

# Noir Poetry

Wiktoria Klera

“The noir sensibility is truly international”<sup>1</sup>.

Crime fiction’s rising popularity in recent years has revived an interest in more experimental takes on the genre. In Polish literature, there is an emerging trend of authors and poets who have never before expressed an interest in this area of mass culture suddenly writing crime novels. Marcin Świetlicki in particular seems to have warmed up to the idea of crime fiction, for he openly declared his sympathy for the genre as a reader, thus undoing the curse on what has been commonly classified as “pulp” and all that the term implies: texts that can be produced without any special craftsmanship. Świetlicki’s own body of work includes a substantial share of poems that seem to conform to the conventions of “noir poetry” in its Polish iteration. As it turns out, he is not alone in his desire to use these conventions whose provenance leads back to the Polish and English literary worlds alike, for not only do these tropes evoke film noir; they also (and in fact more significantly) betray a general affinity for hard-boiled stories. These source texts (the works of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, to single out the authors best known in Poland) were responsible for stimulating a second wave of popularity for film noir, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of neo film noir (“neo-noir”). This mode and its suggestive images influenced poets, who then paid homage to its nuances in texts that were not limited to crime novels (although authors such as Świetlicki and Edward Pasewicz did in fact take this route): poetry noir began to blossom as well.

One indicator of the special status of noir poetry is the fact that from a theoretical perspective, it has drawn scant attention, for theorists typically take the stance that it is a relatively straight-forward reflection of the genre conventions of film, in so far as we can speak of a “simple translation” between two media.<sup>2</sup> Theme issues of English-language journals tend to fundamentally model themselves as poetry anthologies rather than collections of articles and essays interrogating noir poetics.<sup>3</sup> The earliest text I managed to find that addresses the theme of noir poetics is Suzanne Lummis’ article included in the winter issue of *Malpais Review* from 2012-13, titled *The Poem Noir*

<sup>1</sup> N. King, M. Asprey, *Introduction. Organising What We See*, “Contrapasso Magazine. Noir Issue” 2013, November 9, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> John Challis has explored this issue in his dissertation, titled *THE KNOWLEDGE. A Collection of Poetry and THE POEM NOIR: Film Noir in Contemporary Poetry*, Newcastle University, School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, October 2015 [unpublished].

<sup>3</sup> Here we might mention “Contrapasso Magazine. Noir Issue” (discussed above) and the Winter 2013 issue of “*Malpais Review*.”

– *Too Dark to be Depressed*.<sup>4</sup> Lummis reconstructs the origin story of this poetic school. Her major takeaways concern the essence of “good” “poetry noir” that seeks to explicate or cast new light on the darkness that defines the human condition. On the other hand, we are not necessarily dealing exclusively with naturalism, for noir is not only a style, but to a certain degree also functions as a sensibility, and its most consistent feature is its clean break with sentimentality: in fact, Lummis emphasizes that if this last condition is not met, then we cannot speak of the text as a noir poem.<sup>5</sup>

If, however, noir poets of different cultural circles are drawn by the same fascinations, then their work is deeply saturated with local color. The list of subgenres includes “Tartan noir,” “Australian noir” and “Florida noir,” yet there remains no doubt that the essential defining markers of noir poetry are consistent on all continents.<sup>6</sup> John Challis describes these markers in detail, but I will summarize them briefly here. They include: **anxiety** (fear) instilled by the usurping of power, a socially or politically foreign space, or the impossibility of communication; a **pessimism** either produced by the protagonist/reader’s alienation or estrangement from the brutal world or shielding the protagonist from a past or ongoing trauma, and an **obsession** that can easily escalate into self-destruction.<sup>7</sup> Challis goes into detail on two British poets: Deryn Rees-Jones (here he flags anxiety as the dominant theme) and David Harsent (in this case, Challis is drawn by the work’s existential pessimism). He also examines the work of the Irish writer Paul Muldoon, who is perhaps the best known in Poland out of this triad.<sup>8</sup> In Muldoon’s case, Challis emphasizes the role of obsession and its origins in the hard-boiled story.

