

To Describe Fire:

On the Benefits of H.U. Gumbrecht's Project of Non-hermeneutic Verse Studies

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“Those great scholars who seem to know everything; who counted the vertebrae in vertebrates and syllables in Archiloch's poems cannot, however, demonstrate sets people's minds and actions into motion; they analyse art but are blind to what lies at the heart of that art; they study fire but can only describe ashes”.¹

Josef Brodski liked to repeat after Eugenio Montale that poetry is a hopelessly semantic art. I am fascinated by that adverb “hopelessly”, which refers to the semantic potential of poetic art as something both inevitable and undesirable; like a disease for which there is no cure. The opposite of such approach would be a utopian vision of poetry free from semantic obligations; yet neither Brodski nor Montale dreamt of it. In fact, the term “hopelessly” denotes something more basic here: poetry's resistance to semantics and its unwillingness to be nothing but information transfer. The incurably semantic poetry opposes the requirements of communication in order to become art. It surrenders to, as it has to, semantics because language is its building material.

I begin with what is hopeless, quite as a cautionary tale for myself. For my aim is to address Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's project for humanities, best described in his book *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2009) – a project frequently described as non-hermeneutical, although the Stanford scholar does not postulate abolishing hermeneutics altogether. *Production of Presence* has a different goal: “it makes a pledge against the tendency in contemporary culture

¹ Adam Zagajewski, ‘Nietzsche w Krakowie [Nietzsche in Cracow]’, in *Obrona żarliwości [The defence of passion]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2002), 57.

to abandon and even forget the possibility of a presence-based relationship to the world” and “challenge[s] a broadly institutionalised tradition according to which interpretation (...) is the core practice (...) of the humanities”². In the end, however, it “argues for (...) a relation to the things of the world that could oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects”³. Reducing Gumbrecht’s approach to my main subject of interest, i.e., issues of versology, I also make a pledge that it is not my intention to discredit the hermeneutic direction of studies in poetry, because I consider such direction to be inevitable. Rather, I would like to propose broadening these studies to include the issue of presence (and to presence itself). I am thus reminded of the semantic hopelessness of poetry so as not to lose sight of the hermeneutic horizon, even though my primary aim is (metaphorically speaking, although not quite) indefinitely closer.

Gumbrecht, who was direct about “meaning effects” primacy in the reading of a literary text (which is different to listening to music, dominated by presence), would undoubtedly agree with Montale’s and Brodski’s diagnosis. He would add, however (as poets know all too well) that the incurable semantic disease does not deprive poetry of hope because “literary texts also have their ways of including the dimension of presence”⁴. There is nonhermeneutic, presence-oriented potential in material, sensually accessible aspects of poetic structure which are embodied by versification (the latter engaging both sound effects, and typography). That potential can also be found in accidental properties of the medium, through which poetry can reach us. This can be a rough page of a book, smelling of dust, a computer screen, giving off cold light, a pleasant sound of a poetess’ voice, recorded on a CD, or even a barely audible inner murmurando, replaying a half-forgotten stanza. Importantly, “presence effects” are not complementary to “meaning effects”, although they are not mutually exclusive. “[...] presence and meaning always come together and there is always tension between them”⁵.

What is presence? As an ingredient of an aesthetic experience, it depends on an “intrinsic feeling of intensity”,⁶ related to a sensual perception of the object (e.g., a poem). This intensity is predominantly quantitative and unrelated to any specific aesthetic quality. Presence is not experienced continually, as a long-term and stable phenomenon, but as “moments of intensity”, essentially different from the events of the everyday world, which makes them so fascinating. Moments like these occur in isolation, in an “island”-type situational framing, as Gumbrecht calls it following Bakhtin. This happens in one of two possible ways: either in the “modality of being captured in »imposed relevance«”⁷ (Alfred Schuetz’s and Thomas Luckman’s *aufgelegte Relevanz*) or in the mode of “composure” (Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*, i.e., “the ability to leave things as they are”⁸), in which the recipient’s openness and focus make it possible to lose themselves in the subject of an aesthetic experience. Presence is not experi-

² Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 24 (Page numbers provided in the following footnotes refer to the Polish translation by K. Hoffmann, W. Szwebs, Poznań 2016, quoted in the original, i.e., Polish, version of this article).

³ Gumbrecht, 25.

⁴ Gumbrecht, 124.

⁵ Gumbrecht, 120.

⁶ Gumbrecht, 112.

⁷ Gumbrecht, 118.

⁸ Gumbrecht, 90.

enced directly but only as ephemeral “presence effects”, forever “marked by absence” and “surrounded by, wrapped into and perhaps even mediated by clouds and cushions of meaning”⁹. These elusive “presence effects”, which remain in constant tension with or oscillate between “the effects of meaning”, manifest themselves not unlike epiphanies: they seem to come from nowhere (from beyond culture, beyond the world¹⁰), occupy a place in space (or at least they pretend to do so), and operate as unpredictable and momentary events¹¹.

Production of presence devotes much space to the existential aspect of the aesthetic experience – to how the “moments of intensity” influence our life. “It is surely possible to develop an addiction to a certain type of text (not only for its semantic layers) and suffer from it”¹², the author remarks jokingly, admitting to his prolonged fascination with Federic Garcia Lorca’s *Poeta en Nueva York* cycle or Gottfried Benn’s *Astern*. The risk of addiction, losing oneself, loss of control has its source in violence, which is inseparable from the aesthetic experience and understood (unlike in Foucault) not as the tool of power but as occupying space by a substance and exerting physical pressure, blocking a body¹³. One of the more intimate moments of *Production of presence* is the one when Gumbrecht is trying to convey the sensual dimension of his aesthetic experiences, e.g., his listening to *Don Giovanni*: “[...] the almost excessive, exuberant sweetness that sometimes overwhelms me when a Mozart aria grows into polyphonic complexity and when I indeed believe that I can hear the tones of the oboe on my skin”¹⁴. Such intense, somatic experiences are also familiar to readers of poetry, and, while they are occasionally addressed by literary scholars, they tend to remain marginal to their interests. In the meaning-oriented world of academic study, they are not typically deemed worthy of systematic research.

Ultimately, the existential dimension of an aesthetic experience proves to be a spiritual dimension; of course, neither in the sense of a commonly understood religiously mystic experiences (even though *Production of Presence* also touches upon the theological perspective) nor in the moral sense. Gumbrecht clearly separates aesthetics from ethics and reiterates that there is “nothing edifying (...) nothing we could really learn” from such “moments of intensity”¹⁵. He also emphasises that these moments can “prevent us from completely losing a feeling or a remembrance of the physical dimension in our lives”. It is worth recalling Viktor Shklovsky’s similar intuition, who quotes Tolstoy’s diary entry from February 28th, 1897, in his «Искусство как приём» [*Art as a device*] (“I was dusting the room and walking around I approached the couch but could not remember if I had already dusted it. [...] So if I had dusted

⁹ Gumbrecht, 121.

