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Structures in Sign Networks. On an Attempt to Reconstruct the (Cultural) Poetics of Poetry From the Age of Posivitism

c r i t i c s :
Tadeusz Budrewicz, *Wierszobranie (druga
połowa XIX wieku)* [Selection of Verse
(Late Nineteenth Century)], Krakow 2016

Polish poetry written after 1864, once disregarded and considered to fall far short of the work of its great Romantic predecessors, has at long last received some absorbing exegeses in recent times, among which the most prominent is undoubtedly the monograph of Krakow scholar Tadeusz Budrewicz, which bears the modest and unassuming title *Wierszobranie (druga połowa XIX wieku)* [Selection of Verse (Late Nineteenth Century)].¹ It is an attempt to conduct a fragmentary but highly representative analysis of the linguistic and stylistic model of Polish poetry of the period after the 1863 Uprising – and thus of a large part of its immanent poetics – as well as an interpretation of its cultural meanings, which arise due to the reflexive connection between poetic language and “external” reality. Our access to the latter is, of course, always mediated by various (discur- sive) networks of language.

Budrewicz treats the object of his analyses and interpretation differently than has previously been done. He does not solidify the language of poetry as a stable, closed artefact, but sees in it a manifestation of the “anthropology of the word,” underscoring, for example, the fact of the gradual displacement of poetry from the realm of high art onto the plane of popular culture, mass culture, dominated by consumer taste. An examination of the perspective provided by the sociology of literature, and thus the sphere of poetry’s reception, allows the author to make a consequential, revelatory generalization about the shift of its place in the evolving social culture and the changes this shift elicited in its structure:

In the past, such texts took shape as the expression of the author’s individual experience, while in the era of mass publication of couriers and journals they became an elegant verbal product, created and reproduced on a massive scale for the use of consumers of popular culture. Poetry is beco-

¹ T. Budrewicz, *Wierszobranie (druga połowa XIX wieku)*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, Kraków 2016, pp. 239.

ming elite, versification or rhyming– egalitarian [...]. Poems or speech written in verse serve both belles lettres and utilitarian writing. They may be said to be in the sphere at the limit of literary studies. Rhymes in public circulation can be looked at in the categories of cultural studies or sociology. Thus there is a need for a new language of description and other categories of evaluation.²

And those are precisely the categories the author applied to his analyses, thereby rendering his argument complex and multilayered: both historical/literary and sociocultural. The poetics of poetry after 1863 here manifests as dynamic structure, shaped both by authorial choice and by readers' expectation horizon, dialoguing with both literary tradition and the cultural context of the epoch... Budrewicz does not "wash away" the textual substance of literature; the point of departure for him is always the poetic word, treated as the vehicle of meaning. That is what happens in his groundbreaking study "Instrumentarium muzyczne w poezji postyczniowej" (Musical Instruments in Post-Uprising Poetry, 2004), which fascinatingly illuminates one of that poetry's most important aesthetical and poetological features, namely the themes and tropes of "musicality" and "song" that endow a significant group among the period's poems with their distinctive flavour. Budrewicz creates a statistical list of theme-words with musical meanings that appear in the poetry of the Positivist period, thereby revealing the segment of Polish verbal culture in the period wherein a certain "inventory of artistic forms" manifested.³ Poems woven around musical motifs indirectly depicted the dynamics of social development. Budrewicz arrives at some bold general statements about culture, supported by a firm linguistic and stylistic foundation. Consciously subordinating the subjective perspective (the work of selected poets) to a statistic formulation, he develops a pioneering hypothesis about the inner complications of Positivist poetry, about its antinomic character, resulting in part from sociological and literary impulses:

The diapason of the colloquial and the elitist, the dialectic of the linguistic organization of a text founded on the realistic everyday life of a culture of emancipated petit-bourgeois and working-class masses, on the one hand, and, on the other – to generalize grossly – various kinds of – achievements of European art of the highest order can be observed in various texts.⁴

