

**HERMENEUTICS
AND
LITERATURE**

PHAINOMENA

Revija za fenomenologijo in hermenevtiko
Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

31 | 120-121 | June 2022

Andrzej Wierciński & Andrej Božič (*Eds.*)

HERMENEUTICS AND LITERATURE

Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko

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Fenomenološko društvo v Ljubljani

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In collaboration with:

IIH

International Institute for Hermeneutics

Institut international d'herméneutique

Ljubljana 2022

PHAINOMENA

Revija za fenomenologijo in hermenevtiko

Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

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Lektoriranje: | **Proof Reading:** Andrej Božič
Oblikovna zasnova: | **Design Outline:** Gašper Demšar
Prelom: | **Layout:** Žiga Stopar
Tisk: | **Printed by:** Primitus, d. o. o.

Uredništvo in založništvo: | Editorial Offices and Publishers' Addresses:

Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko
Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities

Fenomenološko društvo v Ljubljani
Phenomenological Society of Ljubljana

Vodovodna cesta 101
1000 Ljubljana
Slovenija

Filozofska fakulteta | Oddelek za filozofijo (kab. 432b)

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Revija *Phainomena* objavlja članke s področja fenomenologije, hermenevtike, zgodovine filozofije, filozofije kulture, filozofije umetnosti in teorije znanosti. Recenzentske izvode knjig pošiljajte na naslov uredništva. Revija izhaja štirikrat letno. Za informacije glede naročil in avtorskih pravic skrbi *Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko*.

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The journal *Phainomena* covers the fields of phenomenology, hermeneutics, history of philosophy, philosophy of culture, philosophy of art, and phenomenological theory of science. Books for review should be addressed to the Editorial Office. It is published quarterly. For information regarding subscriptions and copyrights please contact the *Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities*.

Finančna podpora: | Financially Supported by:

Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije | Slovenian Research Agency

Članki v reviji so objavljeni v okviru: | Papers in the journal are published within the framework of:

- Raziskovalni program P6-0341 | Research program P6-0341;
- Infrastrukturni program I0-0036 | Infrastructure program I0-0036.

Revija *Phainomena* je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze: | The journal *Phainomena* is indexed in:

Digitalna knjižnica Slovenije; DOAJ; EBSCO; Emerging Sources Citation Index (Web of Science); ERIH PLUS; Humanities International Index; Internationale Bibliographie der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Zeitschriftenliteratur; Internationale Bibliographie der Rezensionen geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Literatur; Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts; ProQuest; Revije.si (JAK); Scopus; Social Science Information Gateway; Social Services Abstracts; Sociological Abstracts; The Philosopher's Index; Ulrich's Periodicals Directory; Worldwide Political Science Abstracts.

Enojna številka: | Single Issue: 10 €
Dvojna števila: | Double Issue: 16 €

Spletna stran: | Website:
phainomena.com

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»... v presežnosti jezika.« Pripis

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POETRY AND THE CHALLENGE OF UNDERSTANDING

TOWARDS A DECONSTRUCTIVE HERMENEUTICS

Patryk SZAJ

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Abstract

The first part of the paper is the author's contribution to the hermeneutics–deconstruction debate on the status of the literary work and the role of the reader. The author's considerations head towards a conception of “deconstructive hermeneutics of poetry,” stating that the literary text both requires understanding and guards itself against the violence of its uniformization. The second part of the paper involves deconstructive-hermeneutic interpretations of the works of three Polish poets:

Aleksander Wat, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Krystyna Miłobędzka. The author notices their “touching acuteness,” i.e., their refusal of an all-encompassing reading. More important, however, is the way all the poets cultivate their own “deconstructive hermeneutics” of existence. In Wat’s case, it is a hermeneutics of the suffering body. Różewicz is approached from the side of the problem of “the death of poetry.” Miłobędzka turns out to be a poetess who delivers her idea of “releasement.”

Keywords: hermeneutics, deconstruction, poetry, Aleksander Wat, Tadeusz Różewicz, Krystyna Miłobędzka.