¹⁰ Gumbrecht, 89 and 91 (on Heidegger’s “the nothing” as a dimension in which “all cultural distinctions are absent”).

¹¹ Gumbrecht, 126–27.

¹² Gumbrecht, 130.

¹³ Gumbrecht, 113 An intriguingly similar understanding of violence can be found in Susan Sontag’s considerations on photography. In an extensive interview she gave in the late 1970s she expressed her opposition to an exclusively pejorative understanding of aggression, explaining that “You’re involved in aggressions on all levels when you move around the world, you’re occupying a space (...) So I think there are particular forms of heightenings of a certain kind of characteristically modern forms of aggressiveness that are represented in the use of camera” (*Thinking is a form of feeling. Susan Sontag in conversation with Jonathan Cott*). I remark on this similarity as one of a deeper, in my opinion, intellectual affinity between Gumbrecht and the author of *Against interpretation*.

¹⁴ Gumbrecht, 113.

¹⁵ Gumbrecht, 114.

it and forgot, that means I was operating unconsciously, as if that had never happened”). He added that “This is how life vanishes, becoming nothingness. Automation eats things, clothes, furniture, wife and fear of war”. He goes on to say:

[Art] exists [so] that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make an object “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*¹⁶.

The expressions “recover the sensation of life”, “to make one feel things”, to make stone stony” or “to impart a sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” seem close to Gumbrecht’s vision. This is visible, for instance, when he writes that “we sometimes seem to connect with a layer of our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin”¹⁷, or that “experiencing the things of the world in their pre-conceptual thingness will reactivate a feeling for the bodily and for the spatial dimension of our existence”¹⁸, Or, when he describes the aesthetic disposition and the existential state of *Gelassenheit* as “being in touch with the things of the world”¹⁹.

It is not a coincidence that I emphasise similarities with Russian formalism, without insisting on any affiliations between the two. The author of *Production of Presence* does not feel affiliated with the formal-structural tradition; rather, he recalls other sources of theoretical inspiration. I would like to point out, however, that it is in that segment of traditional literary studies one can find support for a versology which opens itself to presence. This enterprise seems particularly worthwhile, as it was the structural-formal paradigm that became the foundation for modern versology, and it was within that paradigm that important and still relevant publications on the theory and history of the poem were created. It is worth considering then how to merge this body of work with contemporary humanities. For obvious reasons in what follows I will focus on the Polish line of this tradition, which does not mean I believe it is exceptional. The example of Shklovsky can be taken to be a *pars pro toto* for a more general diagnosis. I have no doubt that similar affinities are traceable not only beyond formal-structural literary studies, but also beyond literary studies in general, especially in aesthetics (apart from Susan Sontag, the author of *On Photography*, recalled in the footnote, I would also mention, e.g., Arnold Berleant’s works). *Production of Presence* devotes an entire chapter to this issue. Out of a number of names the author lists I would like to, somewhat paradoxically, recall one – that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who in 2000 uttered the following words, regarding the reading of poetry:

¹⁶Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Sztuka jako chwyt [Art as a device]’, in *Teorie literatury XX wieku. Antologia [Theories of 20th c. literature. An anthology]*, ed. Anna Burzyńska and Michał Paweł Markowski, trans. Ryszard Łuźny (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2006), 100.

¹⁷Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, 121.

¹⁸Gumbrecht, 130.

¹⁹Gumbrecht, 132.

But can we really assume that reading such texts is a reading exclusively concentrated on meaning? Do we not sing these texts? [*Ist es nicht ein Singen*]? Should the process in which a poem speaks only be carried by a meaning intention? Is there not, at the same time, a truth that lies in its performance? (*eine Vollzugsbarkeit*) This, I think, is the task with which the poem confronts us²⁰.

The final words about the truth found in performance refer to the concept of “loudness” (*Volumen*), which describes a different dimension of a poem than its semantics; one which remains with the poem in relation to simultaneity. As one can see, intuitions very close to Gumbrecht’s nonhermeneutic idea may appear even in *sensu stricte* hermeneutics. They are therefore even more to be expected in studies devoted to the structure of the linguistic matter of a poetic text. I cannot fail to mention Gumbrecht’s disregard for the works of versologists. This critical *passus* can be found in his *Production of Presence*:

Poetry is perhaps the most powerful example of the simultaneity of presence effects and meanings effects – for even the most overpowering institutional dominance of the hermeneutic dimension could never fully repress the presence effects characteristic of rhyme, alliteration, of verse and stanza. It is telling, however, that literary criticism has never been able to react to the emphasis that poetry gives to such formal aspects – except for the establishment of long, boring and intellectually pointless “repertoires” that list, in chronological order, the different poetic forms within different national literatures, and except for the so-called “theory of over-determination”, which claims against all immediate evidence that poetic forms will always double and reinforce already existing meaning structures²¹.

“Long, boring and intellectually pointless” – these are the words Gumbrecht uses to describe the most important works on the poetics of verse forms. Of course, the author of *Production of presence* is not the only one expressing such views. Similar distaste for versologists’ meticulousness can be heard from different angles; it is clearly expressed in the words I have chosen to be the motto of these considerations, i.e., in the remark about scholars who “counted the vertebrae in vertebrates and syllables in Archiloch’s poems” and “study fire but can only describe ashes”. In this criticism of “those great scholars” Adam Zagajewski was paraphrasing Friedrich Nietzsche, so his charges have a double source: philosophical and poetic. They combine the perspectives of metareflection with that of an artist-practitioner and perhaps this makes them so convincing. Critical voices can be heard from within versology itself too: in his *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* [*Somatic criticism project*] (2014) Adam Dziadek approvingly quotes Henry Meschonnic’s harsh judgement, expressed in *Critique du rythme* (1982): “*la métrique est la théorie du rythme des imbéciles*”²².

Gumbrecht, similarly to other critics of versification, points to the futility of a science which cannot show the poem in action but only focuses on its fossilised forms, replacing fire with ashes. The metaphor of fire seems adequate for “moments of intensity” with their ephemeral flickering and unpredictable violence, typical of epiphany (in *Production of Presence* the

²⁰H.-G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie*, as quoted in Gumbrecht, 84.

²¹Gumbrecht, 43.

²²As quoted in: Adam Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* [*The Somatic Criticism Project*] (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2014), 25.

concept of “capturing in imposed relevance” is illustrated by the images of lightning and the glaring sunlight). Gumbrecht is interested in the role that poetic substance plays in those epiphanies. Meanwhile, “repertoires” of syllabic formats or metrical feet are usually indifferent to the aesthetic (let alone epiphanic!) potential of the poem. In Poland these effects of long-term studies by generations of highly competent researchers are represented in the multi-volume series *Poetyka. Zarys encyklopedyczny* (*Poetics. An encyclopedic sketch*). Browsing through quotations which illustrate individual entries, one cannot fail to notice the editors’ indifference to the aesthetics of a poem: many of these quotations originate from second- or even third-rate poetry. But even if such publications deal with outstanding poetic work, they tend to focus on verse form, leaving aside the issue of aesthetic impact. It is difficult to expect such studies to account for the readers’ “moments of intensity”.