The musical code in language fulfilled crucial semantic functions. Poets in the age of Positivism used it fairly often, silently relying on the referential nature of language. In their opinion, the word could simply convey the essence of human experience in both its individual dimension (intimately subjective) and the collective (social). If they doubted the expressive and evocative power of the poetic word, they did so most often with a sense of their own creative failings. Their belief in the matchless superiority of the great Romantics' artistry might have taken such a form. A fascinating construction of thought and image emerges from Budrewicz's interpretation, joining this musical code in language to a network of sociocultural meanings:

The Positivist lute is an imperfect tool – either it is just learning to make a sound, or has damaged strings, or is broken ... Together with the high frequency of the word "song" this means that **the poetry of the era of Positivism was to a great extent self-referential**. The poets of that time thought and wrote very frequently about the creative process – self-critically, nostalgically, dolefully, without belief in their own strengths. Based on an analysis of about 300 poetic syntagmas containing thematic references to instrumental and vocal music, we can state that Positivism valorised harmony, melodiousness, songfulness, in both orchestral performance as in sounds of nature; the motif of the piano also introduced the theme of flirtation, and the motif of a party, a ball, or a concert served to satirically present material and social stratification.⁵

² Ibid., p. 7.

³ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 32-33 (emphasis mine).

The immanent orientation toward the poetic text itself – as a properly organized linguistic formation – would probably not enable us to discover the cultural motivation that nineteenth century Polish musical culture, dominated by the song, which fulfilled an important ideational and patriotic function, represented for the expansion of the musical lexicon in poetry and the “musicalization” of its structures. As Budrewicz observed:

In the song, a national Polish trait could be perceived. It was to be a “sweet ornament to our sociable meetings,” the guarantee of moral harmony in the nation, the link connecting the culture of the aristocratic estates with that of bourgeois culture. The melodies to such songs were cherished as simple, harmonious, catchy and the kind that “furlow into the memory.”⁶

This peculiar dictate of songfulness also sometimes had unfavorable consequences for the artistic level of poetry, as it solidified its rhythmic conventionality and created a barrier to formal inventions. The “melodiousness” of Polish poetry from the era of Positivism thereafter became, among other things, a negative reference point for the experiments of the modernist avant-garde in the 1920s.

Budrewicz also used a statistical method in the study “Rok 1885 w poezji naszej” (1885 in Polish Poetry). Nobody had previously made such a thorough survey of the poetry published at that time in the pages of the most important Warsaw periodicals. Budrewicz’s creation of a list “by ranking and frequency” allowed him to ground his formulated assessments on an empirical textual basis. The eloquence of numbers suggests the necessity of changing many previously held historical and literary opinions which presented, at the very least, a distorted image of the situation of poetry in literary life in the later nineteenth century. Budrewicz declared:

This survey indicates that further studies are needed, since some signals can be perceived that contradict certain statements made in the fields of

literary history and the history of journalism regarding certain journals’ particular interest – or lack thereof – in poetry. The role of “Świtu” has been overestimated while the Positivist weeklies, often more open to poetry than journals belonging to the “old press,” have been underappreciated. Publishing in a few periodicals, somewhat varied in their programs, proves the poets’ intellectual elasticity as well as that of the editors; in any case it appears to prove the absence of strong tensions, the rapprochement of positions, the process of standardization in the realm of beliefs and values, the opening to dialogue between different perspectives. Echoes of bygone struggles return later only in reminiscences, the ground for a critical balance-sheet of Positivism had been prepared – its defenders did not show martial determination. There was simply no need for a massive attack on Positivism using poetry, burning with the desire for retribution for an affront from *Przegląd Tygodniowy* (Weekly Survey) in its first years of existence. No need, because the threats to national existence and the menace of an uncontrolled social cataclysm, perceived by all, united their position.⁷

