

The Poetics of Indefinition

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“The present work is the fruit of reflection on Polish verse of the last half century” – with these words, in 1999, Artur Grabowski began his great book *Wiersz: forma i sens* (Poem: Form and Sense), in which he offered an intriguing elaboration of his concept of momentaneous systems in the history of Polish poetry.¹ From our perspective fifteen years later, however, this important concept of Grabowski’s calls for some reconsideration and some qualification.

Let us recall that Grabowski, starting out with the claim that modern poetry does not follow principles so much as establish them anew each time, created on the basis of this description his concept of the “momentaneous system” (the principle of the creation of a text as the result of delimitation)² and posited a basic question for this concept: “(...) on what basis is this delimitation poetic, and not accidental or completely arbitrary?”³ Grabowski, invoking primarily the theoretical support of Russian formalism, noted – broadly dismissing the danger of “completely arbitrary” poetic play⁴ – that even if a poem can, as Yuri Tynianov claimed, introduce occasional differences in the meaning of words with regard to their functioning in prose, the study of poetry must consist of relating these momentaneous devices to a particular principle of versification (which makes possible the existence of the device). This justification for his analytical approach lays the groundwork for the postulate, in Grabowski’s work, of “description and enumeration of these rules, to the extent that we are able to discover them, i.e., the grammaticalization of the system of line-by-line production of messages.”⁵

¹ A. Grabowski, *Wiersz: forma i sens*, Kraków 1999, 7.

² See Grabowski, *Wiersz: forma i sens*, 16–17.

³ Grabowski, *Wiersz: forma i sens*, 17.

⁴ See Grabowski, *Wiersz: forma i sens*, 24: “... if we don’t know what the rules of the game are in verse, then we are playing blindfolded.”

⁵ Grabowski, *Wiersz: forma i sens*, 24.

The Polish poem (for the past half century, a version of the modern poem) would thus be a kind of space where old devices are adapted to new ends (their deformation, domination, permutation or variation), which is markedly stabilized by the line as it becomes the momentaneous poetic model.⁶

Reading the form of a poem is revealed to be the study of the line as gesture (the artist-worker's action),⁷ and the analysis of versification (as a grammaticalized theory of the poem) a study in using the road map to the poem. This is the road taken by the poet, this is the road that should be taken by the reader, who moves from one momentaneous model to the next—finally, in this peculiar kind of evolution or ripening to maturity, surrendering to “the understanding being born [to him].”⁸

Does the description of the line as a “momentaneous principle of construction” that guarantees “metamorphoses of momentaneous understandings,” proposed by Artur Grabowski, lend itself to application in the analysis of contemporary Polish poetry, whose renewal has been secured by what is called the new diction?

The thread of critical analysis of new forms of diction was itself introduced into discussions of recent poetry quite early on. In his review of Piotr Sommer's book *Czynnik liryczny* (Lyrical factor), Stanisław Barańczak wrote:

(...) the case of Sommer demonstrates the tremendous role that going beyond the borders of one's native tradition, immersing oneself in the space of a foreign language and foreign poetic diction, can play in a poet's development.⁹

The formula (optionally) evoked here, taken from Miłosz's *Traktat poetycki* (Poetic Treatise), quickly began to describe the contribution of those poets for whom translations of English-language twentieth-century poetry became, to invoke Jerzy Jarniewicz's concise description, a “symbolic opening for new languages in Polish poetry”¹⁰ (among other examples, we could cite no. 7/1986 of the journal *Literatura na Świecie* [Literature in the World] entitled “The New York School,” and Polish translations of Frank O'Hara collected in the book *Twoja pojedynczość*

⁶ See Grabowski, *Wiersz: forma i sens*, 36: “A line, that manifests... organization, becomes a momentaneous model for the next line, instructing the reader to expect repetition.” In an earlier text Artur Grabowski stated even more clearly: “It seems that only having abandoned meter and rhythm was poetry able to show that it endeavors toward the poem – since free verse not only is not a phenomenon apart from poetry, but without poetry has no existence” and “As the power of each line (its independence) is so great, that each contains the potential to be the end of a whole poem. [...] Lines added to each other create a chain that keeps extending. [...] Of course not all meanings are equally strong, some are even imperceptible, internally hierarchized—hence the feeling of harmony instead of chaos. But therein, among other places, lies the creative power of a poem – even a short work can hold as much as an encyclopaedia” (A. Grabowski, “Czemuż to wiersze pisze się wierszem” (Why Is a Poem Written As a Poem), *Pamiętnik Literacki* (Literary Diary) 1995, no. 3, 70, 81.

