

# Ontology of Non-modernity in Piotr Szewc's Poetry

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## Anachronism

Piotr Szewc's poem *Gorzkie żale* [*Bitter Sorrows*], from 2013, brings a suggestive picture of the Polish village. It is so evocative that one can have the impression that the described events are taking place at this very moment, and nothing else is happening apart from them: no wars erupted, no children were born, no plant and animal species died, no people died. All that matters is that:

Mice bite the poppyseed beds in granary the pods burst  
beans pour with holes roof leaks from aspen  
leaves fall and they stick to shoes when we settle on the stairs  
of the entryway like black army they flow these bitter sorrows of our  
daily bread collect eggs says grandma in the cold rain  
cows get wet bristly hens nap the cat meows familiarly  
chaff cutter sauces it vomits with chopped straw before dusk  
a stray pigeon looks for a home he has already left short day ripped  
off a calendar it hurries through ploughed fields<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Piotr Szewc, "Gorzkie żale" ["Bitter sorrows"], in: *Tymczasem. Wybór wierszy* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo WBPiCAK, 2019), 51. Unless otherwise stated, all lines quoted in the article come from this collection, marked with the "T" symbol, the full title of the work and the notation of the publication page. All poems and lines in this article have been translated by A. Kocznur. The original text:

Myszy pogryzły makówki w spichlerzu pękają strąki  
sypie się fasola dziurawy dach przecieka z osiki lecą  
liście i kleją się do butów gdy przysiadamy na schodach  
sieni jakby wojsko czarne płyną gorzkie żale chleba naszego  
powszedniego zbierz jajka mówi babcia w zimnym deszczu  
krowy mokną drzemią nastroszone kury kot miauczy znajomo  
pyskuje sieczkarnia rzyga pociętą słomą przed zmierzchem  
zabłąkany gołąb szuka domu już odleciał krótki dzień oderwał się  
od kalendarza pospiesznie przeprawia się przez zaorane pola

What is striking in the above description is the accumulation of ordinary activities and things, their excess, over-exposed practicality. If we look at it not as a flaw in the text, especially an aesthetic flaw, but as a signal of the renewal of the category of description, we could find in this poem elements of Tim Ingold's concept of creating a story about materials<sup>2</sup>. The British anthropologist claims that our attention should be focused primarily on practical stories of things: 'To **describe** [bold – M.T.] properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate<sup>3</sup>.'

The command "collect eggs", issued by the heroine of the poem, the grandmother, means as much as the most important political decisions of that time. Simultaneously – let us stay with the impressions of a surprised reader – it is a little bit striking with its simplicity, a strange suddenness of turning away from the important problems of modernity, and annoying with its out-of-the-box behaviour. Why should anyone care about the order "collect eggs" at all? Why did it find itself in poetry?

Written a few years ago, the text is not only about the time it was written. It is a memory of a village from half a century ago, which has snuck into the present and became part of it. The complicated temporal situation of *Gorzkie żale*, as well as the entire poetic output of Szewc, seems to be the result of the poet's free attitude towards the past and the present, but above all of his assimilation of the category of anachronism, which he sometimes identifies with the mixing of times, free association of perspectives, anticipation of history or retrospectives placed in the future. It is also thus with Ingold's description criteria. As Marek Zaleski writes:

Anachronism is considered a tool for recovering the past trapped in the present, the present not necessarily appropriated by regimes of power and knowledge. The Benjamin's metaphor of "evoking images of the past" is especially meaningful here. We deal with the past history as if it were a text, the reality – the present or the past – is deposited in the text in the form of images that can be compared to images potentially existing on a photosensitive plate<sup>4</sup>.

The category, briefly discussed by the researcher, is associated with this poetry for many reasons. In 2006, when Szewc published his volume entitled *Całkiem prywatnie* [*Quite Privately*] and suspended writing novels, Polish literature faced the problem of consumerism and advanced capitalism (Michał Witkowski's *Fototapeta*), emigration (Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki's *Dom Róży*, Zbigniew Kruszyński's *Powrót Aleksandra*), exile and the exclusion of various social groups (Magdalena Tulli's *Skaza*). At the same time, the issue of the past and its representation became much more important than all the others, but it appears in such linguistically and poetically diverse stories (including Andrzej Bart, Stefan Chwin, Jerzy Ficowski, Mikołaj Łoziński, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz) that even today it seems difficult to put them in order and present them as a single synthetic concept.

