

Awareness of the Line*

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*Research for this article has been financed from the budget funds for science 2018-2022: the *Diamond Grant* program No. DI2017 / 008947: “New self-referentiality? Meta-reflection in Polish poetry after 1989.”

In order to reexamine the question of creative and critical self-awareness in the Polish humanities, it is important not only to identify, map, and interpret meta-reflexivity in contemporary literature, but also to engage in discussions with scholars and artists. This conversation is intended to expand the reflection on the definitions and functions of self-referentiality in the humanities, which cannot be reduced to an objective analysis. The present interview with dr hab. prof. UŁ Kacper Bartczak, an Americanist, poet, and translator, may be the first step towards opening up this new perspective.

Agnieszka Waligóra: Let's start with the basics. What is creative (self)awareness?

Kacper Bartczak: I think that this term can be defined in two ways: there is the classic definition and, let's say, the processual definition. By the classic definition, I mean the artist's growing awareness of their accomplishments, of what they managed to shape over the years, of the problems they have encountered and the solutions they have come up with, and how these solutions – and therefore also individual works which are these solutions – have influenced their self and personality. In this understanding, we are also dealing with the broadest perspective, the perspective of creative life: the artist who has lived their life creatively and their work (series of works) which has intertwined with what is now called their life (their biography); both have fused. In this case, creative awareness is synonymous with life. In this matter, my guide is Alexander Nehamas, the author of studies devoted to, broadly speaking, self-fashioning and self-creation. This question dates back to American Romanticism and was creatively processed by American pragmatists: William James, James Dewey, Richard Rorty, Richard Shusterman, as well as Nehamas, although his links with pragmatism are rather weak (Nehamas is much closer to Nietzsche than to Dewey and James).¹

These philosophers differ in their approaches, but they are all interested in reflexive praxis in the material world and, and this differentiates them from the entire school of Deleuzian approaches, the emerging subject. The subject conceived as somehow separate from the world, an outline which, thanks to this separation, can enter into other – new, more interesting, and richer – interactions with the world. Creative life, life in and through art, is thus a form of self-fashioning and self-creation. Still, we do not want to favor this type of creative self-fashioning and self-creation in any way (such a gesture would be hopelessly romantic).

In the other understanding of creative (self)awareness, which I have described above, is seen in a single work. A single work is a site and space of praxis that will eventually develop its own self-awareness; this will be the awareness of a work of art as an event, as a certain singularity and ambiguity existing in the world in spite of conventions and laws (it is a deconstructive approach, consistent with Derrida's understanding of literature as a strange institution that constantly undermines its own institutionality.² However, I find that it is still alive today, for example in the works of Charles Bernstein, which I have recently translated, for whom it is a sign of the lasting influence of Edgar Allan Poe and his artistic philosophy.³ The fact that this ambiguity was conceptualized by Jacques Derrida only shows that deconstruction was, and still is, something much more interesting and broader than an ephemeral academic trend).

¹ I refer to two books by Aleksander Nehamas: Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1985) and Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: the Place of Beauty in the World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

² Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature" (an Interview with Jacques Derrida), in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 33-75.

³ Charles Bernstein, "The Pataquerical Imagination: Midrashic Antinomianism and the Promise of Bent Studies", in *Pitch of Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 299-344. The poet based his lecture which he delivered at the University of Łódź in November 2014 on this text.

One may ask: but what is the content of this awareness? What meanings does it involve? Is it a set of meanings created once and for all? My answer would be: it is an awareness created in the process of reading a given work of art (by different readers); on yet another level, it is a kind of aesthetic and cognitive space that has been designed by the author and as such it belongs to them, but it is not entirely synonymous with their usual empirical identity. Perhaps what I am trying to say here will be a little clearer if I remind you that the reader is often able to come up with new interpretations – they are different, maybe even more interesting, from those that the author was aware of when they created a given work of art, object, etc. Or, in other words, the author will be confronted with different interpretations of the “meaning” of a given work.

Summing up, this processual self-awareness is a set of tendencies, projections (following the Romantic and pragmatic approach, Charles Olson wrote about projective verse⁴), and various kinds of tensions which arise in the creative act and which the work will try to resolve, stimulating this creative space. Jackson Pollock went down in history not only because the mainstream media became interested in him (in 1949 *Life* interviewed the painter, and made a photo session documenting his artistic process) and not only because an outstanding critic, Clement Greenberg, became interested in him, but because he managed to bring to an end, summarize, concentrate, and thereby lead onto a new path the tradition of thinking about intention in the creative act which dates back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his “organic form.” This tradition tries to combine intention with intuition, and in the twentieth century it effectively takes the form of an experiment which is meant to express the intricate relationship between the self and the world. One could therefore say that – at a micro level, within the space of a single work of art – this self-awareness is a kind of spontaneously emerging and sustained open intentionality (i.e., where intention and intuition work together), which relishes its own vitality and openness. Thus, the space of a work of art is constantly evolving and, as such, it reinforces this spontaneity; it creates a favorable environment. Perhaps we will elaborate on this point further below.

Indeed, I talk about poetic self-awareness with a person who is active both in the artistic field – poetry, translation – and in research and criticism. Do the writer and the scholar understand creative awareness differently? Here, I refer to your latest academic study *Materia i autokreacja. Dociekania w poetyce wielościowej* [Matter and Self-Creation. Investigations in the poetics of plenitude],⁵ in which you investigate the question of the self. You discuss literature from a personal perspective (especially in the autobiographical introduction and the final explication of your poems), combining this point of view with an academic, objective, approach. You are a translator, a poet, and a scholar – or maybe you draw a line between your roles as an academic and a poet?

⁴ Charles Olson, *Projective verse* (New York: Totem Press, 1959).

⁵ Kacper Bartczak, *Materia i autokreacja. Dociekania w poetyce wielościowej* [Matter and Self-Creation. Investigations in the poetics of plenitude] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2019).

