

THE TROUBADOUR TAKES THE TRAM:  
EXPERIENCE IN POLISH POETRY AND MUSIC

by

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IN MEMORIAM

PAWEŁ EJMONT  
(1975-1994)

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## INTRODUCTION: TEXTUAL LIVES, COVER TO COVER

*A gdyby tak wrócić do ojczystego domu poezji, do jej źródeł, do momentu, gdy tworzyła nierozzerwalną całość z muzyką, tańcem, brawurą, kształtem, gdy stanowiła misterium życia i śmierci, do mementu, gdy nie istniał problem: sztuka a życie, treść a forma? [And what if we returned to the paternal house of poetry, to its sources, to the time when it formed one indivisible whole together with music, dance, bravado, shape, when it constituted a ritual of life and death, to the time when the problem: art and life, content and form did not exist?]<sup>1</sup>*

Claudius, king for an evening, king in a dream,  
did not know he was a dream until that day  
on which an actor mimed his felony  
with silent artifice, in a tableau.<sup>2</sup>

“The Troubadour Takes the Tram: Experience in Polish Poetry and Music” follows select developments in Polish poetry over three decades in order to show how they culminated in the surge of poetic performance activity of the 1980s. The eighties culture in Poland produced an astounding amount and variety of songs—in the styles of rock, cabaret music, sung poetry, and many others. Each style responded and contributed in its own distinct way to the social and political changes that took place over that last decade before the fall of communism in 1989, drawing energy from the frustrations of young people and fueling their desire to transform the world around them. I examine the genre of *poezja śpiewana* ‘sung poetry’ as a phenomenon that fostered personal growth through a unique experience of poetry, centered around intimate interpretations of common texts and ideas, channelled through and embodied in the figure of the “bard.” While music facilitated distribution of these ideas and brought people together in private

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<sup>1</sup> Katarzyna Grela, “Poetyckie znaki zodiaku” (92).

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Mirrors” [*Los espejos*], in Alastair Reid’s translation (Selected Poems 107).

settings conducive to their reception, it played only one part in a set of self-didactic practices. I argue that Polish artists resurrected the bard in order to revive the national imagination and assist society in its efforts to re-invent itself as more humane, equitable, and just.

My analysis of *poezja śpiewana* places this literary and social phenomenon in the context of contemporaneous debates about the role and function of art in society. In particular, I focus on Edward Stachura (1937-1979), a poet who (in the opinion of many) personified the ultimate bard, both as an experimentator and a thinker vitally interested in designing new forms of artistic expression. Tracing one poet over the course of his career emphasizes and exploits all dimensions of the complicated process I term “textual experience”—living in, through, and around texts. First, we can discern individual goals and idiosyncrasies of one author as he attempts to define himself against existing literary conventions and philosophic traditions, both at home and abroad. In addition, we can evaluate responses to his writing through the critics’ assessment of his contributions to Polish literature. Lastly, the afterlife of his work in the genre of *poezja śpiewana* can provide some indication of how readers continue to process and react to Stachura’s poetry.

With this kind of telescopic lens, zooming in and out through a number of perspectives on Stachura, I urge several critical interventions. Because Stachura’s popularity among young people in the eighties reached levels bordering on idolatry, his legacy remains misapprehended by fans and detractors alike. The most common misconception, the source of admiration in one camp and of dismissal in the other, places the poet always outside—outside society, outside politics, outside the real world and its



concerns, and occasionally even outside literature. To be sure, Stachura himself initiated and encouraged such readings of his lifelong project. A stalwart champion of personal freedom and artistic autonomy, irreverent of social customs and hostile to most institutions, the poet often embraced the role of an outcast. He praised and performed manual labor, slept on trains, and at times suffered from hunger and cold. In his writing, he identified with artists who shunned the comforts of ‘normal’ life: François Villon, the fifteenth-century French lyricist who composed unforgettable verses but who was also sentenced to hang at the gallows; Cyprian Kamil Norwid, the dark angel of Polish Romanticism who spent his last years in a poorhouse on the outskirts of Paris; Sergei Aleksandrovich Esenin, the Russian Imagist and an incorrigible drunkard, who wrote his last poem in his own blood before hanging himself. Such broken vitae perfectly complemented the poets’ utter commitment to Art, certifying it, as it were, with the seal of mandatory disregard for material possessions and for basic self-preservation. The entanglement of suffering with creativity and inspiration also seems to mirror Stachura’s concept of *życiopisanie* ‘life-writing,’ the idea that writers must use their own experiences as material for what they describe.

In departure from the unfortunately prevalent biographical approach, I propose to read Stachura’s work and the specific circumstances in which it arose as part of a dynamic, complex system of influence and reciprocity. Stachura’s uncompromising stance on truth and spontaneity, often understood as a marker of a complete alignment of the writer with the man to the point of seamless identification, belies the sophistication and finesse with which Stachura crafted his multiple images on the page. We have as much to gain from looking closely at the artist’s attitude towards his vocation as from

examining the representations of lived experience filtered through his unique perspective. To appraise the work on its own terms, with full appreciation of its originality and multilayered literariness, is only part of the task; we must also move outside that intricately constructed world in order to evaluate Stachura's position within the context of relevant cultural and social power relations specific to his time and place.

Pierre Bourdieu's insights on the sociological underpinnings of art perception and valuation, especially what he refers to as "the field of cultural production" and "the economy of symbolic goods," will provide theoretical guideposts marking these separate (though interrelated) dimensions of my analysis. Following Bourdieu's definition of "the literary and artistic field as, inseparably, a field of positions and a field of position-takings"<sup>3</sup> will allow us not only to re-assess Stachura's apparent disinterest in social and/or political issues, but also to reconcile seemingly contradictory strains of his work. While Stachura often hides behind his self-professed simplicity and unwordliness, he does not conceal his opinions on cultural values and the institutions or individuals who propagate them. Neither does he appear ignorant of the processes of artistic or cultural hierarchization; on the contrary, he consciously attempts to influence or even supplant them. Through his disavowal of interest and condemnation of intellectual careerism, through the contrived genealogies linking him to other literary underdogs, Stachura undoubtedly participates in the "reverse economy" believed to operate in the domain of pure art, "based, as in a generalized game of 'loser wins,' on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From the essay "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," translated by Richard Nice (The Field 34).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 39.

Exploring this little acknowledged aspect of Stachura's literary activity does not put the sincerity of his motives into question but, rather, adds depth and significance to what he was trying to accomplish. Despite the purported singleness of purpose, Stachura is notoriously impossible to pin down. Bourdieu suggests elsewhere, with just a shade of disdain, that

the Christ-like mystique of the *artiste maudit*, sacrificed in this world and consecrated in the next, is nothing other than the retranslation of the logic of a new mode of production into ideal and ideology: in contrast to 'bourgeois artists', assured of immediate customers, the partisans of art for art's sake, compelled to produce their own market, are destined to deferred economic gratification. At the limit, pure art, like pure love, is not made to be consumed.<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, Stachura's ideological profile fits Bourdieu's description almost perfectly, complete with messianic tendencies and the ultimate sacrifice. Yet Stachura did not merely suffer through financial privations—he extolls the virtues of manual labor in such a way that it is hard not to notice that at least at times he *enjoys* working with his hands. And if he shares some of the tendentious favoring of difficult works of art, together with the pessimistic belief that “the autonomous work of art at its most hermetic becomes the last refuge of truth in an otherwise totally mediated and therefore totally false society,”<sup>6</sup> he also distances himself from high art's exclusions through irony and social optimism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From the essay published as “Field of Power, Literary Field and Habitus,” translated by Claud DuVerlie (*The Field* 169). Originally presented as the Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism at Princeton University in 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Russell A. Berman on Theodor Adorno, from Berman's introduction to *The Institutions of Art* (xiii).

<sup>7</sup> Stachura rarely formulates explicit social critique, preferring to channel it obliquely through description and dialogue. With his sympathetic portrayals of industrial and agricultural workers, he demonstrates true respect for the value of labor. Moreover, he betrays a keen sense of class consciousness and makes human (and therefore social) injustice a critical target in a decidedly Marxist manner. In one of the short stories published in 1966, titled “*Dzienna jazda pociągiem*” (“Going by train during the day”), he describes a scene on a train in which a couple of well-dressed parvenus display their superiority to fellow travelers and are therefore sharply rebuked by the voice of the first-person narrator. When they are leaving the compartment without a word, the young man in question says goodbye with ostentatious courtesy. The older man perceives the intended slight and answers angrily, to which the young man feels entitled to respond “full-

It is perhaps this peculiar mixture of ardent faith and palpable despair, uncompromising idealism and humorous pragmatism, disaffected simplicity and astounding erudition, fueled by genuine commitment to the humanist cause and belief in the transformative power of art that makes Stachura such a compelling figure. He responds to the problems of his age in a uniquely nuanced way, offering complex insights on the plight of the modern man and ushering in novel literary methods. His playful and polyvocal syncretism, disregard for arbitrary divisions between popular and high-brow art, focus on the narratological constructedness of identities mark Stachura as a precursor of Polish postmodernism. Because as a writer he veers off towards a kind of self-established, beguiling orthodoxy, critics—nearly as much as the fans—tend to respond to his work more like “connoisseurs” (to use Bourdieu’s term again) than literary specialists.<sup>8</sup> To comprehend the full extent of Stachura’s contributions to Polish literature, and at the same time to explain the renaissance of his popularity against the backdrop of social and political changes in the 1980s, we must grasp the connection between the poet’s adherence to aestheticist ideals of art for art’s sake and the simultaneous challenge of such positioning against the institution of art itself. Peter Bürger paves the way for this kind of analysis in his Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974).

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on: ‘And what is this all for?’ I said. ‘What for? When we know very well you belong to a moribund class’” (Opowiadania 178).

<sup>8</sup> In making the distinction between connoisseurs and theorists, Bourdieu urges us to re-examine our own assumptions of self-evident or deceptively universal values:

And, just as students or disciples can *unconsciously* absorb the rules of the art—including those that are not explicitly known to the initiates themselves—by giving themselves up to it, excluding analysis and the selection of elements of exemplary conduct, so art-lovers can, by abandoning themselves in some way to the work, internalize the principles and rules of its construction without there ever being brought to their consciousness and formulated as such. This constitutes the difference between the art theorist and the connoisseur, who is usually incapable of explicating the principles on which his judgements are based. (The Field 228)

Quoted from “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception,” originally published in English in International Science Journal (Winter 1968).

Like Bourdieu, Bürger calls for a thorough interrogation of artistic gestures *and* critical responses to them by firmly grounding *both* in the socio-historical contexts that condition, explicitly and implicitly, their respective hierarchies of judgement. Bürger accords these conditions of production (artistic and theoretical) constitutive force in terms of value perception but not exclusive determinism, and therefore manages to salvage the autonomous status of individual works of art. Bürger overcomes the problem of art's weakened potential as an instrument of social change by re-situating pessimistic assessments of its relevance in their own sociohistoric moments. Specifically, he addresses Adorno's tendency to view art "in the isolated form of monad-like works" disconnected from any real social function. As a result of this "functionlessness," Adorno resigns to conclude that "it can no longer be hoped that art will provoke change" (Theory 11).