<sup>2</sup> The category of material in Szewc's poetry requires a separate study. I deliberately do not write here about materiality, because it is precisely this notion that raises many legitimate doubts in Ingold's research. Cf. Tim Ingold, *Materials against materiality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ingold, *Materials against materiality*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Marek Zaleski, "Alaryk ante portas, czyli korzyści z anachronizmu", in: *Sam początek. Lata 1944–1948 w literaturze okresu Polski Ludowej*, ed. Hanna Gosk, Bożena Karwowska (Warszawa: Elipsa Dom Wydawniczy, 2017), 195.

The anachronism of many of Szewc's poetic texts can also be proven by their themes and characters: first of all, Czołki, a village located in the Sitno municipality in Zamość district, mentioned by the poet dozens of times, Łabuńka, Czarny Potok, Stabrów, Majdan, Łapiguz; everyday things, animals and plants, whose names are not remembered today:

The three-spined stickleback, sift, snowberry, leghorn chickens, pet speckled hens, little owl, canary yellow, sagan, common brimstone; people known only to their loved ones and the author: Mrs. Bilowa, Mr. Kawa, Mrs. Baranowa, old Kuczyński, Miss Skórkowa; long gone village habits and rituals, like May devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary by her statue, grazing cows in the field, sowing grain with one's own hands, traditional dishes, plucking geese, slicing potatoes in spring, opening poppyheads in autumn, and using traditional measuring tools.

What has recently been completed belongs to a not very interesting and not quite well digested and preserved past. Examples of such a past are things, situations and events Szewc describes. They are not suited for symbols and metaphors (because of their young age and inconspicuousness<sup>5</sup>, but also, frequently, because of the lack of connection with the so-called high culture or the peasant "etymology"), in many aspects they cannot compete with the problems of the urban world, nor can they be called important from the point of view of social life, art or science (such as politics or economics)<sup>6</sup>. A simple calculation shows that the beings described in this poetry are the source of many modern ways of grasping reality, including the anachronism mentioned above: a category derived from the dualistic conviction of the separate existence of time, temporality and modality. All of this makes it necessary to analyze them not by means of traditional concepts, but on the contrary, by concepts that are new, strongly linked to or derived from poetic material.

Meanwhile, restoring operability to anachronism, Zaleski places it in the dictionary of modern terms and makes it responsible for strengthening certain divisions and orders. The aim of this article, on the other hand, is to prove that Piotr Szewc's poetry has nothing in common with the categories of western thinking on which modernism is based, but exceeds them in the direction of a new ontology that denies, for reasons unknown, modernity. It is composed of various, fragile combinations, presented for the purposes of this sketch in three, perhaps exaggeratedly ordered, groups: dead - alive<sup>7</sup>, present - past, human - inhuman<sup>8</sup>. Thanks to the proposed division and discussion of selected poems belonging to the

<sup>5</sup> Cf. on this subject: Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, "Twórczość niepozorna i nowa fenomenologia. O wierszach Piotra Szewca", in: *Twórczość niepozorna. Szkice o literaturze*, ed. Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Lucyna Marzec (Poznań: Pasaże, 2015), 75–83.

<sup>6</sup> Many of Szewc's poems, especially those from the volumes *Całkiem prywatnie* [*Quite Privately*] and *Moje zdanie* [*My Sentence*], are emphases, and they also process themes closely related to the presentation of nature and suburban and rural landscapes by graphic artists, including Leszek Rózga, Leopold Lewicki, Barbara Rosiak, Stanisław Fijałkowski, and painters (featured on the cover of *Światelka* [*Little lights*] watercolour by Henryk Wańek).

<sup>7</sup> Antinomy, recorded without a hyphen as "martwe żywe" [dead alive], appears in the poem *Dawno nieobecne* [*Long time ago unrepresented*]. Piotr Szewc, "Dawno nieobecne", *Cienka szyba* [*Thin glass*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014), 33.