I like the fact that you start with “scholarly creative awareness.” The corporate humanities relegate the fact that it is difficult to pursue the humanities without engaging with creative psychology on the periphery. A literary scholar is also an artist – sensitivity, perceptivity, and creativity play the same role in their work as reliability, verifiability, and logic. The corporatization of the humanities removes the creative element because it turns the humanist into a “typewriter.” And creativity is non-mechanical; creating is not producing. Production requires a certain set of material conditions, and creativity does not. In other words, the conditions which govern a creative act cannot be fully predicted, calculated, or arranged. Moreover, in the long run, the “obligation to write” renders our creative faculties sterile (and that includes research).

This is not to say that research is exactly the same as artistic practice, creating a work of art. That would be an overstatement. Research is subject to different requirements than creative work; both are governed by their own rules, but artistic creativity probably differs from research insofar as it is the freedom of finding one’s own rules. However, research must contain a creative element; it should not be entirely “mechanical” (as explained above).

I have been a researcher and an academic for many years. I am also a poet. And I have also become a translator. And for many years I did not think this. Probably because youth does not have to wonder about such things as one’s many different commitments. But let me get to the point: it would probably be completely crazy to treat those commitments, found in one person, as separate. I think it is about creating adjacent and related fields; they are functionally and institutionally different, but psychologically and cognitively similar; they stimulate one another. Of course, some kind of risk is involved, maybe even a compromise, but that is part and parcel of life. After all, perhaps all this energy could be focused in one field? But I couldn’t do it. At one point, I realized that it would be like a forced amputation. Forced and unnecessary. And I think it’s not about compromising, it’s about the very nature of understanding the world. In my poetry and criticism, similar questions and problems clash ... Only they develop differently, at different speeds, with different dynamics ... Literary and creative space is all about accelerations, condensations, projections, insights into the future that leave me, as a researcher, behind. At least I hope so. But I am sure of one thing: these different fields stimulate one another. I don’t fully understand the mechanisms and channels of these recharges, but maybe I don’t have to understand them.

Let me give you a specific example: I have realized that I really enjoy reading philosophical works. I believe that I understand philosophical texts quite well in the normative and academic sense (not to argue with philosophers, but to use their concepts in an orderly, valid, and verifiable manner). However, later I noticed in various philosophical texts a certain “surplus.” Sometimes, I could read them the way one reads a novel, or as if a philosophical argument was a musical composition that could lead us somewhere (I don’t know if philosophers would like that idea ...). American literature has made this connection: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, Rae Armantrout, to name but a few. And I found it fascinating. It is interesting that James, Rorty, and Nehamas are also aware of these trans-actions. I might add that in Poland, I found this reciprocity of (literary and philosophical) fields in the works of Tadeusz Ślawek and Agata Bielik-Robson.

And does the creative understanding of the line differ from the academic one? How does one think about verse when writing (and reading) a poem as a poet and as an academic? Are these two conceptualizations different? This issue seems to be particularly interesting considering that you are associated with artistic intellectualism, which, in a simplified approach, removes affective categories, negating the freedom of lyrical subjectivism and, to paraphrase the title of Olga Tokarczuk's collection of essays, renders the narrator "tender-less." We may ask whether intellectualism, if you identify with this position at all, is at least to some extent the result of analytical habits to which you have been exposed in your work as an academic. After all, as you have mentioned, academic work and research requires a certain critical distance to literature, which is usually not expected of the poet.

"Intellectualism" is an empty concept, an artificial target, a fallacy. There is such a thing as the accumulation of creative tendencies and their implementation – either in research or in art. The point is not to bore others. I do not write poetry that is a boring lecture. My poetry is not a monster that can only be read with footnotes that refer to history and philosophy, etc. It just doesn't work that way. The intellectual tradition that I consider relevant tried to eliminate the division between intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic cognition. Will (Emerson), acting in the world whose substance is plastic and which enters into certain situational relations with the human body (Dewey, James, Rorty), language (Rorty), structure of thought that is not cognitive but affective and "rooted" in the body (Shusterman) – where is there room for "pure" intellect? The connection between cognition, emotions, and linguistic formulas – William James has discussed these concepts in his *Principles of Psychology* (giving rise to the modernist "stream of consciousness"), and then in his brilliant writings on pragmatism and pluralism.⁶ This tradition means that, at least for me, the "linguistic turn" has never involved losing contact with the body: the body is involved in meaning-making, affect regulation, interacting with reality. "Language" makes sense only as a certain ability of the body to co-react with the world (and let me add: such a world is not a solid mass, but a living environment).

The embodied self endowed with linguistic imagination and agency, which manages to recognize its limits and networks of dependencies with the surrounding living environment (with what Tadeusz Sławek, drawing on Thoreau, calls "the community of the world" – although newer philosophical traditions, which see the individual in a different light, probably have a different approach to the category of the environment⁷), is the best "tender narrator." And in their interactions with poems, it is enough for the reader to assume the role of such an active, mobile linguistic embodied self that thinks, feels, and for which the use of language does not lead to false divisions such as "thought," intellect, language, sensitivity, emotion and affect.

⁶ These include: William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1955); William James, "What Pragmatism Means. Lecture 2", in: *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975), 43-84; William James, "The One and the Many. Lecture 4", in: *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975), 127-164.

⁷ Tadeusz Sławek, *Ujmować. Henry David Thoreau i wspólnota świata* [Grasping. Henry David Thoreau and the Community of the World] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2009).

So, I do not think that I am on the side of intellectualism. I identify with some form of linguistic-affective holism.