The renewed hope in art's potential has come, in Bürger's opinion, after the transformations resulting from the events of 1968. With the avant-garde movement, art entered "the stage of self-criticism" necessary for turning it into a more pointed instrument of social critique. "The avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences" (Theory 22). The wave of social protests aimed at various established systems and the injustices propagated by them unfolded and realized some of art's hidden potential in the challenges it posed to the hierarchies of power. A few major differences distinguish the situation in Communist Poland during the same era from the circumstances that Bürger describes as operational in the capitalist Western Europe: in Poland, 1968 presents a different kind of historical and political caesura; the function of

art and artists in a socialist state is disputed differently; poetry, in many places considered almost an epitome of insularity and insignificance, plays a much larger role in Polish social life. My dissertation attempts to address all of these issues as it reconstructs the multiple contexts in which Stachura's work must be read. I argue that the "symbolic capital" Stachura had gathered through poetic activity and relentless questioning of the meaning of art and its institutions—encapsulated in his famous statement "*wszystko jest poezja*" ("everything is poetry")—paid off in the 1980s because the tenor of his avant-gardiste protest resonated in the voices of the young people who began to challenge the legitimacy of the communist regime.

The notion that poetry can be "everything," or at least "something on the level of essential human needs, like bread, like tools of work and weapons,"<sup>9</sup> is not a commonly accepted view, especially among political activists. Milan Kundera, a Czech writer who pressed for reforms from within his country's communist system before defecting for France in 1975, in his latest book (*The Curtain*, 2005) considers the novel as the best access point to allow humankind understand "that ineluctable defeat called life" (10). In Kundera's scheme, poetry is a relic of the past, a testament of an earlier stage of intellectual development:

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<sup>9</sup> This is the way Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz describes the role of poetry in Poland in his introduction to *The Invincible Song*, an anthology of war poems initially published in 1942 and re-issued in 1981:

For many people in America, poetry belongs to a sphere of "culture," a vague notion associated with "leisure." [...] Owing to the tragic history of that nation, a poem, often copied by hand and circulated clandestinely, has been an affirmation of faith in survival and in victory over the oppressors, also by its very nature, a triumphant manifesto of vitality and a bond between ancestors and descendants. Poetry assumed that role already in the nineteenth century, and that is why it was prepared for the ordeals of any modern totalitarian rule. An outburst of underground poetry in Nazi-occupied Poland had, to my knowledge, no analogy in any other country of war-time Europe, with a possible exception of Yugoslavia.

The text of this introduction was published in English (vi).

I have long seen youth as the *lyrical age*, that is, the age when the individual, focused almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him. If we start with that hypothesis [...], then to pass from immaturity to maturity is to move beyond the lyrical attitude.

If I imagine the genesis of a novelist in the form of an exemplary tale, a “myth,” that genesis looks to me like a *conversion story*: Saul becoming Paul; the novelist being born from the ruins of his lyrical world. (88-9)

Jean-Paul Sartre, one of Kundera’s intellectual idols, likewise criticizes poetry for its inability to “commit” to meaning. “Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language,” Sartre proclaims, relegating figurative uses of language to the indeterminate space somewhere between speech and silence.<sup>10</sup> Both Kundera and Sartre turned to literature for political ends in very specific historical moments, when commitment of the best minds to the cause of ending oppression and injustice seemed not only morally necessary but also practically unavoidable.<sup>11</sup> Can poetic language truly stand up to the challenge of assisting real people in their struggle for greater independence or democracy, here and now?

Polish people, for whom a sense of shared history remains one of the fundamental tenets of national identity, turn to poetry most often in the hour of threat or in response to a tragedy. Piotr Śliwiński, a prominent literary critic recently asked by an interviewer to comment on the surge of poetic activity after John Paul II’s death, calls this literary propensity “our national malady” (14). Poetry written in the marginalized Polish language has not only been the most instrumental vehicle of national identity and pride in times of crisis and catastrophe, but has served as a kind of moral compass. During the long years of partitions (1775 to 1918), when Poland disappeared altogether from the

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<sup>10</sup> What Is Literature? (29).

<sup>11</sup> See Julien Benda’s classic text La trahison des clercs (1927) for an interesting discussion of the problem of literary men’s involvement in the affairs of the state. As a proponent of dispassionate, rational approach to politics, Benda condemns the “learned” for stirring dangerous passions (warmongering and nationalism) in their fellow men. The book appeared in English under the title The Treason of the Intellectuals. Trans. Richard Aldington. New York: William Morrow, 1928.

map of Europe, the inspired words of Adam Mickiewicz resounding from faraway Crimea or Paris stirred the hearts of his compatriots nearly as much as his political activity rallied them up. The haunting verses of the war-poet poster boy Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński killed in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 reminded them again of the ultimate price one must pay for national freedom. Later, the banned works of Czesław Miłosz trickled in and shaped the collective consciousness as demands for ending the communist oppression grew in strength and boldness. Political critique could be much more easily veiled in ambiguous metaphors and obscure allusions crafted by celebrated national bards whose work had to be sometimes smuggled from abroad and often circulated clandestinely through the word of mouth.<sup>12</sup> Even more importantly, aside from criticizing hostile regimes and calling for political and social change, Polish poetry has consistently stressed the need for individual self-examination and interrogation, urging mental clarity and personal responsibility during long stretches of perplexing ideological turmoil and absurdity. Because of this rather unusual social function, poetry must feature more prominently in discussions of transformations in Poland.

The first chapter of my dissertation, “Keepin’ It Real,” provides the socio-cultural contexts that will help us understand the subsequent upheavals of the 1980s. I discuss some of the major tenets of the *Nowa Fala* (“New Wave”) literary movement as attempts to construct an ideology of culture, with literature at the center. Branded by the traumas of 1968 and 1970, *Nowa Fala* writers (Adam Zagajewski, Julian Kornhauser, Stanisław Barańczak, and Ryszard Krynicki, among others) urged increased commitment of artists

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<sup>12</sup> The practical necessity of saying one thing and meaning another, formed under circumstances of oppression (most often perpetrated by foreigners) and under threat of political repercussions, had morphed into a mental habit that has proved difficult to eradicate from Polish collective consciousness. Perhaps Sartre was right about the dangers of “non-committed” language—meaning veiled behind metaphors can easily produce a false sense of unity among readers. I discuss this problem more extensively in Chapter IV.



to the formation of national consciousness through recovery of common language and uniquely Polish cultural capital. Their call for greater socio-political awareness and civic involvement extended from artists to all citizens. While the main target of these writers was the duplicitous communist propaganda, they also poised to fight the perceived rise of consumerism and mass culture. In the last section, I demonstrate the extent to which their work influenced oppositional rhetoric, focused on unity, personalism, and social responsibility.

The following two chapters, “Poetry on the Move” and “Beyond and between Words: A Fluid Poetics,” deal with a poet who polemized with the prevalent “nationalization” and “solemnization” of Polish poetry. Edward Stachura agreed that poetry should play a significant role in everyday life, but he reacted against treating it as servile instrument of any ideology or program, and most of all against using it as “a weapon.” Theodor Adorno’s idea of art as “negative reason,” that “which speaks up for the differential and non-identical, promoting the claims of the sensuous particular against the tyranny of some seamless totality,” illuminates this section in particular, but also haunts my entire project.<sup>13</sup> Part of the thrust behind these two chapters is revisionist and recuperative in objective. Stachura’s poetry has not been treated with due respect and critical attention; in a sense, it became a victim of its own popularity in sung form. While everyone took note of the unusual intensity of angst and loneliness drenching the pages, few could explain its literary mechanisms, without reducing Stachura’s work to crude autobiographical exhibitionism or messianic tendencies picked up on by equally angst-ridden teenagers.

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<sup>13</sup> From Terry Eagleton’s summary of Adorno’s thoughts on ideology (*Ideology* 126).

Chapter II disentangles the poet's knotty relationship with biography, authorship, and self-creation. It aims to restore some of Stachura's sophistication and complexity as a writer and thinker, and to showcase his unique poetic idiom through extensive close reading. Chapter III, in turn, examines his ideas on the the role and function of art in society and in human existence, moral responsibilities of poets, and on aspects of poetic form as it adjusted to the changing needs of writers and readers. I dispel the myth of Stachura as naïve savant savage, by showing his profound engagement with literature and philosophy. As much *l'homme-plume* as Gustave Flaubert, that most lyrical of prosaists, Stachura lived for literature and responded to other writers with lively interest; his formal experiments eventually led him beyond the realm of literature, to the post-textual spheres of music and/or silence. In the last part of the chapter, I read Stachura's songwriting phase with and against the rest of his work, as an example of what Edward Said terms "late style"—"nonharmonious, nonserene tension, [...] a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*..."<sup>14</sup>

The fourth chapter, "The Bard Battles," follows the implications of dividing art into politically committed and non-committed, and exposes artificiality of that division. It explains the importance of song in the shaping of Polish national identity, defines the function of the "bard," and describes various social practices associated with the production, distribution, and interpretation of sung poetry. I focus on two major figures, Jacek Kaczmarski and Edward Stachura, together with the cults they (inadvertently) created, to show how political circumstances both expand and limit the boundaries of readership. I look at the characteristics and practices of these two overlapping "cults" in order to highlight their common values and pinpoint the difference in their respective

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<sup>14</sup> On Late Style (6).

interpretations of what patriotism and “Polishness” can mean.

