

“there’s certainly enough pain (...) but not enough poetry:” Halina Poświatowska’s autothematic poems

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Halina Poświatowska is most often discussed as a poetess of love and death, two themes which she consistently examined in her work. Love and death are inextricably linked in her poems with illness and a celebration of the female body, and the latter, in turn, is read in the contexts of nature and culture. Poświatowska’s poems appear to have been written in a highly emotional state, directly communicating lived experience. And this experience is further authenticated by the lyrical I that is usually associated with Poświatowska herself. The poems “appear” to have been written in this way because in most we find spontaneity that is precisely controlled and emotions that are skillfully employed. Indeed, most poems were carefully constructed. Poświatowska brilliantly explored the poetic possibilities of language, proving that the formal aspects of poetry were important to her. The same applies in the poem [*nie potrafię być tylko człowiekiem*]/[*I cannot be merely a human...*] from the collection *Oda do rąk* [Ode to hands].¹ The poem, on the one hand, exhibitionistically opens up to the reader the private emotional world of the I and, on the other hand, it encloses the expressive whole in an intellectual frame that is inevitably meta-reflexive.²

¹ Halina Poświatowska, *Wszystkie wiersze* [Complete poems] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), 341; Halina Poświatowska, *Właśnie kocham... Indeed I love...*, trans. Maya Peretz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), 104. All Poświatowska’s poems in the original Polish cited in this article come from the collection *Wszystkie wiersze*. When citing, I refer to the abbreviated title of the collection (WW) and provide page number. Poświatowska’s poems that were translated into English come from the collection *Właśnie kocham... Indeed I love...* When citing, I refer to the abbreviated title of the collection (WK) and provide page number. Other poems were translated into English by the translator of this article – translations appear in brackets after the original Polish text.

² I use the terms “autothematicism,” “metapoetics,” and “meta-reflexivity” interchangeably, but I am aware of the differences in the genesis and meaning of these concepts and the definitional problems related to the fluidity of terminology and its use. On autothematicism (also) in women’s poetry, see: *Nowy autotematyzm? Metarefleksja we współczesnej humanistyce* [New autothematicism? Meta-reflexivity in the contemporary humanities], ed. Agnieszka Waligóra (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2021); Agnieszka Waligóra, *Nowy autotematyzm? Metarefleksja w poezji polskiej po roku 1989* [New autothematicism? Meta-reflexivity in Polish poetry after 1989] (Kraków: Universitas, 2023); *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje* [A century of Polish poets. Cross-sections – themes – interpretations], ed. Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

nie potrafię być tylko człowiekiem
 jest we mnie spłoszona mysz
 i łasica wężąca zapach krwi
 i przestkach i pościg
 porośnięte włosami mięso
 i myśl

nie umiem być tylko drzewem
 wytrwały wzrost nie jest moim jedynym
 celem
 ani tężenie konarów
 ani owoc
 ani kwiat

ciekawością nacięłam korę
 oszlifowałam zastygłe żywiczne krople
 żywą tkankę zamieniam codziennie
 na świecące próchno słów

słowami
 skarżę się z moich udręczeń
 jak gdyby liryka była kluczem
 którym można by otworzyć
 zatrzaśnięty przed wiekami raj

I cannot be merely a human
 a scared mouse is in me
 and a weasel that knows the smell of blood
 and fright and pursuit
 hair-covered flesh
 and thought

I cannot be merely a tree
 stubborn growth is not my only
 purpose
 neither are firm branches
 nor fruit
 nor flower

with my curiosity I've cut the bark
 polished the solid drops of sap
 daily I change the living tissue
 into the glowing rot of words

with words
 I complain of my torments
 as if poetry were a key
 which could open the paradise
 slammed shut ages ago