<sup>8</sup> The names of the groups, which are of an opposition nature, in fact mean the link between the objects covered by this nomenclature and the passages. In turn, passage [fr. *passage* – aisle] is understood not so much as an oppositional set of adjectives, but as a link that denotes mobility, or even "slipping" of meaning.

aforementioned orders, it will be possible to show that the new ontology does not reduce itself to a private mythology functioning on the edges of the subject's socio-political involvement, but is a quite serious, strong proposal to negate reality and to dismantle most of the divisions that make up it, including above all the division into what is important here and now and what is anachronistic.

The Lublin village of the sixties and seventies may seem not only anachronistic, but also a backlash. In trying to explain this difficult to define concept, introduced by Susan Faludi in her work *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*<sup>9</sup>, Piotr Forecki used such different terms as ricochet, reaction and - in a literal sense - "the violent rejection of a flask just after shooting a firearm". Belonging to the dictionary of feminism, and therefore a tradition unfamiliar to Szewc, backlash also means "an antagonistic reaction, opposition, confrontation with the social changes taking place and progressive ideas appearing"<sup>10</sup>. The role of backlash can be played not only by a specific social reaction, but also by literature or art. Consistently recorded testimonies from the life of the Lublin village in the 2000s, and especially family relationships, alternated with memories, are for Szewc a "confrontation", a response to the logic of late Polish capitalism, which he mentions time and again in *Całkiem prywatnie* [*Quite Privately*]. An example of manifestation of such a stance can be the *Foreign Body*, a poem with embedded memories of 'gomulki district Poland':

[...] I remember black and white  
 childhood videos the meagrest gomulki district  
 Poland so it overtakes me embrace me in vain  
 I try to unite this foreign body propitiate it consolidate it or I lose  
 energy I won't get her back I get up I leave I lie down  
 I remain (*Foreign body*, T, 28)<sup>11</sup>.

In Szewc's poetry, districts of Poland is not only the leading theme, it is the one that is equivalent to the emergence of time from the edges of anachronism, a reactionary backlash, and finally a "cap" on reality, where at a closer look it turns out to be itself. As in *Przetarłem oczy* [*I rubbed my eyes*], where the subject, walking between new houses located on one of Zamość's streets (Spadek), starts to recognize the past in them:

[...] and they disappeared new homes have taken the place of the old ones other  
 just broke up in the pedestrians I wanted  
 to recognize old friends I thought of my (*I rubbed my eyes*, T, 58)<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1991).

<sup>10</sup>Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem*, 23.

<sup>11</sup>[...] przypomniły mi się czarno-białe  
 filmy z dzieciństwa ubozuchna gomulkiowska Polska  
 powiatowa no więc zagarnia mnie zawłaszczca na próżno  
 staram się go ciało obce zjednać umocni się albo tracę  
 energię już jej nie odzyskam wstaję wychodzę kładę się  
 zostaję (Ciało obce, T, 28).

<sup>12</sup>[...] i znikwały nowe domy zajęły miejsce starych inne  
 właśnie się rozpadły w przechodniach chciałem  
 rozpoznać dawnych znajomych pomyślałem o moich (*Przetarłem oczy*, T, 58).

## Splices

While contemplating the possibility of analyzing Szewc's poetry with the category of inconspicuous work, Mizerkiewicz referred to the concept of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's presence:

[...] the special, somewhat distant status of inconspicuous creativity comes from the fact that it belongs - in Gumbrecht's words - to the culture of presence of a given time. It is created not for the purpose of establishing logical relations, hierarchy, fiction and interpretation, which, for example, the activities mentioned above assume distance and referring to the world seen as a game of meanings. It would rather see its task in recognizing how certain phenomena coexist, creating together something essentially plotless a collection of equivalent objects perceived as present<sup>13</sup>.

Mizerkiewicz is a pioneer in recognizing the plotless; juxtapositions of equivalent objects, as Szewc's poetry turns out to be a collection of splices and sequences, full of memories, deceptions, twists of reality, but also very accurately remembered facts. No one has ever written about this concept, although it seems to be imposing, in relation to the poetic work of the author. Incidentally, explaining it by means of the same tools that criticism applied to the prose of the author of the *Zagłady* [*Shoah*] - that is, above all, the category of small homelands and mythography - does not make much sense, not only because the range of problems undertaken by the poet in his collections *Całkiem prywatnie*, *Moje zdanie*, *Cienka szyba* and *Światelko* is more extensive than the aforementioned concepts<sup>14</sup>. It also makes no sense because the stable reality of Zamość, known from the novel trilogy, has been broken, wiped out and disintegrated here, becoming a collection of various particles, ontologically confusing entities, unclear discourses, and unsystematic knowledge. One can find in it the ghosts of the dead, half-living figures, phantoms, dreams, old, useless objects, places difficult to locate on the map, torn out of atlases and characters' biographies, in a word - a series of information which cannot be easily ordered or used in any way. In another place, Mizerkiewicz compares this condition of things to "fluidity" and "wandering"; he talks about loosening the ties between objects, and finally about changing the space of human subject's life from earthly to aerial<sup>15</sup>.