If the awareness of “threats to national existence” and growing social conflicts was shared at that time by more or less all participants in literary life and could meaningfully lead toward a certain tempering of disputes, the language model of poetics of the Positivist period was nevertheless undergoing internal differentiation, caused by the increasing social and economic differentiation of the body public, and also by local determinants. One important impulse in the development of poetry in the Positivist period was a factor that might be described as an element of geopoetics. For example, Galicia – due to the relatively liberal sociopolitical attitudes there – saw a flourishing of the humoristic epic poem, which played an important role in the political discourse of that part of Poland. The genre functioned as a vehicle for ideologico-political meanings evoked by a complicated network of signs creating various types of – in fact, mutually interconnected – discourses: political, ideological,

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

philosophical, and ethno-cultural. Using the blade of satire, authors of epic poems attacked the province's ruling conservative formation, which had a terrible record where literature was concerned. Another problem that received loud topical echoes in the genre was that of the dogma of papal infallibility, discussed at the First Vatican Council; it gave rise to fervent ideological, religious, and even ethnic disputes. These last related to anti-Semitic moods that were fed by certain writers of a nationalistic worldview.

Budrewicz demonstrates a splendid familiarity with questions of genre studies. The problematic of the genre has played and continues to play a huge role in studies of literary history; we need only mention the brilliant, now-classic works of certain Polish literary scholars: Anna Martuszevska's book on the poetics of the Positivist novel and Michał Głowiński's monograph on the Young Poland novel.

Budrewicz's monograph is partially indebted to the methodologies of those two authors; this can be seen for example in his attempts to reconstruct the poetological consciousness of the period as manifested in critical and theoretical texts that formulate a normative poetics of poetry, and also in his examination, mentioned above, of the genre perspective. The latter continues to function in many theoretical proposals in the domain of literary scholarship, even in such innovative systematic formulations as, for example, those advanced in the works of Franco Moretti, who creates a map – based on the biological-evolutionary matrix – representing the spread of the novel through various areas of the world and situating that genre both in a network of connections within literary history and theory, as well as in a set of relations with the dynamically developing socioeconomic context.⁸

Budrewicz's book naturally does not have such a broad theoretical and methodological base, and it considers

⁸ See T. Bilczewski, Introduction [to:] F. Moretti, *Wykresy, mapy, drzewa. Abstrakcyjne modele na potrzeby historii literatury* (Charts, Maps, Trees. Abstracts Models in the Service of Literary History). Trans. T. Bilczewski and A. Kowalcze-Pawlik. Wydawnictwo UJ, Kraków 2016, p. XIIff.

a comparatist perspective quite casually, but poetic genres are located within his field of scholarly reflection. Budrewicz ties their appearance, development, and unexpected expansion to “external” reasons. Cultural optics, coupled with a traditional literary history approach, enable him to formulate a revelatory hypothesis:

Among the range of artistic forms, the unusual popularity of the sonnet stands out. This demands we revise our view of the fall of the sonnet form in Positivism and its creative renaissance in the lyric poetry of Young Poland. In the mid-1880s we can see a “sonnetomania.” In this regard, the compositions of Szczęsna (Bąkowska), who boldly transformed the format of the stanzas, breaking them up into distichs located in the various parts of the sonnet structure, are particularly interesting. We then see the epicization of this lyric form and the weakening of the dualism of description and reflection. Such engagement with form constitutes a link to the modernist aesthetic. The poetic prayer is also frequently found being practiced as both a genre and to express metaphysical content which is explicit and doubtless confirms the fracture in Polish spiritual and religious life. An astonishingly large number of poems speak of death— I refer to both poetic epitaphs and also the thematic motif (coffins, the last adieu, autumnal still lifes) by means of which a pessimistic world view is expressed [...]. In the daily press, more than in the weeklies, poems dealing with themes of the seasons changing featured frequently. There is a pronounced dominance of autumn, with its elegiac and melancholic tone, disappointment with the world, resignation, a search for Stoic detachment [...]. A great number of the poems could have been reprinted in an anthology of Young Poland poems.⁹