The poem begins with a confession. The language is natural and simple. We find ourselves in the midst of the I's private reflections: "nie potrafię być tylko człowiekiem"/ "I cannot be merely a human." This declaration can be a statement of fact, an existential complaint, a nervous reproach, a violent rebellion, or a cry for help – the performative power of the sentence depends to a large extent on the pragmatic context of the utterance constructed by the reader, on the imagined context, the projected psychosomatic lyrical situation. At the very beginning, the lyrical I defines itself through negation, which will be additionally reinforced compositionally in the opening of the following stanza, when the lyrical I adds: "nie umiem być tylko drzewem"/ "I cannot be merely a tree." This triggers oppositional and complementary logic, which points to the parallelism and relationality of the natural and the human world that is so important in this poem (and many others). The opening lines conjure up a rapid, polysensual, and animated image of the I's private world. It is wild and natural. Importantly, the I does not say "I am a scared mouse and a weasel." Instead, the I says:

jest we mnie spłoszona mysz
 i łasica wężąca zapach krwi
 i przestkach i pościg
 porośnięte włosami mięso
 i myśl

a scared mouse is in me
 and a weasel that knows the smell of blood
 and fright and pursuit
 hair-covered flesh
 and thought

We find ourselves in the midst of a dramatic struggle for survival – it is animalistic, instinctive, and chaotic. However, the image of this struggle has been constructed with great precision. The poetess combined different experiences in a multi-sensory and intensely somatic image: an elliptical description of the chase, which nevertheless conveys its dynamism and visuality; the synesthetic “zapach krwi”/ “smell of blood;” the raw haptics of “porośłe włosom mięso”/ “hair-covered flesh;” as well as numerous sounds associated with struggling, rustling, and sniffing. In Polish, they are reinforced by the strongly instrumentalized tissue of the poem, which relies on a number of hissing, whistling, and rustling sounds (“spłoszona” [scared], “mysz” [mouse], “łasica” [weasel], “węsząca” [knows the smell]). They semantically concentrate around the ideas of “przestach” [fright] and “pościg” [pursuit]. Respectively, we also find clusters of unvoiced consonants in the poem – they convey the aggressive and predatory nature of the situation (“krw” as in “krwi” [blood], “prz” and “str” as in “przestach” [fright]) – as well as paronomastic combinations. The latter, which include “porośłe włosom mięso” [hair-covered flesh], read as more delicate thanks to the use of open vowels. They are accompanied by the dominant “m” (“mnie” [me], “mysz” [mouse], “włosom” [hair], “mięso” [flesh], “myśl” [thought]). The stanza, which tells the story of a deadly chase, employs a carefully selected repertoire of sounds. It is indeed thoughtfully composed in terms of sounds, encrypting or anagrammatically coding in this emotional, vibrant, and moving image death – which in Polish is “ś/mie/rć.” “Strach” [fear] turns into “prze-strach” [fright], a fear that moves, drives forward, but also a fear that is felt more strongly than usual, a fear that is overwhelming. Interestingly, this dynamic and hyperbolic description of internal experiences is deprived of verbs which would indicate movement – the words in the sentence which extends over the entire stanza are as if enumerated, attached to one another in succession with the help of conjunctions. Parataxis, a series of short phrases, seems to be the governing principle: “i łasicę węszącą [...] / i przestach i pościg [...] / i myśl”/ “and a weasel that knows the smell [...] / and fright and pursuit [...] / and thought.” In Polish, the first section of the poem is framed by an imperfect, distant, and ambiguous rhyme: “mysz” [mouse] turns into “myśl” [thought]. It thus has the last word in the described chase.

The second stanza, whose layout and structure are very similar to the first one (six lines which gradually become shorter and shorter as enjambment becomes more prominent), begins with a statement that is both symmetrical and antithetical to the opening line. “nie umiem być tylko drzewem”/ “I cannot be merely a tree,” the I says this time, thus slowing down the forces of nature which dominated in the first stanza. That which is human – implicitly, that which is creationist and intellectual – begins to grow and prevail in the poem. The rustle of sounds quiets down, and the simple syntax of spoken language is replaced by hypotaxis, which allows for intellectual ordering and logical argumentation. Instead of the inclusive “i”/ “and” there appears the exclusionary “ani”/ “neither... nor” and the arrangement of lines seems to emphasize this logic:

nie umiem być tylko drzewem	I cannot be merely a tree
wytrwały wzrost nie jest moim jedynym	stubborn growth is not my only
celem	purpose
ani tężenie konarów	neither are firm branches
ani owoc	nor fruit
ani kwiat	nor flower