⁷ Grabowski, “Czemuż to wiersze pisze,” 27.

⁸ Grabowski, “Czemuż to wiersze pisze,” 40.

⁹ S. Barańczak, “Nowa dykcja” (New Diction), in Barańczak, *Przed i po. Szkice o poezji krajowej przełomu lat siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych* (Before and After. Sketches on Kraków Poetry of the Late 70s and Early 80s), London 1988, 153.

¹⁰ Jerzy Jarniewicz, “Co amerykańista może zobaczyć w najnowszej poezji polskiej?” (What Can an Americanist See in the New Polish Poetry?), *Dekada Literacka* (Literary Decade) 2011, no. 5/6, 240.

[Your Singularity] and of John Ashbery, collected in *No i wiesz* [Well, You Know]). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the poets engaged in this work of discovery included Piotr Sommer, Bohdan Zadura, and Andrzej Sosnowski. Jarniewicz observes that the introduction into Polish language of British, Irish, and American poets “may have resolved a certain crisis situation which Polish poetry was in, in the late 70s and early 80s”:

The crisis was very perceivable. And if Sommer went to England and Ireland a few times, he was not doing that in order to be the ambassador of their literature, but because he was a poet of the Polish language. If Bohdan Zadura learned English, if he bought himself dictionaries and began translating that poetry, it was because he also felt the need for some kind of intervention.¹¹

In his 1983 book entitled *Zejsście na ląd* (Disembarkment) Bohdan Zadura published the long poem “1 VIII 1979 7.45 – 22.45 [czternaście godzin z Piotrem Sommerem]” (1 August 1979, 7:45-22:45 [fourteen hours with Piotr Sommer]), which may be considered the shortest intervention made in such matters in the Polish language. The poem begins with the following stanzas:

W pierwszą środę sierpnia kiedy
Piotr Sommer przyjechał do Puław
pociąg pospieszny z Przemyśla
do Warszawy spóźnił się ponad
dziewięćdziesiąt minut

Znosiliśmy to jak ludzie mężni
przyzwyczajeni do niewygód życia
żałując kolacji w niepotrzebnym
pośpiechu zjedzonej i niedopitej
herbaty¹²

(On the first Wednesday in August when / Piotr Sommer came to Puławy / the express train from Przemyśl / to Warsaw was delayed by over / ninety minutes / We took it like strong men / accustomed to life's hard blows / regretting our supper eaten in needless / haste, without a cup of tea to wash it down.)

The beginning of Zadura's long poem wishes to be a poem, wishes to be subjected to the constraint of being arranged in lines – it invests a great deal in its line structure. It tries not to take risks with the reader, tries to set up the rules of the game in the lines. Thus, firstly, we have two (regular) five-line stanzas (this regularity is not violated until the third stanza, which has 10 lines, and then more severely by the fourth, with 11 lines). Secondly, the first stanza nearly manages (except for the last line) to maintain syllabic repetition (lines 1 and 3 have 8 syllables, lines 2 and 4 have 9), while the second nearly manages to keep its lines at 10 syllables (it does so in lines 1-3), breaking this pattern only in the fourth (with 11 syllables).

¹¹Jarniewicz, “Co amerykańista może zobaczyć...?”, 241.

¹²B. Zadura, “1 VIII 1979 7.45 – 22.45 [czternaście godzin z Piotrem Sommerem],” in *Wiersze zebrane* (Collected Poems), vol. 1, Wrocław 2005, 316.