Together, then, the first and the last chapter form a narrative arc that connects cultural institutions and practices that have shaped the meaning and social significance of Stachura’s overall project. What lies at the center of it is experience. “Experience,” as Martin Jay locates it, lies “at the nodal point of the intersection between public language and private subjectivity, between expressible commonalities and the ineffability of the individual interior” (6-7). Serving as a conduit for experimentation, contestation, and struggle, a double mirror that reflects the outside world and our own image of ourselves, it allows individuals to assert their uniqueness but also forces them to define their identity within the context of whatever social groups they happen or choose to belong to. Above all, individual experience assures *engagement* at the level of affect and judgement: it demarcates the threshold of change. In Michael Oakeshott’s words,

the given in experience is given always to be transformed. The primary datum in experience, as such, is never solid, fixed and inviolable, never merely to be accepted, never absolute or capable of maintaining itself, never satisfactory. [...] And consequently our attitude in experience towards what is given is always positive and always critical. From the given as such, we turn to what is to be achieved; from the unstable and defective, we turn to what is complete and can maintain itself. (Experience 29)

A meaningful experience is one that disturbs and shifts—if only slightly—the totality of our inner world. Oakeshott emphasizes the role of critical thought in this complex process of re-assessment: the value of any experience can only come from what we make of it, how it is ordered and appraised, when the old and the new crash and alter each other at the point of contact. *Poezja śpiewana*, with its unique merging of words and music, creates a liminal space where the imaginary meets the concrete, where the senses can be

stimulated as much as the mind. In today's rational, decidedly "unmagical" existence, textual experience of this kind can open doors to the "magic" of transformation.<sup>15</sup>

Before I begin my detailed analysis of how this transformation became possible, I would like to offer one last remark on the subject of experience in the Polish context. Among many meanings of the Polish word "experience," whose full semantic range Ryszard Nycz explores in the introductory essay to *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie* (imprecisely translated, "Contemporaneity as experience"; 2006), two are particularly relevant to my discussion: "undergoing trial" and "giving witness" (12-6). Many Poles believe that their land and people have undergone an unequalled share of abuse and suffering in the struggle for sovereignty and nationhood, a belief that has left an indelible mark on both historiography and literature. "*Doświadczenia narodu*" ("trials" or "hardships of the nation") obligatorily find expression in poetry, which should "give witness to" ("*poświadczyć*") and thus memorialize those hardships. Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), the celebrated "bard of the nation" writing alternately from Russian prisons, Crimean exile, scores of European countries he traversed, and finally from France where he had settled, set the exalted tone for national literature that every Polish poet must contend with. Józef Kallenbach, the editor of Mickiewicz's *Writings* (1921) published only three years after Poland regained independence, remarks on his unparalleled stature in the following way:

Mickiewicz's influence in Poland has not only not stopped with his death, but instead has intensified and grows stronger from generation to generation. His heart continues to beat in the many millions of his compatriots towards everything that is great and noble. This heart of Mickiewicz has always encompassed the entire, single, indivisible Poland; in spite of external partitions and interior divisions, he has always united,

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<sup>15</sup> Following other cultural critics, Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska traces the basis of the transformative potential of experience back to religion and its rituals (*Nowoczesność* 28-9).

brought us together, melted us into one, indivisible national organism.  
That superhuman poem of his, that song-creation still carries on. (xlvi)

A friend of Goethe, who reigns equally supreme in the German national imagination, Mickiewicz established (and successfully embodied) the Romantic idea of “*wieszcz*,” loosely translated as ‘prophet-poet.’ Drawing on somewhat mystical powers (which reflected Mickiewicz’s private interests in mysticism), the *wieszcz* was supposed to inspire the dishearted people, give them strength, and lead them out of oppression into a better future. Mickiewicz fashioned the idea of Polish messianism which gained enormous popularity and enduring power, perceptible even today.<sup>16</sup> In the “Codices of the Polish Nation and Pilgrimage” (1832-35), the poet articulates a very catchy idea of Poland as the “Christ of nations,” suffering innumerable punishments for the crimes committed by European powers. Like the humble but triumphant Christ surrounded by Roman and Jewish soldiers, Poland stands for the ideals of personal freedom and equality, compromised by the enmity and hostility of foreign governments. “And Poland said at the end: Whoever will come to me will be free and equal, for I am LIBERTY” (16, emphasis in the original). Mickiewicz portrays Poland as the martyr of Europe, sold off by the Prussian king’s kiss of Judas and further betrayed by the Franco-Gaul Pontius-Pilate-like indifference. The natural extension of this idea was the hope for a more glorious future reserved for Poles and other Slavs, who will rise like Lazarus and Christ to be crowned as the epitome of a Christian nation.

The contemporary figure of the bard can be seen as an updated, transformed version of the *wieszcz*. As a result, any poetic statement—made to express avoidance, participation, complaint, or exasperation—constitutes a “position-taking” on the issue of

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<sup>16</sup> British historian Norman Davies, beloved in Poland, relies on this idea in God’s Playground: A History of Poland. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

national literature. Polish poets may enjoy enviable wide social recognition and popularity, but at the same time they are subject to increased public scrutiny and to other pressures. While the greater involvement of poetry in public life in Poland demonstrates a commendable level of interaction between artists and their audiences, the interests and expectations of each may be at odds with one another, as the pages that follow will explain.

## CHAPTER I. KEEPIN' IT REAL

In their 1974 manifesto *Świat nie przedstawiony* [The World Not Represented], Julian Kornhauser and Adam Zagajewski argue for a new realism. Their polemical exposé offers to diagnose the ills of contemporary Polish literature, shed some light on their etiology, and provide a practical course of treatment that will bring literature out of the crisis in which it has found itself in the first few years of the new decade. The two poets propose to perform not so much a routine check-up but rather a thorough self-examination, to find out “why we know so little about ourselves and about our world, despite the fact that so much depends on this kind of awareness.”<sup>17</sup> The insistent use of the pronoun *we* throughout the book gestures beyond a mere indication of collaboration of two writers advancing a new poetic program. Kornhauser and Zagajewski’s project grows out of certain unifying socio-cultural tendencies that begin to take over not only Polish letters but other aspect of public life, tendencies that continue well into the 1980s and will translate into more radical political movements of the Solidarity era. This chapter will first sketch out the dilemmas of literature in the “little stabilization” period and outline the writers’ response to them in the form of the *Nowa Fala* movement signalled above. Just as the effects of these renewal efforts have fanned out into wider social circles, my analysis will follow by tracing various changes at the level of the

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<sup>17</sup> ”Próbujemy w tej książce z różnych stron oświecić problematykę literatury—jako składnika kultury—aby przekonać się, dlaczego tak niewiele wiemy o nas samych i o naszym świecie, podczas gdy tak wiele od tej świadomości zależy” (5).

individual, local social groups, and public at large, drawn against the backdrop of political unrest. Special attention will be paid to the shifts in language and modes of communication, those threads with which the Polish people were hoping to knit the torn fabric of society back together.

*Nowa Fala* writers defined themselves through clearly articulated commitment, against self-referential, esoteric literature that willingly removed itself from the sphere of influence and social relevance. The way they depicted avant-gardiste project of art for art's sake made formal experimentation seem not only incomprehensible, but also irresponsible and harmful. Public discourse, in which literature should take an active role, was hardly a game—for users of language the stakes were high, and consequences of improper usage tangible and real. Instead of receding into a timeless, imaginary space of eternal Art, *Nowa Fala* intellectuals grounded their activities firmly in the specific historic moment and adjusted their methods of persuasion accordingly. What they poised to fight was passivity, indecision, and lack of ideological clarity; in order to counteract those socially destructive tendencies, the artists appealed to the power of reason and to the values of universalist humanism and personalism that could appear practical and useful for ordinary people. Unlike their avant-gardist predecessors who launched frequent attacks on the institutions of art, *Nowa Fala* poets presented tradition as a lost haven, the last beacon of hope radiating light in the darkness of a barbaric age. This conservative stance influenced their attitude towards existing structures of power, which they intended to subvert without questioning their basic legitimacy *as* systems. The communist regime was exposed as “fake” only because its institutions did not live up to the promise of bettering the lives of Polish citizens. “True” authority and leadership could be restored



through political involvement, using methods of rational discourse, and playing by the rules inherent to the established system. As Henri Lefebvre explains, “if politics alienates, and contains alienation, it can also be disalienated, and this through political activity—in and through struggle on the political level and in and through the conflict between life and politics” (Critique 91). *Nowa Fala* poets thus focused on representing “everyday” life and on addressing concerns of ordinary people, in an attempt to reconnect art with the people whom artists had a duty to serve.

### 1. UNSERVICEABLE LETTERS

I can think of nothing more gallant, even though again and again we fail, than attempting to get at the facts; attempting to tell things as they really are. [...] Reality is that which, when you don't believe in it, doesn't go away.<sup>18</sup>

<i>Poezja—jest jak transfuzyjna krew dla pracy serca: choćby dawcy już dawno pomarli w nagłych wypadkach, to ich krew żyje—i cudze krwiobiegę spokrewnia, i cudze ożywia wargi.</i> <sup>19</sup>	[Poetry—is like transfusion blood pumping the heart: even if the donors have long died from acute trauma, their blood continues to live—fusing the bloodstreams of strangers, bringing life to the lips of strangers.]
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The 1960s, widely regarded as the decade of tremendous upheaval elsewhere, by many accounts—if critics of the day are to be believed—failed to produce remarkable artistic achievements in Polish literature. The ground-breaking work of experimentators like Tadeusz Kantor or Jerzy Grotowski, who revolutionized the performing arts worldwide with such ideas as *akt całkowity* [total act] and *teatr ubogi* [“poor” theater] embodied in stage productions shown at his *Teatr Laboratorium* in Wrocław, did not necessarily find worthy successors in other genres. Grotowski’s productions shook the accepted notions of acting and viewing alike. The blurring of boundaries between the

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Viereck, from an interview with Tom Reiss (47). “The First Conservative: How Peter Viereck inspired—and lost—a movement.” The New Yorker October 24 (2005): 38-47.

<sup>19</sup> Ryszard Krynicki „Poezja żywa” from the volume Organizm Zbiorowy, reprinted in Magnetyczny Punkt: Wybrane wiersze i przekłady. Warszawa: CiS, 1996.

stage and reality forced the actors to reach deeper into their psyche, at the risk of exposure and vulnerability, while inviting the audience to participate more fully in the unfolding drama. Grotowski sought to undercut the comfortable habits of staid theatergoers, in order to elicit a more natural, “human reaction”<sup>20</sup> to art. He envisioned “a new kind of encounter” with those who came to witness the plays, one which was “closer, more human”.<sup>21</sup> What sparked and facilitated such fruitful encounters was spoken language—“the living speech”<sup>22</sup>—augmented by the immediacy of the interaction between the performer and the audience. Grotowski did not aim for wider access or inclusion (at first his performances attracted very few followers, and some nights the actors would perform for 5-7 people). Rather, he was interested in provoking an intense, visceral experience that promised to alter all its participants by launching them on a soul-baring, soul-searching quest which carried on beyond the playhouse. This was art that mattered, more “human” because more closely concerned with ordinary people’s emotions and reactions.

Similar hopes of revival and intensification were held for other arts as well. One can easily see, however, why the type of mutual engagement made possible by the theater’s performative aspects would be difficult to implement in literature. Whereas in theater the creative process may be not only witnessed but also enhanced by the immediate bodily presence of the spectator, alienating conditions peculiar to writing prevent authors and readers from meeting in real time and space while the work is being

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<sup>20</sup> Excerpted from the 1971 press conference led by Konstanty Puzyna, published under the title “Jak żyć by można,” as part of the series devoted to the writings of the acclaimed director in the journal *Odra* (37).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: “*W ogóle to tak, jakby się szukało innego rodzaju obcowania z tymi, którzy do nas przychodzą. Bliżej, bardziej po ludzku*” (35).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: “*A nie trzeba u nas szukać takich ‘tradycyjnych’ elementów, jak podmiot, orzeczenie, logika, że tu jest główny akcent, a tam nie. Nie, ponieważ żywa mowa nie zawiera takich elementów. Wtedy, gdy to istotne w życiu, mówimy cali sobą*” (37).

created. Actors and viewers *must* come together in their efforts to interpret a given piece; they are momentarily united in the experience. Even sculptors or painters can organize events in which the audience ‘meets’ the artwork in a participatory manner. Writers, on the other hand, are often reticent to ‘explain’ their work, and may not be able or willing to face their readership. The act of writing, tediously long and non-spectacular by its very nature, excludes participation, while its symmetrical and indispensable double, reading, also occurs in silence and isolation. Under most circumstances, reception of literature is not dependent on the immediate involvement of the reader with the writer,<sup>23</sup> or with other people.

