

# *Ars poetica* as the Art of Survival

## an Interpretation of Urszula Kozioł's Poem "Tysiąc i jedna noc" (A Thousand and One Nights)

Marta Stusek

Self-referentiality is an important component of Urszula Kozioł's poetry. Kozioł develops this aspect of her work in both her smallest works in such cycles as *Pestki deszczu* (Rain Seeds) or *Wyrwyki* (Chance) and in self-contained longer poems. Małgorzata Mikołajczak has discussed this problem in her monograph on Kozioł's poetry. In that book, Mikołajczak references a poem entitled "Tysiąc i jedna noc" (A Thousand and One Nights), from her debut collection, *Gumowe klocki* (Rubber Blocks, 1957):

"(...) At the same time, from its beginnings the material of language is an element of the imagination: it co-creates metaphors, acts as a comparative link, and can also be a significant element of the represented world. In the poem 'Tysiąc i jedna noc' (GK 5), from her debut volume *Gumowe klocki* (1963), «baloniki, nieważne słowa, pysznią, piętrzą się kolorowo» (little balloons, unimportant words, puff themselves up and stack themselves colourfully). Already here there appears, anticipating later utterances, reflection on the word, which has the power to prolong life and to suspend time."<sup>1</sup>

Mikołajczak writes in her introduction that Kozioł's published poetic debut was overlooked and underappreciated by the critics, but also notes that:

"If the poems included in *Gumowe klocki* do not entirely yet proclaim the talent that her later work would reveal, they unquestionably designate the path of her poetic development; they are the

<sup>1</sup> M. Mikołajczak, "Jak wypowiadać..." (teoria języka poetyckiego) ("How to Say..." [A Theory of Poetic Language]) [in:] *Podjąć przerwany dialog. O poezji Urszuli Kozioł* (Picking Up Where the Dialogue Broke Off. On the Poetry of Urszula Kozioł), Kraków 2000, p. 96. The passage quoted here contains a chronological error— Urszula Kozioł published *Gumowe klocki* in 1957.

seeds of the poetics that will become crucial for the author of future collections. As it turns out, the poetry of Urszula Koziół already, starting from her debut, bore distinct traces of a fascination with certain authors and literary characters.”<sup>2</sup>

As Mikołajczak aptly notes, the first book published by Koziół, later the author of *Ucieczki* (Escapes), in some sense presaged what would later become particularly important elements of her poetry. It is worthwhile to spend some time considering the poem in question, with which Koziół opens an important (never closed) chapter of her work – writing about writing. The work contains references to the heroine of the *Thousand and One Nights* cycle of tales, Scheherezade. This intertextual gesture, evident already in the title, has crucial significance in the poem:

*Tysiąc i jedna noc*  
 Wiemy że to się stanie  
 Układamy gumowe klocki  
 śliczne kłamstwa drobne błażostki  
 wiemy że to się stanie  
 baloniki nieważne słowa  
 pięt rzę  
 pyszną się kolorowo  
 wiemy –  
 Szeherezada zmyśleniem  
 chciała o dzień przedłużyć życie<sup>3</sup>.

(*A Thousand and One Nights* We know that it is going to happen / We arrange the rubber blocks / lovely lies small frivolities / we know that it is going to happen / little balloons unimportant words / stack up / puff themselves up colourfully / we know – / Scheherezade with her fabrication / wanted to prolong her life by one day)

There is no distinct boundary between life and art in the poem, though their separateness is highlighted in the comparison to the story of Scheherezade. Artistic creation is not life itself, for it has the task of prolonging life; their connection, however, is so strong that both the one and the other can take turns taking over each other’s functions and merge into one. Art is a means of prolonging life. Life is a means of making art, its foundation. Koziół makes the comparison at the level of metaphors. “Rubber blocks,” “lovely lies,” “small frivolities,” “little balloons,” “unimportant words,” are all to an equal extent components of human existence and elements in a representation of artistic or writerly activities. The first of these formulations became the title of the entire book, so that the poem can be seen to constitute an enunciation of the author’s early (and later developed further) artistic world view. Blocks are used for building, they create order, but also represent a form of play; their constructions are ephemeral, like balloons, with which the persona juxtaposes them. Transience struggles with the attempt to grasp and understand reality, to make sense of the world. The material from