Thirdly, the beginning of Zadura's poem also invests "locally," i.e., in meter, using syllabotonic meter at the beginning of the second stanza – the first two lines are uttered in regular, difficult rhythmic particles (these lines are composed of two third paeons, with an added trochée in the ending). Finally, fourthly, to hold on to these forms of regularity it has seized upon, without doing anything to modulate or underscore the seriousness of the utterance or the poem's content (i.e. its momentaneous expression), Zadura's poem is willing to risk mechanical enjambment. Of course, it could be said that these momentaneous models constitute an element in the refined kind of play with tradition that Zadura's poem undertakes, consenting in part to the domination of one principle over others (e.g. the syllabotonic principle, assuring – as it appears – repetitive regularity, more effectively than the syllabic principle in the first stanza, and equal line size in the quoted second stanza), in part to variations on the theme of metric models. At least these are the conclusions that can be reached above all by the reader who agrees – as does Artur Grabowski – with the position that "in our literary consciousness poems must be written in lines."¹³ If, however, we weaken that position (even so much as slightly descending from our verse expert pedestal), we quickly observe that the ruling principle of Zadura's poem is not at all the principle of line, but rather that of literal meaning. The structure of the lines in the first stanza does not contribute anything to what Zadura is saying; the poem communicates in a manner similar to a report on soil erosion in Nebraska – such a report can of course be read in a "literary" way (by making an attempt, strong or weak, to see an organized verbal composition in it), but does such a reading make these five lines something "to rival King Lear"?¹⁴

When "images...resist symbolic interpretation, we must make do with their literal meanings. But how do we proceed?"¹⁵ It seems to me that in answering that question we would do well to consider the following quotation from Marjorie Perloff's analysis of Frank O'Hara's "Essay on Style":

Style...is thus a matter of suppressing all the connectives that impede the natural flow of life, that freeze its momentum. Hence there can be no fixed meters, no counting of syllables, no regularity of cadence, no sound repetitions at set intervals. Just as the syntax must be as indeterminate as possible, so no two lines must have the same length or form. Thus the verse forms themselves enact the poet's basic distrust of stability, his commitment to change.¹⁶

Zadura's poem from the turn of the 1980s appears to anticipate, and in a certain way confirm, this hypothesis of poems committed to change. Firstly, the fifth lines of the regular five-line stanzas break the regularity previously maintained (albeit with difficulty) – in two everyday, literal language situations; in the first stanza everything is determined by the number – which also signals the third paeon at the beginning of the next stanza, in which "tea" is furthermore just tea (as the snow in O'Hara's "Essay on Style" is just snow, the floor is gold, and the kitchen

¹³Grabowski, "Czemuż to wiersze pisze," 26.

¹⁴I am borrowing here (using the exact examples) from Terry Eagleton's reasoning in his book *How to Read Literature*, where he argued that it is no crime to mix talk of literature with talk of so-called real life, but that the marginalization of the work's "literariness" (the replacement of the question "how?" with the question "what?") has become common in our time (2-3).

¹⁵I repeat this question from Marjorie Perloff's "New Thresholds, Old Anatomies: Contemporary Poetry and the Limits of Exegesis Author(s)," *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter, 1974), 94.

¹⁶Perloff, "New Thresholds, Old Anatomies," 97.

table black – also effectively resisting any symbolic interpretation), “herbata” (tea) in Polish is a word naturally accented (like most Polish words) on the penultimate syllable. So much for that. Secondly, the status of the syllabotonic lines is curious. It is true that the third paeon (foot of 4 syllables with the accent on the penultimate one) “can feature very frequently in our [Polish] poems,” as Maria Dłuska argues,¹⁷ but all the same few poems are built exclusively from paeons (since “too little distinguishes them from trochaic or ditrochaic meter”¹⁸). The positioning of paeons together with trochees in a line thus becomes “a sign of an unusually sensitive ear”:

In keeping with the tendency toward the rhythmic that rules the consonance of our language, the direct proximity of longer and shorter forms of consonance, spoken in one breath, influences the pace of their utterance in the sense that it accelerates longer consonance and slows shorter, in order to maintain the fiction of their equal length.¹⁹

In the space of two lines, Zadura’s poem about quite literally hurrying and being late develops that fiction. We enter into that experience not so much through knowing what the poem is about, however, but rather through entering the action of the poem. This poem – being less a lesson in perception than a particular perception of an object – thus ultimately demystifies the need for an arbitrary pause in versification, which would set up momentaneous principles of the lines’ construction (to invoke Artur Grabowski’s idea once again); it is rather interested in staging a kind of verbal landscape in which various inclinations of language engage in play with each other, thus drawing the reader into the game (the action of the poem).