Poezija in izziv razumevanja. Na poti k dekonstrukcijski hermenevtiki

Povzetek

418 Prvi del članka predstavlja avtorjev prispevek k hermenevtično-dekonstrukcijski diskusiji o statusu literarnega dela in vlogi bralca. Avtorjevi razmisleki se usmerjajo k zasnutku »dekonstrukcijske hermenevtike poezije«, kolikor literarno besedilo obenem terja razumevanje in samo sebe varuje pred nasiljem njegovega uniformiranja. Drugi del članka vključuje dekonstrukcijsko-hermenevtične interpretacije del treh poljskih pesnikov: Aleksandra Wata, Tadeusza Różewicza in Krystyne Miłobędzke. Avtor razgrinja njihovo »dotikajočo silnost«, se pravi, njihovo odklanjanje vseobsegajočega branja. Toda pomembnejši je predvsem način, na katerega vsi pesniki gojijo svojo lastno »dekonstrukcijsko hermenevtiko« eksistence. V Watovem primeru gre za hermenevtiko trpečega telesa. Różewiczu se članek približa z vidika problema »smrti poezije«. Miłobędzka se izkaže za pesnico, ki podaja svojo idejo »sproščenosti«.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, dekonstrukcija, poezija, Aleksander Wat, Tadeusz Różewicz, Krystyna Miłobędzka.

I would like to propose a deconstructive hermeneutics of poetry. This rather strange formula (are hermeneutics and deconstruction not contradictory theories? Well, they are not, as a handful of well-established scholars had tried to show many times before me)¹ may turn out to be even stranger if we realize that the very term “hermeneutics of poetry” is ambiguous enough to call it an amphibology. Though it can be understood as a hermeneutic work of understanding what poetry is (in terms of ontology) and how it functions in reader’s reception (in terms of epistemology), it is possible—and even more interesting—to comprehend it as a hermeneutics that is cultivated by poetry itself. I intend to elaborate on this structural ambiguity to show how contemporary Polish poetry can be seen as a deconstructive hermeneutics dealing with the challenge of understanding.

On understanding, once again

Let me start with some general remarks on a rather well-acquired issue. The basic hermeneutic concept of understanding is both well-known and constantly ... misunderstood. It is surprisingly easy to find—in 20th-century humanities as well as in the latest thought—strange comments distorting its meaning. It was common, for instance, for (post-)structuralists to formulate critical thoughts on hermeneutic “naivety,” as if hermeneutics were about finding a “secret,” profound (“abysmal,” one would be tempted to say) meaning of a literary text or any kind of phenomenon indeed. Roland Barthes, for example, wrote about two possible modes of the signification of signified (*signifié*), upon which the literary text closes:

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either it is claimed to be apparent, and the work is then the object of a science of the letter, which is philology; or else this signified is said to be secret and final, and must be sought for, and then the work depends upon a hermeneutics, an interpretation (Marxist, psychoanalytic, thematic, etc.); in short, the work itself functions as a general sign, and it is natural that it should represent an institutional category of

¹ See: Caputo 1987; 2000; 2018; Gasché 2000; Güney and Güney 2008; Hoy 1985; Leitch 1983; Palmer 1979; Silverman 1994; Silverman and Ihde 1985, as well as many others.

the civilization of the Sign. (Barthes 1986, 58–59; see also: Dybel 2012, 66–67.)

In this view, it is obvious that the hermeneutic desire of “delving deeper” (Barthes 1986, 59) into the work should be replaced by the joyful, infinite play of the perpetual signifier. But the assumption is also that this tracing (hunting connotations intended) is somehow dangerous for the text itself, because it transcends the text to find its external meaning. One of the most important Polish structuralists Janusz Sławiński even stated sarcastically that:

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The service, which [the hermeneut] enjoys, is reduced to trusting submission to the initiative of the work, to listening to the pulsation of its semantics without prejudice and anticipation, to patiently capturing the impulses flowing from there. In order not to hurt the work, he tries hard to disarm himself [...]. He is a tolerant being, full of good will, and kindly open to otherness (Otherness). He will be rewarded: the work will entrust him with its secrets and make its essential meaning accessible. This kind of hypocrisy has been perpetuated by virtually all hermeneutic thought. (Sławiński 2000, 70; see also: Januszkiewicz 2007, 11.)

In short: underneath hermeneutic good will to understand lies the “good will to power,” as Jacques Derrida dared to say to Hans-Georg Gadamer during their infamous encounter in 1981 in Paris (see: Derrida 1989b).²

Today, that (post-)structuralist popular belief is often re-stated by the so-called new humanities (new materialism, actor-network theory, affect theory, etc.), and by many literary scholars who turn “against interpretation,” as Susan Sontag had done 55 years ago (Sontag 1966; see: Gumbrecht 2003). Moreover, in the field of environmental humanities, it is often believed that hermeneutics

² The editors of the volume *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* decided—as far as I am concerned, inequitably—to change the original French title and the title of the German translation of Derrida’s intervention. What an example of a good will ... to power! It is worth mentioning, however (even though it is quite a known story), that Derrida, as the years passed, changed his mind (see: Derrida 2002).

remains an anthropocentric, traditional, and anachronistic discourse, which is not true, as some authors, myself included, tried to prove (see: Caputo 2018; Clingerman et al. 2013; Romele 2019; Szaj 2021).