American takes on noir poetry often reflect echoes of the war (which can also be discerned in poetry of other languages, regardless of how they resonate). This is at least true of the poem that gives the book its title, Michael Spence’s *Poem Noir*.<sup>9</sup> In this text, as the narrator is setting the scene, he speaks of a “diner” that was “the kind that thrived / Before the Second World War.” A coldblooded private detective kills (although this occurs after a long series of exhausting investigations) his former secretary who had once expressed interest in working for him and has come to seek revenge for her rejection. At first, all signs seem to indicate that it is the woman who will ultimately be the duel’s victor, but in the end, the narrator concludes his own story:

<sup>4</sup> S. Lummis, *The Poem Noir – Too Dark to be Depressed*, “*Malpais Review*” 2012/2013, winter, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> “The good one [poem noir – W.K.] will throw light, and defining darkness, on some area of the human condition. [...] noir is not only a style but to some degree *stylized*. [...] certain characteristics will always be present; whatever its subject, this poem will speak out of a voice stripped of all sentimentality, a voice of cool detachment. If it does not, it is not noir.” Ibid. I am quoting an unpublished version of the text with the permission of the author since the journal cited here is not available in Poland.

<sup>6</sup> See also: N. King, M. Asprey, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> “1. Anxiety created through a usurping of power, border crossings into the past, unfamiliar political or social territory, or the impossibility or over-saturation of communication. 2. Pessimism delivered tonally or thematically as a result of alienation from the world, or to alienate the protagonist and viewer from the violent, dangerous and random world, or to shield the protagonist from past or present trauma. This might be exhibited by the use of indifferent and impersonal narration or clipped and economic language, and also through a nair of detachment, conveyed through a use of an omnipresent, summative narrator. 3. Obsession that can drive a protagonist to become the agent of their own destruction, delivered either from narrative and character action or through *film noir*’s cinematography of angular shots and shadowy ests, or storytelling devices such as flashback and the subjective camera.” J. Challis, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Several translations of his texts have appeared in the issue titled “Illusive” (“*Złudne*”) of the journal “*Arterie*. Kwartalnik artystyczno-literacki” 2016, issue 24.

<sup>9</sup> M. Spence, *Poem Noir*, *Shenandoahliterary.org*, Vol. 64, Nr. 1, *Noir*, <https://shenandoahliterary.org/641/2014/08/15/poem-noir/> (last accessed 02.13.2018).

[...] I fired down  
 Once more to be sure. Then I walked off  
 In the rain and thought: I hate this town<sup>10</sup>.

I am citing Spence's poem here as an English-language activation of noir poetry that offers an example from which we might easily extrapolate the style's overall signature features. The poem features a protagonist cut off from his emotions, operating solely in isolation, distrustful of women, distanced from the outside world, and contemptuous towards his own city.

Lummis perhaps played the most decisive role in defining the term "poem noir." Lummis is deeply wedded to Los Angeles, which also happens to be Chandler's hometown. It was Lummis who, in the text *The Poem Noir – Too Dark to be Depressed*, identified the first twentieth-century "poem noir" as *Crime Club*, a poem by Weldon Kees,<sup>11</sup> who never received much attention in Poland. Lummis then reinforces this "founding" gesture by rooting it in her own autobiography: she is the granddaughter of an LA Times editor, and is therefore continuing her family tradition. She relays her experience of an assault during which she was held at gunpoint and robbed of a keepsake from her grandmother. This event ultimately influenced the themes she took up in her poetry. She explains: "The film noir sensibility gave me a way to do that [to write about violence – W.K.] without being sentimental."<sup>12</sup>

Writing noir poetry has become more of a trend in English-speaking countries than it has elsewhere. A great volume of websites publish texts in this vein (by established writers and online amateurs alike).<sup>13</sup> What's more, many creative writing programs now offer courses on writing noir poetry. In its Polish iteration, this branch of writing has taken a somewhat different shape.