The poetics of Positivist poetry thus here acquires a new illumination, its image becoming filled with previously unseen elements. Budrewicz deliberately refrains from putting the individual poetic personalities of the period (even such important ones as Konopnicka or Asnyk)

⁹ T. Budrewicz, op. cit., pp. 53-54.

on display, accenting the plane of the sociology of literature, the dynamics of literary life and its connections with various kinds of cultural signs, so to speak. We might say that Budrewicz is trying to grasp the structures of poetic language as “fluid” artistic constructions and as vehicles of meanings. Through his use of this heuristic strategy, a new image of the (cultural) poetics of the era of Positivism takes shape, presenting it as a system of internal ideological, philosophical and artistic tensions, arising at the meeting-point between spheres of social communication: that of literature and those of multifarious other linguistic (discursive) practices. In justifying his chosen strategy, Budrewicz writes:

The basic premise was to consider poetic material *en masse*. Depersonalization makes it possible to grasp psychosocial phenomena and trends in aesthetics that are often obscured by the focus on the individual features of a particular author’s subjectivity. Looking at an era from the perspective of everyday life, from the position of an average reader of newspapers and magazines, who paged through announcements, obituaries, read introductory articles, local news, weekly feuilletons, digested excerpts of belles lettres, and sometimes poems printed in these papers, allows us a chance to perceive issues, problems and moods that cannot be observed in either historical studies or works of literary scholarship whose aim is to explicate masterpieces.¹⁰

Scrupulously examining the works of minor poets or those who have been left out of literary history’s syntheses, connecting them with the problems of everyday life, discovering the poetic reflexes of the cultural life of that time in its various manifestations and in its local incarnation (drawing to the fore, for example, geopolitological differences) – all of this finds its application in the author’s practice of reading both “closely,” scrutinizing the fabric of the text, and in terms of broad, far-reaching generalization. Budrewicz’s book has revealed the hitherto underappreciated or utterly neglected fields of occasional and humoristic verse, in which were con-

centrated – as if in a lens – important ethnographic and cultural traits of the Polish community that underwent democratizing social changes in the late nineteenth century. The extensive set of fascinating hypotheses put forward by Budrewicz includes one, voiced somewhat as a throwaway aside, that stresses the dominant place of patriarchal culture in humorous epiphanic poetry.

We may confidently expect that the exegetic strategy adopted by Budrewicz, oriented toward revealing aspects of the poetics of literary works both through a traditional analysis (grounded at least in historical poetics) of their language and genre conventions and the application of variable, dynamic systems of cultural signs, could be applied to many areas of empirical literary history. Obviously, one might hope for broader and deeper implementation of the technique, showing, for example, statistical lists of poetic words used with consideration of local specifics and differences. An opportunity would thereby be created for the (re)construction of a multi-layered (cultural) poetics of genres, styles, literary currents, no longer placed in “closed” extrapolated structures, but dynamically produced through the transfer of ideas and artistic conventions among multiple levels of literary life.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

KEYWORDS

mass culture

genres

sociology of literature

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ABSTRACT:

The subject of the review is Tadeusz Budrewicz's monograph entitled *Wierszobranie (druga połowa XIX wieku)* (Verse Selection [Second Half of the Nineteenth Century], Kraków 2016), which constitutes an example of cultural interpretation of literary history, oriented toward (re)constructing the poetics of Polish late nineteenth-century poetry. Budrewicz brings together several exegetic strategies, successfully applying the statistical method and certain categories of geopoetics. Poetry here appears as a dynamic formation of artistic conventions, functioning in many external contexts and stimulated by various literary currents (including the popular current). A complex ethnocultural image emerges from Budrewicz's book, in which the variety of conceptual threads that co-created Polish cultural consciousness in the second half of the nineteenth century become woven together.

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