

COLLOQUIA LITTERARIA

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SILENCES OF ALEKSANDER WAT

We know Aleksander Wat's propensity for long, complicated, dense and knotty utterances. Such was his debut, *Pieczek* (*A Small Stove*); many years later, in a different manner, *Wiersze śródziemnomorskie* (*Mediterranean Poems*), and in a yet different way *Mój wiek* (*My Century*), or his 'whispered tape-recordings', which actually could be treated as one text, randomly separated into pieces.

We also know that there was a period of silence in his creative biography. As a poet he became silent in 1926. For a long time.

From the earlier period, apart from *A Small Stove* we have some poems which are futuristic-surrealist and Dadaist 'namopopańik' poems.¹ It might be suspected that it was his fascination with Dada which caused Wat to fall silent. In other words, that it was a rebellion against the logic of language and against its 'mission'. This rebellion after all, as Tristan Tzara himself described, was the result of the 'loathing of language'.² Wat was to write in *My Century* about the loathing of words in the period when he was editing an almanac, *Gga* (*Gga*), yet he did not mention Tzara's name in this context.

This loathing was to incline poets to write and publish poems which were to be ugly, bad, gibberish. Many years later Wat described his own poetic praxis of that time as an attempt "to destroy words".

¹ A remarkable analysis of "Namopopańiku Barwistanu" was given by Jarosław Płuciennik in an essay, "Awangardowy «święty bełkot» Wata." ("Wat's avant-garde 'Holy gibberish': "O «*Namopopańiku Barwistanu*»"; in *Szkice o poezji Aleksandra Wata*, ed. by Jacek Brzozowski and Krystyna Pietrych, Warszawa 1999, 23–46.

² Tristan Tzara, Dada, „Zwrotnica” 1922, no. 3

However, what is allowed to a poet belonging to a group of futurists was not allowed to poets from the 'Skamander' group, and Wat did not like the linguistic experiments of Tuwim; he saw in them "hatred of words and a fight with words",³ and it seems that this phrase was not praise. There is a deep, strategic difference between 'destroying' and 'fighting'.

Therefore, maybe the first poetic silence of Wat was the result of 'loathing of language'? And maybe it was already an ideologically grounded conviction about the redundancy of literature in the traditional sense of this word. Wat recollected that before the war, in the period when he was editor of *Miesięcznik Literacki* (*The Literary Monthly*), he was convinced that in the future, after the victorious revolution, literature would become superfluous. Such a position might be described as 'positive' scepticism. It was George Orwell who represented negative scepticism in this period. According to him, literature loses its *raison d'être* with the end of liberalism, and the only type of literature which will remain is going to be subservient to totalitarian systems. Or maybe it was Józef Czapski who was right when he stated that the reason for Wat's poetic muteness was the excess of knowledge of the world, paralysing the capabilities of writing.⁴ Wat himself avoided answering this question in earnest, and he wrote that while working in the publishing house of Gebethner and Wolf he helped others to make books, which freed him from the invidious task of writing.⁵

It turns out, however, that the fact that Wat fell silent did not mean that he lost the linguistic sensitivity so characteristic of him. It is worth recalling his story about a Jewish craftsman Wat met in Warsaw prison in 1931, who used 'ptaszęcy' ('birdy') language. It was

³ Tuwim, Pub., 825. A sketch written in the 1960s.

⁴ Józef Czapski, "Głosy o Aleksandrze Waciu", *Zeszyty Literackie* 2007, no. 99, . 50.

⁵ Aleksander Wat, "Letter to Czesław Miłosz", 28.02.1966, K, part.1, . 432.

[...] ptasia mowa, te niesłychane słopiewnie, które polegały na doskonałym instynkcie dla odmiennych sufiksów i prefiksów, których żaden poeta by się nie domyślił
[...] birdy speech, this unusual 'wordsinging', which was based on the immaculate instinct for different suffixes and prefixes, which not a single poet would ever have guessed.⁶

Wat recollected that he took this language down, and years later he tried in vain to remember it.