Polish poets have applied noir conventions to various effects. It would suffice to examine the tests collected in the anthology *Farewell, My Lovely. Noir Poetry*.<sup>14</sup> It seems relevant that this term hardly appears anywhere else.<sup>15</sup> As the anthologies' editors, Marcin Baran, Marcin Sendeki and Marcin Świetlicki, all concede, the idea for the anthology's subtitle was proposed by the book's editor, Irek Grin (who is also an author of crime novels, yet not of poems). The new 2010 collection included a reprint of texts from 1997. This fact is worth highlighting, for in 2010, the term "noir poetry" was not yet in wide circulation, even in English-speaking countries. The cover of *Farewell, My Lovely* cites Świetlicki: "Just as the dark crime novel brushed close to poetry, so was poetry ashamed to openly approximate the dark crime novel. It's time to put an end to all

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>"Weldon Kees drew upon the visual and tonal qualities of another medium, *film noir*, with its interest in fate, human fallibility and mortality, and its sense of social order undercut by a substratum of delirious disorder. To that mix he added a murder, or, at any rate, a body, and his own icy black irony – and that became the first modern poem noir, *Crime Club*" – writes Lummis. S. Lummis, (*Never*) *Out of the Past: Film Noir and the Poetry of Lynda Hull*, "Los Angeles Review of Books" 2015, November 17, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/never-out-of-the-past-film-noir-and-the-poetry-of-lynda-hull/#!> (last accessed 02.14.2018).

<sup>12</sup>"The film noir sensibility gave me a way to do that without being sentimental". *Writing Noir Poetry, With LA as a Backup*. Suzanne Lummis speaks with Jacki Lyden, National Public Radio, Inc. (US), <https://www.npr.org/2013/09/15/222820591/writing-noir-poetry-with-l-a-as-a-backdrop> (last accessed 02.14.2018).

<sup>13</sup>For an example, see: [allopoetry.com](http://allopoetry.com), [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org), [hellopoetry.com](http://hellopoetry.com).

<sup>14</sup>*Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir. Z dodaniem legendarnej antologii Długie pożegnania. Tribute to Raymond Chandler*, ed. M. Baran, M. Sendeki, M. Świetlicki, Kraków 2010.

<sup>15</sup>For more on issues of nomenclature associated with "dark crime fiction" as the foundation of noir poetry, see: W. Klera, *Kryminal*, in: *Interpretacyjny słownik terminów kulturowych*, ed. J. Madejski, S. Iwasiów, Szczecin 2014, p. 91.

this shame. This book came about to make it clear that film noir and noir literature can go hand in hand with poetry.”<sup>16</sup> From the perspective of today’s great abundance of noir poetry, these words might come as a surprise. Wojciech Burszta and Mariusz Czubaj have written more on the features of dark crime fiction that define language as the basic material of poetry: “[...] we often speak of its realism: of images of vast cities in the throes of economic crisis, the disintegration of social bonds, and the resulting ethical amorphism and complexity of its protagonists. However, the salient feature of this variant of crime fiction is its fascination with daily life in its most tender expression – in manners of speaking and on the layer of language.”<sup>17</sup>

The 1997 anthology was an homage to Raymond Chandler, which explains why most of the included texts directly reference his work or signature hero (Philip Marlowe has proven to be a powerfully generative figure).<sup>18</sup> The texts anthologized in 2010, however, are organized by more flexible criteria (or at the very least, the reader gets this impression). Aside from select poems commissioned for the book, the editors included several older works, thereby expanding our sense of what falls under the category of noir poetry and foregrounding the fact that the “noir sensibility” is not by necessity the product of intentional and conscious self-stylization. Among the texts whose affiliation with this mode is less obvious, we find Wisława Szymborska’s *Black Song* (*Czarna piosenka*):

The long-drawn saxophonist, the saxophonist joker,  
he’s got his system for the world, he does fine without words.  
The future – who can guess it. The past – who’s got it right.  
Just blink those thoughts away and play a black song.

They were dancing cheek to cheek. When someone dropped.  
Head struck floor to the beat. They danced by him in time.  
He didn’t see the knees above him. Pale eyelids dawned,  
plucked from the packed crowd, the night’s strange colors.

