

AGNIESZKA CZAJKOWSKA

ALEKSANDER WAT AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Placing the writing of Aleksander Wat in the context of the category of ‘historical experience’ seems to be appropriate mostly because of the biographical factor which has entered literature mostly through *Mój wiek* (*My Century*), but also because of the auto-thematic and meta-literary remarks in Wat’s poems, essays, (unfinished) novels and short stories. Wat was a communist activist and a victim of communism in one, an activist of intellectual life in Poland after its re-birth in 1918 and an acute critic of artistic output in a country dominated by ideology. His personality in itself was a problem to be solved; he was an exile and a post-World War II emigrant. All these factors made him uniquely predestined to be a true witness of the history of the twentieth century. Such an opinion was given in the foreword to *My Century* by Czesław Miłosz.

[...] Not only was Wat a member of the intelligentsia, but he was also an intellectual, educated in philosophy, and his Jewish origins made for a valuable shading, one that provided him with a certain distance in Polish ways. [...]. No one in his generation, I thought, was leaving historians a gift of this sort in this field.¹

The quoted fragment proves not only the extraordinary usefulness of Wat’s biography to illustrate historical experiences, which were the fate of a community of people determined geographically. This fragment also points at the factor which here is presented as

¹ Aleksander Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, ed. and transl. by Richard Lourie, foreword Czesław Miłosz, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, xxii-xxiii.

the cognitive value of such a testimony, but could also be understood as its specificity and uniqueness. The extraordinary mindset of Czesław Miłosz means that we are reading a standard literary picture of this period.

Reading Wat's texts as a record of specific experience, which can be called a close relationship with external reality and the record of its changing forms should, therefore, be approached with caution. Historical experience is one of the elements of existential experience,² which shows similar forms. It is also related to aesthetic experience, which allows for the usage of meta-historical concepts to reflect on the historical grounding of literary texts. Frank Ankersmit wrote about it in the following way:

In the autobiographies and letters of several historians after Herder we may find testimonies of what I shall call a "historical experience." As becomes clear from their accounts, historical experience gave them a sudden revelation of "what the past actually was like." This unexpected revelation of the past—often experienced by them by a sudden falling away of the historical distance—is always accompanied by a conviction of complete "authenticity"; that is by the conviction that this experience cannot be delusions, but is as real and reliable as what is given to us in immediate sensory experience.³

The quoted fragment applies to Wat's writing in the sense that it is characterized by the conviction of the very direct nature of historical experience and the disappearance of the temporal distance in relation to things past. Another aspect which should be stressed is the authenticity, which may be connected with the sensation of experiencing the past, which in the case of Wat becomes a fundamental dimension of his sufferings. Ankersmit connects

² See Ryszard Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej*, Kraków 2001.

³ Franklin Rudolf Ankersmit, "Language and Historical Experience", in *Meaning and Representation in History*, ed. by Jörn Rüsen, Berghahn Books, New York, 2006, 137.

the sensation of the past with its representation, its linguistic shape, which seems to be adequate also in the case of Wat's writings. Wat's musings on history should also be perceived from this perspective.

In *Bezrobotny Lucyfer* (*Unemployed Lucifer*) (1927), which could be treated as a mocking diagnosis of the spiritual state of Europe and a forecast of its downfall, Wat wrote about the status of history and its representational possibilities:

[...] If you have in mind what used to be called the historical truth, the material truth, this type of truth does not exist anymore and has not existed for quite a while. The relativity of events, the fundamental ambiguity of historical experiences, dependent on this or that selection of facts and interpretations, dissuaded historians from the search for such truth a long time ago. Historical truth today is first of all a formal truth. History renewed with the methods of mathematics forms now several systems based on different assumptions—conventions suggested by experience: systems which order experience, roughly corresponding to it and expressing it in different schemes of ideas.⁴

