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Freedom as vulgarity in the poetry of débating poets at the watershed moment of 1989

In the PRL's poetry, prose, and drama, as well as in cinema and songs, there were almost no vulgarisms present. In that respect, the art of the entire 45-year period seems a time of great prudery. The PRL's culture and art, despite many allusions to folk topics or stylisations drawn from popular culture, was part of the high circulation, somewhat based on the principles of the applicable doctrine. In fact, that was a symptomatic paradox: the state, which referred to itself as a "people's republic", considering all its projects clearly directed *pro populo*, e.g. moderating social promotion, combating illiteracy, collectivisation of the countryside, nationalisation of industry, the fight for trade, etc., existed within an extremely elitist paradigm, which was reflected also in a communicative fork. Thus immersed in official circulation PRL could not and did not intend to teach the working nation of the cities and villages foul, obscene, blasphemous words – in fact, no form of ill lexis whatsoever. The borderline were euphemisms: all the instances of *psiakrew* [damn], *cholera* [bugger], or even euphemistic litotes: *cholewka* [little damn] and *kurka* [shoot], all the way until the parodies of low speech such as the famous Bareja's *motyla noga* [butterfly's leg].

Another paradox was the fact that stronger words or those actually vulgar started appearing in the post-WWII culture of Poland only, and actually rather late, in the translations of foreign books or in the voice-overs of films from behind the Iron Curtain. Today, it is difficult to decide whether that was part of an ideological plan to indicate that the foul West spoke in foul language, or a type of shame of the ethical and aesthetic didactics of socialism. Nonetheless, it was not a trivial problem as linguistic transgressions were often the triggers of contestation or revolutionary moods. Polish futurists, including communising Tuwim, were not frugal in their lexical choices, thus taking revenge on the hated bourgeois reality through, as Stanisław Barańczak excellently defined it, a revenge on language. Therefore, it was a substitute, an image-based revenge, which, by

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the way, for ages has been validated with the well-known topos of *in effigie*. Its tradition dates back to antiquity; it was particularly eagerly used in Roman satire and lampoon works. It might be possible that the excessive representation of thick talk in old Polish works by Calvinist poets led by the unrivalled Rej was also an expression of a negation of the dominant doctrine, and the practice of Catholicism, not just a sign of moral freedom, and naturalness of linguistic conduct of the masters of farm and literary houses.

Let us, however, return from that long journey. The PRL did not speak beautifully. The language of labourers did not even reach the standard depicted by Marek Hłasko in *Baza Sokółowska* or *Pierwszy dzień w chmurach*. Anyone who had ever heard the soundscape of a construction site, a factory or a military unit, must have noticed that. Nor was beautiful speech something practised by educated people in the post-WWII state, artists in particular. While in the first, proletariat (to define it based on class), circulation one must today rely on self-reflective memory, the intelligentsia left many relics of its linguistic rites in the form of autobiographies, recollections about stars, collections of anecdotes, etc. Even such subtle women as Kalina Jędrusik or Beata Tyszkiewicz delivered during the intermissions in their stage performances or on film sets transgressions of thick army talk, if you will. That remained in clear contrast to the image of the characters they created: ethereal lovers, aristocratic ladies, true embodiments of immaculate elegance and top manners. Their fellow directors, the likes of Kazimierz Dejmek or Kazimierz Kutz could be excused based on their tension-filled working conditions, but in their case as well the regular recipient of art could have expected some moderation – the former was, in fact, the model party theatre entrepreneur, while the latter represented Silesia with its ethos and proper upbringing.

Why, then, did artists, the admired and often considered as model judges of elegance, curse so pungently while acting in or directing national or regional classics? Was it a manifestation of freedom – at least from linguistic duty? An element of their lifestyles? Or maybe quite the opposite: an ideological, though not official, validation of the main role they played: of the working intelligent? No one would say that it had always been like that in the discussed groups. If one compared the anecdotes left by Igor Śmiałowski to those in which Gustaw Holoubek held court as their narrator or protagonist, one would immediately notice a striking change in the style. Humour remained, obviously, punchlines were always hilarious, but the level of the vocabulary used plummeted. Some might say that actresses thus fulfilled their emancipatory ambitions, somewhat resembling women-soldiers or women-labourers they indicated that they were just as tough as their masculine surroundings. Others could add that the fact of adopting the language of the lowest classes constituted a sign of a dramatic attempt at defending their threatened professional position in the new social context. That is fairly doubtful. Though the words uttered by Kalina Jędrusik to a theatre fireman who informed her about

the need to put out her cigarette while on stage: “fuck off, fireman” could, if one tried hard enough, be considered as a result of class courage (but to prove it, it would require the intellectual qualifications of Stanisław Dygat), Gustaw Holoubek’s master/plebeian retort to Jan Himilbach’s call: “intelligents, get the fuck out of here” in the café of Czytelnik: “I don’t know about you, Ladies and Gentlemen, but I’m getting the fuck out of here” solidified the status of the demiurge of reality rather than a defender of the lost cause.