Three decades later, in the book *Dni i noce* (Days and Nights) Piotr Sommer, the protagonist of Zadura’s poem, published his “Wiersz o przecinkach” (Poem About Commas):

Nic oczywiście się nie zdarzyło
w te dwa tygodnie, nic się bez ciebie
nie zawaliło, koniecznie nikt
się nie musiał z tobą widzieć
i nie zostawił bardzo ważnej wiadomości,
przyszły trzy listy, w pracy
odłożono ci stos gazet, które
wychodzą dalej, mimo że pusto w nich
jak nigdy, choć dalej są zadrukowane
tym, czym wypełnia się historia²⁰

(Nothing, obviously, happened / during those two weeks, without you nothing / fell apart, nobody imperatively / had to meet with you / or left a very important message, / three letters came, at work / a pile of newspapers was set aside for you, which / still come out, even though they’re empty / as never, though they’re still printed / with the stuff with which history is filled)

¹⁷M. Dłuska, *Studia z historii i teorii wersyfikacji polskiej* (Studies in the History and Theory of Polish Versification), vol. 2, Warszawa 1978, 84.

¹⁸Dłuska, *Studia z historii i teorii*, 85.

¹⁹Dłuska, *Studia z historii i teorii*, 84–85.

²⁰P. Sommer, *Dni i noce* (Days and Nights), Wrocław 2009, 11.

From the very beginning, we must make do with the literal meanings of the words. Nothing in particular is happening here. Some kind of somebody, some kind of voice is taking to some sort of someone (this situation frequently occurs in poems by the author of *Dni i nocy*²¹); he is not communicating anything wildly important to him, however – it looks like a conventional debriefing after someone's absence, no doubt a colleague at work. Only one thing is sure: one person was there (or rather here, where the poem is taking place) for two weeks, while the other was not. So much for that.

There is actually a lot happening in that one sentence, however – namely, to sum it up, excess jostling with absence. We can observe them wrestling in, for example, the organization of (some) successive lines: the first line, initiated by “nic” and closing with “zdarzyło” (happened); parallels between lines (for example “trzy listy” [three letters] and “stos gazet” [pile of newspapers]). They almost tempt us to form an interpretation, based on that impression, that would see the building of tension between antinomies, between the excess suggested by language and the absence, inscribed in that very language, which exposes the emptiness of that excess. We are kept from treating it as an open-and-shut case, however, by a series of gestures that undermine any such neat and simple explanation.

Firstly, while it is true that we observe negative signals organizing the first five lines (negation, repetition of the words “nic” [nothing] and “nikt” [nobody]), the next five lines tell about what happened, thereby reducing those signals from the first lines (with the one exception, however, of the phrase “pusto w nich/ jak nigdy” [they're empty / as never]). The poem thus potentially has a chance, taking shape in these utterances, at creating a regular five-line (the only comma at the end of a line, in the fifth line, appears to encourage this hypothesis). Sommer's poem does not, however, actualize that possibility and instead bows out of introducing stanzaic order into the utterance.

Secondly, the title exerts a kind of heightening effect not so much on the arbitrary versification pause (which would seemingly enable us to “to get at the heart of the poem”²²), as on the syntax itself of the linguistic utterance. We are dealing here with a figure of speech called the asyndeton (a series of related clauses in a sentence from which conjunctions are omitted). Constructing simple connections between words, between successive clauses in the sentence (negation, predication, and so on) thus becomes impossible.