The return to poetry (the return of poetry?) came in 1940 in the prison in Lwów. From this moment individual texts, written down later, were signed with the places of consecutive prisons in Saratov and Alma-Ata.

In the meantime, in the Lubyanka prison in Moscow in 1941, a subsequent important prison meeting happened: this time with the poet and one of the most distinguished translators of Persian poetry into Russian, Yevgieniy Dunayevsky (1889-1941). Wat devoted a lot of space to him in his spoken memoirs. Dunayevsky was, as Wat recollected, his 'mentor'.⁷ He introduced Wat to the realities of prison life and told him about life in Soviet Russia. Although he had already spent more than two years during interrogation, despite threats and torture, "he bore himself handsomely, with dignity",⁸ managed to be stoical for quite a long time, and turned out to be an ideal mute-active listener to Wat's reminiscing monologues.

⁶ Alexander Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, translated and edited by Richard Lourie, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988. Translator's Note: In the English version of this book there is a fragment (page 72) describing a Jewish co-prisoner of Wat, but the fragment of the language he spoke is omitted. "One of them was a very young Jew, who worked in some large tailor shop. Mercurial, he didn't pace like a caged lion but bustled around from one person to another, nonstop. He had an incredible, cheerful disposition. He had often taken part in strikes; he was constantly talking about strikes. He worked in a Jewish tailor shop and the Jewish tradesmen were constantly on strike." For this reason, the fragment about his language is in my translation.

⁷ Ibid., 171.

⁸ Ibid., 190.

Dunayevsky was an erudite in the area of the history of Russia and the Far East, the Orthodox religion and demonology. His prison passion was comparative linguistics, which was in fact similar to the philosophy of language of Velimir Khlebnikov. Wat recalled Dunayevsky's 'research' with a mixture of fascination and terror. He himself refused to participate in these experiments, as he feared falling prey to the prison's 'mania'.⁹ Because it was mania that started to reign over the mind of Dunayevsky—the polyglot-translator. The penultimate stage of this mania had the form of semi-conscious monologues: "Ish, sha, shashai, ishaa"¹⁰ which were similar to Wat's "namopańiki". The list of etymological associations led Dunayevsky to discover "the first word",¹¹ that is to the Hebrew word 'isha' (woman). Later Dunayevski stopped speaking at all and quit eating. In the end he was taken away from the cell. Wat, of course, did not know what had happened with him. His case is still not explained.¹² He was in a group of a few prisoners whom we might call 'special', who were shot not within some larger operation undertaken by the NKVD, but separately, with no trial, (on 6 November 1941, probably in Kuybyshev) on the basis of a separate, confidential order of Beria. The theme of Dunayevsky in *My Century* is extremely important; it is not only a portrait of an unusual fellow prisoner; it is more like a parable on how dangerous linguistic games and excessive curiosity about the etymology of words might be.

In the first decade after WWII Wat was still slowly moving out of silence. He wrote a few poems devoted to religious experiences, about Jewish consciousness, but which also in a very direct way touched on the issues of Stalin's terror. In the poem "Rozmowa nad rzeką" ("A Conversation on the River) Wat formulated a clear order for attention: "Watch out!", which was connected with a call to "give

⁹ Ibid., 243.

¹⁰ Ibid., 249.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Based on information of the Memorial Society in Moscow.

up metaphors. "And the night caught us/ torments us and does not give hope for "growth" and "creation".¹³

His protest against metaphors was deeply justified. Twelve years later he was to write a longer text against the metaphor and for the metonymy. Metaphorical poetry, he claimed, exhausted its possibilities and fell into happy-go-lucky arbitrariness. Metonymical poetry of "sensitivity and memory" was the one which firstly could hold the weight of experience, and secondly it was in agreement with Wat's conviction about the non-similarity of human pain.