That which they did not have the opportunity to hear from the backstage of domestic art, the recipients of imported popular culture in the PRL could hear in American films, in which from underneath the smooth voice-over there crept out various *fucks* and *shits*. Not immediately, of course, even after the thaw which ended Socialist realism. One had to wait out the period of morally just and linguistically proper westerns to finally immerse oneself in the soundsphere of gangster films. The same applied to music: Elvis Presley had not started to curse in song, but the Rolling Stones had, while their punk rock successors went all out in the matter, with their curses even deserving muting in English-speaking countries by record labels. Polish fans of the Sex Pistols probably approved of their language and were certainly excited about the combination of social rebellion with a linguistic revolt. Well, in domestic productions of the Socialist realism, i.e. dud and painfully smoothed out, pop culture, only SS men and other villains in Nazi uniforms cursed. Provided that, of course, they were not Soviet undercover agents, like Agent J-23. Hans Kloss did not swear, even the more pungent lines assigned to him, upon careful examination of all the episodes (once it became possible thanks to home video recordings), proved mere legends. Similarly, to draw from a different tale, to the alleged ending of one of the episodes of *Miś z okienka*.

Neither did the tank squad from the popular television series *Cztery pancerni i pies* nor Red Army soldiers from hundreds of films, with which both teenagers and adults were tormented, swear. That was strange in the light of the stories of the still living witnesses of WWII, but the audience accepted that extremely refined film and inter-nationalistic convention. People who travelled the tourist and trade friendship train to the USSR, the buyers of illegal recordings of the performances of Vladimir Vysotsky or the listeners to Alexander Galich’s broadcasts on Radio Liberty, had a firm opinion on that. Some liberty at taming obscene language was also ensured by the intelligentsia’s playing on words, e.g. the famous “gra półsłówek” (spoonerisms), which was already known in Poland in the inter-war period (Julian Tuwim), and which was perfected in terms of its transgressive limits, in fact in line with its English provenance, at universities (Stanisław Barańczak). The switching of the first syllables in words had always been amusing: from the tame pre-WWII phrases like: “grała babka w salopie” (upon switching: “grandma shits while galloping”) or “pradziadek przy saniach” (“grandpa

shits by the ladies”), through those rooted in Stalinist lexis, such as: “stój Halina” (“Stalin’s dick”) or “pokój hutnika” (“penitent’s dick”), to those clearly related to later decades, such as the one which referred to the cycling Peace Race: “pikująca Szozda” (“shocking cunt”). In fact, to explain the essence of spoonerisms, one could always seek less blasphemous examples, e.g. “domki w Słupsku” (“straws in the arse”), “słynna praczka” (“free-flowing diarrhoea”), or the almost neutral within anatomical nomenclature “tenis w porcie” (“penis in cake”).

There were also various phonetic stylisations related to the sounding of foreign languages: requiring French displaced accent (“trę dupą o trotuar” or “lej na mur”), necessitating the combination of Japanese lexemes (“na chuj mi ta chata”, “macha jajami jako tako”, “kiła jaja mu harata”), or begging the monosyllabic Chinese scansion (“pękl chuj”, known in the civil version as “pękl tynk”). There had even appeared some, absolutely unexpected in terms of their location, yet justified with the nationalities of dictators: Stalin and Ceaușescu allusions to the sound of Georgian (“kał ma na wardze”) or Romanian (“srał na deskę”). Finally, also jargon stylisations in which consecutive words formed tabooed vulgar formations. That sophisticated scatologia was supplemented by much less fanciful jokes, usually told by men among men, the racy aphorisms assigned to Boy or Sztudynger, indecent quotes allegedly or actually borrowed from course literary traditions, or pornographic enumerations emulating children’s counting-out rhymes. This study cannot serve as a justification of their low nature, which is why in their case no examples shall be provided. Then again, a separate question is what actually justified them then. Was it the nature of human communication? The eternal need to swear due to pain, fear, or resistance? The inclination rooted in the human mind to break the taboo? The pathological pleasure in coprolalia?