History takes part in the general sale of values in the twentieth century, which Wat describes. It is devoid of an element thanks to which it once created an illusion of being *magistra vitae*. The truth it offers turns out to be a creation of an art of telling, which, according to Wat, depends on ideology. The way of thinking, shaped by goals of the period, becomes truth: dominant, radiating into the future and organizing its influence on future generations and events, which they will encounter. This appropriation by a dominant, collective picture of individual experience makes impossible such a description of history which is both critical and true. On the other hand, the epistemological purity of historical testimony, in Wat's opinion, is blurred by the autobiographical factor, which in *My Century* is figured by St. Augustine. In Wat's conversation with Miłosz the scope of the space of historical discourse is spread between St. Augustine

⁴ Aleksander Wat, *Bezrobotny Lucyfer*, in *Ucieczka Lotha. Proza*, ed. by Krzysztof Rutkowski, Londyn 1988, . 46.

and Titus Livius. Now this discourse is blurred by the memory of Rousseau's experiment, which enters writing of historical ambition in the form of dominant psychology. This revaluation is connected with a specific understanding of history itself, which in Wat's statements takes the character of theophany and creates a space of *agon* between God and the devil. The humanization of history which happened in the twentieth century—in the sense of the exclusion of its political and state dimension and penetration into the body and psyche of an individual—is marked with the stigma of sin, and forced its participants to face redemption.

The personal experience of history, its half 'carrier-state' is, for Wat's poetic consciousness, first of all an artistic problem, magnified by the layers of tradition funding its heteroglossia.⁵ On the one hand, it is expressed in the sense of moral obligation, which demands a testimony—an element of true knowledge about the most important biographical event, shaping the whole of his later life, which for Wat is communism. On the other hand, the multiplicity of experiences, filtered through and enriched by unavoidable—as Wat's writings show—cultural and religious contexts, turns out to outgrow "even the largest of forms", and results in the fragmentariness of Wat's texts. Aleksander Fiut regards Wat as "trusting, open, looking in the layers of cultural memory for an opportunity for self-enrichment".⁶ That is why the 'great whole' which he intends is reflected in parts, digressions, repetitions. It is also declared in the remarks about the process of writing included in *Dziennik bez samogłosek* (*A Journal without Vowels*):

Again projections, illusions, lying to oneself and others. I will not accomplish anything else.[...]

⁵ See Aleksander Fiut, *Uwierzytelnić swą nieprzynależność*, in: *Pamięć głosów. O twórczości Aleksandra Wata*, ed. by Wojciech Ligęza, Kraków 1992, 18. See also Małgorzaty Łukaszuk, *...i w kołysankę już przemieniony płacz... (Obiit... natus est w poezji Aleksandra Wata)*, Londyn 1989, 46–47.

⁶ Aleksander Fiut, op. cit., 25..

How can I, with all this wishful thinking and promises, start going through all these papers, to analyse them, when the very sight of them onshelves, from my bed when I open my eyes, makes me full of despair, of stuffy vomits.⁷

Writing, in Wat's confessions, takes on the character of manual labour, of body's and soul's simultaneous suffering, with the soul dominated by the sense of duty. The awareness of being in between what is personal and what is collective becomes a source of musings on the cognitive aspects of literature and the possibilities of individual statements. While commenting in *A Journal without Vowels* about George Orwell's *1984*, Wat points at its power of generalization, not necessarily validated by personal experience.

For me, Orwell's *1984* was such a book. I promised myself that if I survived I would write such *Hauptwerk*. And, just to think, that I was forestalled by someone who was never on the spot, who was never in prison. The true nature of Stalinism cannot be expressed in a more accurate, in a more brilliant way.⁸

So 'historical truth' is located beyond experience, the result of intellectual construction, devoid of emotions. Moreover, it is connected with cutting off from the specific motivations for writing which are listed by Wat in the margin of his assessment of contemporary literature.⁹ "Testimony of history" is in Wat's writings marked with a dichotomy which really cannot be solved: on the one hand it is organized by an ethical obligation, the need to tell, motivated by the most intimate sense of guilt, and on the other, by the necessity to 'be a poet', which means inevitable participation in the extensive literary, philosophical and religious context, encrusting or blurring the individual voice of an author. Thus, poetry becomes an area of the transposition of a personal, individual biography onto the space of culture. This happens in the poem devoted to a nanny:

⁷ Dbs. 197.