Now that we have outlined the background, let's move on to more specific questions. Traditionally, Polish versification studies have shown great interest in versification systems and their typologies. In the twentieth century, once metrical systems were dethroned by free verse, Polish literary studies searched for different regularities – this is how, for example, the categories of Peiper's, Przyboś's, Czechowicz's or Różewicz's poems were created, which are still taught at Polish universities.⁸ On the other hand, the times of the neo-avant-garde brought more and more freedom in the field of poetic forms and scholars dived into "minimum poetic requirements." For Adam Kulawik or Dorota Urbańska, the key "minimum requirement" was the arbitrary nature of division into lines.⁹ The discrepancy between syntactic delimitation and the limits of the line had the strongest formal potential to "defamiliarize" the work, endowing it with ambiguity (i.e., poetic effect). What is more, the division into lines in a poem was seen as fundamentally different from the "traditional" page layout.

Critics further searched for possible "sources" of non-systemic poetry in other components of the text and at various levels of literary communication: for Artur Grabowski the poem was a way of creating and understanding a text, which was later developed by Adam Dziadek, who analyzed this problem in a wider anthropological and aesthetic context.¹⁰ For Witold Sadowski the poem in free verse was a graphic "image" – a unique, verbal-visual figure whose idiomatic shape was determined by the arrangement of lines.¹¹ This thesis was supported by Paweł Bukowiec, who also stressed the importance of rhythm and sound in the free verse poem as its constitutive elements.¹² Joanna Orska has recently come up with one more theory. She has critically summarized previous reflections in Polish versification studies and proposed a rhetorical approach to (especially the avant-garde) verse, emphasizing the textual disposition to act.¹³ Basically, however, none of these propositions has completely challenged the delimitation theory based on the division into and the arrangement of lines; in other words, the line is still seen as a condition for the existence of the poem.

⁸ Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, "Wiersz awangardowy dwudziestolecia międzywojennego" [The avant-garde poem of the interwar period], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 56, no. 2 (1965): 425-446; Michał Głowiński, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Zarys teorii literatury* [Outline of the theory of literature] edition 6 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1991): 203-210.

⁹ Adam Kulawik, *Teoria wiersza* [The theory of the poem] (Kraków: Antykwa, 1995): 32-63; Dorota Urbańska, *Wiersz wolny: próba charakterystyki systemowej* [Free verse: Attempt at systemis characterization] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1995): 14-25.

¹⁰ Artur Grabowski, *Wiersz: forma i sens* [Poem: Form and meaning] (Kraków: Universitas, 1999): 124-154.

¹¹ Adam Dziadek, "Wersologia polska – kontr(o)wersje" [Polish versology – contr(o)verses], in *Strukturalizm w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej: wizje i rewizje* [Structuralism in Central and Eastern Europe: visions and revisions], ed. Włodzimierz Bolecki and Danuta Ulicka (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 2012): 370-390.

¹² Paweł Bukowiec, *Metronom: o jednostkowości poezji "nazbyt" rytmicznej* [Metronome: the singularity of "too" rhythmic poetry] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2015): 15.

¹³ Joanna Orska, *How Does Free Verse "Work"? On the Syntax of the Avant Garde*, *Forum of Poetics*, no. 10 (2019): 110-131.

This short overview is but a starting point for further detailed considerations, including a question that is fundamental not only in the face of the presented relations between the line and the poem, but also in the face of your strong attachment to the very category of poetry (for example, considering the absolutely fundamental nature of this concept in *Materia i autokreacja!*). Where exactly does this attachment come from – and does it also mean that you stay true to the line and see it as a fundamental poetic category?

Maybe I'll start with the fact that all the concepts presented above are conceptualizations of praxis. They can be very useful in research and serve many purposes, be it interpretative or taxonomical. But the poet does not think in such terms. The poet has a kind of intuition and will at their disposal: an intuition of what is about to happen in the poem, and a will to make it happen. Of course, there will be poets who will see the line in a way that can be described using one of the concepts and theories outlined above.

My approach, as a poet, is probably eclectic. I think that the very arrangement of the poem on the page "says" something: the visual-graphic form is the first filter; division into lines, as a "decision" that is immediately visible, is another filter, just as the decision to fill the page with regular lines of text, for example in prose. I'm not saying that the layout of the poem should visually resemble something – concrete poetry goes, for me, too far in the direction of fusing the poem with the image; and text is text and not image. While, of course, such intermedial transitions and transactions are interesting, I tend to focus on how "visibility" becomes a certain conceptual construct, something secondary to the textual language game, and I mean visibility in general: the visibility of the world, objects, etc. The visibility of the poem on the page is also important: it is the first impulse that suggests something to the not fully aware reading apparatus, preparing the reader for the event of the poem.

As regards this general visibility, seeing the world, perhaps the poem must first act in the cognitive realm – or, more generally speaking, in the conceptual realm – just to become visible. Here I refer to the combined perspectives of Stevens and American pragmatism (especially Rorty and his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* but also *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*¹⁴): the empiricists were wrong – sense experience is not the origin of all knowledge; rather, knowledge is the end product of the complex process in which culture, language, the affective and the volitional operate. The modernist poem embraces all these spheres, sheds light on them, and thus discovers how specific conceptual maps determine our constructs of visibility.

Let me return for a moment to the issue of the visibility of the poem itself: I am talking about something very basic, about the original morphology of a work of art, about the length and the arrangement of lines which may be more or less regular on the page, and how it immediately communicates to the reader (to this reading apparatus which I have mentioned above) what expectations it creates. For example, the long line, resembling prose, will create a completely different first impression than minimalist verse. It is therefore about the initial

¹⁴Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979); Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980).

modeling of the act of reading (because perhaps we should talk about the act of reading itself, about the processing of information which, in the poem, consists of many factors at the same time; and this is what the “reading apparatus” does). In any case, the poet should feel the line. And it is because of this postulate that I accept the fact that various approaches to the line are more or less arbitrary – it all depends on the situation at hand.