<sup>2</sup> M. Mikołajczak, “Wprowadzenie. Próba rozpoznania idiolektu poetyckiego Urszuli Koziół” (Introduction. An Attempt at Analysis of Urszula Koziół’s Poetic Dialect), [in:] *Podjąć...*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> U. Koziół, “Tysiąc i jedna noc,” [in:] *Gumowe klocki*, quoted in: *Stany nieoczywistości* (States of Subtlety), Warszawa 1999, p. 8.

which toys are made, rubber, represents the opposite of the raw material universally used (at the time when the poem was written) in the production of blocks, wood. Rubber is artificial and chemical; wood is real and natural. Artificially is linked with lying.

Keeping in mind the task of prolonging life, we might claim that the poet attributes a momentous role to artistic creation. However, the metaphorical definitions she employs present (poetic) art as something that can be nugatory, irrelevant, fleeting and simultaneously false or simulated, thus containing a negative element. “Lovely lies” placed in the same row as “small frivolities” weakens the semantic difference between these epithets. The marginality of the items mentioned is here underscored, their lack of meaning in the face of the weight of existence as a whole. Remembering that we are dealing with a poem about art, we can subcutaneously sense the semantic weight of “lovely lies,” which function here somehow on another plane. Lying carries a pejorative connotation, referring to the sphere of morality. To draw the conclusion that the poet is declaring art to be immoral would, however, be a gross oversimplification. Something unambiguously negative cannot simultaneously be trivial or unimportant. The juxtaposition of “lovely lies” with “frivolities” and “little balloons” shows that this immorality of art is not its most important aspect in the poem, and perhaps, on the contrary, the poem is a negation of that aspect. The key to this interpretation is the figure of Scheherazade. The fact that she appears in the couplet that sums up the poem is instructive. In weaving her stories, the heroine of the Arabian Nights cycle managed each time to prolong her life by a day, but the effect of her action was nonetheless something more than survival over one thousand and one nights and days. In the end, the Sultan Shahriyar abandoned his criminal plan to murder his wife and returned to normality, and together with his transformation the life of the entire nation also changed for the better, freed from the cruelty that had gripped its ruler. Scheherazade awakened love and ended a cycle of violence. Her action is consciously undertaken, it is the mission and sacrifice central to the tale.<sup>4</sup> Her stories had the leading role in the whole affair – i.e. fabrications, stacked-up (seemingly?) unimportant words, the arrangement of lovely lies referred to by Koziol. This fairytale heroine thus helped not only herself, but above all the kingdom.

In a poem, poetic art is simply the arrangement of words, as well as invention – though Scheherazade created stories, a prose form, the stacking up of words applies equally in both cases. In this sense, poetry and prose are made equals; they rely on the same or similar means and have the same goals and effects. Creating art fulfils a need. Twice, with the first time being in the opening line, we read: “We know that it is going to happen” (*Wiemy że to się stanie*). The word “know,” which also recurs at the end, underscores the notion of awareness, but awareness of what? The first line introduces a tension of waiting, which heightens in successive lines. The final couplet corresponds to the first line of the poem – Scheherazade fabricated stories because she wanted to avoid being killed. “We know that it is going to happen” – the end, of which every person is aware, will ensue – the final, inescapable reality is death. Despite the initial assurance of awareness, between two successive declarations of that knowledge

<sup>4</sup> “Opowieść o królu Szachrijarze i bracie jego, królu Szachzamanie” (The Tale of King Shahriyar and His Brother, King Shahzaman), [in:] *Księga tysiąca i jednej nocy: wybrane opowieści* (The Book of a Thousand and One Nights: Selected Tales), selected by W. Kubiak, trans. W. Kubiak and J. Ficowski, Introduction by T. Lewicki, Wrocław 1966, p. 16.

we find “measures” whose purpose is to maintain or beautify life/art. With this recurring statement, the subject underscores that she is aware of her situation. The reappearance of the same words between the first and second verse is like a steady apprehension of the truth – the subject highlights her sober manner of thinking, while simultaneously declaring that despite her being fully conscious, she continues to “arrange the rubber blocks,” not tiring of striving and measures. All of that is done to spite the knowledge of the end. The repetition of the assurance of knowledge is likewise an expression of how oppressive that knowledge is. It is something painful and tiring, something that gnaws away at her from the inside and will not let itself be forgotten. Death ends all endeavours, but can we be certain that it invalidates them? The poem does not provide easy, unambiguous reassurance. It presents Scheherezade at the moment when her efforts to prolong her life have not yet ended in conclusive triumph. We read that “with her fabrication / she wanted to prolong her life by one day” (zmyślaniem / chciała o dzień przedłużyć życie), and thus do not learn anything from the text about the results of her actions – those are filled in for us by our familiarity with the tale.