The most common mistake of those who remain skeptical towards hermeneutics is that they address it as a kind of a method. But hermeneutics is not a method—far from it. It is a theory and practice of understanding, which is quite obvious to the readers of Heidegger and Gadamer. As we know, Heidegger grasped understanding as a pre-ontology of human being, “a fundamental *existentiale*,” “a basic mode of Dasein’s *Being*,” which situates itself at the core of one’s existence: “The kind of Being which Dasein has, as potentiality-for-Being, lies existentially in understanding.” (Heidegger 2001, 182–83.) Contrary to most of the common-sense usages of the concept, understanding is not equal to “understandability” (or intelligibility) of the world. It is not a positive phenomenon, rather a negative one:

in so far as understanding is accompanied by state-of-mind and as such is existentially surrendered to thrownness, Dasein has in every case already gone astray and failed to recognize itself. In its potentiality-for-Being it is therefore delivered over to the possibility of first finding itself again in its possibilities. (Heidegger 2001, 184.)

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This notion of understanding was re-established by Gadamer who linked it with the concepts of the horizon and the history of effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). According to the author of *Truth and Method*, “[t]he historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is rather something into which we move and that moves with us.” (Gadamer 2004, 303.) From this, I would like to draw two conclusions. First, understanding is a fundamentally open (and incessant) movement of thought, as opposed to being a closed method. Second, one cannot be “against hermeneutics”—if anything, one can be against a particular version or concretization of hermeneutic theory. So, where is the rub?

Well, one is often tempted not to be faithful to the “original difficulty of life” (Caputo 1987, 1) stemming from an honest consideration of this hermeneutic

logic. The condition of the thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) means that a human being is fundamentally lost and needs some anchorages. These anchorages, however, often are metaphysical lies, as Friedrich Nietzsche taught us. That is why I agree with John D. Caputo that hermeneutics needs some kind of a deconstructive “twist” (see: Caputo 1987; 2000). To be more precise, I believe that hermeneutics is always susceptible to deconstruction, such as deconstruction is not something applicable to hermeneutics from outside, but something that always already works in hermeneutics: understanding never comes to rest, the hermeneutic circle never closes, horizons always move, and we move with them. In this view, hermeneutics and deconstruction are not as much opposite, as interlinked discourses, bound in a Derridean “double bind.”

422 Figuratively speaking, we can find in such radicalized hermeneutics a particular trope, which is *contradictio in adiecto*. In contrast to the traditional expositions of hermeneutics as “displaying,” “explaining,” or “transferring,” it emphasizes specifically conceived “undisplayability,” “inexplainability,” and “intransferability,” and its “radicalism” means, contrary to Latin etymology (*radicitus*—rooted), that it lacks access to origins, foundations, or principles. Even though it might seem to be at odds with what we normally associate hermeneutics with, nothing supports this more than Gadamer’s and Derrida’s dialogue on the status of the literary text. And while, it seems, Derrida is constantly on fire, and Gadamer often comes under fire, mingling their theories might be fruitful.

Deconstructive hermeneutics of poetry

Against all appearances, Gadamer and Derrida share a common (though slightly shaky) ground when it comes to the literary text. What is the purpose of hermeneutic reading, according to Gadamer? Of course, it is to grasp its sense. However, it is rather a regulative idea than an actual experience:

it does not mean that the indeterminate anticipation of sense that makes a work significant for us can ever be fulfilled so completely that we could appropriate it for knowledge and understanding in all its meaning. [...] To expect that we can recuperate within the concept the

meaningful content that addresses us in art is already to have overtaken art in a very dangerous manner. (Gadamer 1987, 33.)

What to do, in order not to overtake art? Well, one should abandon every method given in advance and “let something be said” (Gadamer 2007a, 129). Moreover, what the text says, does not confirm our identity and our worldview, on the contrary: “It is not only the impact of a ‘This means you!’ that is disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us: ‘You must change your life!’” (Gadamer 2007a, 131).