The length of the line and how it works together with syntax opens up a whole range of possibilities, which will modulate the tone and the voice.

I also like to talk and think about the line as an active entity. Although for me the basic unit is the whole poem as a certain environment, the line itself is a very important part of this space. I like to think about the sensitivity of the line or, to put it differently, its “innervation,” which in turn stems from thinking about the poem not as a description which is external to the event, but as its environment and research apparatus. I like to think of the poem as a research probe that ventures into a certain area and explores it, transforming itself in the process ... Well, I understand that might be a bit vague, but it is hard for me to talk about what is essentially an amalgam of different traditions... such as William Carlos Williams, the Objectivists and their successors, and as far as Polish poetry is concerned, definitely Miron Białoszewski and Witold Wirpsza.

In any case, what it means in practice is that we pay attention to where the line is to be broken. A certain decision must be made. It is a decisive moment; the line break embodies the fusion of musicality, rhetoric, figurativeness and, ultimately, meaning. This decision will affect the reading, the musicality, the category of fluidity or a kind of roughness or dullness of the text (it is obvious that the line is analyzed in the wider context of lexis and syntax).

American poets thought about the line in such terms, which is close to me, including Williams, Robert Creeley, George Oppen and Charles Olson (especially Olson – he is not well-known in Poland; people in the West, not only in the States, still read his poetry), with various later varieties. Peter Gizzi, whom I have translated twice, is such a variation; some Language poets, such as Rae Armantrout and Bernstein, also think in such terms. There was a time when the poets and critics associated with experimental American modernism spoke only about the musicality, based on a line break... The meaning has always been derived from the sound and such considerations. I consider such an approach to be generally consistent with the broadly understood rhetoric: because the “innervated” structure of the line (i.e., a structure that is constantly “rediscovering itself”) becomes, after all, a part of the figurative layer, i.e., rhetoric, and therefore action. A line break points to the active nature of the line and the entire poem.

I use the metaphor of the innervation of the line (and ultimately: of the poem) to remind us that in the poem, language is the carrier of conceptual, intellectual, and cultural, as well as emotional and affective content, thus evoking the fact that our emotions are embodied, or the fact that the body takes part in the cognitive processes. Pragmatistic poetics, which I tried to outline both in *Świat nie scalony* [Un-merged world] and *Materia i autokreacja*,¹⁵ was supposed

¹⁵Kacper Bartczak, *Świat nie scalony* [Un-merged world] (Wrocław, Biuro Literackie: 2007); Bartczak, *Materia i autokreacja. Rozważania w poetyce wielościowej*.

to be a generalized lesson or a certain synthesis of pragmatist philosophy and some (not only American) poetic movements and voices, which simply show the complexity of our being in the world: the constant transactions between language, concept (abstraction), material detail, the body, affect and emotion. Frank O'Hara says in his partially ironic manifesto *Personism*: "you just go on your nerve."¹⁶ So, the form of the poem is shaped instinctively. But the inner-variation metaphor is not accidental: it is a trace of all those American aesthetic ideas that root all aesthetics in interaction with the environment, the interaction in which man is involved as a bodily linguistic entity.

Or let's put it differently, let's put it simply: we have senses because we feel the world. I am interested in a poem whose very structure reminds us of this dynamism, sensitivity, and perception of the material world.

One of your books of poems presents us with a unique vision of the poem already in the title. I refer to *Wiersze organiczne* [Organic Poems], published in 2015: let's try to read this volume in relation to the self-referential, because it enters into an interesting discussion with the previously mentioned analytical approaches. For if we treat the poem as a certain organic, or, in the words of Anna Kałuża, hybrid,¹⁷ whole, we may wonder if the concept of the line as a compositional unit does not stand in opposition to the "organic," which in itself implies a certain integrity of the text. After all, the aforementioned literary critics drew attention to the "arbitrariness," and therefore the "defamiliarization" of line breaks, which is not related to any metrical system, governing its structure and form.¹⁸ There is no obligatory repetition in the free verse poem, and therefore no predictability: we can thus advance a maximalist thesis that the free verse poem depends on the author.

We will discuss the relations between the poem and the subject below. Before we get there, however, let us address the intriguing question of, if we were to slightly modify the title of your volume, "organic line" or "organicity" of the line. Is line in your poetry something "natural" or "arbitrary"? If the changes that I have made in the title of your book were justified, your vision of poetry and its form would contradict the indicated theoretical contexts, perhaps also the observations of Krzysztof Skibski. Although Skibski argued that the line as a unit "is not a result of dividing a larger whole,"¹⁹ he does not treat the poem as an organic whole composed of interconnected lines but assigns "potential independence"²⁰ to each line. Thus, the line is, metaphorically speaking, primarily "in-itself" or "for itself," and not "in-the poem"

¹⁶Frank O'Hara, *Personism: A manifesto*, in: *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 48.

¹⁷Anna Kałuża, "Biologiczne i polityczne" [The biological and the political], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, May 9, 2016, online: <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/biologiczne-i-polityczne-33687>, date of access: May 20, 2021.

¹⁸Bukowiec, *Metronom: o jednostkowości poezji "nazbyt" rytmicznej*, 20.

¹⁹Krzysztof Skibski, *Poezja jako literatura. Relacje między elementami języka poetyckiego w wierszu wolnym* [Poetry as literature. Relations between elements of poetic language in free verse] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2018): 55.

²⁰Skibski, 54.

or “for the poem” (after all, Skibski also writes about complex, surprising relationships between lines within the same text²¹).

As far as the line as a “unit” is concerned, yes, but for the reasons I have discussed above, that is, in the context of dynamic versification, understood as a continuous search for a more holistic textual whole. Each line should be a work of art on its own, but, ultimately, for me the poem works as a sequence of dynamic events. So, after all, at least as far as my poems are concerned, it is ultimately the “line-in-the poem,” but that does not mean that the line cannot be independent. A clever move in a game is a single move (you can isolate it, watch it in replay, or rewind it), and at the same time it translates into the entire text. When I write, I always think about each line, but “this line” makes sense because of the other lines, and ultimately the entire poem.