Maybe it was at that time a poem was written which mocked the dispute between a follower of the metaphor and a supporter of metonymy. It is entitled "In a Literary Café":

"Metonymy," said an admirer of Roman Jakobson.
"Metaphor," said a disciple of Peiper.
And they got so incensed that they fought with fists.¹⁴

Despite fundamental questions about the very nature of writing, it opened a new phase in Wat's return to poetry. In 1953 he was to write a cycle entitled "Z notatnika oborskiego" ("From Notes Written in Obory"), which opens in this way:

Liryka się zaczyna, gdy pada komenda
otrąbiono
Gdy można przysiąc w trawie
skręcić papierosa
wsłuchać się w
szmery drzew w
łanów falowanie w
śpiew wilgi.¹⁵

¹³ The poem was signed: Warszawa, 1952, it was published in the cycle *Inne* (*The Other*) in the volume *Wiersze* (1957), 167.

¹⁴ The poem is preceded by a motto from Pushkin. Alexander Wat, *With the Skin*, trans. and ed. by Czesław Miłosz and Leonard Nathan, The Ecco Press, New York, 1989 95.

¹⁵ Wat, *Inne*, op. cit., 192. "Lyric begins when the order/rest is given/When one can sit in the grass/roll a cigarette listen/to whispering trees to corn/waving to oriole's song."

Wat understood at the same time that opening the mouth would not be easy, that people would emerge from Stalinism maltreated, that it would be difficult to give them non-viable tasks, to force them to speak. This is the way in which another poem of his, also written in the year of Stalin's death, can be understood [*Umył ręce i włóczył...*]: [He washed his hands and with a spear]

[...]
 Poza tym jest milczenie.
 Dobrze, że
 czeka na
 każdym
 rozdrożu
 na
 zdrożonego
 człowieka.¹⁶

It is true that in 1953-1954 it was possible to predict the thaw, to count on some form of cleansing, but for people like Wat such a settling of accounts could not happen at once. A longer process was aborted—and the thaw ended too quickly. What remained was a lack of fruition.

Wat addressed those who managed to confess in this period in the poem dedicated to “Przyjaciołom – «odwilżowcom»” (“To Friends—“Thawers””)

Więc świat wasz znów jest czysty jak pierś młodej
 matki?
 Starte zostały znaki zdrady, krwi i trwogi?¹⁷

There were also other problems connected with the overcoming of errors of the Stalinist period, with moving beyond it. Wat draws

¹⁶ Ibid., 177. “Apart from this there is silence./which is a good thing/that it waits at/ each crossroads/for a way worn/man.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 197. So your world is clean again as the breasts of a young/mother?/The signs of treachery, blood and fear are wiped off?

attention to the aspect of this issue, which may be called psychosomatic: while writing a book about Stalinism in 1962 he "suffered from obstinate eczema as a result of revulsion [to Stalinism]".¹⁸ He wrote in a different text that this eczema was the result of his reading materials from the twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party.

It is interesting that at the same time two poets of the former avant-garde, Wat and Przyboś, considered the problem of difficulties of finding a proper language to address the changing world. They both travelled to the West, and were aware of civilizational and cultural changes.

Przyboś, through paradoxes ("poetry is the result of the lack of proper words")¹⁹ and paradoxes with question marks,²⁰ wanted to arrive at, and maybe even arrived at, faith in this new language. However, in fact he reached it only together with his little daughter Uta, through a return to the language of children and the questioning of the speech which:

Is deep at the bottom, mute, the speaker does not open, as he does the mouth, the stones which he rolls with the tongue from a word to a word...²¹

Wat was heading for murderous fighting, traces of which would remain in his poems, essays and letters. He did not appreciate Przyboś as a poet, to put it mildly. He considered his poetry to be (despite appearances) old fashioned and banal. Yet, he admitted:

[...] (Anyway, maybe there is some dramatic greatness in it, in the very stubborn attempt to construct out of new word combinations new

¹⁸ «...jak upiór staję między wami i pytam o źródło złego». „Na Antenie” 1966, no. 43 (dodatek do „Wiadomości” z 6 XI 1966, no. 45).