We must therefore – and here I shall quote Roland Barthes' exact words – “grasp... at very point in the text the asyndeton which cuts the various languages.”²³ This recognition has serious consequences. As the author of *The Pleasure of the Text* writes: it turns out to be impossible to construct a text shaped like an anecdote (to permanently constitute a text so that it moves toward a successful, satisfying resolution, like the punchline of a joke). There remains

²¹Already in the early 1980s Tadeusz Komendant remarked on this aspect of Sommer's poetry, writing about its ubiquitous, fundamental “conversational tone” (*Ja podanie ręki* (I Handshake), *Twórczość* (Creativity) 1981, no. 11, 123); Piotr Śliwiński remarked that it was not so much conversational as “chatty” (“Mówić po ludzku” (Speaking Human), *Kurier Czytelniczy Megaron* (Megaron Reading Courier) 1999, no. 54, 27).

²²A. Kulawik, *Poetyka. Wstęp do teorii dzieła literackiego* (Poetics. Introduction to the Theory of the Literary Work), Kraków 1997, 153.

²³Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1975, 10.

the kind of reading that “sticks to the text.” Barthes here uses the metaphor of “the children’s game of topping hands”: “the excitement comes not from a processive haste but from a kind of vertical din (the verticality of language and of its destruction); it is at the moment when each (different) hand skips over the next (and not one after the other) that the hole, the gap, is created and carries off the subject of the game—the subject of the text.”²⁴ From this perspective it may be easier to understand the specific kind of corrective that Piotr Sommer offers in *Ucieczka w bok* to Michał Larek’s hypothesis of “a predilection for play that has a punchline.” Sommer speaks of “anti-punchline play,” referring to a peculiar “instinct for slowing down” and adding – once again in the spirit of Barthes’ metaphors – that this would involve “improvisation, jazz, misdirection and concentration.”²⁵

It might seem that we are once again in the classical situation (described by Artur Grabowski) of the “dynamic process of reception” of a poem, leading to instability in its interpretation, the “irresistible feeling of ambiguity of any text arranged in lines” – the kind of ambiguity that is “provoked and consciously exploited by the author of the poem.”²⁶ The work is divided, writes Grabowski, by the split: between print and its absence, among signifying phrases (the meaning of individual words or clusters of words), among lines (due to the versification pause). This split is only momentaneous, however, and, precisely because of the division of the text into lines, the possibility of unification becomes activated. But what happens when there is no period in a poem (as in “Poem About Commas”), when it introduces increasing confusion (it is impossible to trace out a principle on commas in Sommer’s poem), when it makes a commitment in favor of change?

“Poem About Commas” shows that the line in contemporary verse initiated in Polish poetry by such poets as Zadura and Sommer appears to distinctly undermine a poetological analysis that would – to quote Andrzej Grabowski again – be a “study of the relationship between a versification device and the particular principle of line arrangement on the basis of which that device can exist.”²⁷ Here the reader’s attention is diverted from how the poem is coming into being (through momentaneous construction principles), toward – to reference the anti-punchline of “Poem About Commas” – “the stuff with which [its] history is filled” (i.e., as Perloff would say, toward the action of the poem itself). The consequences of this diversion deserve, I feel, to be discussed separately (I will try address only two of them here, signaling at the end of the text what I find to be a striking methodological solution).

First, to invoke a classic text, albeit one that deals with problems “outside literature” – Michał Głowiński in his 1993 essay “Gatunki literackie w muzyce” (Literary Genres in Music), admitting the marginal nature of the reflections explored in his text, analyzed the “function-

²⁴Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 10.

²⁵“Ucieczka w bok. Rozmowa z Piotrem Sommerem” (Escape to the Side. A Conversation with Piotr Sommer), in Jerzy Borowczyk, Michał Larek, *Rozmowa była możliwa. Wywiady z pisarzami* (Conversation Was Possible. Interviews with Writers), Poznań 2008, 55. Barthes wrote, looking for possibilities other than “articulations of the anecdote,” of “the flash itself which seduces, or rather the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance” (Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 8).

²⁶Grabowski, “Czemuż to wiersze pisze,” 41–42.