Are we not strangely close to Derrida here? For sure, he rejected every longing for a “transcendental signified” (see: Derrida 1997b), but does hermeneutics really look for it? On the one hand, yes, it does, because it takes the form of “transcendent reading,” and in such approach, as Derrida claimed, “reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as a fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos.” (Derrida 1997a, 14.) On the other hand, and this is crucial for my reading of the Gadamer–Derrida (hermeneutics–deconstruction) controversy, it is not so that the author of *Of Grammatology* was totally against the “transcendent” approach. Even more so, he insisted on the indispensability of it: “a text cannot by itself avoid lending itself to a ‘transcendent’ reading. [...] The moment of ‘transcendence’ is irrepressible, but it can be complicated or folded [...]” (Derrida and Attridge 1992, 45). So, it is all about this complication or “frouncing” of hermeneutic reading, not about abandoning hermeneutics. Let me quote one more excerpt, this time from the book on Paul Celan’s poetry (is it not interesting how Derrida and Gadamer shared their interests in the same authors, the same topics?), and let it be a conclusive (though *inclusive*) argument for deconstructive hermeneutics:

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Within the bounds of this generality or this universality, insofar as its meaning is repeatable in this way, a poem acquires the value of a philosopheme. It may offer itself, and it must do so, to the work of a hermeneutics that does not require, for its “internal” reading, access to the singular secret once partaken of by a finite number of witnesses or

participants. The poem itself is already such a hermeneutic event, its writing is a matter of *hermeneuein*, it proceeds from it. (Derrida 2005, 48.)

424 So, what we need here is a repetition of the Gadamer–Derrida debate—repetition, however, conceived in a deconstructive manner: repetition with a displacement, an iteration. Firstly, we could repeat after Gadamer that both hermeneutics and deconstruction are descended from romanticism and intend to derive profound implications of its legacy (Gadamer 2003). So, is not the Derridean notion of the “signature” of author and text and the reader’s “countersignature,” which amends it, something along the lines of the Gadamerian “dialogue” between the text and its reader? In both cases, it seems, we are dealing with a similar ontology of the literary work, which only exists (that means: becomes actualized) in the process of interpretation. And even though this actualization takes place in various ways (more as an “ecumenical” process for Gadamer, more as an “agonistic” exchange for Derrida), we might risk positing the thesis that next to the hermeneutic circle it would be possible to speak of a specific (deprived of its “wholesome” wholeness) deconstructive fractured circle, where the point is likewise an answer to the challenge of the text: “I almost always write in response to solicitations or provocations,” but “my response to such expectations is not always docile” (Derrida and Attridge 1992, 41). In this “provocation” we must hear a *pro-vocatio*, a challenge directed to none other than ourselves, calling to impart a creative answer, to amend the idiom of the text with our idiomatic signature. As is known, Derrida speaks in such cases of invention, but do we not catch him here in the middle of the hermeneutical act? Are we not very close to Gadamer, for whom “understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well. [...] It is enough to say that we understand *in a different way, if we understand at all.*” (Gadamer 2004, 296.) And, last but not least, could we not think of *différance* as the radicalization of hermeneutic *atopon* (see: Cesare 2004; 2006)?

To be sure, Gadamer’s “fragment” is not the same as Derrida’s “trace.” Caputo compellingly noted:

The Gadamerian fragment is a *symbolon* which is to be fitted together with its missing half, which is a perfect match for it, a token by which we can recognize infinity, the whole, the holy. The remain(s) in deconstruction are the [...] *symbolon* which was shattered too badly ever to be fitted together, indeed which never was a whole. (Caputo 2000, 50.)

Well, it takes one (deconstructionist) to know one (hermeneutist). In other words, I believe that this slight disuniting should not be a deterrent for us. Since “[t]here is no hermeneutic recovery without deconstruction and no deconstruction not aimed at recovery” (Caputo 1987, 65), one is tempted to say that the hermeneutic experience understood as the “primordial” situation of being thrown into the world (even if the world of the text) and desiring to find (recover) oneself in that world inheres *at the center* of the deconstructive experience of being shorn of all metaphysical precautions. Subsequently, what the literary work tells us, is not only “This means you!” (though “You must change your life!”), its performative power is even stronger, so that what we can learn from it is that “there is no you—this means you!” (Caputo 2000, 55). “You” is only constituted as an effect of reading, it is *performatively stated*, called into existence by the text. In short: the reader’s identity is relational.