This goal is also hard to achieve when studies in versology are specifically oriented towards semantics, i.e., when their aim is no longer just a description of versification systems, or poem forms or individual poems-works (or their groups within individual historical poetries), but also an outline of the semantic potential of versification. Such studies, currently mainstream in versology, have had a long tradition in Poland. Semantics of poems constituted a cognitive framework for scholars from Lucylla Pszczołowska’s circle²³, but it needs to be emphasised that the leader of Slavic Comparative Metrics was very careful in matters of the meaning of semantics. In her programmatic *Semantyka form wierszowych* [*Semantics of verse forms*] (1981) she was meticulous about separating strictly versological, i.e., systemic issues from analyses of “specific possibilities of expression, enabled by the verse form of the utterance”. She adds that, while “such interpretations are obviously necessary,” at times they lead to “exaggerating the role of verse structure – especially when it comes to the semantics of the text”²⁴. She identified such “hypersemantisation” or even “semantic pathos”²⁵ in the works of Ivan Fónagy and Juri Lotman. The scholar also emphasised that “unlike words or phrases, system of versification or the size or type of stanzas or rhymes do not have semantics which could emerge as a basic concept in a semantic dictionary”²⁶. By “semantics of verse poem” one should thus understand a group of associations or connotations ascribed to verse forms. Moreover, Pszczołowska was convinced that not all forms of a poem can be assigned such connotations of meaning; some of them are “exclusively prosodic and general-aesthetic in nature”²⁷ and should be described as asemantic. What she

²³In a posthumously published essay Pszczołowska described the collection *Semantyka form wierszowych* [*Semantics of poetic forms*] (1988) as “groundbreaking” for the work of Slavic Comparative Metrics team and “something close to revolution” with regard to topics and methodology (Lucylla Pszczołowska, ‘Słowińska Metryka Porównawcza. Ewolucja celów i metod badawczych [Slavic Comparative Metrics. Evolution of aims and research methods]’, in *Strukturalizm w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej. Wizje i rewizje* [*Structuralism in Central and Eastern Europe. Visions and revisions*], ed. Danuta Ulicka and Włodzimierz Bolecki (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2012), 166).

²⁴Lucylla Pszczołowska, ‘Semantyka form wierszowych [Semantics of poetic forms]’, in *Wiersz – styl – poetyka. Studia wybrane* [*Poem – style – poetics. Selected studies*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 268.

²⁵Pszczołowska, 269.

²⁶Lucylla Pszczołowska, ‘Badania nad wierszem [Studies in poems]’, in *Wiedza o literaturze i edukacja. Księga referatów Zjazdu Polonistów, Warszawa 1995* [*The science of literature and education. Papers from the Congress of Polish philologists, Warsaw 1995*], ed. Teresa Michałowska, Zbigniew Goliński, and Zbigniew Jarosiński (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 1996), 588.

²⁷Lucylla Pszczołowska, ‘Powtórzenia w prozie Gombrowicza [Repetitions in Gombrowicz’s prose]’, in *Wiersz – styl – poetyka. Studia wybrane* [*Poem – style – poetics. Selected studies*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 229.

meant by that were reiterations, like choral parts in songs, or verse repetitions in a pantoum, a triolet or a vilanelle.

In more recent versology studies Pszczołowska's conservative, careful approach, has been replaced with approaches which take a more daring approach to exploring the semantics of a poem (we will return to these later). Generally, they are variants of the "theory of over-determination", whose explanatory power was equated by Gumbrecht with the effects of "long, boring and intellectually pointless" versology studies. While I cannot concur with such an unequivocally negative assessment of interpretative findings of versology (I would attribute this unnuanced approach to Gumbrecht's polemic attitude; I am convinced he would have appreciated the achievements of many a verse specialist²⁸), I can well understand Gumbrecht's impatience for the persistent ignorance of and lack of appreciation for verse matter. The "repertoire" strand idealised it, whereas the "semantic" one saw it as a carrier of sense, usually subservient to lexicon (if not in theory, then in interpretative practices). Even if the point of departure for research methods are poetic texts, then sign substance of such texts is treated very selectively.

For versological "repertoires" what matters is the systemic part, whereas interpretations of verse works only consider semantically loaded elements (against theoretical assumptions they are not often all the components of versification). Gumbrecht probably does not mind initial analyses themselves; ultimately, they are a form of direct contact with the material of verse. Regardless of the research purpose, be it recognising the form or capturing semantic potential, any attempt at following the rhythm of a poem cannot occur without activating sensual perception. What is problematic is the inevitability of a leap from material to conceptual sphere (versological concepts, the outline of the work), and reducing a poem's aesthetics either to historical conventions (selected, rejected, restituted, creatively reshaped, etc.) or to something like a resonator of meaning.

The dominance of the hermeneutic approach leads to neglecting phenomena of presence in humanities or to encompassing them to under another type of meaning (the structuralist concept of "poetic information"²⁹ is a good example of this perspective bias). On the other hand, "presence effects" are inherent to our aesthetic experiences (also professional ones), which seems to be reason enough to consider these phenomena more closely. The question remains; what is it that we should consider more closely? "Presence effects" have a tendency to remove themselves right after they have appeared and then the omnipresent meaning takes their place. Gumbrecht says that "It is extremely difficult – if not impossible – for us not to 'read', not to try and attribute meaning"³⁰. This remark is particularly poignant with reference to poetry, which is a hopelessly semantic form of art. What is meant by that is not the automatic assignment of meanings to words used in a poetic work, but also the compulsion to "read" the form, including the form of versification. Let us, for example, try not to read the versification of the following poem:

²⁸Cf. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana–Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

²⁹Janusz Sławiński, 'Wokół teorii języka poetyckiego [On a theory of poetic language]', in *Dzieło – język – tradycja [Work – language – tradition]* (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), 82.

³⁰Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, 121.

Panny nieroztropne

Wiatr w środku powieści zarządza gimnastykę
 starym skręconym dębom, które sypią wszystko,
 co im zostało: liście, resztkę żołądki,
 by znów się wypłacić, lecz już się nie wykręcą.
 Bo wiatr jest nieugięty, wiatr jest entuzjastą-
 -komisarzem, nagina miękkie, łamie twarde.
 Obłoki go kochają i zawsze ma rację.
 Opisy irytują go, więc wyrwa kartki.
 A właśnie mamy przestój. Dom jest taki pusty,
 jakby z niego latami wysiedlano ludność
 na stepy Azji. I sam nie mogę się znaleźć
 w żadnym pokoju, schowku, pudełku, rozdziale.
 Dom jest tak bardzo pusty, że go nie ma w domu.
 Jak papierowy lampion, z którego zwiął płomyk³¹.