The stepping stone for that should be literature, or actually a specific moment in its Polish history, which is why it is time to tilt the spotlight that way. A turning point in Poland in the approach of writers to the language of impudence was undoubtedly the release of *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Actually, it was the final, shocking through its slatternly vocabulary monologue of Molly Bloom. There is no sufficient space in this article to interpret it or offer an intellectual discussion of it; That has been done many times before in the most recognised literary studies. What was symptomatic was the delayed reception of the pre-WWII scandalising work by the Irish author in the post-WWII Poland of the age of the late and unwaveringly morally conservative Gomułka. Truth be told, *Ulysses* was read by a handful of those who purchased the legendary blue copy. Usually, people were content with reading only the final monologue by the protagonist awoken by her husband. That revealed yet another feature of the PRL’s erudition, i.e. its fragmentary nature. The initial pages of Proust with his integral madelaine, and the final, probably less boring, but more linguistically challenging, fragments of

Joyce. From Mann: only the titles and the names of the characters. Out of mercy, let us remain with the author of the fortunes and the peregrinations of the contemporary Odysseus. Surely the solid wall of the text which had to be faced by the Polish readers of *Ulysses* was not pulled down intellectually, but the very ascertainment that one can write in that manner and it is befitting, that an acclaimed work of which people learn at school and university, could include similar strange passages, albeit rapidly flowing down the rush and changing current of the stream of consciousness, was shocking.

That which James Joyce did not manage to do was done a few years later through a book which was also delayed in Poland, yet at least not released posthumously, by Henry Miller, who offered a much less linguistically complicated, much more expressive in terms of the story, much more pungent in terms of the descriptions, message for a less sophisticated perception. His prose, especially that which was read for the millions of listeners of the *Lato z radiem* show, could not had gone unnoticed through the Polish literary market. Just like the whole wave of translations of American belles lettres by Anna Kołyszko, equally skilled as the original authors. Yet it was Miller who was the key to the imagination and the linguistic courage of Polish authors of the political watershed period. He himself defined the language of *Tropic of Capricorn* as an insult to the seven fundamental values and symbols of culture: Art, God, Humanity, Destiny, Time, Love, and Beauty. Such an insult was certainly craved by a considerable group of debuting writers of the initial stage of the Polish transformation – in literature, song, and film, as well as in theatre, and the plastic arts. Focussing on the first three domains, and only listing: Andrzej Stasiuk in stories (*Mury Hebronu*), Kazik Staszewski in song (*Spalam się*), Władysław Pasikowski in film (*Kroll, Psy*).

Interestingly enough, that scatologic characteristic also appeared in poetry, mainly due to the debut book of Marcin Świetlicki (the *Zimne kraje* collection), and his stage performances of his lyrics (a record *Ogród koncentracyjny*). That spirit also permeated the first anthologies of the emerging generation (*Przyszli barbarzyńcy*, *Po Wojaczku 2*, *Macie swoich poetów*). It would be difficult to decide which of the above-listed ideological and aesthetic backgrounds were in that case the most important. Maybe rock, possibly the already mentioned literature, which should encompass the prose and the poems of Anthony Burgess, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Charles Bukowski. Contrary to what is most often indicated as their inspiration, neither New York nor Liverpool poets took delight in curses. The linguistic revolt stemmed from a slightly different atmosphere. The texts of theatre stars of the last decade of the 20th c. in Poland could be a good reference: Werner Schwab (*Mariedl/Antiklima(x)*), Mark Ravenhill (*Fucking and Shopping*) or Sarah Kane (*Blasted*). The terms *toilet* or *faecal drama* somewhat reserved for the works of the Austrian scandal-maker could be transplanted onto

a big part of the young poetry of the transformation period, because nasty language and nasty reality seemed in all the works equally their existential essence, an actual vision of the world not subject to falseness.

The cesspool of words and representations fulfilled a similar function to Artaud's plague: one must go through it to become cleansed. Actually, it was a cesspool made of words, because language appeared in that case as the highest guarantee of existence. Language understood as a landfill of the old culture, a pile of waste, a gigantic dump, where the beastly mindless human tribe scours. It replaced hell in the good old aesthetics of the classics because hell had ceased to exist, or rather: the hell of today has only become a striking mask of the evil wild man, while Schwab or Kane, who was younger than him but who died in similarly tragic circumstances, also wanted to show us the evil beast. In poetry, that translated into the convention of *In-yer-face theatre*: to write while having one's head immersed in a pool of waste; selecting lexis tainted with foul physiology; a veristic record of the experiences of the body; post-symbolic attributes of things and characters. In Schwab's works, a woman anointed all things and members of her family with lard in order to paste the household reality together, a man masturbates to drain deadly liquids from his body and "not to besmear the world with fatherhood." An act of violence, including its verbal type, becomes the last line of communication because in it people meet at least for a moment in a ritual of reverse love, i.e. hatred. The ascertainment of that anti-aesthetics and the essentially heroic ethics is grim: there is no opportunity for cleansing, there is no *catharsis*. Just as there is no avoiding the trap of one's own body, i.e.: oneself.