And if we were to think of the poem as a body, as an entity? What role does the line play in it? Is it the frame? Is it the “head”?

It’s more like a limb, a probe. Or to put it differently: once (in *Świat nie-scalony*) I thought of the poem as a “speaking organism:” from this point of view, the line is more like part of the locomotor system, or a device that enables movement. Bohdan Zadura once wrote a brilliant essay on the “poetry of conjunctions,” in which he comments on John Ashbery’s work and writes about conjunctions as joints which enable movement (in fact, not only Ashbery, but also, and perhaps above all, Gertrude Stein, is associated with such an approach).²²

Zadura (after Stein) draws attention to the importance of the secondary parts of speech. For me, however, this mobility should characterize the entire poem, but it must result from the “movement” and the dynamic of individual lines.

Let us talk about the specific ways in which the line works. And I refer to the line as both a compositional unit, a part of its architecture, and as a syntactic structure, i.e., a set of specific relations between words. Let’s focus on *Pokarm suweren* [The Sovereign Food] from 2017. If we were to read this book in a self-referential optics and assume that it is about poetry and that the titular “food” may be language, which you describe in one of the poems as nutritious “zdaniowy torf” [sentence peat],²³ we come across an interesting trope. If language is “matter,” can we then say that the line is its sovereign, i.e., something which organizes this matter at different levels? Let’s talk about it in the context of the title poem *Pokarm suweren*, in which language feeds and the line integrates, creating strategic multiple meanings:²⁴

²¹Skibski, 55.

²²Bohdan Zadura, “John Asbhery i ja. Poezja spójników?” [John Ashbery and me. The poetry of conjunctions?] in: *Szkice, recenzje, felietony* [Sketches, reviews, essays], vol. 1 (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie 2007), 359-366.

²³Kacper Bartczak, *Pokarm suweren* [The Food Sovereign] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2017): 5.

²⁴Bartczak, *Pokarm suweren*, 28.

**Sycę morfologie
torfemy zdaniowe**

**parametr nukleiny we mnie
trwa rekonstrukcja stacji glebowej**

**obecny kultem upojny
puszczam grudeczki w fałdę**

**koduję kult kodeks
tablet morfem morał**

**morfologie są mi nad wyraz
ikonostatyczne**

**hoduję wersje szczepów w nie
ślę osoby miłe mi wasze**

**mieszczę was w albumie pola
kultywuję zryw łamanie szef**

**szwem wersu stos ikon płonie
aż wyjdiesz z rzezi na przodku**

**kolebkę przerażenia otworzysz
w skryptorium mięs zagrają**

**osoby hodowlane wasze w nich
moja miłość kamień inteligibilia²⁵**

Well, in this collection, I approached “sovereignty” not as a formal but as a philosophical, political, or actually psycho-political concept. I wrote the poems in this collection at a time of great political upheaval in Poland, when history returned to the stage, or perhaps rather dark ways of understanding history returned to the stage. At that time, I finished my insightful, psycho-political reading of Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz’s poems, and even read them together with Stevens. I was writing with a general idea in mind, namely that a certain supra-individual psycho-political energy is “sovereign.” It is a powerful force: the beliefs and views held by a given group of people suddenly thicken, accelerate. They are a form of movement,

²⁵As noted above, due to its linguistic and syntactic complexity, this poem is virtually untranslatable. Transcribed in English, which does not convey the full meaning of the original, it reads: “I feed morphologies/ sentence peat// a parameter of nucleic acid in me/ the reconstruction of the soil station is underway// present intoxicated obsessed/ I put small balls in the fold// I code cult codex/ tablet morpheme moral// morphologies are extremely/ iconostatic to me// I grow seedlings in them/ I send people who are dear to me your// I put you in an album I cultivate/ fields spurt break seem/ seam line stack of icons on fire/ until you come out of the slaughter// you will open the cradle of terror/ they will play in the flesh scriptorium// cultivated people yours in them/ my love stone intelligibilia” (Translator’s note).

or action, but also constitute a loop, a closed whole. I thought about these totally irrational currents which, from time to time, invade and shape our political reality. And in some poems, I tried to come up with a language and a form that would reach these layers, expose them, and maybe even fuse with them, which is of course very risky. The only “sovereign” I had in mind at the time was this thickening energy – I wanted to give it a voice, I wanted the real demon of psychopolitics to speak.²⁶

In order to construct a model of this psychopolitical energy, apart from a specific language – a language that pointed to decay processes, fertility which results from crushing organic substances (peat) – I also employed an “active poetic formula” that I have mentioned earlier. I wanted to show how active this demonic psychological energy that suddenly took over Poles is.²⁷

So, the above poem is a process – this energy moves through the respective lines with a hiss.

I also thought about everyday, public language, about language in and through which a given community cultivates its beliefs and ways of understanding politics and history, and in which – like in the layers of peat – the processes of destruction and dark “fertility” intertwine. In this language, a certain type of worldview is “cultivated,” that is, individuals are controlled or influenced.

I also thought (and wrote about in my essays on Rae Armantrout) that, after all, modern tools of social manipulation are also like a “poem” – they are a rhetorical composition used to manipulate society. Ultimately, it all boils down to the understanding that we are writing poems that explore that larger, more sinister poem that someone imposes on us.

Michel Foucault greatly informed our understanding of the irrationality of power. My poems in *Pokarm suveren* were supposed to imitate this irrationality in order to challenge it in other poems in the volume. But the form is similar – in *Pokarm suveren* I wanted to show how mysterious, and yet efficient and vital, this energy is; it propels certain structures of reality and determines what is sacred, influencing the masses. It was like transforming Foucault’s biopolitics (this powerful energy, of course, also controls our bodies) and the broadly understood notion of psychopolitics into poetry.