A literal translation of the poem into English would be:

Foolish virgins

The wind orders exercise in the middle of a poem
 To the old, twisted oak trees, which are losing everything
 That they have left; leaves, remnants of acorns
 To pay off their debt, but they will not wriggle out of it
 For the wind is adamant, the wind is an enthusiast-
 Commissar, it bends what is soft, it breaks what is hard;
 The clouds love it and it is always right.
 Descriptions annoy him so he tears out the pages.
 And we are in standstill. The house is so empty
 As if for years on end people were displaced from it
 To the Asian steppes. And I cannot find myself
 In any room, cupboard, box or chapter.
 The house is so empty that it is not at home.
 Like a paper lantern, whose flame has been blown away.

Even if I try to deal only with the verse form of Tomasz Różycki's work – focusing my attention appropriately and opening myself up to the dynamic shape of the sound and the architecture of its record, what occurs between the initial *wiatr* 'wind' and the final *płomyk* 'flame' I see as oneness. Obviously, whenever I reflect upon my own reading, I can differentiate between a gradual understanding of the first verse of *Panny nieroztropne* and the perception of that verse's rhythm with two initial syllables, uttered S | Ss, after which two trisyllabic prosodic words with symmetrical peaks occur: sSs | sSs, followed by the final proparoxyton, with its stress on the antepenultimate

³¹Tomasz Różycki, 'Panny nieroztropne [Foolish virgins]', *Czas LiteratURY*, no. 4 (2020): 9.

syllable: sSss. Initially I intend to read it with a falling intonation, but correct myself because, lacking a period or comma, the intonation is uncertain and then rises, along with the coda of the word and verse. There is a pause after the thirteenth syllable. But then, when my reading is little more than an aesthetic experience (upon reading *Panny nieroztropne* I find it hard not to be experiencing what Gumbrecht called “being lost in focused intensity³²”), prosodic-phonetic-graphic “presence effects” blend with lexical-semantic “meaning effects”.

I am thus under the impression, that the entire first verse is semantically and rhythmically moved, first with a sudden uprising, which causes the pages of a novel to flutter, and then an unexpected heigh-ho!, and something like a reverse movement, where the word stress falls on a different syllable than I expected. It is the wind that “orders the exercise”, lifting up a clause from the verse and throwing it onto the following line, in the midst of the alliterative “stare skrecone dęby które sypią” (‘old twisted oaks which drop’) that what will not suffice anyway (leaves, acorns – 12 syllables in the Polish version), just to “pay off” their debt. But – here this long and conclusive utterance makes a final loop – “they will not wriggle out of it”. That same wind in the fifth line reminds me about the obligatory daily exercise, half-rhyming *gimnastyka* (‘exercise’) with *entuzjasta* (‘enthusiast’) (word stress accentuates the same group of phonemes – “ast”, only this time it is paroxytonic – it hops one syllable forward and lands on the penultimate one). Carrying a hyphen over from line five to six, it shows that the “enthusiast” is also a stern “commissar” (Pol. *komisarz*)... and so on and so forth.

It can be said that the rhythm of this poem echoes semantics or that the rhythm confirms what words and sentences are saying. One can, however, reverse this dependence and state that prosody, phonetics and graphics advance their own agenda, to which words and sentences attempt to sensibly adjust. After all, in Różycki’s lyric, rhythmic movements and corners significantly precede the verbalisation of a profound lack and uneasy expectation (the proper topic of the poem is only revealed in the words *A właśnie mamy przestój* ‘And we are in a standstill’, although somehow it is possible to sense even earlier in the poem an almost physical imbalance between the lyrical world and the “I” speaking). Professional versological readings usually adopt the former perspective, granting semantics primacy over the poem. The consequence of this is perceiving versification as something “readable” and interpretable. A versological “reading” of a poem can thus occur in two ways. The first one can be termed historical semantics of verse forms, as it focuses on recognising the poem’s form, whose meaning is derived from literary convention.

In the fourteen lines of Tomasz Różycki’s poem a well-trained eye and ear will have no trouble recognising a sonnet, despite a lack of division into stanzas. Any syntactic delimitation roughly coincides with divisions into hypothetical stanzas, which is particularly evident in the first quatrain, containing a complex utterance. The poem lacks regular rhymes (most clauses feature an even, partial consonance, some of which only concern the stressed vowel; there are also numerous alliterations, paronomasia and other sound figures, occurring both within and between verses³³). The syllabic meter of the Polish alexandrine is executed here with many deviations from the (7+6) scheme (these concern verse length, the position and

³²Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, 119. Here Gumbrecht quotes Olympic swimming gold medalist Pablo Morales.

³³I adapt the term introduced to Polish versological terminology by Adam Dziadek (cf. Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej [The Somatic Criticism Project]*).

visibility of breaks between verses, stress type in cesuras and verses). An interpretation of this “play with the traditional, sophisticated form³⁴”, which one can notice in *Panny roztropne* would require establishing to what extent Różycki’s poem takes over cultural associations and the intrinsic worldview of a sonnet, and to what - at the same time - it questions these very norms by rejecting senses and values associated with a sonnet to build its own senses and values. A still different issue is semantic motivation for selecting a stichic form. This decision seems to be poignant given that in his earlier works, like in the 77 sonnets from the book of poetry *Kolonie* [*Colonies*], the poet followed the pattern of French stanzaic segmentation (4+ 4 + 4 + 2).

Another way of “reading” versification depends on the assumption that all elements of a poetic structure are semantically functional, so each of them can be assigned more or less definitive meanings (connotations). This approach stems from the structuralist theory of poetic language. A well-known dogma of this theory was the claim that all, even the smallest linguistic elements, are semantically autonomous; meanings of lower degree units are not fully absorbed by the meanings of higher units, but they permeate from underneath them³⁵. Janusz Sławiński wrote about the emergence of big semantic figures, like the lyrical “I”, in the following manner:

The carriers of meaning, which create the lyrical subject in the course of a work, are not only lexical elements and their syntactic arrangements but also elements like verses (or even their parts), verse groups, intonation groups etc., in general: all identifiable and thus meaningful, fragments of utterances. Of course, only words and sentences can name the “I” (...) But a direct naming of an object may not be possible at all. The information, as it emerges, can be carried by specific stylistic or versification devices, characteristic for the accepted manner of speaking³⁶.