Szewc's poetry seems to be a laboratory of the ontology of nonmodernity, a place where the divisions between power and knowledge, technology and nature, artificially imposed by modernity, are removed and new alliances are formed. Following Bruno Latour, this way of building relationships can be called "assemblance" (fr. *rassembler*). It is expressed, among other

<sup>13</sup>Mizerkiewicz, *Twórczość niepozorna*, 78.

<sup>14</sup>On the subject of the category of "small homeland" and its politicization, of which, according to Krzysztof Uniłowski, Szewc's prose also became a hostage, cf. Krzysztof Uniłowski "Do czego liberałom potrzebne «małojczyzny»?", *FA-art.*, nr 3-4 (2003): 132-139. Cf. also: Jarosław Borowski, "Smak prowincjonalnej magdalenki. Zamość, którego nie ma w prozie. Piotra Szewca", in: *Literackie twarze Zamojszczyzny* (Zamość: Wydawnictwo Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej w Zamościu, 2009); Waclaw Pyczek, "«Jadę do Zamościa». Geografia poetycka Piotra Szewca", in: *Literackie twarze Zamojszczyzny* (Zamość: Wydawnictwo Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej w Zamościu, 2009); Agnieszka Nęcka, "Drobiazgi życia wyrwane. O poezji Piotra Szewca", in: *Literatura i obiekt/yw(izm)*, ed. Barbara Gutkowska, Agnieszka Nęcka (Katowice: Oficyna Wydawnicza Wacław Walasek, 2014); Artur D. Liskowacki, "Martwe żywe. O poezji Piotra Szewca", *Elewator* nr 2 (2016); Paweł Mackiewicz "Tymczasem. Tutaj", in: Szewc, *Tymczasem*.

<sup>15</sup>Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, "Przestrzenne czytanie wierszy Piotra Szewca", *Nowe Książki*, (2019).

things, in comparisons like: “defining - or not defining - matter, law, consciousness and animals’ souls, without using modern metaphysics as a vantage point<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the category of the culture of presence, explained by Mizerkiewicz on the one side as a dialectic of the uncovered and hidden, and on the other side as a certain formal characteristic of Szewc’s texts, is worth complementing with the possibilities offered by the notion of nonmodernity for the interpretation of this poetry, designed in a reflex of doubting the perfect idea of modernism and under the influence of the environmental and economic crisis that Western capitalism led to, which, after 1989, is also increasingly present in district Poland<sup>17</sup>.

The concept of nonmodernity, the basis of which will be considered further, should be understood literally. Technology, which is an important subject of Szewc’s poems, is based on simple solutions that are outdated today and concerns primarily agriculture. Its intermediary (material carrier) is the grandfather, as in the poem *Kształt chwilowy* [*Temporary shape*]:

The beginning of the holidays grandpa’s sharpening scythe Czołki sounds steady  
it’s about noon in the bushes chickens chatter in a drowsy way... (*Temporary shape*, T, 52<sup>18</sup>)

Or in the poem “Jak źdźbło” [*Like a grain*]:

[...] we drove the ruts through Sitno yellow butterflies flutter the forest smelled  
I collected blackberries fly to the sky because from here is closer grandpa shouts from a wagon<sup>19</sup>

The heroine of many memories from Czołki is also the grandmother. Usually, Szewc describes her work in the field in the rumble of a tractor and a reaper-binder: “Peter she says do a grain wisp bind it”<sup>20</sup>.