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So, if we agree with Gadamer that the hermeneutic approach to the literary text is based on an assumption of its meaning, we also must see along with him that every kind of hermeneutic experience is quite rugged: “experience in this sense inevitably involves many disappointments of one’s expectations and only thus is experience acquired,” moreover, it is chiefly “painful and disagreeable” (Gadamer 2004, 350). The same goes for the experience of the literary text that Gadamer grasps as “being struck by the meaning of what is said” (Gadamer 2007a, 129). What is important for me, is that in the original German version this “being struck” is set out as *Betroffenheit*—a noun that implies some affectation, some corporeality of the very process of interpretation. An analogical image has been invoked by Gadamer during his encounter with Derrida. He spoke there about the “thrust that the text delivers” (Gadamer 1989, 57), so that one loses oneself in it and needs to restate one’s status. Once again, the corporeal aspect of that “thrust” (an aspect confirmed also by the German original where

we read about *Stoß*) is very clear. Do we not catch Gadamer here in the middle of the deconstructive act?

It comes as no surprise that Derrida himself underscored the bodily status of interpretation, as well. In conversation with Derek Attridge, for instance, he related to the experience of reading as an “ordeal” (but also, importantly, bodily “desire”) (Derrida and Attridge 1992, 50). The ordeal is painful because, as we read elsewhere, there is “no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding” (Derrida 1991, 233), which thus would not, on the one hand, expose itself to interference by the reader, and, on the other, interfere painfully with the reader’s world.

426 Again, a strange agreement amid the dispute. From this, I would like to derive a conception of deconstructive hermeneutics of poetry, which can be characterized figuratively as a concept of a “touching acuteness.” This category seems to have several important assets. First of all, it indicates that understanding is not—regardless of appearances to the contrary—a purely intellectual activity, but also has a bodily dimension, and involves the participation of affects, mood, a certain “orientation” on the reader’s part. Secondly, in such a perspective “staying close to the text” would mean being sensitive to its painful sensations. And, in addition to that, to remain faithful to the text would mean to creatively betray it. Or, in Gadamer’s words on Derrida, it would be a hermeneutics tracking the trace(s) (Gadamer 2007b). Thirdly and finally, “touching acuteness” appears to present itself as an “undecidable” category: on the one hand, it underscores the painful aspect of being struck by the text, while, on the other, it also points towards a certain intimacy, or even eroticism, a tenderness (in both senses of that adjective) in the relationship with the text. On the one hand, it says that the text painfully marks me, on the other, that I intervene in the text, adding to it my countersignature. Everything happens at this intersection, at this point of encounter, in this *inter-esse*, *chiasmus*, “relationship between two experiences, two occurrences or two languages involv[ing] double invagination” (Derrida, after: Markowski 1997, 368). And that figure of the chiasmus can be seen as the radicalized (here meaning: weakened) figure of the fusion of horizons.

The challenge of understanding in contemporary Polish poetry

On the one hand, poetry requires from the reader some kind of deconstructive hermeneutics. On the other hand, however, the poetry itself cultivates radical hermeneutic work. By saying so, I hint at Derrida's notion of poetry as the language of the impossible, that is to say, the language of *the* impossible, but also an *impossible* language being able to express the most inconceivable ideas. Nevertheless, as we also know from Derrida (reading Paul Celan), this comes at a price. The lesson is well-known: "to the keeping of each poem, of every poem, the inscription of a date, of this date [...] is entrusted," but "despite the date, in spite of its memory rooted in the singularity of an event, the poem speaks: to all and in general, and first of all to the other" (Derrida 2005, 6, 7). Or, in the words of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: the uniqueness of the idiom is inevitably forfeited in the very act of writing, in the very act of using language aimed at its salvation (Lacoue-Labarthe 1999). And *this* is "touching acuteness" on the text's end.

So, what interests me, in this part of my paper, is the philosophical awareness of this "writing of the disaster" (see: Blanchot 2015) one can find in contemporary (Polish) poetry. For, if along with Caputo we hear a Latin etymology in the disaster—*dis-astrum* meaning the lack of the lodestar (Caputo 1993, 6)—, we begin to understand that the poetry itself expresses its understanding that understanding is impossible ... and indispensable at the same time. I would like to examine this awareness on the examples of Aleksander Wat, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Krystyna Miłobędzka.