⁸ Dbs. 29-30.

⁹ See Dbs, 49:

Our nanny, Anusia Mikulak, a peasant from an area of Przasnysz, taught me songs, words and adages of her wheat land. She was killed by Germans, probably in an asylum in Skierniewice. Twenty years later I found her face, the face of the peasant saint, turned into stone on a capital in Avignon.¹⁰

In this poem the person from Wat's childhood turns out to be an element of the heterogeneous, ambiguous identity of a subject—the language of the “wheat land” he learnt is recalled in the reception of a Romanesque cathedral, and in a similar way the Jewish heritage is mixed with Catholic rituals and the ideological reality of post-war Communist Warsaw. Many faces of this person are connected by one wish: to see Jerusalem, to find the Promised Land, united in ways of expression, content and form of experience.

The search for the way of expression which is written in “the first person most singular” (true and not obscured by interim conditioning) but at the same time universal and clear, turns out to be an impossible task. In the poem *** [Antynomia dla mnie najgroźniejsza zawsze...] [Always the worst antinomy for me...], published as the last in the volume *Poezje (Poems)*, Aleksander Wat puts words against a barrier in the form of an unsolvable contradiction between time and space. A chronotope in this poem is not a category from literary theory which is useful in the process of making comments on the statements of others. On the contrary, it becomes a creative obligation, both intellectual and existential. It is the most important element of poetic art, an expected result of an author's intention. It is described in practise through ‘armour of thought’ or cooperation of “theory of relativity”.¹¹ It marks for the poet the process of elimination, the final result of which is extinction of voice and the end of biography. Pursuit of an ideal in the form of an individual understanding with the world turns out to be a gradual extinction of a skill with words, of being dispossessed from successive forms

¹⁰ ***[*Niania nasza, Anusia Mikulak...*], 404;

¹¹ The quotations from: ***[*Zakulem się w pancierz myślenia...*], P, 446;
***[*Antynomią dla mnie najgroźniejszązawsze...*], P, 447.

of expression and arriving at the border of speech—silence. Watt writes in the poem, which has already been quoted, the penultimate one in the volume *Poems*,

Zakulem się w pancierz myślenia:
wszystkie słowa zostały mi odebrane już prócz jednego.

Może były tylko wypożyczone? do pory?
Może były tylko etalowane by wabić oko
przechodnia? a teraz noc jest, głęboka noc?¹²

The price paid by Wat's poem's for an attempt of understanding with the world are not only the poem's clarity and the chance that readers will like it. In fact, the price is the poem's very existence as a coherent, holistic form. The final solution is the epiphany in which reality is spread onto "lines shapes colours stains"¹³ perceived by an individual. And the writing becomes killing, repeated after the Biblical Cain:

Dla mego wiersza kim jestem?
Tym, kto śni mu się natrętny.
Gdy otwiera oczy: stoję u węzłowia, uzurpator
z nożem ofiarnika,
z którego pocieknie wolno wystygła krew atramentu.¹⁴

The perverse lecture on poetic art, quoted here, changes the role traditionally ascribed to an author of a donor of life to literature, into the role of a killer. Biography and words possess values opposite to the ones they usually have: that which is dead turns out to exist

¹² *** [*Zakulem się w pancierz myślenia...*], P, 446. "I put on the armour of thought/ All words have already been taken away from me/Except one//Maybe they were only borrowed? Till/now?/Maybe they were only used to/lure a passerby? and/Now it is night, deep night."

¹³ *** [*Antynomią dla mnie najgroźniejszą zawsze...*], P, . 447. "For my poem who am I?/The one it dreams of compulsively./When it opens its eyes: I stand/At the bedside, a usurper with a knife/sacrificial, of which/slowly will flow cooled blood/of ink."

¹⁴ *** [*Dla wiersza mego kim jestem...*], P, 418..

in reality, deep in sleep, needing just awakening. Writing takes on features of violence directed at the poem and killing an author at the same time. “Cooled blood of ink” connects the subject and object in one organism, dying in the act of writing.