In another line from the volume *Moje zdanie* [*My sentence*], reality appears as a barn in which the broken tools are closed:

[...] on a barn floor near the tractor it left a mark but he only  
in the meantime wherever she didn’t remember dressed warmly because  
november or december above the tub we opened with a knife  
poppyheads I was so bored my legs went numb dusk (*Only in the meantime*, T, 55)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, trans. C. Porter, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>17</sup>Latour, 9-10.

<sup>18</sup>Początek wakacji dziadek klepie kosę Czołki dźwięczą miarowo  
dochodzi południe po krzakach kury sennie gdaczą... (*Kształt chwilowy*, T, 52)

<sup>19</sup>[...] jechaliśmy kolejnami przez Sitno żółte motyle trzepotały las pachniał  
zbierałem jeżyny leć do nieba bo stąd bliżej dziadek woła z furmanki (*Jak źdźbło*, T, 49).

<sup>20</sup>Piotrusiu mów mi zrób powróści zwiąż to” (*Zwiąż to*, T, 38).

<sup>21</sup>[...] na klepisku koło ciągnika odcisnęło ślad ale on tylko  
tymczasem gdzieżbyś nie pamiętała ciepło ubrani bo  
listopad lub grudzień nad wanną nożem otwieraliśmy  
makówki strasznie mnie to nudziło nogi ciepły zmierzch (*Tylko tymczasem*, T, 55).

Or like a home from *Tak trzeba* [*It's a must*]:

The road the ladder car used to take I have to push through  
so much of the unnecessary here  
padlocked house empty barn in a cell mattocks get rusty<sup>22</sup>

It seems important not only that Szewc describes outdated agricultural tools, but also that instead of modernized technology, he shows the process of destruction. Thus, he cuts out the time of transformation from the story, but also the period of the collapse of the village of PGR (State Agricultural Farm) and its transformation after 1989. One can reflect on the point of this process. After all, it is neither about elevating the most frequently difficult human work and quite primitive tools, nor about emphasizing its exhaustive character. Szewc writes about inconveniences in a passing and casual way, repeating the language one uses to speak about them to a child, not wanting to frighten him too much. From a poem about the wheat harvest *Zwiąż to* [*Bind it*]: “hemp rope wounds the hands grasshoppers are jumping” (*Zwiąż to*, T, 38).

The elimination of technical progress from the description of life in the post-war Lublin village means, first and foremost, a departure from the concept of time as an irreversible axis and the idea of capitalization. At the same time, it means abandoning the modern preservation and museumisation of the past. It also has the traces of archaization, a phenomenon accompanying progress, which for the modern man, as Latour claims, means the return of the repressed, with whom the past has been identified, confirming the conviction that it can be controlled. In Szewc's poetry, the archetypal displaced does not frighten, time does not flow, and the proliferation of memories does not mean their invasion, but, as Mizerkiewicz claimed, “a community of equivalent objects perceived as present”.<sup>23</sup> The poet ends with the illusion of the consequences of the times, so characteristic of modernity. His protagonist, driving with his grandfather and mother in a wagon, suddenly becomes motionless (in a space-time sense) and throws out the words of the poem: ‘we stopped, the horse lowers its head and grazes for over forty years waiting for us to move on’<sup>24</sup>. In Szewc's poems, what has been separated in culture for centuries becomes a liquid, hard to define mass. This is clearly shown in the ending of the poem *Na rowerze* [*On the bike*] from the *Światelko* volume:

[...] throw away matters mix up grind split off the wheels  
are still spinning I have to wait until the present gonna spill out  
like a less and less clear stain<sup>25</sup>.

One can risk a thesis that wherever Szewc writes about time in a way that is far from the tradition of Western culture (let us recall that these statements, like many others, are not treated

<sup>22</sup>Drogą którą jeździł kiedyś drabiniasty wóz muszę się przeciskać  
tyle tu wszystkiego niepotrzebnego  
dom zamknięty na kłódkę pusta obora w komórce rdzewieją motyki (*Tak trzeba*, T, 61).

<sup>23</sup>Mizerkiewicz, *Twórczość niepozorna*, 78.

<sup>24</sup>“stanęliśmy koń opuszcza głowę pasie się już ponad czterdzieści lat czeka aż ruszymy” (*Jak żdźbło*, T, 49).