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Aleksander Wat: Expiring

Wat was a Polish author of Jewish origin (let me remind at this point that "all poetic language is, like all poets [...], Jewish in essence"; Derrida 2005, 62) born in 1900 who is best known in the world for his "spoken diary" *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*. His poetry, however, though intellectual and erudite, enforces to me the notion of touching acuteness. In the second part of his life, Wat suffered from a burdensome, detrimental illness called lateral medullary syndrome. In spite of incredible pain (or, rather, thanks to it), he managed to write some radical hermeneutic, and at the same time somatic,

poems. The somatic side has been reaffirmed by the title of his selected poems in English: *With the Skin* (see also: Barańczak 1989). The radical hermeneutic side can be found in the undecidable status of “expiring.”

“Expiring,” I would argue, is the proper name of *différance* structuring Wat’s postwar poetry. Wat himself indicated its aporetic status in his *Diary without Vowels*, referring to it as “everyday—progressing once slowly, gradually, continuously, then in leaps—disintegration,” of which it is impossible to say something disambiguating: it is “neither war nor peace,” “neither life nor death,” nor “a narrow pass or shaky footbridge between life and death,” nor “outliving death, life in death, Heideggerian *Sein zum Tode*, dying in life” (Wat 1990, 39–40). What is of great importance, for Wat, “expiring” is something non-terminating, an expiring without expiration. Even though it is a process of becoming-dead, death itself is constantly deferred. And there is more to it. Sometimes expiring frequents inspiring: it brings the breath of fresh air (like in Latin origin: *in-spirare*, to breath in).

428 Undecidable “expiring” is both a topic and a lining of Wat’s acute poems, of which the most famous is the one under the incipit “The Four Walls of My Pain” (Wat 2007):

The four walls of my pain
have no window no door.
I only hear – the guard
pacing out there and back.

His heavy faceless steps
mark empty survival.
Is it night still or now dawn?
Darkness has become my four walls.

Why does he pace there and back?
How can death’s shadow find me,
when my cell of pain
has no window no door?

Out there life no doubt is a blur
from the blazing bush.

Here the guard paces, there
and back – a shadow without face.

The translation does not do justice to the poem. In the Polish original, it is a steady metrical text, with each line consisting of four trochaic feet. Four walls of pain, four verses, four lines in each verse, four feet in each line. There are (at least) two interpretative possibilities of this construction. First, one can underscore homology between the monotony of the pain and the monotony of the poem, implying the steps of a prisoner walking around the cell. This is Barańczak's path (Barańczak 1989).³ Second, one can see the antinomy between the pain and its record: the poem itself would be an attempt to intellectually control suffering. This ambiguity goes even deeper. Once we begin to ask questions about the formal side of the poem, we begin to consider its influence on the content. Does the poem really confirm absolute confinement? Or maybe there are some gaps, allowing to get through the "four walls"? And, if so, is not what we experience here the contamination of the inside and the outside? *And if so*, is it not a hold taken by the work of *différance*?

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What arrests my attention is the guard. Who or what is he? Is he even *present* in the poem? His status seems to be problematic, to say the least: he controls the prisoner from outside the cell, but he cannot be identified with the figure of the outside. His faceless steps mark empty survival (in Polish original, rather: measure bland continuance) inside the four walls of pain, not the passage of time in the "ordinary" world. Literally (physically?), he is outside the cell, but structurally (spiritually?), he belongs to the closed world of the prisoner. And, there is more: if the pain contained the prisoner in the nonporous prison, then the guard would turn out to be a redundant, hyperbolic, tautological figure. Why is he guarding the prisoner at all, when it is impossible to escape? Indeed, is it impossible?

My answer to these questions would be that the guard is a metaphor for the undecidable "expiring." It may evoke death, but it is not identical with it. It may anticipate death, but death is deferred since its shadow does not have access to

³ See also other works that had dealt with this poem: Dziadek 1999; Pietrych 2009; Śliwiński 2011.

the four walls of pain. It deconstructs binary opposition of the inside and the outside. And, most importantly, it has the ability to break into the prison, as we read in the last verse. Hitherto, it (the guard) was only heard, the prisoner did not command a view of it. Now, something has changed: “*Here* the guard paces, there / and back,” meaning: it is being seen. And if so, the containment is not absolute. The poem is touching, because it moves us, affectively and intellectually, and appears as a call for a “responsible response,” for the compassionate understanding awakened up against someone’s suffering.