A creator, a constructor, an experimenter who wants to learn about the world speaks in the poem. She cuts ("kora"/ "bark"), polishes ("zastygłe żywiczne krople"/ "the solid drops of sap") and transforms "żywa tkanka"/ "living tissue" into "świecące próchno słów"/ "the glowing rot of words." Writing is absorbed into the bloodstream of nature. It is a process that is both super-natural and natural. It is superimposed over nature, but at the same time it still uses its processes and rules, referring to the Aristotelian sources of mimesis.

The creationist aspect of human existence, man's intentional agency and cognitive "curiosity" are important for the lyrical I. The third stanza, similarly to the first one, activates the sounds. It conjures up a polysensual and vibrant image in which the I comes to the fore. Creative transformation is both metaphorized and thematized:

ciekawością nacięłam korę	with my curiosity I've cut the bark
oszlifowałam zastygłe żywiczne krople	polished the solid drops of sap
żywą tkankę zamieniam codziennie	daily I change the living tissue
na świecące próchno słów	into the glowing rot of words

It is an attempt to formulate a positive answer, one that would balance the previous negative declarations: "nie potrafię"/ "I cannot," "nie umiem"/ "I cannot," "nie jest moim [...] celem"/ "is not my [...] purpose." Poświatowska often writes about helplessness and about overcoming limitations. It is not surprising considering her biography. In the poem with the telling and autothematic *incipit* [*myślę że jest trudno pisać wiersze*] (WW 373)/ [*I think it's hard to write poetry*] (WK 234), she compares writing poetry to such physically demanding physical activities as mountaineering or swimming across the English Channel. And we know that the poetess could not have accomplished either due to her heart condition. Many other poems also start with the poetess confessing how difficult it is for her to write. At the same time, she evokes metaphorical images of the natural world that is "we mnie"/ "in me:" "nie potrafię inaczej"/ "I can't do otherwise," the poetess complains, trying to tame the animal inside her (this time it is a cat: "uspokajam go słowami / kłamię / o przedziwnych kolorach i dźwiękach"/ "I comfort it with words/ tell lies/ of wondrous colors and sounds" [*nie potrafię inaczej*] WW 455/ [*I can't do it otherwise*] WK 148). In other poems, she admits: "nie potrafię pieścić / nawet słowami..." [I cannot caress / even with words] ([*nie potrafię pieścić*] [I cannot caress] WW 541); "nie potrafię uskładać ze słów / miłości / ona rośnie we mnie / pulsuje w korzeniach / nabrzmiewa w pniu / odkwita" [I cannot make love/ out of words / it grows in me / pulsates in the roots / swells in the trunk / un-blossoms] ([*nie potrafię uskładać ze słów*] [[I cannot make love out of words]] WW 470); "nie umiem powiedzieć słowem / nie słowem tęsknię / ale rękoma"/ "I can't say with a word / not with a word do I yearn / but with my arms" ([*nie umiem powiedzieć słowem*] WW 468/ [*I can't say with a word*] WK 158). In the often-quoted poem that begins with the question "kto potrafi / pomiędzy miłość i śmierć / wpleść anegdotę o istnieniu" [who can / weave an anecdote about existence/ between love and death], we learn that "nikt nie potrafi" [no one can] (WW 176). Therefore:

słowami	with words
skarżę się z moich udręczeń	I complain of my torments
jak gdyby liryka była kluczem	as if poetry were a key
którym można by otworzyć	which could open the paradise
zatrzaśnięty przed wiekami raj	slammed shut ages ago

This last part of the poem may be read in different ways – directly and naively, as a call for poetry that opens up better worlds and makes up for the imperfections of the mortal one, or with distance and irony, as a sign of helplessness, further emphasized by the subjunctive mood: “jak gdyby liryka była kluczem, / którym można by otworzyć”/ “as if poetry were a key/ which could open.” Poświatowska’s self-reflection remains a-metaphysical and a-religious. “Zatrzaśnięty przed wiekami raj”/ “the paradise/ slammed shut ages ago” is merely a cultural projection – an elusive and unfulfilled probability. The poem does not conjure or promise anything; it only constructs and at the same time exposes the artificial decorations of words, thus weakening the tragedy of the I’s “udręczenia”/ “torments.”