Certainly, simultaneous and active presence can be hardly expected to function as a *sine qua non* requirement of accessing or understanding any object of cultural production. Art appreciation for centuries had in part *depended* on limited access, as John Berger’s influential book Ways of Seeing (1972) exemplarily demonstrated. Berger’s Marxist critique exposed meta-aesthetic values and conditions which had shaped pictorial representation in European painting. Not coincidentally, Polish art of the communist era was likewise often evaluated on the basis of its role in the ongoing struggle against capitalist inequality and exploitation. For example, in the mission statement of Miesięcznik Literacki [Literary Monthly], the editors stressed the need for a “fighting magazine”<sup>24</sup> in the modern world dominated by conflict and controversy. Elaborating on the same idea a few years later, Włodzimierz Sokorski opined on behalf of all socialist artists and thinkers that “[i]nstead of shrinking back from a productive exchange of ideas,

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<sup>23</sup> The experience of reading has more to do with the interaction between reader and text, though readers undoubtedly imagine the text’s author in one way or another. In Ends of the Lyric, Timothy Bahti argues that poems (and, presumably, other texts) cannot exist without reading. “There is no lyric without reading because we cannot conceive of a poem that does not have at least the one reader who is its author” (7).

<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Sokorski (70).

we must maintain a sense of responsibility equally for what we are saying and in front of whom we are saying it; we must know who stands with us and who fights against us.”<sup>25</sup>

This “sense of responsibility” meant that, as trendsetters and educators, writers in particular were bound by moral obligation to produce socially and politically conscious art. Even a perfunctory glance at the critical literature tells us that the debate surrounding writers’ duties and readers’ needs was protracted and ongoing. Famous novelist Roman Bratny advised in a Kultura piece “to be elitist in the choice of issues and accessible in getting through to the reader.”<sup>26</sup> In Odra, Leszek Szaruga wondered as much about “the needs of the reader” (31) as about “the crisis of reception” (35) of contemporary poetry.

By the late 1960s, Polish literature had apparently left behind most of its readers, together with any sense of relevance and credence. The “fighting magazine” issued this kind of grim assessment, penned by Kazimierz Maciąg:

*Można [...] powiedzieć, że nasza współczesna literatura nikogo właściwie nie wyraża i że o nic jej właściwie nie chodzi. Stała się ona dziedziną zainteresowań kilku lub najwyżej kilkunastu tysięcy „hobbystów”, pięknoduchów, profesjonalistów lub nauczycieli języka polskiego, którzy poznają ją bez przekonania, że jest im to do czegokolwiek potrzebne—poza koniecznością zawodową lub pewnego rodzaju duchowym treningiem. Między osobistym losem tych czytelników a książkami, jakie czytają, nie ma bowiem żadnej wewnętrznej więzi, do rzeczywistości psychicznej współczesnego Polaka literatura ta właściwie nie dociera—o tym wiedzą i autorzy, i czytelnicy. Nie oczekują tego od niej, przyzwyczaili się uznawać to za stan naturalny, traktują literaturę jak jeden z tych świątecznych kostiumów, w które lubimy się ubierać od czasu do czasu, chodząc na co dzień w zupełnie innych fasonach.*

[We could (...) say that our contemporary literature does not express anyone in particular and it does not concern itself with anything in particular. It has become the domain of interest of a few, at best of several thousand “hobbyists,” romantics, experts, or teachers of Polish literature who master it without conviction that it is in any way useful—beyond professional necessity or mental training of some kind. Because there is no internalized connection between the personal fate of those readers and the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. (71).

<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in “*Kto nas czyta i po co?*” [Who Reads Us and For What Purpose?]. Odra 108:2 (1970): 107-9.

books they read, this literature does not enter the psychic reality of a contemporary Pole—this is a fact acknowledged by both authors and readers. They do not expect this from it, they have gotten used to view this as a natural state, they treat literature like one of those holiday costumes which we wear from time to time, while dressing in completely different clothes on a daily basis.]<sup>27</sup>

As we gather from Maciąg's account, the real tragedy of the situation lay in the complacency with which the diminished role of literature was accepted by authors and readers alike. Even if books were still being written and discussed, the scope of reception had narrowed down so significantly as to render literature socially redundant. Its great potential for education and acculturation was clearly not being realized. And yet, the same time period witnessed what Michał Sprusiński called "the demolyric spike" (46), a record number of literary prize winners, laureates, published debuts. Young talent was being encouraged and acclaimed throughout the land (especially at the local level of provincial poet clubs); its staying power (or any other power, for that matter), remained paltry at best. Spontaneous creativity had been replaced with "mass production of literati,"<sup>28</sup> who swelled the ranks of professional organizations but failed to connect with the reading public they were meant to serve. Ironically, some of the factors that contributed to this state of affairs acted both as its causes and preventive measures at once. For instance, by encouraging more people to write and providing multiple venues for publishing new material, literary circles fell victim to the effects of the very democratization they had sought to establish. Poems were being written, Sprusiński sneeringly describes, as if to fit the connect-the-dots model included in the Sunday magazine special: stock phrases thought 'poetic' would be combined almost randomly by

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<sup>27</sup> "Czy literatura ma obowiązki?" (48).

<sup>28</sup> Sprusiński: "I oto gwiazdy konkursów jednego wiersza szybko powiększają szeregi oddziałów Związku Literatów Polskich. Nowe to i przygnębiające zjawisko—taśmowa produkcja literatów" (48).

“those worshippers of fish, bird, salt, and stone” (46). If this was indeed how a significant portion of literary output looked, then one could easily follow the direction of Maciag’s finger pointed at literature’s “irresponsibility for the condition of souls, its defensiveness, reluctance or helplessness in this matter,” attitudes that threatened to create a situation where “its absence will signify not only carelessness, not only opportunism, but may transform into a kind of escape, a powerless silence” (50).

Most of this scathing criticism was aimed at the debutants, not at the literary stalwarts who had experienced the War and made it their chief point of reference. Certainly, no imaginary “fish” or “salt” can compete with the spilled blood and suffering of real people, but the new realities of post-war Poland, where peace—despite the Cold War propaganda hype—had become a fact of life for the new generation, perhaps did call for a different set of values. It seems that the typical generational difference was in this case exacerbated by the unusually large gap in experience between the old guard who could have fought with the likes of Baczyński, and those barely born around the time his words were becoming a legend. If young people were no longer dying with poetry on their lips, this should not necessarily render their own work empty or meaningless. Perhaps the crisis into which Polish literature had slid by the end of the 1960s resulted at least in part from unreasonable expectations hoisted upon it in the first place.

The solemn role apportioned to poetry—that lofty tool capable of “steeling the hearts” and sparking uprisings—is a familiar theme in Polish history. Charismatic artists easily become revered leaders and national heroes, as long, of course, as they are willing to serve whatever current cause the nation needs them for. Generally suspicious of the

intelligentsia (what would today be best termed “*wykształciuchy*”<sup>29</sup>) and highbrow culture commonly associated with excesses of capitalism, the party leaders were nonetheless aware of the potential inherent in powerful words and in those who shaped them. The proliferation of provincial literary contests ridiculed above formed only one part of the state’s concerted acculturation efforts. Local talent was searched and supported; access to “culture”<sup>30</sup> was being facilitated through organized poetry readings to which groups of school-age youth (or retirees) were herded; outings to music and theater performances were subsidized for workers, etc. While such initiatives exposed much wider social strata to experiences they had formerly no access to, the implicit element of compulsion and lack of proper educational context in which these events could be understood often did more harm than good. Jerzy Grotowski, for example, mentions that the feel of the audience (and, by extension, the quality of the performance) depended greatly on whether the viewers had their seats reserved by one of the cultural institutions or got inside “because they fought their way in,”<sup>31</sup> occasionally traveling great distances or waiting long hours in bad weather for as much as a promise of a ticket. Similarly, the popular idea of *wieczór autorski* (“evening with an author”), which for the poet often meant nothing more than a source of supplemental income and for the

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<sup>29</sup> This new term coined by the leaders of the Fourth Polish Republic perfectly captures the ambivalence of Polish attitudes towards the educated classes. It has been used by right-wing politicians as a pejorative designated to expose and deride not only snobbish intellectuals but even college graduates influenced by suspect, often ‘foreign’ ideas. Conversely, it has been also embraced by the educated minority eager to reclaim the term in defiant mimicry, to re-assert pride in intellectual accomplishment.

<sup>30</sup> The Polish word *kultura* has a slightly narrower semantic range than the English *culture* does, most often used to designate the institutions of culture, as well as the art of personal *savoir-vivre*.

<sup>31</sup> “*Oczywiście była też normalna widownia, którą można by umownie nazwać ekskluzywną, czyli ta, którą zapraszała Stołeczna Rada Narodowa korzystając ze swoich instytucji kulturalnych i innego rodzaju odpowiedników. W każdym razie ta widownia normalna niekiedy niewiele miała wspólnego z tamtym drugim rodzajem widowni, która dlatego się dostała, ponieważ o to walczyła*” (35).

audience an enforced ‘encounter with culture,’ could easily dissolve into a series of disappointments.

Pressures of the state, together with any ill-conceived initiatives that contributed to the growing indifference to and irrelevance of art, pushed with a significant but hardly overwhelming force against its paper walls. The “crisis of reception” in literature was occurring for other reasons as well, including changes in the perceptions and definitions of “art” in the postmodern age, incursions of pop culture and consumerism, the rising influence of television and other mass entertainment media. Looking closely at those factors will give us a fuller picture of the period, contextualize the *Nowa Fala* movement as a response to the post-1968 social inertia and conformism, and help us understand developments in *poezja śpiewana* of the 1980s.

## 2. THE ART OF... DICHOTOMY, DUPLICITY, ONE TRUTH

*O nie! nie!—odpowiedziały głosy. Tyś wieszcz nad wieszczami! Tyś wieszcz z ramienia Boga! Wieszcz “z archanielskimi skrzydłami i głosem”, dzierżący w ręku miecz Archaniola. Tyś Polski, tyś naszym duchem! Tyś Polski, tyś naszym Archaniołem-Stróżem! Ty naród, jak nas w tej chwili, uszczęśliwisz!*

[O no! no!—the voices answered. You are the prophet-poet above all others! You are the prophet-poet appointed by God! Prophet-poet “with an archangel’s wings and voice,” holding the Archangel’s sword in hand. You’re Polish, you’re our spirit! You’re Polish, you’re our Guardian Archangel! You will make the nation, like us in this moment, happy!]<sup>32</sup>

The human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manner, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues.<sup>33</sup>

With the placement of Marcel Duchamp’s playfully irreverent 1917 *Fountain* as a signpost of change, the challenges posed to Western art in the twentieth century

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<sup>32</sup> The enthusiastic response of Polish university students in Berlin to Adam Mickiewicz’s improvised speech there in 1829. Reported by Wojciech Cybulski, quoted in Mickiewicz (224).