<sup>25</sup>[...] wyrzucić sprawy mieszają się ucierają oddzielają koła  
jeszcze się kręcą muszę czekać aż terażniejszość rozleje się  
jak coraz mniej wyraźna plama. Piotr Szewc, *Na rowerze*, in: *Światelko*, 11.

in this case as metaphors; otherwise, the understanding of time as a figure of a certain cultural revolution would surely have to be changed), formulates text *We have never been modern* a little bit out of tune with this intuition:

This retrospective attitude, which deploys instead of unveiling, adds instead of subtracting, fraternizes instead of denouncing, sorts out instead of debunking, I characterize as nonmodern (or amodern). A nonmodern is anyone who takes simultaneously into account the moderns' Constitution and the populations of hybrids that that Constitution rejects and allows to proliferate.<sup>26</sup>

The concept of nonmodernity is even more evident in Szewc's poetry in two of the three splices mentioned. The first one is formed by human relations with the dead, while the second one is created by relations with animals. The source of both - just like spiral, not linear time - is Polish peasant culture, immobilized in memory from the second half of the 20th century. However, contact with ghosts, which is one of the main themes of *Cienka szyba* and *Świątełka* turns in Szewc's books into something more than a folk belief based on Catholic rituals (such as May or funeral prayers). Just like the movements of time, the presence of these phenomena does not arouse fear, doubt, surprise or any concern in the subject. It is exactly as it should be. It happens as if nothing else happened then in the world. This is reminiscent of one of the remarks made above in connection with the poem *Gorzkie żale* [*Bitter sorrows*], which evoked the same effect of indifference as here as well, while agreeing to the expected state of matters. The poet states it casually, like in the poem *Bukiecik* [*Little bouquet*], where the only proof that the subject has a ghost in front of him (i.e. Mrs. Stasia, who came for a moment to the grandmother) is short: "weird because she's been lying next to mom for a long time."<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most important thing in the perception of the living-dead splice is that it does not belong to any transcendence and does not result from belief in anything, nor is it religious. The natural context for these reflections is the aforementioned Catholicism, but just as time does, declared faith in God does not fit into the poetry of Szewc in any rigid framework; it is experienced by the subject as anything else under the influence of only known decisions. The process of experiencing the absent resembles reaching for the present with one's hand, and in this sense it is more like a gesture by Gumbrecht than Latour; the present, "it should be possible to touch with the human hands"<sup>28</sup>.

Szewc writes suggestively about experiencing the presence of the absent in the title poem from the collection *Cienka szyba* [*Thin Glass*], where the dead relatives - "grandmother grandfather father Lutek Jacek"<sup>29</sup> - are compared to pigeons who "merged on the silhouette"<sup>30</sup> and the medium, separating the living from the dead, is called "thin glass."<sup>31</sup> Particularly important seems to be the observation about the way in which the deceased appear in the life of

<sup>26</sup>Latour, *We have never been modern*, 47.

<sup>27</sup>"dziwne bo przecież od dawna leży obok mamy" (*Bukiecik*, T, 50).

<sup>28</sup>Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Produkcja obecności. Czego znaczenie nie może przekazać*, tłum. Krzysztof Hoffman, Weronika Szwebs (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016), 23.

<sup>29</sup>Piotr Szewc, "Cienka szyba", in: *Cienka szyba* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014), 34.

<sup>30</sup>Szewc, *Cienka szyba*.

<sup>31</sup>Szewc, *Cienka szyba*.

the subject, together and separately (“you sit together and each separately”)<sup>32</sup>, which means precisely this Latourian hybridity, indecisiveness, the non-complexity of being, simultaneity. Szewc repeats the same thought in the title poem of the next volume - *Świąteczka* [*Little light*]:

Some side by side, others separately grandma  
your big duvet is too small to  
cover us<sup>33</sup>.