Tadeusz Różewicz: Hauntology

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No one in Polish poetry acknowledged Derrida’s already cited statement “no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding” (Derrida 1991, 233) better than Różewicz who even used almost identical phrase in one of his poems: “poetry / like an open wound” (Różewicz 2006b, 326). There are many beguiling reasons to consider Różewicz’s work as a poetic incorporation of deconstructive hermeneutics (see: Szaj 2019), but I will focus my attention on the post-avant-garde, as well as postwar, issue, namely “the death of poetry.”

The problem itself comes from Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno 1983), but Różewicz dealt with it more like it was a question of the Derridean hauntology (Derrida 2006). Why? In terms of classical two-valued logic, we experience a performative contradiction here. It is impossible to write poems after the death of poetry. The thing is that for Różewicz the death of poetry cannot be separated from the diagnosis of the collapse of the metaphysical interpretation of the world, which requires rebuilding poetry from scratch, thoroughly rethinking the situation of a contemporary poet, who not only no longer has his place on earth, but is out of place (or, as Hamlet would say, out of joint). Tomasz Kunz rightly stated:

Różewicz “comes after the end” and that is why he asks with such determination about the sanction of the existence of poetry and the reason for being a poet, and looks for answers; he looks at the world through the eyes of someone “who should have died in principle but

accidentally escaped” and who has faced the actual absence of God. (Kunz 1996, 328; see also: Skrendo 2012; Bogalecki 2014.)

Poetry is dead, but it—almost literally—comes back from the spirit world. So, it is rather *undead*. Is it not so that the death of poetry—like the death itself in Wat’s expiring—is permanently postponed? “Dead” poetry haunts those who outlived its death, returns, again and again, refuses to be forgotten. And, as we read in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, “a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.” (Derrida 2006, 11.) In Różewicz’s poetry, the same movement takes place as in the spectral haunting—an anachronistic movement that calls into question the contemporaneity of what is present, indicating the inalienable nature of heritage (“you have to walk / with all the years / [...] / with all faces of the dead / with the faces of the living”; Różewicz 2006a, 364), but also making us aware that “there is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation.” (Derrida 2006, 114.)

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What comes from the past, needs to be re-established by virtue of the future. Or, to be more precise, we do not know where the specter precisely comes from: “It is a proper characteristic of the specter, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future [...]” (Derrida 2006, 123). Among Różewicz’s poems, one is particularly noteworthy due to this disjointing—“The Larva”:⁴

I am dead
and I have never been
so attached to life
[...]

4 Since I do not have access to the English translation of the poem (see: Różewicz 1976, 95–99), I present it in my translation.

I am dead
and I have never talked so much
about the past
and about the future to come
about the future without which life is
supposedly impossible
[...]
I dead cold
fell for the movement
I am eager for the movement I move
from place to place
[...]
I live life to the full
I am so alive
that I cannot imagine
the second death
Me dead busy

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I still write
yet I know that you keep leaving
always
with a fragment
with a fragment of the whole
of the whole
of what
am I the larva of the new?

It comes from Linnaeus that we associate larva with immature forms of animals. However, the original Latin meaning remained: a ghost, a specter, a disembodied spirit. So, “The Larva” is a poem about specters, a spectral poem, a poem-specter. It deconstructs binary oppositions between life and death, between presence and absence, and at the same time, it introduces some structural anachronism, denying a bond relationship between presence and present. What is more, if understanding, so to speak, runs in a circle, it is a dislocated, fractured one, in which we can only track traces, without any hope for the totality. And yet, it is the very (fluxional) foundation of life, the impossible condition for the possibility of the impossible—the future to come:

“The time that is out of joint is a messianic time, a time that does not close in upon itself, that is structurally ex-posed to an out-side that prevents closure.” (Caputo 1997, 123.) *No apocalypse, not now*, we could repeat after Derrida. Saint John’s “second death” is not an option for us if we understand that what dies immediately becomes the larva of the new, even if this is a painful process of fracturing (meaning: turning into fragments), dislocating, cracking down. You have to distort the old form, in order for the new one to be born. Poetry has to die in order to circle back ... from the future.

Krystyna Miłobędzka: Poetic dwelling

Krystyna Miłobędzka, born in 1932, is usually associated with Polish linguistic poetry and the tradition of concrete poetry. She adds Zen Buddhism to this list of inspirations. All together, combined in an original way, result in a poetic project close to John D. Caputo’s radical hermeneutics and, at the same time, Martin Heidegger’s idea of “releasement” (*Gelassenheit*).