The reference to Foucault provides a segue into the question about the creative and textual “I”. In *Materia i autokreacja*, you argue that subjectivity in poetry can be constituted precisely by means of form – the subject is composed in and through the poem, and “becoming a subject” involves establishing one’s boundaries. Thus, a text

²⁶The term psychopolitics comes from Bernard Stiegler’s essays. He analyzed how in today’s world politics develops in accordance with the rhythm of crises affecting the psyche of entire societies; but in Polish poetry, precisely in Rymkiewicz’s poems, I found a similar concept – history and the politics it contains – is a psychological phenomenon, related to the notion of “repetition compulsion.” But the two understandings of the term come together: the mentality, or rather a certain psycho-historical and psycho-political complexity, which I found in Rymkiewicz can be seen as a constant drive to repeat crises and catastrophes.

²⁷Such as spontaneous marches against immigrants which took place in Poland in December 2015, without any immigrants around... or people who wanted to hang some MEPs ...

is not only a constituent of the author's (auto)biography, but also a mechanism behind this (auto)biography. You write: "życie to zawsze już skonfigurowana praca polegająca na samozwrotnym i autointerpretatywnym zyskiwaniu kształtu [life is a configured work of self-reflexive and self-interpretative shaping].²⁸ So is the poem indispensable for (creative) consciousness? In other words, if the arrangement of the lines makes a poem, which is a kind of laboratory of subjectivity, then do the lines also make the subject?

I have already talked about Nehamas. For Nehamas, a work of art is a continuous act of interpretation and re-interpretation. When they enter the work, the artist transforms the environment, transforms the building materials, but at the same time they also transform and constitute the subjectivity of this situation, subjectivity in which they participate. In a word, they also create themselves, and this newly created self is open, aware of its environmental dependencies, and able to distance itself from romantic solipsism. I also argue that in today's psycho-political conditions, when we examine this sinister "external poem" that is out there waiting for us, the constitution of the subject may (must?) go through a phase of atrophy: such atrophy or evasion, a temporary disappearance, is perhaps a strategic move in the psycho-political game with the "external poem." I first thought about this when I realized that the concept of the poem as a linguistic organism is in fact a form of opening (itself/oneself) to the world. And although it is an opening to the material world, some American contemporary poets have convinced me that matter is no longer an innocent sphere – it has been colonized by various ideologies; it has been mediated. Perhaps this strategic "disappearance" of the subject points to the subject's artificiality, how and through which it is mediated, which, in turn, creates the conditions for the return of the subject.

I also meant something else: creative movement and dynamics which give rise to form is actually a form of life. In a way, I thus questioned Agamben's notion of "bare life." I think that there is no "bare life" in art. Form, its movement, its dynamics, its drive towards transforming matter and the environment – this is life. Therefore, I concentrated on the reciprocal relationship between form and life: rhetorical movement means the ability to move away from the *status quo* and that, in turn, means more life. At the most basic level, it is realized in versification – the well-innervated versification that harmonizes with rhythm, syntax, and lexis. Ultimately, then, and in a not so obvious way, I agree with you: especially in psycho-political conditions, the subject, in order to emerge and persevere, must be "shaped" well – it must "write" itself well.

Movement, shape, life – all these notions are closely related to the concept of work that has been mentioned in the above quote. You use it often, both in poetry and in your criticism. You see a poem as a certain mechanism which, through how it arranges space, simultaneously and reciprocally creates itself and its environment, including the aforementioned creative "I." In *Materia i autokreacja*, you explain this concept by referring to Wallace Stevens's poetry, where text allows us to reach a space that has not yet been "marked" in any semiotic way, allowing us to create a world

²⁸Bartczak, *Materia i autokreacja: dociekania w poetyce wielościowej*, 88.

that is positively devoid of meaning.²⁹ This leads you to the conclusion that figurativeness precedes both concepts and “constellations of matter,” as if the form operated before the content appeared.³⁰ Perhaps, it marks a return to hylomorphism or its variation in literary studies, insofar as we distinguish between form and its semantic content. Does this individual work which the poem mean that the poem is a separate, independent (not-completely-dependent) actor, endowed with an autonomous body made of lines? Or perhaps it is something still different? You write about the poem as an “environment.” This concept is broader than the understanding of the actor or the body.

Work – because neither the subject nor its environment are given in advance. And if they were, we would have to think carefully about whether we accept them as such.

I borrowed this from James – I have never moved beyond his ethical-metaphysical conception of Meliorism, based on the belief that the world is based on the constant pursuit of truth, knowledge, social order, etc., while still recognizing our great responsibility for the world. In James’s pragmatic understanding of Meliorism, it has no one stable moral form (as implied in definitive declarations such as “the world is good” or “the world is bad”), because its moral condition depends on us (and here we enter into James’s understanding of the post-secular).

I believe that Stevens wants to recreate the ability to rhetorically reconfigure the environment, which gives the community the tools to act and produce change (although this turn is more evident in the works of other poets, such as Williams). I write in the introduction that what I call “the poetics of plenitude” has its hardcore version. Its modernist version is hardcore: both Stevens and Williams believe that the poem activates consciousness, gaining access to the very foundation of the real, the actual, even what is barred by trauma (the Lacanian “real;” this movement actually seeks to eliminate the boundary between the aesthetic, the poem itself, conceptualizations of reality – for example, cognitive mapping, and ontology – ontology opens itself up to be rewritten). I also explain later that this hardcore modernist version of how the poem works changes in the works of later poets: Sosnowski, Ashbery, Gizzi, Armantrout. Modernists wanted to reach the very core of reality, the deep unity of matter and mind – and this was what the poem was supposed to do. They believed that some unmediated level, pure creative agency, may be reached. Postmodernists questioned this: wherever you turn, you will find the trace of the “greater poem” that was there before your poem. But this does not invalidate the imperative of work, it only changes its nature.