The quoted fragment transcribed from magnetic tapes recorded just before Wat’s death is valuable not only as the author’s commentary to his work. After all, it is given the reference mark included in the title of the cycle which refers us to his life in its most intimate, physical dimension. It includes information about an illness which makes writing impossible. It is also a figure of the writer’s poetic super-awareness, limiting the possibility of writing (creation). And it is also a link between experience and the conditions of expressing it, which in Wat’s case could be fulfilled to a large extent without a pen and ink, using a tape recorder recording his voice.

Paradoxically, the experience of what was deemed by Wat—the witness of the twentieth century—to be most important, was recorded not only in poetry, leaning towards silence and organically connected with the “others’ voice”, but also in *My Century* without a pen and, in a way, not directly, through ‘surrogates’ such as Czesław Miłosz or Aleksander Wat’s wife, Ola Wat, who transcribed the recorded text. The proper writing (creation), which only simplifies the dialogue with the world and orders the individual experience in constant interaction with what is universal and fixed, turns out to be incapable of coping with the task described before and found in the poems of Aleksander Wat. Miłosz was aware of this when he mentioned the project of a “great whole”, and quoted in the preface to *My Century* the words of the poet written as an introduction to his planned *opus magnum*: The author is not a politician, someone who makes history.

The author is not a politician, meaning a person who makes history. Neither is he a historian, meaning a person who describes historical acts. He is a poet and, in so saying, does not have in mind that no-double meaningless fact of writing verse but rather a certain specific way of experiencing all experience, which also includes the workings

of history; he connects phenomena, facts and events, and expresses them in a certain, specific way. [...]¹⁵

The truth about "the workings of history" is by Wat unequivocally connected with experience which is to be expressed in a poetic way, understood as a deep look into the roots of words in order to abolish the limitations imposed by them. The quoted fragment of the statement defines at the same time the essence of being a poet, not identical with the fact of writing poems, but being the result of the specific way of experiencing reality. But experience, which, after all means "putting to a test", and "feeling something", but also "proving" and "giving testimony",¹⁶ implies a specific relationship between feelings and words. Wat, while trying to re-establish relations between poetry and the world, funds them on experience. While recollecting a 1963 meeting in Paris with friends he writes:

This, exactly this, is what I need, just me, at one time a rowdy member of the avant-garde: to know, to touch, to feel, that what is, already was, that what I am experiencing now, was already lived and experienced, that it is within the bounds of human power, that is in my power, to experience it. And it really does not matter, if "it" is dangerous, common or banal. This, exactly this statement *déjà vu, déjà vécu*, is what I am searching for all the time, and I am searching for not only in 'life', but, against all appearances, in my poems, and this is what makes me different in the context of contemporary poetry.¹⁷

Poetry, as the quoted fragment testifies, becomes repeated experience. It connects this experience not only with sensual impressions, but also with knowledge. Its meaning, apart from the aesthetic one, becomes ontological—poetry re-creates the subject

¹⁵ Aleksander Wat, *My Century*, op. cit., xxv-xxvi.

¹⁶ See Ryszard Nycz, *O nowoczesności jako doświadczeniu – uwagi na wstępie*, in *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie*, ed. by R. Nycz, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Kraków 2002, 12.

¹⁷ Quoted in Anna Micińska, *Aleksander Wat – elementy do portretu*, in Aleksander Wat, *Poezje zebrane*, ed. by A. Micińska and Jan Zieliński, Kraków 1992, 91.

in its (his) relations with the world. Experience—as impressions and relation—is therefore a superior challenge and the goal in Wat’s writings.