Don’t make a scene. He’ll live. He must have drunk too much,  
the blood by his temple must be lipstick. Nothing happened.  
Just some guy on the floor. He fell himself, he’ll get himself up,  
he made it through the war. They danced on in cramped sweetness,  
revolving fans mixed cold and heat,  
the saxophone howled like a dog to a pink lantern.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Żegnaj, laleczko. *Wiersze noir*, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> “[...] zwykło się mówić o jego realizmie: o obrazach wielkich miast w czasach kryzysu gospodarczego i rozprężenia więzi społecznych, o – tym samym – amorfizmie etycznym i niejednoznaczności bohaterów. Istotą tej odmiany kryminału jest wszakże fascynacja codziennością w najczulszym z jej przejawów – w sposobie mówienia i warstwie językowej.” W.J. Burszta, M. Czubaj, *Krwawa setka. 100 najważniejszych powieści kryminalnych*, Warsaw 2007, p. 20. Bill Pronzini and Jack Adrian also discuss this important theme: dark crime fiction is about disorder and discontent. Its protagonists’ main feature is their skepticism of the law, the state, and power; the crime or menace perpetrated is only of secondary importance. See: B. Pronzini, J. Adrian, *Hard-Boiled. An anthology of American Crime Stories*, Oxford 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Here we should mention Kamila Czaja’s text on this anthology. Czaja focuses mainly on tracing Raymond Chandler’s influence on Polish authors. K. Czaja, *Wierszem białym o czarnym kryminale. Raymond Chandler w poezji polskiej*, in: *Kryminał. Gatunek poważ(a)ny?*, Vol 1: *Kryminał a medium (literatura – teatr – film – serial – komiks)*, ed. T. Dalasiński, T.S. Markiewka, Toruń 2015, pp. 119–133.

<sup>19</sup> W. Szymborska, *Map: Collected and Last Poems*, Boston & New York, 2015, p. 6.

This poem is given the approximate date of 1949 and betrays a repertory of devices that justify its inclusion in the anthology. The protagonist, a saxophonist described as a “joker” equipped with his own system for the world, is suspended in the present moment, straddling the past and the future, which are both uncertain. Echoes of existentialism ring loud and clear in *Black Song*, offering one of several features that qualify it as a “poem noir.” The mood that dominates the cramped dance hall where people dance side by side but anonymously – all individual figures melting into the crowd – is saturated with a mixture of cold and heat. By joining the dancing crowd that appears as a discrete and rhythmically pulsing organism, the individuals composing it are ultimately isolated. This movement also resembles a kind of *Danse Macabre*. And in fact, this motif resurfaces in *Farewell, My Lovely* in Marta Podgórnik’s poem *Renewable Dancing (Odnawialny dancing)*. As a rule, the protagonists of the noir genre are no strangers to death. Detectives experience extreme ups and downs, and their weakness for alcohol makes them fall prey to fleeting romances. The man who falls down drunk is dead to the world – he is useless.

Szyborska’s poem is one of many texts in the anthology in which crime does not appear as an explicit feature of the content. After all, in this world, “[one] does fine without words,” for there is always rhythm, music, and the “dog’s howl” of the saxophone. The man who hits his head on the dance floor, “just some guy on the floor,” must reckon with his own fall, but for him, this poses no problem. After all, “he made it through the war.”

*Black Song* is preceded in the anthology by Bolesław Leśmian’s poem *Migoń and Jawrzon*, and the third reprinted text is Ryszard Krynicki’s *Blow (Cios)*. The remaining twenty-eight texts were written specifically for the book by Bogdan Zadura, Andrzej Sosnowski and Tadeusz Pióro. Also in the mix are writers once strictly identified with the ‘60s generation but now read in more flexible terms: MLB, Paweł Paulus Mazur and Cezary Domarus.