<sup>33</sup> Hume, David. “Of National Characters.” *Selected Essays*. Ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. 113-25. (115)



continued to mount. The very idea of “original artwork” was being questioned—the era of “mechanical reproduction” brought to the fore problems accentuated by readymades, endless replication of popular imagery, revocation of authorship. The humanitarian crises of the two world wars certainly urged re-evaluations of artistic achievement, while the toppling of rigid social structures transformed the characteristics and demands of an average consumer. In the United States and Western Europe the sixties are commonly associated with freedom, experimentation, and contestation of everything old. In Poland, where the rebuilding process was still very much under way, similar trends were beginning to emerge, if somewhat belatedly. They were soon overshadowed by the trauma of 1968, when the waves of protests crashed on the breakers of strong governmental resistance to change. Indignance and disappointment were felt particularly acutely by the young student protesters whose renewed hopes for a better future suddenly dissipated. The “*Nowa Fala*” movement, alternatively known as “*Generacja 68*,” formed as a literary response to the perceptible rise of hopelessness and nihilism. The seventies provided a few more comforts, but bought at a price of docility and conformity, as well as further loosening of social cohesiveness. “March 1968,” Iwona Gierszal asserts, forced many to realize “the fragility of all kinds of socio-political stability, the power of irrational instincts driving human behavior, the proclivity for manipulation. Reality had become uncertain, as had human beings. This uncertainty bred distrust.”<sup>34</sup>

The distrust and uncertainty percolated just under the surface, filtering perceptions of everyday events. Meanwhile, in various magazines, academic debates on the condition and role of art continued. Two lines of inquiry taken up in those are most relevant for our

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<sup>34</sup> “*Marzec roku 1968 [...] uświadomił im kruchość wszelkiej stabilizacji społeczno-politycznej, moc irracjonalnych odruchów, kierujących postępowaniem człowieka, jego podatność na manipulację. Niepewna stała się rzeczywistość, niepewny człowiek. Ta niepewność zrodziła—nieufność*” (160).

discussion: the status of the “work”, i.e., the material object produced in the act of creation, and the new open-ended definition of art itself. In the article titled “Sztuka w epoce postartystycznej” [Art in the post-artistic era], Jerzy Ludwiński closed off the sixties as a time when yet another major break in the development of art had occurred. Perhaps the word *break-down* would more accurately convey the idea of the change he reported, since Ludwiński focussed on the “destructive” tendencies in contemporary art, describing its “drive towards the zero situation, as if artists were mostly interested in oscillating near the borderline of making nothing” (51). The material, spatial, and temporal dimensions of the work were radically altered, crystallizing into mere concepts or gestures, more often verbal than plastic. Ludwiński proposed to call this new set of conditions in creative processes “absent art,” something at the borderline of existence, something “impossible” (55)—encompassing the known as well as the unknown. This kind of process dissolved the traditional triangular division between the artist, the artwork, and the viewer, inviting previously passive audiences to participate in the creation and modification of the imaginary object. Stefan Morawski, in his erudite piece “Sztuka dawniej i dziś,” examined the mechanism of determining what constituted a work of art. He attempted to come up with a set of “unchangeables” (50), basic aesthetic valuation criteria that remain stable throughout the ages. Experimentation and rebellion, accordingly, could occur only in reaction (negative or positive) to the unchangeables. In emphasizing the “doing-the-impossible” aspect of conceptual art, Morawski predicted a sharp “civilizational turn” (54) and boldly suggested that by the end of the century the term *art* might become obsolete. He prophesized that in the future art might be replaced with *creationism*, comprised of all kinds of “syncretic messages (acoustic-verbal-visual,

enriched perhaps by other elements as well)” (55). All in all, both Ludwiński and Morawski saw the end of a certain era.

What is curious about both critics that they wrote about the phenomena in question as if they were occurring elsewhere. Every concrete example each one of them uses—names like Allan Kaprow, terms like *activité*, *happening*, *minimal art*—comes from abroad. One also detects an unusual tone of finality, irreversibility in the described events, accompanied by an uncertainty as to what will follow. If these two critics were any indication, one would gather that Polish art at the outset of 1970s had reached some sort of an impasse, and that its problems remained at odds—or discontinuous—with the direction in which art movements in the West were heading. In Poland, one waited for something.

This lull was welcomed by some as a period of relative stability. The clashes between workers and the riot police which resulted in the tragedies of 1970 were followed by what seemed like a genuine response from the government. The uncompromising First Secretary—who justified the use of violence against the very people his Party was ostensibly representing—was replaced with a younger, more dynamic Edward Gierek. Whereas Gomułka saw in the strikers’ motivation “unbridled anarchism, wild willfulness, disdain for law and the rule of law, abdicating any responsibility for one’s country and its future,”<sup>35</sup> Gierek chose to view it as, “for the most part, honest and understandable.”<sup>36</sup> The immediate cause of the workers’s protests, the price increases, were rolled back in 1971. For the average citizen, the material situation improved, at least in the first half of the decade; real wages slightly rose. Despite the

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<sup>35</sup> From Gomułka’s March 1971 letter to the PUWP Central Committee, quoted in Fajfer (75).

<sup>36</sup> Trybuna Ludu, December 21, 1970; quoted in Fajfer (86).

signs of disunity in other areas of public life, the population was united under the common aegis: the desire for consumer goods. Gierek's reliance on foreign loans to boost the lagging economy produced a sense of increased international exchange, of connection to the rest of the world. One paid more attention to fashions from abroad, but pride in domestic production (and typically Polish love/hate relationship with the foreign) encouraged home-grown alternatives. This was a time of substitutions: *skaj* imitated leather, domestic *teksas* stood in for foreign denim.

The rise in consumption was accompanied by the broadening influence of boundary-crossing mass culture. Imported music in particular gained an instant following, and domestic imitators of most popular styles turned out new hits to which the whole country seemingly tuned. "*Beatlemania*," viewed as a breath of fresh air by the young hopefuls, or as a pernicious craze by the older traditionalists, serves as the most conspicuous example.<sup>37</sup> The notorious Jerzy Putrament regarded the "fashion started by the Beatles" in terms of gender, which forced him to "react absolutely in the same way every man of [his] generation did: negatively."<sup>38</sup> For Putrament, the long-haired Beatles visibly removed gender differences and thus lowered the status of the man: "by covering his forehead, they eliminate the most important attribute of masculinity" (84-5). The critic warned against such dangerous trends as threats to time-tested aesthetic values and culture in general, as mere "difference" without deeper meaning. By 1971, Marek

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<sup>37</sup> Radosław Piwowarski's 1985 film *Yesterday*, which portrays a group of four small-town friends obsessed with the Beatles, unsentimentally gazes back at that era. Excellent performances by Piotr Siwkiewicz as Paweł "Ringo," Krystyna Feldman as Paweł's aunt, and Krzysztof Majchrzak as Mr. Biegacz. One of the most memorable scenes in the movie casts enraged Paweł chasing his elderly aunt around the house, with an axe in his hand, after he discovers she secretly cut off his long hair at night. (Zespół Filmowy Rondo.)

<sup>38</sup> This is the same man who, as General Secretary of the Literati Association, attacked Aleksander Wat at the January 1953 mass meeting, finishing off the poet's career in Poland. Czesław Miłosz wrote about Putrament in *The Captive Mind* under the pseudonym "Gamma."

Garztecki, writing for the more mainstream Polityka,<sup>39</sup> bemoaned mostly the lack of professional expertise and knowledge among music critics who talked about its pop varieties. Garztecki rightly pointed out the inaccuracy of continuing to view contemporary pop icons like Elvis Presley or Czesław Niemen as “teenage music” figures (which made it possible to dismiss them as fads, rather than to treat them as serious cultural contenders). No matter how one personally regarded the Rolling Stones or the Beatles, the spread of mass culture had become not only a fact, but perhaps even “a real social problem.”<sup>40</sup> In Poland, discussions about such evident capitalist ‘inventions’ were inevitably framed in terms of ideological competition.<sup>41</sup> But it was clear that these new performative art forms attracted and swayed the masses.

Another medium growing in popularity and influence was film and television. When in the early thirties Ezra Pound measured the creative potential of the few modernist poets against “five hundred troubadours, with no cinema, no novels, no radio to distract ‘em,”<sup>42</sup> he was alerting his readers to important changes in the conditions of cultural production that affected the quantity (and, presumably, also the quality) of artistic output. In 1975, Stachura had to add—twice for emphasis—“no television”<sup>43</sup> to

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<sup>39</sup> Garztecki, Marek. “Wstęp do beatologii stosowanej” [Preface to Applied Beatology]. Polityka 755 (1971): 6. Another article, a translation of excerpts from George Melly’s “Revolt into Style,” likewise attests to the growing scale of interest in the issue. “Rewolta w styl przemieniona.” Polityka 867 (1973): 7-9.

<sup>40</sup> Jerzy Jastrzębski, “Kultura masowa...” (41).

<sup>41</sup> Agnieszka Osiecka, by far the best known songwriter in post-war Polish history with over 2000 songs to her credit, likewise commented on the “big-beat” (a British term adapted into Polish referring to, roughly speaking, rock and roll) explosion by criticizing mindless celebrity worship imported from America. She noted the absence of appropriate domestic role models, but instead of chastizing young people about poor choices, she suggested capitalizing on the big-beat music’s popularity by using it for “more noble purposes.” In her opinion, to ignore the genre or to allow it to be dominated by meager talent meant wasting a valuable opportunity to educate the young, perhaps directionless but quite eager to hear about pressing social issues that the songs could raise. “Kwiatek do kozucha” (6).

<sup>42</sup> ABC of Reading (76).

<sup>43</sup> Wszystko jest poezja (180-1). Stachura’s pseudo-quote following Pound’s is attributed to “*głos z puszczy*” [a voice from the forest], and then to “*echo*.”

make the list of distractions more complete. Even if both poets worried mainly about unnecessary diversions keeping writers away from their desks, the same problem must have affected their audiences, now drawn to other, more powerful media. An anonymous respondent to an intriguing discussion that spread over three separate issues of Polityka, for instance, called Andrzej Wajda, a film director, “the greatest Polish poet of our times.”<sup>44</sup> In competition with literature and highbrow art, pop culture had clearly taken the lead.