As far as the work of the poem and the subject are concerned, I can only repeat: a working poem will produce its own forms of subjectivity. It will be them. In some variety of this poetics, subjectivity will be clearly defined, it will be endowed with agency, it will point to the points of contact between the psyche, thought, emotion and matter. The form of the poem will emphasize these layers: in this sense, the poem will recreate, recall the embodied nature of our interactions – our “work” – with and in the world. The poem works – it examines the

²⁹Bartczak, *Dociekania w poetyce wielościowej*, 133-165.

³⁰Bartczak, *Dociekania w poetyce wielościowej*, 160.

environment and examines itself at the same time – establishing the conditions for its being separate from the environment, and this being separate does not mean that it is not a part of this environment. Just like a man who, if he wants to be part of a community, will not lose his autonomy in this community.

Let us talk about dynamics some more, but this time let us focus on literary consciousness. Has your understanding of the poem (and the line) changed over time? Or maybe you have always shared the vision we have just discussed? In *Widoki wymazy* [Views swabs], you sometimes abandon verse and write poetic prose; respectively, in your poems, you work with rhymes and pay particular attention to words and sounds which appear in final positions. You worked with similar poetic tools in *Noworadiowa* [Noworadiowa - a neologism] (2019). However, when we compare them with your earlier works, we see that your poetics has changed. *Przenicacy* [Przenicacy - a neologism] is a collection of poems that are formally diverse in terms of punctuation, creating the impression of “a line-within-a line” (by imposing multiple syntactic divisions onto the visual divisions). We can also notice in your poems a specific dialectics within the lines, which is especially distinct at the end – when read together, the respective lines often create contradictions. As, for example, in the poem *Teoria poezji dla początkujących* [Theory of Poetry for Beginners]:

To jest poczekalnia do której wkracza się by w niej
 niknąć Niknięcie może się zmniejszyć
 lub zwiększyć Może nie mieć nic wspólnego z
 Wszystko może³¹

***Widoki wymazy* is endowed with an intriguing, almost rap-like dynamics, the lines run loose and often engage with the titular “views.” For example, in *Mieszanka widokowa* [Viewing Mix]:**

paliwa i wirusy
 w powietrzu w szarościach
 domki gniece w czasie
 mieszanka tej wartości

kompas białkowy
 śpiewa mi w głowie
 mknę chyży widmowy
 jakbym informował

biel cynkową kobalt

³¹Kacper Bartczak, *Przenicacy* [Przenicacy – a neologism] (Poznań: Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna i Centrum Kultury w Poznaniu, 2013): 19. As noted above, linguistic and syntactic complexity renders this poem virtually untranslatable. Its transcript in English, which does not convey the full meaning of the original, reads: “This is a waiting room which you enter to/ fade away Fading away may decrease/ or increase It may not have anything to do with/ It may everything” (Translator’s note).

**kadm gęsty w czaszy
dawne miejsca twarze
mielą się w czasie**

**sejsmika wspomnień
spakowanych magnetycznie
oddech je notuje
w mgnieniu bitumicznym**

**spasuję z powietrzem
zdjęcia w szarościach gęstych
wszystko spamiętam zarazony
miłością zdjęty³²**

Yes, I believe that my understanding of the line has evolved greatly. At first, I played freely with an extended sentence which effectively acts as a counterpoint to the line – the line and the sentence seek one another, and I decided not to use punctuation marks to emphasize the fluency of this reciprocal dynamics (it seems significant to me; it is a trick that tells a lot about the author's formal intentions). Then, I wanted to move away from this symbiosis towards discontinuities, breaks. *Przenicacy* is probably such a transitional collection. Next, I tried to come up some kind of hybrid approach. Perhaps it is most effective in *Noworadiowa*?

Two or three versification systems clash in *Przenicacy*. In *Teoria poezji dla początkujących*, the line is governed by the same formal experiments I employed in some of my earlier collections – the fluency of movement, a sentence that transforms into and moves through the line so that it makes its way to the next line. Although syntax and meaning do indeed fall apart in the above-quoted ending. This poem was a manifestation of the autonomy of the poetic imagination ... But in this collection, there are also poems based on much more radical breaks (*RozPeKaPedygot* [Neologism] or *Ciało mowa trawa* [Body speech grass]), or on a deliberate and more mechanical equivalence between the line and the sentence, and sometimes I also work with mechanical repetition (*Wiersz wolny przybliżony...* [Free verse poem: Approximation], *Kaspar Hauser mówi w godzinie lunchu...* [Kaspar Hauser says at lunchtime...]).

Mieszanka widokowa... At first, right after writing this poem – which was influenced by Annie Lennox singing her own version of Henry Purcell's aria – I was convinced that it was a very classicist poem, in which regular syntax (except for the first stanza, the poem is rather regular) contrasts with versified poems in the first part of the collection (for example, the disjunctive *Wymazy z krajobrazów* [Landscape swabs] or *Wiersz skraju* [Edge poem]). However, now, guided by your question, I notice that these poems try to maintain some grammatical balance;

³²Kacper Bartczak, *Widoki wymazy* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2021): 9. As noted above, linguistic and syntactic complexity renders this poem virtually untranslatable. Its transcript in English, which does not convey the full meaning of the original, reads: “fuel and viruses/ in the air in the grey/ a mixture of this value/ crumples houses in time// protein compass/ it sings in my head/ I move fast ghostly/ as if I were informing// zinc white cobalt/ cadmium dense in a bowl/ old places faces/ grind in time// seismic activity of memories/ magnetically packed/ breath records them/ in a bituminous blink// I give up with the air/ photos in dense gray/ I will remember everything infected/ down with love” (Translator's note).

they move towards enjambment, a breaking point, but do not always reach it. Or they move towards some other syntactic continuation – just when it would seem that the line or the phrase have exhausted their grammatical potential.