This potential impermanent world that was created with words and tainted by death is not rejected in the poem. The I cannot be “tylko człowiekiem”/ “merely a human” and cannot be “tylko drzewem”/ “merely a tree” – the I still needs creativity to exist. Therefore, the I transforms the living tissue into “świejące próchno”/ “glowing rot” and makes sure to include an “anegdotę o istnieniu” [anecdote about existence] somewhere between life and death. With every imperfect word, it captures the startled “mysz/mysł”/ “mouse/thought,” temporarily escaping death. In other words, the I “nasłuchuje brzęczenia słów” [listen[s] to the buzzing words] hoping that it will be possible to reflect, describe, and capture “treść niknącą” [vanishing content] (*[kto potrafi]* [[Who can]] WW 176). Writing poetry gives the I a chance not to lose everything.³ In a letter to Tadeusz Śliwiak, the poetess wrote: “And I have to write, and I look at the words, and I plant them very carefully. I don’t like them; there’s certainly enough pain in them but not enough poetry.”⁴

Poświatowska is maximalist in her poetry – she is lyrical and emotional, and at the same time logical and conceptual, egocentric and seemingly chaotic. She pays attention to the form, syntax, and rhythm of the poem. She pays attention to how the chosen words sound. The *signifiant* of the poem, words that have been carefully selected and arranged, matters to her. Maneuvering between the human and the non-human, she chooses a third path, becoming an experimenter who transforms reality into words. She writes about it so that the experience may be even stronger. Poświatowska’s poetry strengthens biological existence through poetic meta-reflexivity, through textualizing the described world, constantly encouraging self-reflection.

Metatextual revelations (*Wiersz o miłości/ A poem about Love; Wiersz dla mnie [A poem for me]*) and self-referential metaphors may be found in many of her poems: “skrzydła o pociemniałych zgłoskach”/ “wings of darkened syllables” (*Wieczny finał* WW 64/ *Eternal finale* WK 36); “brunatne plastry książek” [brown slices of books] and “brzęczenia słów” [buzzing words] (*[kto potrafi...]* WW 176). They are held together by the sylleptic psychosomatic I who speaks as both a poetess and a sick woman: “przed chwilą napisałam słowo / jestem starsza o słowo / o dwa / o trzy / o wiersz”/ “I have just written a word/ I am older/ by a word/ by two/ by three/ by a poem” (*[jeszcze jedno wspomnienie]* WW 370/ *[one more memory]* WK 114); “poezja dławi się własnym oddechem”/ “why does poetry suffocate on its own breath” (*[Tęgo roku jest znowu wiosna...]* WW 393/ *[This year again there is spring]* WK 130); “wszystkie oddechy i słowa” [all breaths and words] and “patrzę na dzień już umarły / myślę” [I’m looking at the day that is already dead/ and I think] (*[czy wszystkie dni są*

³ “czy wszyscy tracimy wszystko / żyjąc?” [do we all lose everything / by living?], the poetess writes in her autothematic poem [czy wszystkie dni są stracone dla umarłych] [[are all days lost to the dead]] WW 563.