Experiments and developments in the plastic arts, while often genuinely conceived to break down age-old barriers, contributed little to the wider understanding of contemporary art. Many a casual viewer of modern art works would heartily agree with the disgruntled philosopher who said that, “by divesting them of their aspect of ‘lived’ reality, the artist has blown up the bridges and burned the ships that could have taken us back to our daily world.”<sup>45</sup> Conceptual art, with its radical redefinition of the materiality of the artwork, carries the potential of alienating the viewer if s/he could not understand the concept behind a particular work. It can be hard to tell intention from chance, to notice the artist’s guiding hand in a perplexing new shape. Similarly, the meaning of a happening runs the risk of dissolving into absurdity or hilarity, if the idea behind its playfulness gets lost in the performative aspect of the event. Art which is no longer easily recognizable as such—for instance, Andy Warhol’s Campbell soup can images—can be dismissed altogether as borderline fraudulent. In some ways, contemporary art requires more extensive historical knowledge to be understood by the viewer, since it relies less heavily on verisimilitude and conventional beauty than its strictly representational

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<sup>44</sup> “Poezja i orkiestry dęte.” *Polityka* 717 (1970): 6-7. The discussion went back to issue numbers 712 and 716.

<sup>45</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art” (21).

counterpart. To comprehend rule-breaking, one must first follow previous continuities. With inadequate art education, the “masses” are thus far more likely to be left confused than amused by formal experimentation they are not prepared to process.<sup>46</sup> In Poland, this problem was compounded by the peculiar “priesthood of art and cult of the artist”<sup>47</sup> caused by the conflation of national and aesthetic interests. Given Poland’s bitter experience of statelessness, artists were all too often called upon to shape civic consciousness and rouse their countrymen to fight for independence. Even in the communist era, the artist still remained too much of an idol, a singular object of communal worship. According to Andrzej Szczypiorski, such preferential treatment produced irresponsible, laughable celebrity “clowns” (7) too busy basking in the false shine of idolatry to do any actual work. Moreover, Szczypiorski contends, any critique of public affairs—the natural domain of art under normal circumstances—could be interpreted as “anti-Polish” because the idea of “*naród*” [the nation] did not separate the state from its people (as it should, and did, in France or England).

It seems fitting to illustrate the above situation with a commentary taken from the mainstream media. Tadeusz Chmielewski’s 1971 comedy of errors *Nie lubię poniedziałku* [I Hate Mondays]<sup>48</sup> famously satirizes the art world with a scene in which Zygmunt Bączyk, a provincial farmer who visits the capital looking for a replacement farming equipment part, accidentally leaves the defective implement in the hands of an artist searching for inspiration. The artist picks up the spare part, puts it on an exhibit

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<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu suggests that individual artwork’s readability depends to a great extent on education, and on the minimization of divergence between “the *level of emission*, defined as the degree of intrinsic complexity and subtlety, of the code required for the work, and the *level of reception*, defined as the degree to which this individual masters the social code, which may be more or less adequate to the code required for the work” (*The Field* 224-5).

<sup>47</sup> Szczypiorski (7).

<sup>48</sup> *Nie lubię poniedziałku*. Dir. Tadeusz Chmielewski. Perf. Jerzy Turek, Zygmunt Apostoń, Kazimierz Witkiewicz, Bogusz Bilewski, Bohdan Łazuka, et al. Zespół Filmowy Plan, 1971.

pedestal without much further ado, and by doing so turns the unfamiliar looking object into “art.” Bespectacled, beard-scratching “experts” gather around it at the well-known Warsaw gallery Zachęta and immediately begin to construe erudite interpretations of its purportedly complex meaning. Chmielewski relies here on the familiar trope of exaggerated misrecognition for comedic effect, but the scene nonetheless provides a useful commentary on mainstream perceptions of the art world. The implicit message emerges clearly enough: the artist appears idle, at a loss, desperate to find anything he can use; the critics spin their talk like automatons, programmed to speak learnedly just about anything (which turns out to be *nothing*, like the emperor’s new clothes), regardless of genuine interest. Seen up close, art is a hoax. It does not speak to or serve anyone outside the small circle of professionals, who are unable to communicate its purpose to the general public in a comprehensible way.<sup>49</sup>

This is precisely the kind of disconnect that Kornhauser, Zagajewski, Krynicki, Barańczak, and others of the *Nowa Fala* movement urged artists to minimize. Art needed to be rescued from convoluted aestheticism and turned again into a simple tool designed to hone individual and social consciousness. In a sense, the *New Wave* poets attempted to un-do the twisted effects of the Red Revolution, resist the tide of overwhelming materialism with a solid foundation of humanism and spiritual growth. On the one hand,

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<sup>49</sup> A similar kind of tension between the worker and the intellectual can be seen in the response to student protests of '68, which started, ostensibly, in reaction to the suspension of a play in January. Students gathered signatures on petitions and later took to the streets, especially after two of them, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer, were suspended and dismissed. On March 8, the so-called “*aktyw robotniczy*” (literally: “active proletarians,” groups of workers rounded up and organized to act in public demonstrations) entered the Warsaw University campus, followed by the police. Beatings ensued, intensifying protests and spilling to other cities. Counter-demonstrations were held in some factories, with signs like this one exhibited in Nowa Huta: “*LITERACI DO PIÓRA, STUDENCI DO NAUKI*” [Literati back to their pens, students back to study], expressing the workers’ contempt for petty student problems. Even if such events were staged, at least some of the anti-intellectual sentiment was real. “*Bananowa młodzież*” [the banana youth] was one of the terms that emerged to critique the carefree, privileged youth, perceived to be “disconnected from hardships of real life” (Władyka 34).



they sought to remind Polish culture of its links to Western European traditions; on the other, they aimed to create works that responded to the conditions they viewed as specifically Polish—i.e., their own. As one of the critical designations for the group centered in Kraków suggests, their attention rested on *Teraz—Now*.<sup>50</sup> The movement was intensely historicist, focused on its unique moment in time and space. Kornhauser and Zagajewski, therefore, saw the need to chart out new responsibilities for poets:

*Nowość naszego świata utkana jest z nowych zjawisk etycznych, politycznych, metafizycznych, zmieniły się kontakty między ludźmi, zmienili się sami ludzie—my jesteśmy inni. Są to zmiany mgławicowe, amorficzne, nie podpisane, nie nazwane, nie towarzyszy im żaden słownik. Larousse'em naszych zmian może być dopiero literatura, bowiem ten potężny głos nie tylko nazywa rzeczy, ale sam jest jedną z nich. Inny jest kontekst dzisiejszej poezji, inny jest charakter naszej terażniejszości, innego heroizmu potrzebuje dzisiaj literatura, jej czytelnicy oczekują od niej pomocy w rozpoznawaniu świata. Zwykłym ludzkim językiem powinna dzisiaj przemówić poezja, nie wysilonym, sztucznym językiem pseudonimów Peipera. Są czasy, kiedy rzemiosłem poezji staje się szczerłość. (26)*

[Our world's newness is woven with new ethical, political, and metaphysical phenomena; interpersonal relations have changed, people themselves have changed—we are different. These changes are nebulous, amorphous, not signed, not named, not accompanied by any dictionary. Nothing other than literature can become the *Larousse* of our changes because this powerful voice not only names things but is itself one of them. The context of today's poetry is different, the character of our reality is different, today's literature needs a different kind of heroism since readers expect that it help them recognize the world. Literature today ought to speak the ordinary human language, not the strained, artificial language of Peiper's pseudonyms. Honesty is becoming these days the tool of trade of poetry.]

The *Nowa Fala* manifesto, as underwritten by Kornhauser and Zagajewski, could

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<sup>50</sup> Stanisław Barańczak talks about the difficulty of finding the right terminology to designate the movement in his essay “*Generation 68: a premature sum-up attempt*,” printed in *Etyka and poetyka*: Instead of commonly accepted designations like New Movement, New Wave, or Young Culture, I use a term that could cause opposition in someone wary of its “generational” connotations [...]. In this case, however, I’d rather insist on using this particular term—because not only does it indicate a certain supra-individual phenomenon but also its social roots, the “experience of a generation” that shaped in many young people at the brink of adulthood a specific way of thinking and speaking about reality. (194-5)

very well serve as a textbook case of a conscious—though not explicit—shaping of a prototypical Jamesonian “collective narrative fantasy.”<sup>51</sup> The passage above illustrates a reversal of the usual mechanism of ‘othering’ the strange and the unfamiliar, in that the new culture makers are asked to acknowledge the binary split in themselves and neutralize it through self-recognition. The two poets propose to capitalize on the reifying power of language, that tool which “not only names things but is itself one of them,” in order to re-create a world out of the un-nameable chaos. It would seem that this process must start with the recognition that “the stranger from another tribe, the ‘barbarian’ who speaks an incomprehensible language”<sup>52</sup> is none other than themselves. But Kornhauser and Zagajewski, in accepting their responsibility for collective cultural revival, by the same token immediately shift the burden of ‘otherness’ to different, irresponsible writers, branded as epigones of Peiper (one of the principal Polish avant-gardists) and his “pseudonyms.” The shift we observe at work here bears all the markers of ideology in the making, as described by Fredric Jameson.

Jameson’s analysis provides a useful framework for understanding *Generation 68* particularly because of the ethical repercussions that the critic ascribes, following Nietzsche, to the valuation process immanent to the construction of ideology. Jameson observes that the conceptualization of the distinction between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the strange, polarizes such pairs into the positive/negative opposition of good and evil. Kornhauser and Zagajewski, while calling for increased self-awareness and knowledge, indeed do imply that these intellectual tools should be used to separate the good from the bad. They accuse ‘bad’ literature of contributing to the

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<sup>51</sup> The Political Unconscious (115).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* (115).

emptiness and alienation experienced by the contemporary Pole, and they cast ‘bad’ writers as complicit in at least allowing (if not causing) such pernicious states of mind.<sup>53</sup> “To exist,” the poets assert, “means to be described within culture. A fact not known to culture is something incomplete, shameful, ugly” (32). The power of recognition is so great that “culture” becomes almost a sentient being, capable of aesthetic and moral judgment. It becomes a kind of collective consciousness, an organism given life by a whiff of breath whose strength is multiplied by the countless numbers of mouths speaking as one.

The term “realism,” then, denotes more than a style or mode. For *Nowa Fala* writers, descriptive language is precisely what made the world real, i.e., visible, tangible, comprehensible. Literature pulls reality out of non-existence, *ex nihilo*, as it were.<sup>54</sup> In a later text, Zagajewski uses another personification—this time the figure of “a deaf-mute who was allowed to speak on the televised news”—to explain the nature of communism as “a very silent system, with pursed lips.”<sup>55</sup> According to this oppositional model, articulate culture stands poised to fight dumb communism. The former judges itself self-evidently better because more closely connected with the lives of the people on behalf of whom it speaks; the latter also speaks volumes, but it creates empty signifiers, disjointed babble.