The concept together - individually - first appears in the volume *Cienka szyba* [*Thin Glass*], in the poem *Wszystko osobno* [*All Separate*]; however, it does not concern the intertwining of life and death, but the passage of time: the destruction of the grandmother’s house, the subject’s apartment, the falling polystyrene foam. Material impermanence also becomes the beginning of a reflection on the need to transcend modernist divisions and invent an ontology that would allow to dismantle them on the one hand and show them as an “ensemble” of individual beings on the other. If you look at the *Wielka szpula* [*The Great Reel*] from this perspective, you will find that in Szewc’s thinking, we can “bond” and “juxtapose” everything that is usually considered mismatched, separable and inconsistent: “one sticks together the other shreds the third tears”.<sup>34</sup>

## Suggestions and conclusions

The aforementioned review makes it possible to juxtapose Szewc’s concepts with another project that is critically oriented towards modernity: the theory of new animism by the Israeli anthropologist Nurit Bird-David, who in her book *Us, Relatives, Scaling and Plural Life in Forager World*<sup>35</sup> introduced the category of “plural life”, based on Latour’s findings, among others. Without entering into the details of her work, but only pointing out the most important issues, such as redefining personhood, beings other-than-humans, non-humans and spirits, or finally making the relatives studies the most important category, it is worth suggesting a reflection on a community seen on a small scale, such as the communities of southern India Nurit-Bird studied, in relation to the poetry discussed.

As Szewc describes, the environment of the closest ones consists, like communities such as Nayaka, of relatives, who are not only living people, but also animals in a changing relationship (*devaru*) with them. Abandoning traditional ethnography, especially the classical theory of animism<sup>36</sup>, Nurit-Bird diagnoses the crisis of contemporary Western societies caused, among other things, by the melting of categories describing small communities in global categories, such as the nation or the state. A way to save the progressive melting of micro-phenomena is

<sup>32</sup>Szewc, *Cienka szyba*.

<sup>33</sup>Jedni obok siebie inni osobno babciu  
twoja duża kołdra zbyt mała żeby nas  
okryć [...]  
Piotr Szewc, “Świąteczka”, in *Świąteczka*, 43.

<sup>34</sup>„jedno się klei drugie strzępi trzecie urywa” (*Wielka szpula*, T, 115).

<sup>35</sup>Nurit Bird-David, *Us, Relatives. Scaling and Plural Life in Forager World* (California: University California Press, 2017).

<sup>36</sup>Bird-David, *Us, Relatives*, 154–155.

to develop certain models of actions and behaviours that can become models for the future. It is also Latour's idea of reading Philippe Descola in a similar way<sup>37</sup>. The model, which can be described on the basis of Szewc's poetry, is the story of a certain family that has lived in Lublin county at least since the war. We see it in the sixties and seventies, occurring in the childhood and youth of the main character, sometimes called Piotr, so that he can be juxtaposed with Piotr Szewc without much hesitation. The main protagonists of this story are his grandparents and mother, her siblings, sister, cousins, and neighbors. However, the group of relatives does not end there: it also includes animals, such as the dog Cygan, plants like a shepherd's purse, places and objects like a gate or a well. We continue to observe how one of the members of the community, the aforementioned Piotr, leaves it, but with the help of various mediations with the outside world tries to return to it, among others in the form of a bird. This may sound peculiar, but if one analyses the trail of the human-bird in this poetry, it turns out that it is not the Christian tradition with its representation of the human soul, but it is animism that constitutes a practical theory for understanding Szewc's thoughts.

Starting from [*Całkiem prywatnie*] [*Quite privately*], the poet carefully observes the birds. In *Szare pióra* [*The Grey Feathers*], he thinks about their dead bodies (a pigeon smashed by a car), and in *Sroki za oknem* [*Magpies outside the window*] he returns to the stereotype of a thieving bird, but it is only in Leszek Rózga's graphics-inspired *Liczna rodzina* [*A large family*] that he expresses his desire to enter the community of canopies, which he will implement within various species in virtually all subsequent volumes. Simply remember the poems *Gawrony przyleciały* [*Rooks have arrived*] from *Cienka szyba* [*Thin glass*] or *Kuropatwy ze Świątełka* [*The partridges from Świątełko*], where the birds are dead neighbors, or the poem [*Spoza czasu zaszypanego śniegiem*] [*Out of the time of the snow*] from the same collection, in which the voice of the Warsaw jackdaw is spoken by the deceased mother. The dead relatives have long been part of the earth, plants, and air. The belief that they should not be found in the cemetery follows Szewc constantly, for instance in the two-line *Jak chryzantema* [*Like chrysanthemum*]:

In the October fog a tree crown turns yellow like a giant chrysanthemum  
the wind blows leaves I blow up petals I'm looking for you there<sup>38</sup>.