Perhaps, then, I have more or less consciously stabilized my approach to the line. I am aware of the fact that the line may break at any time, even if everything appears to look smooth and effortless on the surface.

Let's talk about American poetry, which is so important for you. In *Język jest grą, planszówką bez planszy* [Language is a game, a board game without a board], published by Biuro Literackie, you write about your love for experiments, especially syntactic experiments, which, as you point out, would “nurture the contour” of the poem.³³ Should Polish poetry learn such a lesson from American poetry? In other words: what can Polish poetry learn about the line from American poetry?

It's about music. At the level of the word, then the line, then versification. American poetry, at its most vital and uncompromising, challenging what Charles Bernstein calls “official verse culture,” always wants to be listened to. Breaking the line engages or otherwise interacts with a syntactic, logical, or semantic break, embracing musicality at all levels. I have recently re-read Charles Bernstein's interview with Robert Creeley:³⁴ both men can talk for hours about the verse “and what it does” in Williams or Olson. Which in turn also leads them to an in-depth reflection on oral performance, for example to the question of whether the ends of the lines could, or should, be emphasized in oral performance in any way. Creeley tries to understand his own method of “reading” the end of the line, which is actually an interpretation of the so-called “triadic-line verse,” which is a result of his reflection concerning the modernist experiment and its responses to the challenges of tradition.

We also have to talk about Ezra Pound: the most important *cantos* always seek their own meter, a dynamic metrical foot, so that the text transforms into a musical score. Metrical and versification experiments, whose goal was always to find a unique meter, unit of measure, led to the, sometimes radical, experiments of the Objectivists (Zukowsky), Language poets (which can be seen in my translations of Armantrout and Bernstein) and Peter Gizzi, who combines many traditions in order to find his own poetic “voice.” At the same time, this “voice” is actually the subjectivity created by the poem, which I talked about earlier.

Since you have mentioned some of the poets you have translated, let us talk about the often-marginalized translation awareness, the translator's self-reflection. The simplest question could be how, and into what, the verse translates. However, let's dig a little deeper. In your opinion, does the translator somehow engage with the text on a more personal level? In other words, does the translator's subjectivity en-

³³Kacper Bartczak, “Język jest grą, planszówką bez planszy” [Language is a game, a board game without a board], online: <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/debaty/jezyk-jest-gra-planszowka-bez-planszy/>, Date of access: May 20, 2021.

³⁴The interview can be found in: Robert Creeley, *Just in time: poems, 1984-1994* (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 2001).

gauge with the original text or is translation an act of rearranging the environment of the original work? Since we have already mentioned Wallace Stevens, we can talk about your translations of his works.

The translator of poetry comes face to face with the question: what is the most vital, the most essential, most interesting, poetic layer of the text? Or: how does this text work? Of course, very often the answer will involve a number of things. And the translator should try to identify, save, transfer, and signal the “core” of the poem. I have not translated a lot of Stevens’ works. However, he has taught me a lot as a poet – I borrowed from him his abstractions, which still come back to the real, organizing for us what we see in the so-called world; I was inspired by his ability to use sophisticated style in such a way that it does appear hieratic. But when it comes to feeling the line, Armantrout was much more important to me. She is a poet of incredible condensing power; like Emily Dickinson before her, Armantrout condenses and compresses meanings – not through metaphor but through juxtaposing minimalist versification with the language of public discourse. Armantrout turns phrases and words that are widely used in the public space into an ascetic, minimalist poem. The language is cleansed, sometimes discredited, but most often recovered to serve some new purpose. It would be interesting to compare Armantrout’s ascetic poetics with the ascetic poetics of Louise Glück. Armantrout follows in the footsteps of the imagists: she wants precision derived from brilliancy. Glück wants solemnity, hieratic form, and clear meaning – because they “sell” better on the poetry market. Recently, Armantrout sent me her new collection, *Conjure*, and the very first poem stopped me in my tracks, because I realized that I probably wouldn’t be able to reproduce in Polish the condensation of meanings that she achieves in her minimalist couplet. My reading was impeded. The title poem begins with the following words: “How did the synthesis / cross the abyss?” and the word “synthesis” acquires a religious connotation in the following parts of the text.

I also learned a lot from reading and translating Gizzi: this has perhaps strengthened my confidence in a fragmentary composition the most, in which the point is to loosen the relationship between corresponding syntactic units or sentences.

Let’s end our conversation with an open question – a question that is open to the future. What is the future of the line, both in practice and in theory? Do you see in contemporary literature particularly interesting ways of working with the line, and, ultimately, does the line still work?

I think a lot about the possibilities of poetic prose – a poetic essay written in grammatically and syntactically sensitive prose. Poetic prose does not obliterate versification but carries (the specters and memories of) old and new meanings – it is located in-between poems, in-between past lines and future poems.

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KEYWORDS

KACPER BARTCZAK

vesification studies

self-awareness

ABSTRACT:

In this interview, Kacper Bartczak, professor at the University of Łódź, Americanist, poet, and translator, talks about creative self-awareness in the broader context of versification studies. The question of meta-reflexivity and its role in the works of literary scholars and poets is discussed first. More specific questions follow, including the conceptualization of the line in poetry and research, the role of the line in organic poetry and translation. Pragmatism (James, Dewey, Rorty, Shusterman, Nehamas), so important for Bartczak, and the role it plays in creative self-awareness is also discussed. Bartczak also comments on American literary theory and twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon poets (Coleridge, Stevens, Williams, Olson, O'Hara, Gizzi, Armantrout).

modernism

p r a g m a t i s m

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