The fact that the persona uses the plural form, speaking in the name of a collective, is significant. It does not matter whether this is the voice of the community or a voice *from* the community – what matters is the sense of a single shared fate – the same inevitability, the same finality, and what follows from that – a kindred existence, despite all the many differences in earthly life.

As I mentioned earlier, there is no place in the poem for a clear distinction between life and art or artist and audience. The position of life is the creative position, art is always the art of survival. The figure representing the effacement of such boundaries is Scheherezade, for whom fluency in putting words together was, quite literally, a way of life.

Poetry functions according to the same laws as everyday life. The comparison of *ars poetica* with *ars vitae* does not mean that the meaning of the former is less resonant in this poem than in other self-reflexive works. On the contrary, Urszula Koziół uses metaphors that belong to the world of artistic creation to talk about extra-textual experiences. Koziół deploys a tendentious approach to poetic art as a way of acquiring immortality. The author of *Wielka pauza* does not idealize, but simply shows the human way of coping with reality. There is no unambiguous indication in the poem that poetry serves a salvific function. To the contrary, Koziół seems to avoid any such hint, treating that approach almost ironically. We know about mortality, the persona says, but so what? We continue going about our business, saving ourselves however we can, we reach for whatever means we know. Their availability is no guarantee whatsoever of effectiveness. Nonetheless, Scheherezade was victorious. The avoidance of death through the telling of a series of stories, up to the point of the sultan’s conversion away from crime and his surrender to love was primarily a moral victory – thanks to the heroine, the terror came to an end and peace reigned throughout the land.

What kind of *ars poetica* is shown in the *Thousand and One Nights*? As was stated above, it is the art of life. It does not remain detached from extratextual experiences, it is not elitist. Urszula Koziół, in speaking of **stories**, that is, something associated with plot, fiction, narrative, uses the language of poetry. It turns out that the two registers are by no means far removed from

one another. Poetry is story. Scheherezade represents the narrative drive of a mortal being, its way of coping with the world. We know of our mortality and we try somehow to reach an arrangement with it. The story upholds that arrangement, and the arrangement of words is like an appraisal of existence. The author of *Ptaki dla myśli*, using modest poetic means, brings lyric poetry into the sphere of needs, and shows that it is one of the many narratives we find wherever we look. That further leads us to think anthropologically, provokes us to look at the problem through the concept of culture. In the context of the vision of art presented in Koziol's poem, so closely linked with life, fate, and the empiricism, considerations of narrative seem particularly relevant. Narrative these days is understood quite broadly and has a place in scholarly research; as Anna Łebkowska notes, it constitutes an object of study in all fields within (but not only in) the humanities.<sup>5</sup> Łebkowska writes:

The fact is nowadays underscored in various ways that we are immersed in narratives which constitute a sign of our cultural existence in the world and thus need to explain and understand that world (but also ourselves). Certain of them we repeat, others we unceasingly seek out. They surround us from all sides: from myth to internet plots; from narrative as a device recommended for speakers in rhetoric textbooks both ancient and contemporary to stories seen in films; from individual stories to collective histories, from those that are imposed to those constructed out of spite. We are thus surrounded by stories that seemingly tightly construct the world, explaining it in precise terms; it is possible to uncover cracks in that construction, however, and then it may be revealed in its entirety to be an ephemeral construct. Thus we ceaselessly desire stories, both the same ones repeated over again and ever new ones.<sup>6</sup>

Łebkowska, in introducing the broad problem, observes that narratives represent an attempt to explain and understand the world and ourselves. The poem "Tysiąc i jedna noc" is a very fine illustration of that assertion. The most vivid confirmation of it is the character of Scheherezade. She displays the most obvious and seemingly superficial part of our thinking about narratives, the weaving of stories. Thus here we see the dual dimension of fictionality – Koziol makes use of the fairytale heroine who tells fabricated stories and is a symbol of creation by means of the word. The words stacking up and puffing themselves up colourfully may not guarantee her salvation, but they are a way (the only one?) of ordering the chaos, mastering her fear of the incomprehensible world. As I wrote above, they represent the simple art of survival, of coping.