What catches the eye in the English-language poems discussed above is the link between signature noir conventions and aspects of local mythology.<sup>20</sup> To stimulate their imaginations, Polish writers turned to crime fiction, but they also read Adam Mickiewicz’s *Ballads and Romances (Ballady i romanse)*. As early as 2007, in an interview published in the book *Demolition (Rozbiórka)*,<sup>21</sup> Marcin Świetlicki identifies other sources that shaped his writing. Describing his poem *Karol Kot*,<sup>22</sup> he offers his own definition of dark crime fiction. He notes: “evil is a phantasm that is constantly laying siege.”<sup>23</sup> He goes on to say (enigmatically) that the first crime novel he read began with the words: “Crime is ineffable, / the woman kills the man.” Świetlicki’s body of work includes many texts that thematically graze the subject of crime. Not all of them conform to noir conventions.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup>This is perhaps most clear in Paul Muldoon’s volume *Immram*, where the book’s structural concept evokes Celtic mythology. See also: J. Challis, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup>*Rozbiórka: wiersze, rozmowy i portrety 26 poetów*, interview by Magdalena Rybak, phot. Elżbieta Lempp, Wrocław 2007.

<sup>22</sup>This poem tells the story of the “Vampire of Krakow,” a murderer whose crimes provoked a wave of fear in the 1960s in Krakow. The murderer was captured right after he passed his high school exams, and two years later, he was executed.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup>I discuss this in greater detail in the chapter: *Jest miejsce, ofiara się znajdzie*, in: W. Klera, *Namolna refreniczność. Twórczość Marcina Świetlickiego*, Krakow 2017, p. 182 et seq.

Echoes of Mickiewicz resound in Świetlicki's poetry and beyond it. A similar pattern emerges in an excerpt from Grzegorz Dyduch's poem *Two Men and a Clown Talk about Chinatown (Sketch for a Scherzo) (Dwaj panowie i klaun rozmawiają o Chinatown (szkic scherza))*:

Once upon a time in the Chinese district  
 The body of a virgin was found  
 Without limbs, head clipped off  
 A carcass in terrible form.  
 All the neighbors ran out to see  
 And with them came the usual gaggle of gossipers.  
 Tramps and pimps.  
 Around the corpse they start to frolic.  
 Ufff!!!  
 Chinese lanterns burn and oil crackles in woks.  
 The police set off on the murderer's tracks.  
 The renowned detective appears at long last  
 And reveals a slight secret to all present.  
 During the autopsy the victim's sex has changed:  
 A male body: but without its privates!!!<sup>25</sup>

These words are recited by a clown who – as the author indicates – “might well be the voice of the people,” but in fact is not, for “he loathes the people.” The allusion to Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown* is repeated in the illustration appearing on the Polish anthology's cover.<sup>26</sup> Piotr Sommer's contribution is stylized along similar lines:

Choir

The tragedy had happened  
 The woman killed the lad  
 The knife was lodged in his larynx  
 She must have been strong.<sup>27</sup>

This poem brings up yet another feature specific to noir poetry (and one that seems to locate the mode even closer to hard-boiled stories): their knack for delivering a specific kind of joke. Black humor and the absurd are prominent throughout the anthology.<sup>28</sup> We might take Paweł Paulus Mazur's text *Detective Ragman (Detektyw Szmata)* as an example.

<sup>25</sup>Żegnaj, laleczko. *Wiersze noir*, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>26</sup>The anthology's cover features an untitled illustration by Marcin Maciejowski that references Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*.

<sup>27</sup>P. Sommer, *Października czternastego, roku dziesiątego zdarzyło się, co się miało zdarzyć najgorszego*, i: *Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir*, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>28</sup>Although it goes without saying that this feature is not unique to the anthology. Nearly all of the protagonists of the poems discussed here have a knack for delivering remarks saturated with dark humor, yet the female detective-heroes and femme fatales show scarce signs of this style of humor.

[...] he lived alone like a bit of lard. His only company was a tailor's dummy.  
The dummy was over a century old.