⁴ Halina Poświatowska, “[List z 1 II 1961 roku...]” [[Letter of February 1, 1961...]], in: Halina Poświatowska, *Listy [Letters]* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1998), 265.

stracone dla umarłych] [[are all days lost to the dead]] WW 563). Some of Poświatowska’s poems are also manifestos. They speak directly about writing. The poetess confronts avant-garde linguistic poetry with her original concept of art, such as in *[Stworzyć wiersz...]* / *[To produce a poem...]*. In the poem, the I rejects “zabiegi chirurgiczne wokół słów” / “surgical interventions around words” and “dwuznaczność liter spuchniętych od mądrości” / “ambiguity of letters swollen with wisdom” and says that “wibrujący ból w tkankach i zasób słów nie większy od krzyku zwierzęcia” / “a vibrating pain in the tissues and a stock of words no greater than an animal’s scream” is all that is needed (WW 376/ WK 124). Poświatowska also writes protest poems – poems that are polemical and metatextual – in which she addresses the criticism and fads of contemporary poetry which often follows in the footsteps of Eliot’s pessimism (*Argument pro* [Argument in favor]) or evaluates the theme of love: “Dlaczego więc potępiać wiersze o miłości, czemu mieć im za złe bezwstyd i prymityw bezładnego jęku rozkoszy powtarzanego wiernie przez niedbałe o poczytność stulecia” / “Why then censure love poems, why object to their lack of shame and primitive disorderly groan of rapture repeated perpetually for centuries oblivious of readership” (*Tego roku jest znowu wiosna...*) WW 393/ *[This year again there is spring]* WK 130).

Autothematicism is for Poświatowska a language that allows her to both tell and authenticate her story. Writing poetry is a somatic and at the same time an intellectual and artistic experience.⁵ The poetess distanced herself from Przyboś’s linguistic experiments. She distanced herself from “dwuznaczność liter spuchniętych od mądrości” / “ambiguity of letters swollen with wisdom” and prelinguistic “zabiegi chirurgiczne wokół słów” / “surgical interventions around words” (*[Stworzyć wiersz...]* WW 376/ *[To produce a poem...]* WK 124). While Poświatowska did not write “laboratory poetry, governed by strict rules and assumptions,” Grażyna Borkowska explains, she “liked to play with avant-garde idioms, which were skillfully incorporated into the poem, as in the poem *[Lubię pisać wiersze]* [[I enjoy writing poems]] (from the collection *jeszcze jedno wspomnienie* [one more memory]).”⁶ Indeed, Poświatowska carefully examined the avant-garde experiment, taking from it what was useful to her in her own understanding of what poetry is. “I feel twice when I feel and think about what I feel; and a thought that is firmly grasped through who knows what glands may be transformed into feeling and shine,” Tadeusz Peiper, the founding father of the Polish avant-garde, once wrote, trying to reconcile the expression of feelings and emotions with *ratio*, with how humans control the world.⁷ Poświatowska basically said the same, although she used different words, thematizing her way of poetic thinking: “kiedy Kocham / to Kocham / to wiem że Kocham [...] / w samowiedzy się pograżam” [when I love / then I love / then I know that I love [...] / I immerse myself in self-knowledge] (*[kiedy Kocham]* [[when I love]] WW 610). In a different poem she conjured up an image based on syllepsis – “liryczniejemy sobie / tak na przekór / po odrobinie / zachodzimy w wieczorne niebo” [we become lyrical / in spite of ourselves / little by little / we set off into the evening sky] – which wagged an “apokaliptyczny palec” [apocalyptic finger] (*[liryczniejemy sobie]* [[we become lyrical]] WW 155).

⁵ Autothematicism in women’s poetry often enhances non-autonomous aspects of the poem and helps build individual epistemological projects, placing at the center not so much language itself or the problems of expression but the (self) conscious description of experience, which sometimes turns into an auto-description of the I that draws on its life.

The I is aware of the auto-creative power of words. I wrote more about this question in: “Autothematic Description in Poetry by Women: The Case of Joanna Pollakówna”. *Forum of Poetics* 20 (2020): 34–49.

⁶ Grażyna Borkowska, *Nierozważna i nieromantyczna. O Halinie Poświatowskiej* [Senseless and unsensible: About Halina Poświatowska] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001), 9.