As for radical hermeneutics, Miłobędzka seems to remain faithful to its basic rule: keeping one’s eyes peeled to the flux, restoring life to its original difficulty. Movement (often conceived as a run with no cause or purpose) is of frequent appearance in her poems, sometimes it is also their formal organizing principle (as in liberature-like “Shifting Rhyme”). The one thing we can take for granted is the groundlessness of this constant transition. The world we live in is ever-changing, never ready, permanently becoming. Flux, however, does not provoke the Nietzschean *amor fati*. On the contrary, it is awe-inspiring—every epiphany comes directly from it:

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I am. Co-living, co-active, complicit. Co-green, co-ligneous. I coexist. You do not know what it means yet. Endowed with permeation. I disappear I am. I co-stand (with you) in this vitreous day (with this vitreous day I disappear) that disappears with me so lightly. I do not know what it means. Co-opened with window, co-flowing with the river. I am to know I disappear? I disappear to know I am? Complete but complete is nowhere to be found. Co-flying, co-heavenly. Half a century have I lived for that! (Miłobędzka 2010, 187.)

What we can see here is a human subject dissolving in the world, more than marveling at the world from the human “outside.” And this is another distinctive feature of Miłobędzka’s poetry. Not only a human being is simply a part of a more-than-human world. All the actors of this universe—both human and non-human—wonder at the miracle of existence, or rather, of *the existing*, because nothing in it solidifies in some kind of petrification.

Despite Heidegger’s quite well-known anthropocentrism (see: Derrida 1989a; Garrard 2010), it is very tempting to attribute Miłobędzka to his late idea of “releasement.” The latter, taken mainly from Meister Eckhart, but having something to do with Zen as well, is described in *Country Path Conversations* as an engagement in “non-willing,” resembling “something like rest,” being “capable of letting something be in that in which it rests,” “letting go of things” (Heidegger 2010, 77, 149, 103). Now, what is of great importance, this ability has nothing to do with the subject’s power, it comes from outside the subject who is rather bestowed by it.

434 In Miłobędzka’s poetry, we experience the same movement of releasement, of withdrawing from human mastery over the world, expressed often in the wish of doing nothing more than living (more in a biological, than an anthropological sense), of non-intervening in world-affairs. Precisely here, the metaphor of purposeless running occurs:

I would just like to run
run for nothing
run to nothing
only run itself

run
(Miłobędzka 2010, 333.)

The releasement goes to the point of no agency, of running without the one who runs: “(without the one who struggles to be me)” (Miłobędzka 2010, 337). “Poetically man dwells,” suffice it to say. But in Miłobędzka’s writing dwelling comes down to earth, indeed, so the coda should rather sound: “poetically earthlings dwell.”

That dangerous supplement: To-come

Miłobędzka's case brings us to a close, both literally and figuratively. The paper itself comes to a halt, but the deconstructive hermeneutics of poetry remains open-ended. There are compelling and urgent reasons to take up Miłobędzka's (though, of course, not only) teaching and open hermeneutics to the field of environmental humanities, as has already been proposed (see: Clinger et al. 2013). And what is more likely to help us with this task than poetry—the (impossible) language of the impossible, of the future-to-come, of (unimaginable) imagination? Imagination, it seems, is what we need in a destitute time of environmental and climate catastrophe. And poets—in Poland, for example, Julia Fiedorczuk, Małgorzata Lebda, Szczepan Kopyt, Marcin Ostrychacz, Tomasz Bąk, and Anna Adamowicz—yield it over to us. Let us not negate their labor.

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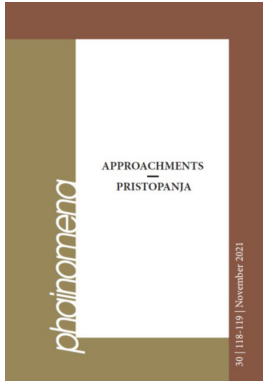
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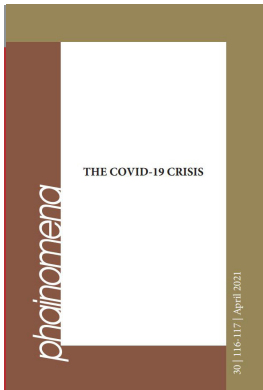
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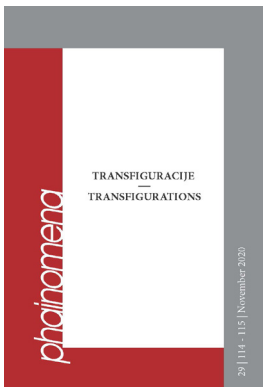


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