The lyrical mood of the first eight verses of Różycki’s *Panny roztropne* seems to be, as mentioned above, construed in this indirect manner. It is easier to sense this intuitively, however, than to present direct textual evidence, supporting this interpretation. For example, is not the proparoxytonic clause in the first verse an iconic sign of the emotional agitation of the “I” speaking? As already noted, such interpretations met with resistance in the past – we remember Pszczołowska’s critical remarks on “hypersemantisation” and “semantic pathos”. I have also mentioned that semantic ascetism was more or less abandoned by the younger generations of versologists. A relatively “restrained”, in his own words, method of interpretation was selected by Witold Sadowski in his book *Wiersz wolny jako wiersz graficzny* [*The free verse poem as a graphic poem*] (2004). In the chapter *Semantyka w wierszu wolnym* [*Semantics in the free verse poem*] he defended Grzegorz Gazda’s and Jacek Łukasiewicz’s “very bold” interpretations against the charges of hypersemantisation, by claiming:

³⁴Lucylla Pszczołowska, *Wiersz polski. Zarys historyczny* [*The Polish poem. A historical sketch*] (Wrocław: Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, 2001), 390.

³⁵Cf. Janusz Sławiński, ‘Semantyka wypowiedzi narracyjnej [Semantics of a narrative]’, in *Dzieło – język – tradycja* [*Work – language – tradition*] (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), 114.

³⁶Janusz Sławiński, ‘O kategorii podmiotu lirycznego [On the category of the lyrical “I”]’, in *Dzieło – język – tradycja* [*Work – language – tradition*] (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), 71.

In both interpretations the semantics assigned to the graphic structure was reinforced by the semantics of the text, and Gazda stated clearly that “the graphic structure reinforces the contents of the text”, rather than builds its meanings from scratch. The poem’s graphic form belonged to a general semantic direction, whereas adopted research methods did not discover its semantic autonomy³⁷.

Cautious conclusions of the versologist from Warsaw, afforded the interpreters considerable wiggle room:

The meaning of the graphic structure of individual verses can thus be deduced on the basis of their lexical context. One can assume that every line, in a sense, “will spill the beans” about its semantic motivation (...) Of course, we will not find answers to questions concerning specific meanings of each verse, but we will know which semantic circles are allowed by the text (...) As for versification, one cannot be entirely successful here, because versification is not equivalent to the lexical layer. Graphic structure of the text cannot become a total substitute for words; it cannot encroach upon syntactic positions and implement the inflectional paradigm. What it can do, undoubtedly, is have a semantic impact within the limits of understatement or indeterminacy, which opens up the context³⁸.

Following that mild interpretative optimism was Sadowski’s “overview of interpretative capabilities of a free verse poem”³⁹, based on a corpus of seven and a half thousand verses, both individual lines and longer compositions. This modestly entitled “overview” is, in fact, an attempt at creating a paradigm of verse graphics’ semantic potential. This is an impressive attempt, and an encouragement to create similar “lexicons” (they are not really stable, dictionary entries; rather - associations) for other poetic devices and versification systems. It remains to be seen, however, how useful this would be for the interpretation of other works; after all, the ultimate criterion is always the lexical context. For example, if Różycki had decided to follow a stanzaic division in his *Panny nieroztropne*, the second division would fall just before the verse “The house is so empty/ that it is not at home”. In addition, the interpreter would have been able to notice that the delimitation of the third stanza visually encapsulates the “I” speaking in a quadrangle (“a room, a cupboard, a box, a chapter”). The space between the first and second stanzas would not have had such meanings, however, and yet again - the lexical context, projecting onto the graphic form, would have governed the semantics. Does it not follow from this that the semantic potential of versification can in a way (how?) depend on some form of absorbency, an ability to adopt meanings emerging on the level of lexicon and syntax? In any case, *Panny nieroztropne* was not written in stanzaic form and yet this does not seem to be a problem for semantics.

Let us now return to versology, in which the prevalent view is that interpretation is the proper and ultimate aim of research. As proof of this prevalence, one may quote nearly ritual complaints about a lack of hermeneutic investment in (traditional) studies in poetry. “The

³⁷Witold Sadowski, *Wiersz wolny jako tekst graficzny [The free verse poem as a graphic poem]* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 59.

³⁸Sadowski, 59–60.

³⁹Sadowski, 61.

richness of concepts about the nature of poem is in stark contrast with a meagre interest in its meaning, visible in Polish versology”, as Jan Potkański wrote in his introduction to the book *Sens nowoczesnego wiersza* [*The meaning of a modern poem*].

We do not really know the purpose of writing in verse; studies up to date have assigned semantics to selected meters or verses, but these tend to be marginal phenomena. Only some forms of the verse are semanticised, mostly by means of intertextual references (which, as a matter of fact, cannot explain the sense of the meter in the exemplar-hypotext, but only in imitation) or iconicity (like in Miłosz’s *Walc* [Waltz]). Similarly, within specific works only a few verses receive meaningful motivation in its own right – also iconic [...] or related to polysemies, generated by a double delimitation”⁴⁰.

There is no doubt that for Podkański the answer to the question concerning the purpose of writing in verse is perfectly obvious, hence the surprise: “Marginalisation of semantics in versificational analysis is, in theory, something of an oddity; it seems obvious that, being a linguistic phenomenon, a poem should first and foremost signify⁴¹”. A similar conviction is implicitly expressed by Paweł Bukowiec, who complains in *Metronom* [*The metronome*] (2015) that “too rarely are the findings and tools of versology used for the purposes for which they were created, i.e., as aids in various hermeneutics of versed literary works⁴²”. Adam Dziadek, in turn, says definitively that “when disconnected from interpretation, analyses of meters or just versification systems (...) are simply boring and cognitively useless”⁴³.

Semantics governs ways of thinking about the poem, without leaving much room for other types of explanations; from a pansemantic perspective one can only see that a poem means or is supposed to mean something. The latter concerns an area problematic for modern versology, i.e., numerical poetry (even though it is the free verse poem that remains the official theoretical challenge). A more or less open dislike for regular numericity and for meter (as opposed to rhythm) remains the common theme of many versological publications from the last quarter century. Studies on metricality also come under a lot of criticism (take Meschonnic’s remark, quoted in *Projekt krytyki somatycznej*, that metrics as a theory of rhythm was created by idiots). Apparently, the cause of this resentment (apart from the desire to support the free verse poem as an emblem of modernity and postmodernity) is the claim promoted by structuralists that strictly regular structures are semantically eroded. Sławiński called it “the paradox of order”.

When we are dealing with a verse work, governed by the principle of complete metric regularity (e.g., of the accentual-syllabic type) it seems as if the contours of words and sentences were blurred. Meanings lose their clarity, melted in a monotonous “melody”. This monotony, born out

⁴⁰Jan Potkański, *Sens nowoczesnego wiersza. Wersyfikacja Białoszewskiego, Przybosa, Miłosa i Herberta* [*The meaning of a modern poem. The versification of Białoszewski, Przyboś, Miłosz and Herbert*] (Warszawa: Wydział Polonistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2004), 10.