At the same time, he himself, the subject of these poems, stops trusting the human condition and becomes someone other than just man: "I had a flock of sparrows I didn't have any/crumbs I felt I was one of them"<sup>39</sup>. But the kinship with birds does not stabilize this hybrid nature either. In the last two lines of the poems [*Zagnieździłbym się*] and [*Płatkim śniegu być*], the subject simply becomes part of the atmosphere, air, a particle of the weather and blends in so perfectly with the surroundings that it disappears. If one were certain about the philosophy Szewc proclaims and its foundation in Catholicism, it would be possible to say that the subject dissolves in the emptiness of his own loneliness, unrestrained after the death of

<sup>37</sup>Latour, *Nigdy nie byliśmy*, 64.

<sup>38</sup>W październikowej mgłę korona drzewa żółci się jak wielka chryzantema  
wiatr rozgarnia liście rozdmuchuję płatki tam was szukam  
Piotr Szewc, "Jak chryzantema", in: *Cienka szyba*, 41.

<sup>39</sup>"obstało mnie stadko wróbla nie miałem ani/ okrucha poczułem się że jestem jednym z nich"  
Piotr Szewc, "Jeden z nich" [*One of them*], in: *Moje zdanie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2009), 5.

his loved ones, but it is not so. Having discovered that they too are part of the community of “nonhuman kins” (Bird-David), Szewc does not describe suicidal dreams. With this gesture, the poet seals - as has been said - his concept of the ontology of nonmodernity, which can be treated as an alternative to the contemporary disintegration of the world, but also as a way for the subject to come to terms with problems which in Western culture do not have the right formulas to alleviate or effectively deal with. These include illness and the death of the family, the accompanying dull emptiness, mourning, isolation from society that turns into egoism and other behaviors that do not serve the common good. In the animist-inspired ontology of the nonmodernity, the aforementioned states become something inconclusive, reversible, and contain an opportunity to turn back time and come into contact with what has not yet happened. In a new animist-inspired ontology of nonmodernity<sup>40</sup>, the aforementioned states become something inconclusive, reversible, and contain an opportunity to turn back time and come into contact with what has not yet happened. The apparent lack of logic, which gives the impression of freedom of thought or interpretation of the disinvoltury, results here only from the need to remedy the most urgent (and not only) human problems, which - when entrusted to nature, referred to history, postponed in time - they become, or may become, supportable.

Description plays a special role in these decisions. Referring to what is static, anachronistic, lifeless in art, description in Szewc’s poetry is at the same time a complicated story-telling, giving things motion, fluctuations, and time travel. It also becomes an opportunity to enumerate everyday, inconspicuous, unsophisticated materials, and often turns into a list, almost an enumeration. Since Szewc’s poetry in many places resembles laying foundations, the description is a form of a basic ontological statement, a form of review - not just of beings, but of lives, and not necessarily only the living.

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Anselm Franke, “Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls, or: The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries”, w *Animism. Volume 1*, red. Anselm Franke (Berlin – Oslo – Antwerp: Sternberg Press, 2010), 11–53.

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# KEYWORDS

o n t o l o g y

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**ABSTRACT:**

Referring to the theories of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Bruno Latour and Nurit Bird-David, the author attempts to prove that Piotr Szewc's poetry is accompanied by a concept that questions the logic of the modern world based on technical progress and an isolated, egocentric subject. The aforementioned concept is an ontology of the non-modern. It is directly inspired by Latour's concept of nonmodernity (amodernity), supported by a reflection on the new animism of Bird-David. The analysis includes four poetry volumes, published between 2006 and 2017, and a selection of poems by Szewc from 2019.

ALIVE

DEAD

present

past

*birds*

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Marta Tomczok (1980) – PhD, an assistant professor at the Department of Philology of the University of Silesia in Katowice. Author of books: *Trofea wyobraźni. O prozie Leo Lipskiego* (2011), *Metonimie Zagłady. O polskiej prozie lat 1987–2012* (2013), *Czyja dzisiaj jest Zagłada? Retoryka – ideologia – popkultura* (2017), *Czy Polacy i Żydzi nienawidzą się nawzajem? Literatura jako mediacja* (2019 – in print). She is interested in the influence of new methodologies on studies of the Holocaust and other genocides, critical reflection on aesthetics considered past (postmodernism), new animism and the environmental history of coal.