In the Humanities of today it means a category which was recalled by the crisis of representation, characteristic for the twentieth century, which was used as a remedy for the “prison of the language”¹⁸ caused—in the opinion of Anglo-Saxon theoreticians—to a large extent by historical events in the previous century (the Holocaust). That is why experience, as a specific rejection of language by an attempt to move beyond its logocentric aspirations, seems to be useful also in the reading of “the confession of the child of the century” in the form of the spoken memoirs of Aleksander Wat. This is a paradoxical type of usefulness, because *My Century* is the record of conversations which Czesław Miłosz had with Aleksander Wat, so it seems to be a really adequate confirmation of the communicative function of speech. This paradox is the result of the surplus of information which is transmitted in conversations and the result of the ‘transfer’ of the competence of the subject of creative activities to his interlocutor, the Noble Prize-winning poet, Czesław Miłosz. The unlimited digressiveness of Wat’s statements refers to the world in its richness and complications, which might be difficult to understand if it was not for the ordering interferences of Miłosz.

Dorota Wolska who has done research on the meaning of experienced in the contemporary Humanities, recalls the words which Zofia Nałkowska wrote in her *Diary*:

We can stand reality because not all of it is experience.¹⁹

This statement, written during the Second World War and focusing on necessary—from the perspective of personal integrity—limits in experiencing the world, may be used as a position opposite

¹⁸ Dorota Wolska, *Doświadczenie – ponownie rzeczywista kwestia humanistyki*, in *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie*, op. cit., 41–42.

¹⁹ Zofia Nałkowska, *Dzienniki*, vol. V: 1939–1945, Warszawa 1996, 445, quoted in: Danuta Wolska, op. cit., 48.

to Wat's. Limited experiencing of reality, the selection of sensations by the subject, which has an influence on the shape and content of memory and determines the readiness to experience new sensations, is here an underwriter of personal cohesion and representative capabilities, while a "spoken memoir" by Wat, in its totality, its details, digressiveness, richness of recalled events, is first of all a testimony of the disintegration of an experienced subject, of which the poet was very well aware of. Wat stated:

I carried in my belly Soviet experiences till they rotted and poisoned me; they were an incurable source of my illnesses, eighteen stays in hospitals. I have never had courage to free myself from them, because to recreate them faithfully means to return freely to Soviet prisons [...]. Physical pains I experienced in America, in *Amica America*, as Jean Giraudoux called it, were like burning ulcers. This margin of time, space and change of personality will—I fear—destroy the unity of style. But, after all, it is not the style which really matters here.²⁰

In *My Century* we commune with a person who, not caring about the shape of the utterance, is focused only on reality, and wants to reveal it and show it from a wide range of angles. Withdrawal from the demands of form and style is compensated by a therapeutic dimension of the return to the past and specific re-living of it once again.

The huge, chaotic maize of names, titles of periodicals, literary texts, facts from literary life before and after the Second World War, which can be defined as the 'bios' of history in *My Century*, is confronted by the barrier of 'logos'—awareness of Wat's interlocutor, being involved through his questions and ordering of the picture of the century. This ideal recipient, whom Miłosz is for Wat, adds to stories which are falling apart a sense of unity—his superior

²⁰ This quotation comes from the opening paragraph of chapter 26 in the second volume of Alexander Wat's *Mój wiek*, Czytelnik, Warszawa, 1997, 87. The whole paragraph was left out in the English edition.

knowledge of the previous century. It gives them meaning in terms of history and history of literature.

Differences in experiences, but also in perceiving and representing the past by Miłosz and Wat are the result, as both of them seem to be aware of, of the generational difference and its influence on the perception of reality. Wat was eleven years older than Miłosz. He calls himself a ‘catastrophist’, but he locates the source of his attitude and intellectual climate he was shaped in not in the geopolitical context in Poland in the 1930s, but in the “merry ruins” which determined the outlook of futurists just before Poland regained independence in 1918. They were aware of the totalitarian threat both from the east and the west of Europe and their ideological and poetic stance was influenced by the political situation without and within. For his contemporaries, as Wat recollected:

[...] we did not have those monsters in front of us; just the reverse, we had a chasm in front of us, ruins, à la longue cheerful ruins, you see, a cause for spiritual joy because here, precisely, something new could be built, the great unknown, the great hope that from this, these ruins...²¹