⁴¹Potkański, 11.

⁴²Paweł Bukowiec, *Metronom. O jednostkowości poezji nazbyt metrycznej* [*The metronome. On the unitarity of ‘hyper-metric’ poetry*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2015), 31.

⁴³Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej* [*The Somatic Criticism Project*], 52.

of dividing the utterance into exactly equivalent parts (i.e., metrical feet, pre- and post-cesura segments, syllabic verses), “obliterates” the semantics and stylistics of the work, as it were, but also redirects our attention towards inertia, showing no necessary resistance. A well-organised metric structure (there are plenty examples of it in Polish post-Romantic poetry) not only blurs all verse-external information, but by aligning with the reader’s “pattern of expectations” and eliminating the element of surprise, its structure becomes itself invisible, thus losing its poetic value⁴⁴.

In order to prevent this loss of informativeness, the scholar explained, the poem has to “play both sides”, as it were:

Towards codification and its contradiction. Deviation from the norm as important as norm confirmation. A norm does not become a norm until it is questioned. The symmetry of parallelisms becomes conspicuous when confronted with the asymmetry of disturbances. The contiguity of signs is discernible against the background of their mutual rebuttal, and vice versa. Metrical structure, as Siedlecki wrote, demands confirmation by means of “meter break”. This pattern is made visible in its variations. (...) The most important thing is the tension between rigour and freedom; a tension which releases *conspicuous elements* in the text, centers of determination – poetic information. On the reader’s side an equivalent to this tension is the dynamics of “expectations” and “fulfillments”⁴⁵.

The primacy of semantics in studies on poetry validates those types of versification which support “freedom”, i.e., the free verse poem and – in the case of a numeric poem – forms which are “variations on” rather than implementations of patterns, abounding in “expressive spaces”, “heterodoxies”, “disturbances”, “meter breaks”, which trigger “disappointed expectations”. Two examples of a versological description based on such preferences can be found in *Projekt krytyki somatycznej*. The first one concerns the works of Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki: “These poems do not want to be arranged in sonnets; they do not want to, and they cannot be arranged into conventionalised forms”⁴⁶. The other quote is a fragment describing the poetry of Edward Pasewicz:

Pasewicz has no problem doing without a regular meter; the regularity of numbers is totally unnecessary here. Numbers hunt for meaning, as Meschonnic rightly puts it; they also hunt for the subject, the discourse and their history. This hunt usually ends with entrapment and limitation; with obscuring the subject, simplifying the rhythm and blurring uniqueness⁴⁷.

If informativeness is taken to be the most important function of a poem, then of course, the regularity of meter is nothing desirable. Accepting, even if for a moment, the opposite perspective, in which the poem has primacy over semantics – “Rhythm first, words second”, as Leśmian put it – removes this certainty. Then comes the suspicion that perhaps the fading out of semantics – which happens not only in the copycat post-Romantic poetry – is in the poem’s own interest.

⁴⁴Sławiński, ‘Wokół teorii języka poetyckiego [On a theory of poetic language]’, 87–88.

⁴⁵Sławiński, 88.

⁴⁶Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej [The Somatic Criticism Project]*, 97.

⁴⁷Dziadek, 133.

This is a recurrent theme in structuralist publications, even if only mentioned in passing or featuring in attempts at theorising about phenomena not well-understood, like the “paradox of order”, noticed by Sławiński. I have already mentioned asemantic ingredients of versification, to which Pszczołowska assigned a purely aesthetic function⁴⁸. Sławiński went even further, taking the whole “model of a metrical order” as an “extreme example of utterance codification; a pattern of verbal communication, whose “unnecessary” structure pushes it to the extremity of poeticity”⁴⁹. Following from this, one could assume that non-metric structures are removed from that extremity, even though they gravitate to it. Poeticity, as noticed by the author of *Wokół teorii języka poetyckiego*, “seems to lead to a reification of the message; to limiting its role as a carrier of experiences, things or commands and emphasising its role as a new “thing”, whose existence would be an aim in itself”⁵⁰.

The word “seems” reflects Sławiński’s hesitation: he was not entirely sure if poetic over-organisation frees the utterance from its semantic obligations or perhaps helps to meet those obligations by preventing information dispersal. Sławiński did emphasise that the “limiting its role as a carrier” can be only mentioned “in categories of aspirations rather than actual situations”, but then – as we remember – he actually did introduce a real situation, referring to the experiences of readers of a metrically regular poem and claiming that in such a work “meanings lose their clarity, melted in a monotonous melody”. One can try to resolve these contradictions by accepting the fact that too much order is a threat to semantics (and poetics itself, which is “information” too). But how much is too much? Is Staff’s *Deszcz Jesienny* [*Autumn rain*] too metric or is it still a poem, which, as Sławiński put it, “works both ways”, maintaining “tension between rigour and freedom”? To return to our leading example: do the versification irregularities of Różycki’s *Panny nieroztropne* situate this poem on the (semantically) safe side of poetic over-organisation? Or maybe, especially when read against the background of contemporary free verse poems, a thirteen-verse sonnet “obliterates” (I repeat Sławiński’s scare quotes) its meanings and begins to be “an aim in itself”?

Another moment of Sławiński’s uncertainty concerns the materiality of the message-thing. Let me recall the original wording: “(...) seems to lead to a reification” – the italics (and quotation marks in “as a new “thing”) in connection with “seems” and “peculiar” remove the literal sense of “reification”. A bit further on, referring to Tadeusz Peiper’s opposition of the naming prose and pseudonymising poetry, Sławiński wrote:

The author of *Tędy* [*This way*] was very aware of the fact that a linguistic sign, which outside of poetry – in various instances of social practices and cognition – is a carrier of information about things and experiences, in poetry becomes the main piece of information. This information concerns its relation

⁴⁸Of course, aesthetics in structuralism had a meaning distinct from the one accepted commonly in literary studies. Cf. Potkański’s remarks about traditional metric versification, whose “redundance makes one search for non-semantic causes of metricality: folk-musical (looking for pleasure in the very sound of the text) or socio-cultural (using an expressive and traditional form in order to join the current and historical community of poets, following the doctrine of imitation)”, Potkański, *Sens nowoczesnego wiersza. Wersyfikacja Białoszewskiego, Przybosa, Miłosza i Herberta* [*The meaning of a modern poem. The versification of Białoszewski, Przyboś, Miłosz and Herbert*], 11.

⁴⁹Sławiński, ‘Wokół teorii języka poetyckiego [On a theory of poetic language]’, 87.

⁵⁰Sławiński, 80.

to other signs. (...) Poetic pseudonym is a sign of its own structure. It is checked only with reference to itself. To be precise, it has a tendency to turn into a non-semiotic category, because it loses the “transparency” proper to signs; it becomes “impenetrable”, like all things are. It is noteworthy that a similar conclusion was reached by Irzykowski - the fiercest opponent of the avant garde – when he wrote in a posthumously published essay *Materia poetica*: » Words [in poetry] are not just the message but the thing itself«⁵¹.