So Inspector Ścierwoński assigned the job to Ragman. Ragman had never solved a single case entrusted to him. But he did love soup, cucumber soup [...].<sup>29</sup>

Even these extremely naturalist descriptions intone a certain distance that allows them to sneak in a hardened laugh at the sad fates of dead bodies, as in Marek K. E. Baczewski's text, which describes a "reclining clod of meat" (*"leżąca kupa mięsa"*) that is "generally none too kind" (*"ogólnie niemiła"*) and "runs off at the mouth" (*"zajeżdża z pyska"*):

According to set theory  
this corpse is particularly dead.  
We might even say it's the corpse of a corpse,  
in all possible respects,  
not least rhetorically,  
and from every angle:  
passive, generative, active.<sup>30</sup>

The conclusion hardly offers any consolation: *"the corpse of a corpse lives"* (*"żywy jest trupem trupa"*). We might say that Marcin Baran takes this strategy to its most extreme limits in his short work of prose poetry titled *Balaang* ("Killing Joke Noir"). It would be ill advised, however, to fall prey to the misleading impression that all these jokes mitigate the general mood of the protagonists' infinite hopelessness and pessimism. To the contrary – in this milieu, these feelings become all the more dominant. *Balaang* appears in two versions: one American, and one British. Depending on his background (the narration starts in the first person and then moves to the third person in the second part), the detective suffers from a different set of compulsions. The American detective "drinks substantially, consistently, and diligently," while the British one "thinks compulsively, pedantically, and systematically."<sup>31</sup> Yet their stories converge as they come to a head in a gesture that lucidly reveals the international nature of noir poetry: "But it was clear to see that it wasn't so. It isn't on the menu and will never be. And into the ages – / the world will always be poisoned by crime...";<sup>32</sup> "But it was clear to see that it wasn't so. It's not on the menu and won't be, ever. Until the end of time / crime will always poison the world..."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup>[...] mieszkał sam jak smalec. Tylko z krawieckim manekinem.

Manekin miał ze sto lat.

To inspektor Ścierwoński zlecił Szmacie zlecenie. Szmata nigdy nie rozwiązał żadnej sprawy, którą mu powierzono. Ale lubił zupę 'ogórkową' [...].” *Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>30</sup>“Z punktu widzenia teorii mnogości

jest to wyjątkowo martwy trup.

Jest to nawet trup trupa,

pod każdym względem,

zwłaszcza retorycznym,

i z każdej strony:

biernej, dajnej, czynnej.” *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 30–37.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid*, p. 37.

The heroes of the poems comprising this noir anthology are all exhausted. Take, for example, Agnieszka Wolna-Hamkała's *At the Last Minute (Pop) Poetry (Spontan (pop) poetry)*: "With the diagnosis 'exhaustion & destruction' / I found myself in the springtime ward. They told me to sleep, / so I slept. I seem to recall being by a river. [...]"<sup>34</sup> At times, the protagonists describe themselves from split perspectives, and often they are torn in two, as in Darek Foks' poem *D-Day*: "Suddenly I feel a dizzy spell brought on by a sudden solid / flash of light, women, a purse, a dog, and the splitting of a soul."<sup>35</sup> These characters can be found in offices crowded with the accouterment typical of those leading a life of crime. The women who rear their heads in these spaces often have "raw mouths" ("*krwiste usta*"),<sup>36</sup> and on the desks we spy "pencils whose ends are bitten through" ("*ołówki z obgryzionymi na wskroś końcówkami*") alongside "fake leather notebooks that look like they've been through a flood" ("*notesie w pseudoskórzanej oprawie z prawdziwym śladem zalania*") and a "battered pack of Gauloises" ("*pomiętej paczce gauloise'ów*").<sup>37</sup> In the noir world, even objects lead lives of solitude.

Świetlicki adopts his hero's voice with great poignancy, in a direct style, as he stands alone, abandoned by his woman, in close proximity to the evil he has conquered (for now) and the crimes (creaking ominously yet again, for we all know that we can never truly conquer them):

I won't play nice. I won't be sweet.  
I will be dry in perpetuity.<sup>38</sup>

The anthology extensively cited here also includes works with more debatable noir affiliations. Contrary to appearances, this is no straight-forward genre, and tacking the descriptor "noir" onto the title is not a permanent solution.