It seems that futuristic, destructive enthusiasm in connection with the declared unlimited ‘freedom of words’ did not create conditions to construct a systematic reflection, which was the case with Miłosz and his contemporaries, and which we could find, for example in letters-essays which Miłosz exchanged with Jerzy Andrzejewski during the Second World War.²² Both writers (born respectively in 1911 and 1909) were looking there for intellectual organization of the surplus of nightmarish experiences during the German occupation. Miłosz refrains from Herbert’s “concrete art”—he is sceptical about the models preserved in culture (he was, after all, aware of the end of European civilization), and he looks for the distance towards reality in critical introspection. He gives up direct forms of expressions and calls for

²¹ Aleksander Wat, *My Century*, op. cit. 4-5.

²² See Czesław Miłosz, *Legendy nowoczesności*, Kraków 1996.

self-cognition. He thus presented possible and adequate responses to events during the occupation: "There would be too much noise and pathos in it, too much bitterness[...]"²³ As a model for his attitude to war he takes Pierre Bezuchov from *War and Peace* by Tolstoy, whose fate becomes the presentation of the road from the feeling of helplessness to the reconstruction of the world of values made on the ruins of civilization. In Miłosz's reflection there is no space for the reconstruction of his own experiences, instead of which others present what has happened to them—literary characters or friends, or authors of books he reads, including texts belonging to private, family or 'local' personal narratives. The lyric "I" of Miłosz's poems is left with "naive poems"—a hymn in praise of the world and its order, and also—in later texts—openness to the fleeting touch of reality, recalling emotions from the times of the Second World War of the autobiographical persona located "a long time ago and far away".

Wat's life from the times of the Second World War, reconstructed in *My Century*, is first of all experiencing in its physical, most painful dimension. Even cultural schemata most fixed in his memory are filled in his reflection with 'life'. This is what he says about his stay in Zamarstynów:

We recited Mickiewicz's poems, his visions of a faceless Russia, a Russia without culture. At one time I had been repelled by the arrogance and false rhetoric of the patriotic *imagerie*, but in my cell in Zamarstynów I touched the living, bleeding heart of it.²⁴

In this fragment it turns out that the experience of a Soviet prison takes the form of a phrase from Mickiewicz, the nineteenth-century poetry of whom becomes filled with authentic suffering and thus becomes reality. What is collective enters directly into reality, taking away from the subject the necessity of finding his own language and giving the word the status of an almost sensual

²³ Czesław Miłosz, *Przeżycia wojenne*, in *Legends nowoczesności*, 81.

²⁴ Aleksander Wat, *My Century*, op. cit., 184.

organ. Wat, while retelling this experience, proves his belonging to the collective scheme. While his poetry, as Wojciech Ligęza writes, is a search for “re-integration”,²⁵ *My Century* is a permission to stop the activity of merging and ordering experiences, the permission for a kind of disintegration, becoming a document of the repeated experiencing of one’s biography with the help of the “words of others”. Tradition, as Wat testifies in the quoted fragment, leads on the one hand to the annihilation of a person, and, on the other, it allows us to speak, thanks to which an act of communication and auto-communication can be accomplished. An “event of speech”, which happened in Berkeley, the result of which is *My Century*, in the midst of recollections, focuses on the potentiality of language, which is capable of different ways of presenting experience. At the same time—while pointing at the lack of subjectivity and lack of limits of textual expression—it leaves a space for silence, which reveals what has really been experienced. Between the ‘heteroglossia’ of poetry and the ‘heteroforms’ of dialogues with Czesław Miłosz there is a space for suffering, which gives to Wat’s history the meaning of topicality. The aesthetic dimension of his writing and the need to give testimony, perceived as ethical, define the poles of his poetic and ‘spoken’ works. They are ceaselessly connected by silence and a surplus of words, participation in the social and most individual dimension of memory, but also of pain returning during attempts of expression; pain which connects the public history of the twentieth century with the individual biography which ended in 1967.

²⁵ Wojciech Ligęza, *Poezja jako czytanie znaków*, in *Pamięć głosów. O twórczości Aleksandra Wata*, op. cit., 15.