Sławiński creatively betrayed the original sense of Irzykowski’s words (*materia poetica* was for the critic not, as one might suppose, the linguistic material of poetry but a material of ideas, provided by literature⁵²), but himself did not seem to treat literally the reification of a poetically organised message. The key issue was, after all, Peiper’s pseudonym, i.e., replacing one elocution with another (poetic sign for dictionary sign). The pseudonym becomes “impenetrable” like an object, when poetic over-organisation makes it so conspicuous that it obscures the proper, non-poetic name, which it is supposed to replace, and by doing so it hides the thing itself. “Iteration” occurs to a bigger or lesser degree, depending on the intensity of poetic power: there are works which are almost “transparent” semantically or those, like Peiper’s *Noga* [*The leg*] which at first glance seems to be a nonsensical collection of words. The loss of naming ability is compensated by the reinforcement of interlexical relations (connotation displaces denotation). This is my understanding of the statement that poetic sign-pseudonym “has a tendency to transform into a non-semiotic category”. If one were to apply this line of reasoning to the structure of a poem, it would appear that the more unified the prosodic structure (the density of the meter framework etc. is the equivalent of connotational relations between words in a poetic pseudonym), the greater the loss of linguistic functionality of prosody (the ability of stress to emphasise words and intonation – to delimit and logically divide sentences). This is the source of the phenomenon described by Sławiński as a melting of meanings in the melody of a regularly metric poem. In this context the scholar’s questioning of the poetic materiality of “things” is no longer valid: metrical regularity literally “reifies” the poetic text and deprives it of its sign-value (even though this phenomenon is gradable and rarely reaches its extreme version). On the other hand, rhythm – a phenomenon typically affiliated with poems – is somewhere between the literal and non-literal reification: rhyming exposes the sound-based materiality of words, but also reinforces their connotational potential.

Finally, the third question is this: is “reification” something beneficial? Sławiński claims it depends on whether the “thing” maintains any sign potential. The “impenetrability” of a poetic pseudonym is not questionable (the game of connotations intensifies through a metaphor, even though the ability of naming is suspended to some degree) but a regular accentual-syllabic verse – which is supposed to be a prosody devoid of semantic function, a mere melody – is depicted somewhat unfavourably (and with much exaggeration). This perspective is a consequence of the assumption that a poetic work is a special kind of message; a linguistic piece

⁵¹Sławiński, 83.

⁵²Writing that words are the thing itself, Irzykowski meant that they “trigger an appropriate emotion”: “Lyrics teaches us, e.g., how we are supposed to love – our lover, our motherland, our mother – and verbalises that state for us (...) let us describe it with a trivial comparison: not so much prescription but medicine, the pharmacy. (Karol Irzykowski, ‘Materia poetica’, in *Alchemia ciała i inne szkice oraz aforyzmy* [*The alchemy of body and other sketches and aphorisms*], ed. Wojciech Głowala [Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Wrocławskiej Polonistyki, 1996], 146).

of information, and nothing more. So then if its communicativeness is somehow limited, this cannot be a positive thing. It is probably for this reason that Gumbrecht believes that talking about “production of meaning” and “production of presence” requires two separate concepts of sign. This does not seem so obvious to me; I have just pointed to a continuum of “reification”, extending from a semantic thing-clue to a thing-formed (prosodic and graphic) substance. On the other hand, perceiving the poetic “thing” as an imperfect linguistic sign causes difficulty in noticing its non-linguistic potential.

It causes difficulty, but does not make it impossible, as evidenced by the research of versologist Teresa Dobrzyńska on poetic ways of arresting time. Her analysis of versification patterns, based on reiteration, led to the following conclusions:

It is possible to say that the very principle of repeating elements, compiling similarly built rows – which are related, yet different – has consequences for the temporal structure of the work. The text develops in time, expanding and acquiring new pieces of information, but at the same time it keeps coming back, taking the roads already travelled, repeating the same structural elements. This is well exemplified by metrical structures, which organise long texts and, through recurrent returns, they are updated from the beginning to the end of the work or in large fragments.

So, then the principle of parallelism introduces periodic repetition to the text, resulting in a paradoxical fusion of linearity and circularity. As a consequence, the text can be used both as a sign replaying the consecutivity of time, and as an exponent of cyclicity. Returns to the starting point and reiteration of the road already travelled lead to a “loop”, turning a linear movement into rotational one⁵³.

Dobrzyńska’s model is not dissimilar to Gumbrecht’s conception, who in his essay: *How to Approach “Poetry as a Mode of Attention?”* (2015) expressed a very similar idea:

The mediation of this seeming contradiction between movement (as property of time objects) and the stability of form comes with reiteration. If the expanding and contracting movements of the circle, after a certain time, come back to perform and repeat the same sequence of movements that they originally went through over and over again, then we will say that this movement has a “rhythm”, and through its reiteration the – moving – circle recuperates an identity that we can call the identity of a “dynamic form.” Such reiteration, however, breaks and freezes the irreversible flux of everyday time. Now, continuing to speak metaphorically, we can say that the flux of time interrupted and frozen does function like a zone, more precisely like a window, through which moments and things from the past (and in principle also from the future) can become present and as if “tangible” for us. This mechanism explains why charms, brief texts that are used to conjure up things and situations from the past, are almost exclusively cast in prosodic (rhythmic) language. For such language interrupts the progression of everyday time and makes it possible for objects and phenomena from the past (and the future) to come into the present⁵⁴.

⁵³Teresa Dobrzyńska, *Tekst poetycki i jego konteksty. Zbiór studiów [The poetic text and its contexts. A collection of studies]* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2015), 89.

⁵⁴Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, ‘How to Approach “Poetry as a Mode of Attention?”’, trans. Joanna Krajewska, *Forum Poetyki*, no. winter (2016): 46, quoted in the original version of this paper from J. Krajewska’s translation.

Gumbrecht's example of a "dynamic form" (i.e., one which develops in time – here, as a contracting and expanding circle) shows that the arresting of time does not require the participation of semantics at all; it only happens thanks to sequential reiterations (the rhythm). The same mechanism operates in a poem; surely, more so in a free verse poem than in a regular metric form (but even the latter involves some form of reiteration, like the visual rhythm of subsequent lines). This is then the function of poetic reiterations; even the ones which seem to be "a goal in itself", as Sławiński put it, or those which are asemantic and aesthetic, as Pszczołowska wanted. Creating a "zone" of frozen time, i.e., a time loop (in Dobrzyńska's metaphor) or a "window" (according to Gumbrecht). Freezing the time in the course of a poem-thing allows the verse substance to make its presence here and now. This requires a recreation of the poem, so then entering into a direct (sensual, somatic) contact with its sound and record and recognising its iterativity – the more the better. This need not be metrical reiteration; syntactic parallelisms or phonic devices also perform this function. I suspect that metaphor and other semantic tropes, which the structuralist theory of poetic language also treats as equivalence devices, function in a similar manner, even though their substantive "iteration" can be less perceptible.