¹⁹ Julian Przyboś, *Odpowiednie rzeczy słowo*, w: tenże, *Najmniej słów*, Kraków 1955, 147.

²⁰ "słowa od swych rzeczy stronią./ Znaczą tyle, ile przeczą?" "words stay away from their things/Do they mean as much as they deny?". Julian Przyboś, "Imię czyli odpowiednie rzeczy słowo", in, *Idem, Utwory poetyckie*, Warszawa 1975, 564.

²¹ Julian Przyboś, "Chowanka", op. cit., 591.

emotions, which are not here, new thoughts, which are not here, new beauty, which is neither new nor beautiful.)²²

This was a private utterance, while Przyboś attacked Wat publicly and cruelly.²³

The truth was that Wat suffered physical pain. He was torn between the conviction that everything had already been said (so contemporary literature is only repetitive), and the belief that he had managed to present some truths which had not been described before. The whole problem was that:

[...] the whole set of old words and definitions is not only useless, but that it is harmful, and the creation of words (in the manner of Joyce) in this matter and in this intention (explanation of history) is not possible. What has to be done is the creation of new ways of connecting words, contexts, new compositions, new ‘method’.²⁴

Let us not forget that in the middle of the 1960s new ways of expression were being searched for practically in all areas of art. “Something has happened (with the ears!)—Zygmunt Mycielski wrote to Andrzej Panufnik—there is no way out of this situation. ‘An ordinary theme’ is no more”.²⁵ As far as social life is concerned it was a time of revolutions, rebellions, counter-culture.

Wat was convinced that he used the new ‘method’ in the introduction to the volume of stories by Abram Terc (Andrzej Siniawski). The problem was, however, that it was not an ultimate victory. Till the end of his life he was torn between love and hatred for words, and he listed arguments for both emotions in “Kartki na wietrze” (“Sheets of Paper in the Wind”)—a text devoted to a large extent to relations between speech and transcendence, speech and

²² Letter to Czesław Miłosz, 5.09.1960 (Nervi), K, part.1, 398.

²³ In a debate published in *Kultura* Przyboś stated that Wat had been malingering in order to leave Poland, but that he was finished as a poet because “you can’t mangle poetry. See Julian Przyboś, Artur Sandauer, Janusz Wilhelmi, Maciej Żurowski, “Dyskusja o «Antologii poezji polskiej»”, „Kultura” 1966, no. 3.

²⁴ Letter to Konstanty Jeleński, 2 August 1964, K, part 1, 335.

²⁵ Andrzej Panufnik – Zygmunt Mycielski, “Dwa listy”, „Ruch Muzyczny” 2007, no. 24. Letter dated 25 February 1961.

thoughts. He praised the wrestling with words of the contemporary poets. So he was interested in the poetry of Edward Stachura. Wat thought that his 'stammering' was "really a good introduction to his own language."²⁶ He claimed that the Polish language, with its ruggedness, and "misshapeness", is "more proper for poetry"²⁹ than French. He stressed a few times the importance of Białoszewski (as the successor of rev. Baka), seeing in his poetry "hatred and repulsion to words". And therefore Białoszewski's poetry reminded him of his own poetry from the futuristic and dada period.

These were Wat's remarks on the technical issues of poetry writing. But the question about words and silence had a metaphysical dimension for him. Beyond the borders of language there was holy silence, "Sny sponad Morza Śródziemnego" ("Dreams from the Shore of the Mediterranean"), which abound in words end with an apostrophe to Odysseus:

[...] Ale ty masz uszy
szczelnie zatkane woskiem pszczelim. Zatkane na ciszę. [...]²⁷

Wat equipped Odysseus with a peculiar ability to hear through wax earplugs, of hearing of "voices untaught"²⁸—voices of nature and poor people. But he was deaf to silence. Wat, however, who went through the poetic silence before the war, was once again steering towards silence. It seemed that silence lured him all the time.