²⁷Grabowski, “Czemuż to wiersze pisze,” 25.

ing of literary genres in instrumental music.”²⁸ Głowiński noted in his article that what he called the “problem of formal singularity” became fundamental in twentieth-century music – the relevance of this to literature is unmistakable, though ambiguous enough to prohibit “drawing concrete conclusions.”²⁹ His remark is most interesting when transposed into the context of the poetry of new diction in recent Polish literature, in that it accents not so much (as Grabowski described the situation of Polish poetry in the last half-century) the possibility of a system of momentaneous poetics (modern poetry does not implement principles, but sets them anew each time, thereby positing the foundation for its existence³⁰), as the arbitrary nature of how lines are delimited, an arbitrariness that primarily benefits the poet’s suspicion toward any kind of stability in a poem, and also indicates his commitment to change.

The formal singularity which I read here as felt to be a necessity in modern poetry in Bohdan Zadura’s poem and as an exploited possibility in Piotr Sommer’s “Poem About Commas” naturally leads us to one of the traditions of modern poetry (perhaps dimly present in the consciousness of Polish poets during the long twentieth century). I have in mind the current of activity in modern poetics that Charles Bernstein encapsulated in the motto clearly influenced by Pound: “the poem said any other way is not the poem.”³¹ That sentence has its roots in William Carlos Williams’s interpretations of poetry. Consider one of Hugh Kenner’s commentaries on Williams’s “Red Wheelbarrow”:

Try [the sentence] over, in any voice you like: it is impossible. [...] To whom might the sentence be spoken, for what purpose? [...] Not only is what the sentence says banal, if you heard someone say it you’d wince. But hammered on the typewriter into a thing made, and this without displacing a single word except typographically, the sixteen words exist in a different zone altogether, a zone remote from the world of sayers and sayings.³²

Contemporary poetry (in that iteration of it which I am addressing) – is singular (consisting of one-offs), both completely arbitrary and driven by absolute necessity (down to the level of the individual word, and even sound and individual punctuation mark), acting on a one-time basis “in a particular zone, separate from the world of all other utterances.” This kind of contemporary poetry is becoming – to once again employ Michał Głowiński’s formula – “non-literary in a literary way,”³³ meaning that its reader has an obligation to perceive (in a completely classical sense) and describe all of the stylistic operations working

²⁸M. Głowiński, “Gatunki literackie w muzyce” (Literary Genres in Music), in *Prace wybrane* (Selected Works), vol. 2, Kraków 1997, 183.

²⁹Głowiński, “Gatunki literackie,” 186, 187.

³⁰See Grabowski, “Czemuż to wiersze pisze,” 16–17.

³¹Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1992, 16. Quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy (Modern & Contemporary Poetics)*, Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2004, xxviii.

³²Hugh Kenner, *Homemade World. The American Modernist Writers*, New York 1974, 60. Quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy (Modern & Contemporary Poetics)*, Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2004, xxix.

³³M. Głowiński, “Gatunki literackie,” 187.

toward the effect of the versification,³⁴ but simultaneously to become engaged on the side of the poem's action, on the side of change, which either marginalize or annul the work of the versification.

The linguistic landscape of new diction poetry is typified by incompleteness, contradictions, and indefiniteness.³⁵ Thus my second point: it condemns the reader – to use one of Edward W. Said's more markedly polemic statements – to accept the “crippling limitation in those varieties of deconstructive [...] readings that end (as they began) in undecidability and uncertainty.”³⁶ Said argued that “to reveal the wavering and vacillation in all writing is useful up to a point,”³⁷ but not beyond that point – what to do then, if a poem and its irreducible singularity do not permit moving beyond this moment of suspension, irresolution, and indefiniteness?³⁸