Zagajewski’s focus on silence indicates a strategic interpretive move directed at

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<sup>53</sup> Zagajewski later expressed regret at his harsh dismissal of poets interested in issues not directly related to political freedom, those who discussed “eternity and everything.” By the mid-1980s, Zagajewski was somewhat weary of activism and dissidence, and wished to return to idealism and metaphysics. He no longer condemned “those who dreamed of ‘everything’ [...] as suspect enemies of freedom, masked proponents of political submission, and at the same time outdated devotees of modernism” (from the essay “Wszystko” in *Solidarność i samotność*, 73).

<sup>54</sup> As Iwona Gierszal points out, “to fight against communism meant to fight against nihilism, that is against nothingness” (160).

<sup>55</sup> *Solidarność i samotność* (19).

the communist party's discursive practices. To describe the public sphere<sup>56</sup> as silent belies the facts on the ground—in communist Poland words incessantly filled the airwaves and covered most available surfaces. Sentences like “*Losy Polski zwiqzaliśmy z socjalizmem, Polska i socjalizm—to jedno*” [We have tied the fate of Poland to socialism, Poland and socialism—are one]<sup>57</sup> plastered bridge overpasses and office walls. The abundance of words, however, was paired with “nontalk” (to use the phrase of Hungarian historian István Rév<sup>58</sup>), which hid certain subjects under the veil of taboo. Zagajewski therefore extends two claims: that the regime manipulated the lives of people by silencing all voices of dissent (thus condemning them to a kind of social non-existence), and that the official rhetoric was so devoid of meaning as to render itself effectively mute. It was not that the government was silent; rather, it spoke only of unimportant matters in a language drained of all significance, completely disconnected from reality as experienced by the living people. For the *Nowa Fala* activists, influence and control over public space was crucial. To fight back the perceived suppression and exclusion, they had to vie for attention and loudly demand their own slice of the discursive pie.

In his exhaustive study on the language of propaganda in the 1970s, Jerzy Bralczyk remarks that the Polish propagandists' efforts concentrated on creating feelings of belonging and solidarity. To promote a sense of unity, the positive language of

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<sup>56</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge link the concept of the public sphere with collective experience: “The public sphere only possesses use-value characteristics when social experience is organized in it” (qtd. in Jochen Schulte-Sasse's foreword to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, xxviii).

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Bralczyk (198).

<sup>58</sup> Rév muses on the strange mechanisms of oppression and submission in the final pages of *Retroactive Justice*:

Nontalk was not just a manifestation of power: compliance with the prohibition—which had not been stated directly but whose infringement nevertheless resulted in an automatic penalty—solidified, reproduced, perpetuated, and prolonged power. Taboo is one of the pillars of power, which—in the case of a well-functioning system—becomes deeply internalized; this is why there is less need for using external force or even explicit rules for enforcing the prohibition against transgressions. (325)

inclusion was employed in contrast to (but inseparable with) negatives that implied disharmony and exclusion. There existed ‘dictionaries’ of stock binary expressions, to be used interchangeably depending on the appropriate context. The most ubiquitous, Bralczyk recalls, included: “*pomoc—agresja; porozumienie—knowania, zмовy; przedsięwzięcia, inicjatywy—machinacje, zabiegi; przywódca—prowodyr; rząd—reżim*” [assistance—aggression; agreement—schemes, intrigues; undertakings, initiatives—machinations, subversions; leader—figurehead; government—regime].<sup>59</sup> With the passage of time and inevitable overuse, many of these words have compromised or lost meaning altogether. In the sphere of public communication of this kind, “[l]anguage contact becomes an increasingly conventional game and the information channel becomes more and more empty, although still filled with words.” The drainage of semantic content, however, did not necessarily cause concern for the propaganda apparatus because its public appeals aimed to convey something that went beyond the overt ‘meaning’ of whatever individual messages contained. “Their effectiveness seems to be as problematical as the informativeness of the statements taken directly from the surface of texts,” argues Bralczyk. “On the other hand there is an imperativeness hidden more deeply, in the mere fact of the existence of the text rather than in its quality. And it is an imperativeness devoid of the distinct moment of control” (226). Thus, the government’s chief concern lay in the demonstration of power, even at the cost of exposing the underlying system of threats that kept its citizens in check, instead of the avowed moral high ground as the “people’s” chosen representative. Perhaps in some way this power was *strengthened* by the very speciousness of official discourse, since its ineffectiveness seemingly made no chink in the Party’s thick armor. A similar principle

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<sup>59</sup> Bralczyk, 93 (emphases in the original).

operates in the story about Abraham the Jew and Jehannot de Chevigny from Boccaccio's Decameron, in which Abraham converts to Christianity after he witnesses the clergy's depravity in Rome.<sup>60</sup>

Polish oppositional literature located its duty not only in exposing the emptiness of words found in newspapers and television, but—more importantly, since their vacuity seemed already rather evident—in reclaiming language so it could serve other ends. The common denominator for the *Nowa Fala* poets, despite many individual differences, became the focus on 'everydayness,' both in the choice of diction as well as in the kinds of issues taken up. Reading a newspaper, buying bread, getting bitten by a mosquito, smoothing out one's dress—these were all fitting subjects of poetry. More often than not, though, such daily activities stood against the backdrop of political life: they signified the struggle of man against History. Hardly an original topic in Polish poetry; what struck a different chord was the predominant mood of hopelessness, absence of faith, weariness, and triviality. Life appeared dreary, humanity—sordid. There was no immediate drama of war, no upheaval, just diurnal drudgery. Ryszard Krynicki captures it expertly in the poem "*W przeddzień*" [On the eve]:

*Kiedy w przeddzień pierwszego maja  
wracając z pracy szarą ulicą armii czerwonej  
mijałem właśnie witrynę sklepu mięsnego,*

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<sup>60</sup> Abraham decides to convert precisely because of the Church's insouciance in hiding its corruption. He explains to Jehannot:

As far as I can judge, it seems to me that your pontiff, and all of the others too, are doing their level best to reduce the Christian religion to nought and drive it from the face of the earth, whereas they are the very people who should be its foundation and support. But since it is evident to me that their attempts are unavailing, and that your religion continues to grow in popularity, and become more splendid and illustrious, I can only conclude that, being a more holy and genuine religion than any of the others, it deservedly has the Holy Ghost as its foundation and support. (First Day, Third Story; 41)

Boccaccio, Giovanni. The Decameron. Trans. G. H. McWilliam. London: Penguin Books, 1995.

*spozrzegłem kątem oka  
jak pomiędzy atrapami i oryginałami  
nieruchomo przyczajonego mięsa  
poruszyła się nagle  
lekko owłosiona ręka  
ze złotą obrączką na serdecznym palcu  
i polakierowanymi na czerwono paznokciami.*

*Nic się nie stało.*

[When on the eve of the first of may  
returning from work along the grey street of the red army  
just as I was passing by the butcher shop's window  
in the corner of my eye I noticed  
that among the fake and real pieces  
of motionlessly crouched meat  
suddenly there moved  
a slightly hairy hand  
with a gold wedding band on the fourth finger  
and the fingernails painted red.

Nothing happened.]<sup>61</sup>

The anticlimactic last line encapsulates the frustration and fatigue of waiting for something to change, after the buildup of tension conveyed by the menacing posture of “crouched” meat and the promise of movement. Any potential threat of the “Red Army” dissolves in the nominality of its presence as a nondescript, “grey” street name (all written in miniscule). Moreover, the display of the shop’s offerings, where plastic meat sits nearly undistinguishable from real animal flesh, and a living human hand betrays its distinctness only momentarily, suggests a world in which the “real” and the “fake” are almost impossible to tell apart.

This difficulty of distinguishing life from death, reality from illusion, truth from falsity permeates many of Krynicki’s poems collected in the volume Nasze życie rośnie. Most of the poems were written between late 1960s and mid-1970s, and pinpoint several

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<sup>61</sup> From the volume Nasze życie rośnie (29).

key problems of the period: indifference, absence of a strong ethical code, docility, excessive consumption. Various forms of organic matter evoked by the title return with surprising insistence in many pieces, to illustrate the idea that the “tongue is wild meat.”<sup>62</sup> Krynicki uses the image of the flesh to critique the shallowness of his society, interested in satisfying only the basest of instincts, enslaved by its own ignoble needs and not capable of true reflection. In its unchecked robustness, the flesh can be a formidable force. Incarnated as lips, for example, it is “capable of anything”<sup>63</sup>—betrayal, lust, greed. On the other side Krynicki places the inhuman face of public institutions and deceptive media. The dominant trope of the volume relies on the juxtaposition of official discourse with everyday speech. In the poem symptomatically titled “The 31<sup>st</sup> of March, at 19:21,” alternating lines jump from subject to subject (gramatically and thematically) to tragicomic effect:

*Kibic Górnika umiera na zawał  
[cudzego serca  
z Wydziału Gwałtów  
miejscowej komendy milicji obywatelskiej  
wychodzi obywatelka milicyjna  
jest dzień wypłat  
dzisiaj nie sprzedaje się alkoholu a jednak  
jakiś zabłąkany przechodzień  
może nie posiadający jeszcze telewizora  
(kupno telewizora jest patriotycznym  
[obowiązkiem)  
śpiewa gdybyś miły nie miał kiły  
[..... ]  
cały świat patrzy na Moskwę*

*ocalał jeden  
zginęło dziesięciu górników  
na wybrzeżu  
w tajemnicy pogrzebano kilkuset zabitych  
Chińczycy zalewają narkotykami  
świat kapitalistyczny*

A Górnik fan dies of someone else’s  
[heart attack  
from the Rape Department  
of a local citizens’ police station  
a citizen policewoman walks out  
it’s payday  
today no alcohol is sold however  
some lost passerby  
who maybe doesn’t own a t.v. set yet  
(purchasing a t.v. set is  
[a patriotic duty)  
sings o my dear if you had no gonorrhoea  
the whole world is watching Moscow

only one survived  
ten miners perished  
on the coast  
in secret a few hundred were buried  
the Chinese are flooding the capitalist  
world with narcotics.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> “Język to dzikie mięso” [The tongue is wild meat], 71.

<sup>63</sup> “Zanim zdążyysz pomyśleć” [Before you have time to think], 40.

<sup>64</sup> (79-80).



The poem uses the timeframe of a soccer match taking place in Copenhagen (on March 31, 1971, Manchester City beat Górnik Zabrze 3:1 in the European Cup quarterfinals) to comment on other events happening simultaneously. Their order of magnitude is confused on purpose, as if one took the scissors to a newspaper, cut out random headlines, and glued their fragments together. This is world news at a glance, undigested and incomplete.