Therefore, the poetics is dominated by *antyclimax*, a figure which consists of thwarting the high fork of poetry through the introduction of the elements of boorishness and vulgarity. The stylistic contrast between apologia and irony, anti-gradation falling into banality or, perfectly described by Alexander Pope, *bathos*, i.e. the opposite of pathos tossed into ridiculousness, could just as well be the poetics of the world in a serious or buffo tone. Much depends on the modal frame, and the context. One thing is certain: obscenity clad in the robes of a satyricon, as discussed by the Enlightenment author, is easier to accept in aesthetic terms than the brutal blasphemy of the Austrian "defilers of the nest" of the late-20th c., devoid of any pretence of a joke (because it was not only Schwab, also his older fellow writers: Thomas Bernhardt and Elfriede Jelinek). That aesthetic has appeared in Polish poetry after the political turning point exceptionally often. It has continued to experience its unfinished initiations, it results from the oppression of the literary traditions, but also from the current ideological or social oppressions. From the ancient priapeia (indecent epigrams on the walls of a temple), through the mediaeval *fabliaux* (obscene fair comics on a board), all the way to modern kinaidologia (anonymous pornographic songs in stage performances and comedy

shows), not much has changed. Contemporary culture is mainly oppressed by pop culture, so any reactions to it are fostered by pop cultural images and props: popular films, television series, computer games, media events, or the non-virtual crackling reality itself. In the anti-collage composed of them, there occur reductions and humiliations of decorum, which the ancients used to call *tapeinosis* and *humilitas*.

Therefore, vulgarity is a form of protest against the existing reality: the official language of first and second-circulation poetry, with its grandeur, celebration, bombastic framing, and contours. It is used for opening the literary “cardboard door” in order to vent the stench left by those fake and disgraced poems, in terms of their lexis and imagery. Opening, of course, by kicking in the door, in a vandalic act of the desperation of brutalists, and new wild poetries. It was also – as indicated at the beginning of the study – revenge *in effigie* on the old and new elites, on the political, economic, social, literary, and, not to be omitted, publishing establishment. A revenge, the style of which resembled the most obscene acts of the expressionistic or futuristic avant-garde, simply transformed by new experiences, stronger, more pungent, and more distasteful. Poets in the *don't-sit-by-me mood* ordered to “fuck off” those who were willing to do that, and shouted at the water in the kettle, hopefully only to it, “boil, bitch, boil” (Marcin Świetlicki), delivered using Joyce’s phrase “a kick in the arse for Maciek Chełmicki” (Dariusz Foks), asked “where do we come from? who we are? who will blow us?” (Cezary Domarus), hoping, though, that Agent Scully will give them the “blow job of the century” (Dariusz Foks), dreamt “dreams sweet like hell” (Marcin Baran), because, unlike the representatives of older generations, they did not see “a fuck’s worth of ideals” (Marcin Baran, Marcin Sendecki, Marcin Świetlicki).

Freedom—from preventive censorship, ethos-based duties, and high traditions—appeared after 1989 in some of its début incarnations as vulgarity. There was more of it, worse in literary terms, artistically useless, and sometimes completely talentless. It faded quickly under the pens of truly exceptional writers because vulgarisms proved to be in poetry a commodity with an exceptionally short shelf life. They lost their attribute of an intriguing novum. It was quickly taken up by the language of the young street, apartment block complexes, and stadiums or music/lyrics phenomena such as rap. Also the creators of comedy shows and films capitalised on its course strong current. Poetry has retained a few clichés and labels which drive the authors of old mad. This time, though, a mood expressed in literary Polish.

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Freedom as vulgarity in the poetry of debuting poets at the watershed moment of 1989

(Summary)

The article is dedicated to artistic vulgarity as a form of freedom of art manifesto. The author explains that using obscene and drastic language which breaks social taboos (particularly sexual ones), has often been caused by the need for artistic freedom. This phenomenon can be observed especially in the so-called communist era (1944–1989) but most importantly in the period of political system's transformation after 1989. By the example of literature, film, theatre and broadly defined popular culture the author analyzes this process, paying special attention to various 'traps' in the usage of vulgar language and artistic expressions, as well as the ultimate high art's retreat from that strategy.

Keywords: vulgarity, obscenity, freedom, transformation, Polish literature and culture of the 20th century.