In that case it must be agreed that where this poetry tradition is concerned, we can't really talk about a “style” that would enable articulation of individual identity (of the speaking subject in the poem, or the poem itself); we can talk about “discourse” (the field of discourse or, as Marjorie Perloff has taken to saying of modern poetry, the landscape of the poem), subject to the influence of “competing ‘dispositions [...]’.”³⁹ Understood this way, the landscape of poetry – first of all – turns out to be less an attempt to elaborate legible communication than a field of collision among various elements of discourse (which are explored, tested, or simply played by the poem). Secondly, then, this space is deprived of merely aesthetic value, or rather various elements of contemporary ideological discourses (social, political, and culture) are raised to the aesthetic level. Thirdly, the space cannot be uniform in the sense that it does not elaborate the poem's message, as that concept is traditionally understood (created in a linear reading) – instead, it agrees, as Rumold observes, to “particular conflicts” among elements of various discourses drawn by the poem into textual play. Fourthly, this variety of discourses can also signify the incorporation into that challenging area of play of various literary conventions, styles, currents and paradigms (for example, the expressionistic disposition can compete here with linguistic experiments such as those of innovative Dadaist poetics – that is the example Rumold describes in detail in his book). Fifth and lastly, the task of the scholar whose work is devoted to the space of this branch of modern poetry increasingly involves localizing particular insertions and influxes

³⁴See E. Balcerzan, “Badania wersologiczne a komunikacja literacka” (Versification Studies and Literary Communication), in *Problemy metodologiczne współczesnego literaturoznawstwa* (Methodological Problems of Contemporary Literary Scholarship), ed. J. Sławiński, H. Markiewicz, Kraków 1976, 356.

³⁵See M. Perloff, “New Thresholds, Old Anatomies,” 20.

³⁶Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, 66.

³⁷Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 66.

³⁸Lack of space prevents us from giving a description of the long tradition of this approach to reading modern poetry; I will merely mention Peter Nicholls's synthetic text “The Poetics of Modernism” (in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis, Lee M. Jenkins, Cambridge 2007, 51–67), in which he argues that in this line, extending from Rimbaud's *Illuminations* through the poetry of Pound, Williams and Ashbery, words begin to enter into collision with the simple, transparent meanings that they theoretically should be subject to. Poetry thus here functions, as Nicholls claims, in a mode of “curious tension” between its precise and clear literalness and its simultaneous surrender to the sway of a peculiar kind of indeterminacy (58). See also Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Princeton 1981.

³⁹I am here quoting some remarks by Rainer Rumold in his book *The Janus Face of the German Avant-Garde. From Expressionism toward Postmodernism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002, 9).

of various elements (Rainer Rumold does not, however, undertake a comprehensive elaboration of such a poetics of intrusion in his book *The Janus Face of the German Avant-Garde*, a fact which I read as a clear signal that the study of this line of poetry, the focus of my text as well, will not lead to, or at any rate does not promise, the elaboration of any kind of grammaticalized poetics; such studies stop on the threshold of close reading of individual, difficult poems⁴⁰).

⁴⁰Marjorie Perloff, an incomparably close reader of difficult 20th and 21st century poems, formulated Five Commandments for attentive, Poundian reading in the introduction to her latest book, *Poetics in a New Key* (ed. D.J.Y. Bayot, Chicago 2015); the list begins with a fundamental directive that when reading a poem, the reader must above all be prepared to feel the effect of “some slight element of surprise” (a quotation from Pound), which draws the reader away from linear reading of the work, and does not allow reflection on free verse to be limited to reflection on how the lines are constructed.

KEYWORDS

POETICS

reading styles

ABSTRACT:

This article is the product of reflection on contemporary Polish poetry, particularly the new diction. A close reading of the beginning of Bohdan Zadura's poem "1 VIII 1979 7.45 – 22.45 [czternaście godzin z Piotrem Sommerem]" (1 August 1979, 7:45-22:45 [fourteen hours with Piotr Sommer]) and Piotr Sommer's "Wiersz o przecinkach" (Poem About Commas) leads to, on the one hand, positing a thesis on the inadequacy of previous conceptions of poetics of the moment (the author enters into a discussion with the concept of "grammaticalizing the system of line-by-line production of messages" proposed by Artur Grabowski), and, on the other hand, to the development of a concept of the poem engaged on the side of change (within a broader description of modernist poetics of indefiniteness).

reading practices

poetics of late modernist poetry

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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