To conclude, I find it interesting that pessimism in noir poetry does not lead to stagnation, immobility, or total resignation. The characters do not suffer from catatonic depression: "*Will we live much longer? After all, our trajectories have been plotted / in advance. [...]*" ("*Czy długo pożyjemy? Trajektorie są przecież z góry / wytyczone*").<sup>39</sup> The characters are constantly starting the conquest of evil from scratch and combatting crimes despite their total certainty that at the end of the day, nobody can overcome them. Yet all of them fall prey to an incumbent duty to put in their best effort. They have no time for sentiment. The years go by and "the losses only pile up" ("*dokładają im strat*"),<sup>40</sup> but this risk is part of the game. An undying willingness to take this risk is what links the heroes of noir poetry from all continents.

transl. Eliza Cushmert Rose

<sup>34</sup>"Z diagnozą 'wyczerpanie & wyniszczenie' / trafiłam na oddział wiosny. Kazali mi spać, / to spałam. Film mi się urwał nad rzeką. [...]" Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup>"Czuję zawrót głowy wywołany nagłą solidną / dawką światła, kobietami, torbą, psem i rozdarciem duszy." Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup>J. Jarniewicz, *Blat*, in: *Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir*, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>"Nie będę miły. I nie będę słodki.

Będę wytrawny wytrwale." M. Świetlicki, *Żegnaj laleczko 3*, in: *Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir*, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>39</sup>G. Wróblewski, *Katastrofy, wulkan, szybkie wycofywanie pieniędzy z banku*, in: *Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir*, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>40</sup>M. Melecki, *Krótkie pożegnanie*, in: *Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir*, op. cit., p. 48.

# KEYWORDS

OBSESSION

noir poetry

*pesimism*

## ABSTRACT:

This article explores the term “noir” that has been introduced relatively recently to contemporary poetry, having been borrowed from the film world. The sources of noir poetry do not exclusively lead back to film and neo-noir, for they also – and perhaps most substantially – draw from features that migrated over to film from dark crime fiction, also known as hard-boiled stories. The first usage of the term “noir poetry” I was able to find appears in an article that American scholar and poet Suzanne Lummis published at the break of 2013. In English-speaking countries, the term is substantially more popular than it is elsewhere. Although an anthology appeared in Poland in 2010 titled *Farewell, My Lovely. Noir Poetry (Żegnaj, laleczko. Wiersze noir)*, the term did not interest the authors on a theoretical level, for they seemed more interested in Chandlerian tropes. The fundamental features of noir poetry include: anxiety, pessimism, obsession, and a rejection of sentimentality. One device employed among Polish poets with particular zeal is black humor. In Poland, authors drawing from the noir tradition include Marcin Baran and Marcin Świetlicki, but we can also trace the genre’s imprints back to earlier work, some examples of which might seem counter-intuitive, such as Wisława Szymborska’s *Black Song (Czarna piosenka)*, which is cited in this article.

## HARD-BOILED STORIES

anxiety

### dark crime fiction

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Wiktoria Klera (b. 1984) is a doctor of the humanities and literary critic. Her research focuses on authors of the “Brulion” generation, and in particular, Marcin Świetlicki (she is author of the monograph “*The Stubborn Refrain. The Work of Marcin Świetlicki*, (“*Namolna refreniczność. Twórczość Marcina Świetlickiego*), Wydawnictwo Pasaże, Krakow 2017). Other research interests include Marcin Baran, Marcin Sendeki, and *noir* poetry. She has taught courses at the University of Szczecin, the High School of the Humanities of the Association for Sharing Knowledge in Szczecin, Collegium Balticum and Stargardinum Stargardzka High School. She works at the National Museum in Szczecin Press. Her criticism has been published in the journals “Pogranicze,” “Portret,” “eleWator,” “artPapier,” “eCzas Kultury,” “Arterie,” “Autobiografia,” and “Fragile.” She is also a poet.