If this replaying is accompanied by "reading" (e.g., deriving the lyrical mood from the rhythm of the poem), it is then limited (as the author of *Production of presence* says, following Karl Heinz Bohrer) to something analogous to reading facial expressions⁵⁵ and occurs by way of following the dynamics of the verse's movements forward and its returns. As we remember, an intense contact with the poetic substance does not teach us anything but reminds us of what it is like to "be in one rhythm with things in the world" (a poem can be such a thing). In his essay on "poetry as a mode of attention" Gumbrecht describes this synchronisation as Luhmann's "unproductive coupling" (as opposed to second order couplings, which are "productive", as they lead to an increase of knowledge in societies) and brings it down to the coordination between the body of the recipient and the rhythm of a poem⁵⁶. It lasts as long as the interpreter's consciousness is not activated. In my reading of *Panny nieroztropne* this moment of initiating "the production of sense" occurs, for example, when I realise I do not really know what "Wiatr w środku powieści" ("The wind in the middle of a novel") means: it can be the middle of a novel or the middle of a book – the latter in the literal sense, between the pages or metaphorically, in the narrative setting. When I stop to consider this multiplicity of meanings, I no longer follow the rhythm of the poem and its substance appears to be pulling back from me.

The question remains; how can the reification of the verse substance initiate the agency of poetry (Gumbrecht is quite serious about listing poetry alongside prayers and magic incantations), so that "moments and things from the past (and in principle also from the future) can become present and "as if tangible" for us"? According to the author of *Production of presence* this is predicated on the affinity of rhythm and imagination: they are both substantive, which is why they are closer to the body than concepts. Rhythmical reiterations operate regressively;

⁵⁵Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, 78.

⁵⁶This coordinative corporeality is studied in Adam Dziadek's *Projekt krytyki somatycznej*, already mentioned here. His concept is in many ways close to a presence-oriented versology.

they uphold the substantiality of the utterance, which is why they prevent the conceptualisation of poetry. As far as contents are concerned, poetry remains close to somatic-sensual imagination⁵⁷ (it was Shklovsky's idea that the "defamiliarisation", i.e., de-automation of form and approach to the subject is a way "to make one feel things, to make the stone stony"). Gumbrecht believes that this is where the impression of poetic intensity comes from.

Is it possible to describe this intensity with the language of versology? It is not easy to answer this question. Thanks to the versological apparatus, developed by generations of scholars, it is possible to hear and see many things in a poem, so it is worth returning to it and improving it. This means that there is still demand for theoretical and historical studies on the poem, including the semantics of verse forms, and graphic forms, which Sadowski postulated. Such studies should be complemented (as is they already are) by systematic investigations into the performative potential of the poem (cf. Piotr Bogalecki's inspiring book on "poems-as-scores"⁵⁸). One need not be concerned about the development of idiographic-interpretative versology as long as the hermeneutic approach dominates in the humanities. Such works, albeit of varied quality (it seems that they benefit from self-imposed rigour), have been and will continue to be published. It would be, however, a good thing if these were counterbalanced with studies oriented towards the "substantive", aesthetic, presence-oriented aspect of the poem. Still awaiting recognition is Lucy Alford's brilliant monograph on poetic attention⁵⁹, (it was announced by Gumbrecht in his article tackling that very problem). The typology of transitive (and intransitive) forms of attention can potentially fill the conceptual gap for something that could in the future exist as the poetics of presence.

On the other hand, one cannot forget that conceptualisation always removes us from presence phenomena: as the poet had it – it changes fire into ashes. It is inevitable. One *can*, however (and this is what Gumbrecht encourages us to in his *Production of presence*) limit the "loquacity of literary discourse and be quiet for a moment". One reason for this silence could be so that the beautiful 13-syllable phrase concluding *Panny nieroztropne* (*Jak papierowy lam-pion, z którego zwiął płomyk* ("Like a paper lantern, whose flicker has been blown away") does not become a commentary on our clumsy versological activities but can be uttered and, as Gumbrecht says, make its presence, occupy a spot in space, touch us from within⁶⁰.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁵⁷Gumbrecht, 'How to Approach "Poetry as a Mode of Attention?', 49.

⁵⁸See. Piotr Bogalecki, *Wiersze-partytury w poezji polskiej neoawangardy. Białoszewski – Czycz – Drahan – Grześćczak – Partum – Wirpsza* [*Poems-scores in the poetry of Polish neo-avant-garde. Białoszewski – Czycz – Drahan – Grześćczak – Partum – Wirpsza*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020).

⁵⁹Lucy Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁶⁰The words on touching from within are Gumbrecht's paraphrase of a quote from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

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KEYWORDS

presence

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AESTHETICS OF A LITERARY WORK

versology

Adam Zagajewski

ABSTRACT:

The article is a proposal for opening verse studies to the problem of presence, on the basis of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's project of a nonhermeneutic humanities. The author presents the limitations of a semantically oriented versology, simultaneously pointing to the possibility of a continuation of formal-structural tradition of studies on verse, following non-semantic threads in the works of Polish theorists: Janusz Sławiński, Lucylla Pszczołowska i Teresa Dobrzyńska. Tomasz Różycki's poem *Panny nieroztropne* [*Foolish virgins*] become an exemplum for the ensuing considerations, while two intuitions of contemporary poets inspire theoretical considerations. One is Eugenio Montale's perverse thesis on the hopeless semanticity of poetry and Adam Zagajewski's Nietzschean claim that versologists take care of fire rather than ashes, i.e., investigate living, aesthetically influential verse forms.

EUGENIO MONTALE

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

RHYTHM

*verse semantics***NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Małgorzata Gorczyńska – (1977) literary theorist, specialising in Polish and Bohemian studies, assistant professor in the School of Polish Philology at the University of Wrocław. She teaches poetics of verse and creative poetry writing. She is the author of *Miejsca Leśmiana. Topika recepcji krytycznoliterackiej* (2011) [*Leśmian's places. Topics in critical literary receptions*] and project member in Witold Sadowski's *Wiersz litanijny w kulturze regionów Europy* [The litany in cultures of European regions]; she publishes in Polish and international journals (e.g., "Pamiętnik Literacki", "Česká literatura"). Her recent scholarly interests focus on the aesthetics of a poetic work, considered from the nonhermeneutic perspective of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. She is currently working on a book devoted to the dynamics of poetic forms in the works of Tomasz Różycki and translating Lucy Alford's monograph *Forms of Poetic Attention*. |