⁷ Tadeusz Peiper, *Tędy. Nowe usta* [This way. New mouth] with a preface and an introduction by Stanisław Jaworski, ed. Teresa Podowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), 361.

Małgorzata Czermińska, years ago, defined four models of femininity rooted in the literature of the 1920s and 1930s and developed after World War 2. Those were: the nostalgic model, the feminist model, the sensual-emotional model and the intellectual-aesthetic model.⁸ Poświatowska's poetry was said to exemplify the sensual-emotional model, and it has been interpreted within this framework since. However, I would argue that it might also be examined in terms of its intellectual and aesthetic qualities – Poświatowska's poems are ironically distanced and erotically sophisticated. At times, questions of gender, sex, and sensuality are concealed – they are not always as exposed as in *Lustro* [Mirror]. Sometimes, as in [*nie potrafię być tylko człowiekiem*]/[*I cannot be merely a human...*], they are subdued. The poem may thus be interpreted without referring to the context of femininity. And although Poświatowska is probably not the best example of an independent “New Woman,” in her autothematic poems she was certainly a freethinking “new woman writer.”⁹ She followed in the footsteps of the 19th-century “woman writer” who, in pursuing her metapoetic interests, also wrote about her life as a woman.¹⁰

It is important not to limit Poświatowska's poetry to the nostalgic, the physical, and the emotional. If we read it only as love poetry, Poświatowska will forever be trapped in a rather conventional interpretative context. Although Poświatowska died before the advent of second-wave feminism, she nevertheless tried to build her own independence, step by step, consistently breaking the oppositions between body and nature as well as between intellect and aesthetics. It is precisely the tension between the two that seems to inspire new readings. It gives rise to the textualization of the body and the somatization of words, which strengthens and emphasizes the presence of the I. The poetess keenly explored the possibilities of somatopoetics and autobiographical storytelling, redirecting attention from language as the subject of expression to personal and psychocorporeal experience, which is something we often notice in poetry written by women. As such, we might read Poświatowska's works in the context provided by vitalism, the non-metaphysical body and its intimate and personal experience, where the celebration of the body is combined with thanatological reflection.¹¹ This poetry is also auto/bio/centric. In its self-reflexivity, it is open to what is both human and non-human, and thus creatively and critically anticipates the contexts of ecopoetics and biosemiotics. It paves the way for the future generation of poetesses.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁸ Grażyna Borkowska, Małgorzata Czermińska, Ursula Philips, *Pisarki polskie od średniowiecza do współczesności: przewodnik* [Polish women writers from the Middle Ages to the present: A Guide] (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2000), 174.

⁹ Cf. *Nowa Kobieta – figury i figuracje* [The new woman – figures and figurations], ed. Inga Iwasiów, Aleksandra Krukowska, Agata Zawiszewska (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2017).

¹⁰ Cf. More on the topic: Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, “Nowa kobieta pisząca? O projektach kobiecości we współczesnej twórczości poetek” [A new woman writer? On Femininity in the works of contemporary women poets], in: *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, 408–425.

¹¹ Cf. Anna Legeżyńska, “Witalizm kobiecy. Mapa problemów, sieć tradycji” [Feminine vitalism: A map of problems, a web of traditions], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 32 (2018): 17, 25.

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KEYWORDS

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autothematicism

ABSTRACT:

The interpretation of the poem [*I cannot be merely a human*] from the collection *Oda do dłoni* [Ode to hands] allows the author to reflect on Halina Poświatowska's poetry. Contrary to stereotypical readings, Poświatowska's poetry is characterized not only by emotionality but also by strong intellectualization and meta-reflexivity. Poświatowska's selected poems are analyzed with a view to explaining how the poetess skillfully constructs emotions and makes use of the poetic possibilities of language, paying particular attention to form. Autothematicism is for Poświatowska a language that allows her to tell and authenticate her autobiographical story through writing. The textualization of the body and the somatization of words strengthen the psychosomatic presence of the I.

metapoetics

CONTEMPORARY POLISH POETRY

interpretation

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