence. Poetyka współczesnej piosenki estradowej* (The Word in the Song. Poetics of the Contemporary Concert Song), Wrocław 1983.