Poetry can be attractive, as in the poem where we read that "words / stack up / puff themselves up colourfully [...]." In the face of the finality which is expressed in the last lines, the pleasure of art has a kind of futility; its triviality and transience are quite ridiculous. Koziol intensifies that impression by using carefully chosen words. In the reference to Scheherezade, her activity is not defined by the words "storytelling," "weaving stories" or other such neutral formulations. The action is referred to as "fabrication," giving it a negative overtone, similar to the earlier "lovely lies." "Fabrication" can also be treated indulgently; it can be linked with

<sup>5</sup> A. Łebkowska, "Narracja" (Narrative), in *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy* (Cultural Theory of Literature. Main Concepts and Problems), ed. M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Kraków 2006, p. 186.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

a possibly child-like tendency to fantasize. There is at the same time a suggestion of pride or hubris (Polish *pycha*) – in the original Polish, the author uses the verb “pysznić” (puff up) next to “piętrzyć się kolorowo” (stack up colourfully), making the reader think of verbal art as a kind of trivial bauble, a form of vanity. Earlier analyses, however, have shown that the persona in fact does not treat art so harshly. Here it should once again be emphasized that art is an activity done in spite of something, a function that goes against instinctive thoughts about the uselessness or irrationality of all of its measures.

In the poem “Tysiąc i jedna noc” Urszula Koziół shows that an *ars poetica* can be an attempt to create order in a world that does not easily yield to being grasped by mortals. Beings endowed with consciousness are engulfed in narratives that may appear to be expressions of hubris or of a certain despair – activity in defiance of the knowledge of what end awaits us. What may be treated as an approach using distance and irony is simultaneously, paradoxically, a reinforcement of the importance of the “arrangement of unimportant words.” The need reveals itself to be so strong that in the final reckoning it should not be dismissed, because it is, in the weightiest meaning of the expression, a way of life, of which the best example is Scheherazade. In her person, the idea of the redemptive word achieves its realization. Koziół does not go for tearjerkng *pathos*, and yet in this aspect a shade of the Romantic vision of poetry’s mission is visible. This poem from *Gumowe klocki* should, nevertheless, not be categorized too swiftly as a poem that glorifies the mighty word. As our earlier analyses have shown, “Tysiąc i jedna noc” is a text full of nuance and ambiguity; it is neither a classic *ars poetica*, nor an explicit rebuke to those who prize the poetic word too highly. The author of *Horrendum* here presents the poet’s right to attempt the endowment (or discovery?) of meaning, not always necessarily written with a capital M, meaning hidden in narratives, which are an inescapable human necessity. In this vision, poetry and the awareness of mortality go hand in hand. Fabrication is not always a bad thing.

# KEYWORDS

*ars poetica*

*Szeherezada*

## STORY

### **ABSTRACT:**

The article offers an interpretation of Urszula Koziol's *Tysiąc i jedna noc* (A Thousand and One Nights), originally released as part of the poet's debut, *Gumowe klocki* (Rubber Blocks, 1957). This interpretation highlights the self-referential aspect of the work and accents the meaning of its references to the tale of Scheherazade. The act of creation is presented as the art of survival, and attempt to order chaos and understand reality in spite the awareness of death. In the discussion of the poem, its inherent ambivalence is brought into relief: its emphasis on the importance of the word and simultaneous distance toward the word's glorification. The author considers the problem of the need for and ubiquity of narrative.

n a r r a t i v e

Urszula Koziół

SELFREFERENTIALITY

art

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Marta Stusek is a PhD candidate in the Department of Twentieth-century Literature, Literary Theory and the Art of Translation at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Stusek works on contemporary poetry, focusing primarily on the phenomenon of small forms. She is also interested in the interconnectedness of different arts. |