Taking into account the number of texts he left, his confession of the faith in silence could be taken only as a rhetorical figure. It would be too rash and unjust. Maybe he was bored by the obligation or his own addiction to speaking? Maybe there was something he was silent about and there was a word, which, as he wrote in one of his

²⁶ Letter to Jerzy Lisowski, 26 May 1962, K, part .1, . 362

²⁹ Letter to Czesława Miłosz, 31 May 1962, K, part.1, 408.

²⁷ "[...] But your ears are tightly sealed with beeswax. Sealed against silence" This long poem was preceded by mottos from Shakespeare and Słowacki. It was dated February-March 1962. (La Messuguière, Cabris). Aleksander Wat, *Mediterranean Poems*, ed. and trans. by Czesław Miłosz, Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1977, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

final poems, he “was not allowed” to speak²⁹ as it would have killing power—this is an obvious reference of Mickiewicz’s poem “Stopnie prawdy” (“Levels of Truth”)

Są prawdy, które mędrzec wszystkim ludziom mówi,
Są takie, które szepce swemu narodowi;
Są takie, które zwierza przyjaciółom domu;
Są takie, których odkryć nie może nikomu³⁰.

By the way, at one moment (that is before publishing *Wiersze śródziemnomorskie* (*Mediterranean Poems*) Wat took the idea about silence so far that he praised censorship. He regarded the censoring of the Polish edition of the documents from the XXII-th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party as an expression of “elementary decency”, which the French were devoid of, as the French edition was *in extensor*.³¹ Wat repeated this argument in *My Century*, which shows that he tackled this problem for a long time. What is “decency”? Is it appropriateness, but in a sphere more ethical or aesthetic? In a sense the ending to Wat’s poem was written by Miłosz three years later. Here, this unsayable word is particularly dangerous for the one who breaks the taboo:

We were permitted to shriek in the tongue of dwarfs and demons
But pure and generous words were forbidden
Under so stiff a penalty that whoever dared to pronounce one
Considered himself as a lost man.³²

²⁹ *** [Zakujęm się w pancerz myślenia...] [I put on an armour of thinking], 446..

³⁰ Adam Mickiewicz, *Dzieła*. (Wydanie rocznicowe 1798–1998), v .I: *Wiersze*, ed. by Czesław Zgorzelski. Warszawa 1998, 379. “There are truths which a sage tells the people,/There are such truths which he whispers to his nation;/There are such truths he confides to the friends of the house;/There are such truths he cannot tell to anyone.”

³¹ The manuscript of an introduction to *Wierszy śródziemnomorskich*; quoted in: Tomas Venclova, *Aleksander Wat. Obrazoburca*, transl. by Jan Goślicki, Kraków 1997, 404.

³² Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, HarperCollins, New York, 2001, 259.

It is obvious that the utterances of both poets can also be understood in the historical context, in the perspective of political submission and censorship. Here, Wat was much more radical as he believed that in Poland "the language was crippled and corrupt",³³ that it was unable to create great literature.

The search for pure and dignified words, hope that one could find "Słowo jedno jedyne i jedno znaczące" ("The one and only word with one meaning")³⁴ led Miłosz to the work on a translation of the books of the Bible. Wat also looked for words to describe Biblical experience, but, as if, in his own experience, we do not know what was the role that he then ascribed to silence. This will remain a mystery. In a text entitled "Trzecia"³⁵ ("The Third"), written at the end of his life, he enumerated the following tools of cognition: love, death, birth, fear, pride, prayer, jealousy, crime. And finally: silence.

³³ «...jak upiór stoję między wami i pytam o źródło złego». *Głos Aleksandra Wata*, ("...as a spectre I stand among your and ask for the source of evil" Pub, 604.

³⁴ Czesław Miłosz, *Strukturalista*, in Idem, *Wiersze*, op. cit., 36.

³⁵ Aleksander Wat, *Trzy starości. Trzecia*, ed. by. Adam Dziadek, „Zeszyty Literackie” 2009, no. 108.