Krynicky targets the mass media, especially newspapers and television, and denounces uncritical reception of information. Utilizing the run-on technique, he demonstrates how careless reading can distort semantic content when separate clauses (lines) are combined into sentences with unintended continuities of meaning. Syntactic and thematic discombobulation obscures the event which lies at the core of the poem—the killing of the protesting workers on the coast. Moreover, the confusion of numbers and places (the survival of an unspecified “one,” the “ten” coal miners who inexplicably die by the sea while “a few hundred” are buried in an unknown location) adds to the uncertainty of what actually happened, and distorts the event’s importance as compared to other world news, like the trial of Charles Manson or the Chinese distribution of illegal drugs. Krynicky blames here the Polish media for feeding falsified information to the public. The oblique references to violence, placed near the phrase “citizens’ police,” insinuate responsibility for the bloodshed. But even if the government is to blame for the spreading of lies (not to mention the killing of unarmed men), the citizens who sit transfixed by their television sets or who roam the streets drunk with bawdy songs on their lips, deserve censure as well. Through his verses, the poet calls out to his fellow countrymen to shake up and resist all forms of manipulation. Like Stanisław Barańczak,

Krynicky seems to believe that “poetry appoints itself to the task of breaking mental and linguistic automatism in man. It teaches him how to think, talk, act—independently. Which also means responsibly.”<sup>65</sup>

In order to resist the totalizing effects of communist dogma, *Nowa Fala* focused on individual experience and pain. Weakness and vulnerability, the very same qualities that make humans susceptible to corruption and betrayal, may be redeemed through suffering; nihilism<sup>66</sup> may be countered with remembrance<sup>67</sup> and piety. Human beings need to regain their dignity through reflection and spirituality. Such were a few of the didactic precepts of *Generation 68*. Poetry occupied a special place because of its metaphysical potential, its capacity to imbue commonplace words with figurative symbolism. The apotheosis of the inner sanctum became one of the signature features of *Nowa Fala*, with or without overt Christian undertones.<sup>68</sup> In public people were obedient citizens; in private they could be free-thinking individuals whose minds and souls remained inviolable, impervious to the state’s efforts. The space inside, the area of the

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<sup>65</sup> From the essay “*Zmieniony głos Settembriniego*” [Settembrini’s changed voice], written by Barańczak in June of 1975: “*poezja stawia sobie za zadanie wytrącić człowieka z myślowego i językowego automatyzmu. Uczy go myśleć, mówić, działać—samodzielnie. A więc i odpowiedzialnie*” (*Etyka i poetyka* 18).

<sup>66</sup> One of the worst fears of Krynicky’s generation was that their docile and lukewarm age would leave no visible trace in the book of History: “*bo wierzysz, że jedynie kometa może cokolwiek zmienić/ a po nas nawet Nic nie pozostanie*” [because you believe that only a comet can change something/ while we won’t leave even Nothing in our wake]. From the poem “*Piosenka*” (*Nasze życie rośnie* 85).

<sup>67</sup> Memory figured powerfully in oppositional literature. Poems like “*Biała plama*” [The blank spot], with the stark empty page suggestively following the epigraph *in memoriam* of Bruno Jasiński (a Futurist poet executed on Stalin’s orders in 1938), commemorated the lives of individuals destroyed by totalitarian regimes (*Nasze życie* 92).

<sup>68</sup> Adam Michnik, one of the chief actors in the March ’68 events, offers a richly polemical discussion of the uneasy relationship between the (liberal, intellectual) Left and (sometimes reactionary and passive) Christianity in his *Kościół, Lewica, Dialog* [The Church, the Left, Dialogue]. Like many others of his generation, Michnik focuses on personal freedom, individual responsibility, and truth. But unlike the Christians, who exhibit enviable levels of “trust and calm” thanks to their faith in a supernatural power, Michnik prefers to rely on other, though no less “absolute,” authority:

This sanction is the basic canon of European culture in its specifically Polish incarnation. It is a sanction equally human and superhuman. Human because the canon was created by people, yet superhuman because its abolition would mean annihilation of all those values of human existence that are worth living and suffering for. (168)

heart and mind, was the hallowed ground where humanity could regain its elevated status. “To label R. Krynicki as ‘a metaphysical poet’,” Iwona Gierszal points out, “does not mean that the range of issues he takes up has narrowed to the sphere of the sacrum. It would be more appropriate to describe the opposite process: the sphere of the profanum has broadened to include a new, religious dimension” (170). Krynicki, like other poets of his group, imbues everyday experience with new significance, as a site of spiritual renewal.

This peculiar metaphysics formed in response to the force of ideology which underplayed or even erased individuality. Words like “proletariat” or “the people,” in principle created as part of the discourse to recover certain rights of underprivileged social groups, obscured what an individual person being felt and lived through day by day. Such is the nature of abstraction; *Nowa Kultura* poets, however, sought to resist what they believed to be its destructive power through sensitization and particularization. Marxist materialism (in the PZPR edition<sup>69</sup>) was thus opposed with tangible materiality. As Henri Lefebvre demonstrates, this strategy can bring about a sense of social cohesion:

No matter how alienated need, natural necessity and man’s essential properties may become, they still form a link between the members of this society. Thus these needs in everyday life are a cohesive force for social life even in bourgeois society, and they, *not political life*, are the real bond. So the individual tends to transcend his own separation from his self, his illusory image, his real appearance and false reality, his artificial atomization, his duplicity. (*Critique* 91)

On the one hand, focusing on the materiality of the human body brought to the fore its actual needs as living matter. Sheer physicality, the poets nonetheless reminded, had another dimension as well—deprived of the spirit, a body threatened to become nothing

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<sup>69</sup> Michał Głowiński labels this type of ideology “etatolatry,” in which the state “has become an idol demanding sacrifices and worship” (*Mowa* 15). Interests of the state overshadow everything else, reducing citizens to the role of servants with negligible personal value.

more than a piece of quivering meat. In fulfilling their pedagogic mission as champions of humanism, these writers appealed to each reader to fulfill his or her intellectual potential. Theirs was what Terry Eagleton calls “the well-meaning fantasy of the great Enlightenment ideologists”, built around “a full-blooded programme of social engineering, which will remake our social environment, thus alter our sensations, and so change our ideas” (66). To pay attention to everyday reality meant to be united by shared experience. It also translated into increased responsibility for one’s own choices, and for the welfare of others. If ‘society’ in communist propaganda stood for the dehumanized machinery of progress, *Nowa Fala* poets wished to animate it with life. The giant puppet, as it turned out after all, moved by the collective force of small hands hidden behind it, and spoke with the voice of the subaltern.<sup>70</sup> It was a voice that grew in strength.

### 3. WINK-WINK, NUDGE-NUDGE: THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

*Cała młodzież chce się uczyć,  
by w świecie tym lepiej móc żyć.  
Młodzież czyta oraz pragnie  
zgłębić to, co leży na dnie  
przemian i zmian, i to,  
{co to jest płodozmian.*

[All our youth want to learn  
how to lead better lives in this world.  
The young ones read and desire  
to probe what lies in the mire  
of changes and transformations, and what  
{means crop rotation.}]<sup>71</sup>

*... tam, gdzie nie można się porozumieć, leje się krew*  
[...wherever communication can't happen, blood gets spilled].<sup>72</sup>

*Poeci milczą zazwyczaj wtedy,  
gdy naród oczekuje od nich  
prawdy. Poeto, nie daj się zwieść  
pozorom. Naród pragnie usłyszeć  
tylko to, co sam wymyślił. To*

[The poets are silent usually when  
the nation expects from them  
the truth. You, the poet, don't be misled  
by appearances. The nation wants to hear  
only that which it has made up itself.

<sup>70</sup> I realize I am taking a risk in using this term, fully aware of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s warning that “subaltern” is not “just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie.” My appropriation of it is warranted by the way some analysts, including Głowiński, likened communism in Poland to a form of modern colonialism. Excerpt taken from: de Kock, Leon. “Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa.” *A Review of International English Literature*. 23:3 (1992): 29-47.

<sup>71</sup> From Jacek Kleyff’s 1972 song “*Cała młodzież*” (27).

<sup>72</sup> Głowiński (142).

<i>ma być jego prawda, a nie twoja.</i>	This will be its own truth, not yours.
<i>Dlatego nie zginaj karku, wyprzedzaj to oczekiwanie.</i>	Don't lower your head, then; get ahead of this expectation.] <sup>73</sup>

By 1975, the Nowa Fala movement had caused enough ripples in the calm seas of Gierek's Poland to earn a few warnings. On the pages of *Odra*, Leszek Bugajski worried if those young poets truly realized "the twistedness of reality" (44), and predicted that the period could be

dangerous for the movement because, through this individualization of attitudes, the artists might begin to feel acute loneliness and might be absorbed by the existing cultural establishment, the movement might be crushed or dissolved among existing institutions which prefer stability and calm.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, only one year later many of the poets mentioned above were written off by censorship and either left the country (Zagajewski for Paris, Barańczak for Harvard) or awaited better times. In the February, 1979 issue of *Odra*, Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz wrote of *Nowa Fala* in the past tense, critiquing its connections with "a dead tradition" (51). Waśkiewicz underscored the movement's young age and leadership ambitions incommensurate with its poor understanding of the social world. Ironically, the "new privacy" that the group urged literature to explore in order for society to understand itself better had also purportedly caused its downfall. The critic accused *Nowa Kultura* of hermeticism, passivity, and anti-social tendencies precisely because of its focus on the individual and the private. The interest in "polyphony and re-vindication of forgotten areas of tradition" had brought about "a sad end for the *New Wave* campaigns" (55-6). It was a case of egomania, Waśkiewicz opined on behalf of the establishment, that alienated those conceited youngsters and eventually uprooted them from the social

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<sup>73</sup> Julian Kornhauser, "Wyprzedzaj, poeto" [Get Ahead, You Poet]. (*Zjadacze kartofli* 20).

<sup>74</sup> From: "Koniec kontestacji początek..." (45).

structures they so shunned.

But even if the movement had been given an official funeral, it was hardly dead. Its legacy continued, as the literary output of *Nowa Fala* poets entered *drugi obieg*—the “second circulation” of the publishing underground. In a way, blacklisting enhanced the political goals heretofore undisclosed by the artists and pushed them to the forefront of intellectual opposition. The linguistic approach to resistance they advanced, in which the veracity of what the government presented verbally was constantly being tested in order to expose its *mauvais foi*, provided one of the mainstays of oppositional thought and technique in the 1980s. Poetry once again inspired and united Polish people in the quest for independence, as the world cleaved into “our” truth and “their” lies. “The influence of propaganda on the entirety of Polish life,” according to Michał Głowiński,

is not only pernicious and fatally noxious, but also multifaceted. Above all, it causes sharply dichotomous worldviews to form—and not only in the sense that it imposes uncompromising and unilateral divisions into good and evil, into the spheres of right and wrong. [...] Its dichotomous vision of the world, however, produces a dichotomous vision of the world *à rebours*.<sup>75</sup>

Because Polish propaganda operated on the principle of polarization and clear distinction between “us” and “them,” anyone harboring even a shade of doubt had no choice but to gravitate towards the opposite pole. Allegiances were univocal and complete, without any gray areas between to linger in.

Oppositional literature took advantage of this polarization to strengthen its claim of moral superiority by championing the weak and the oppressed. Poetry, which speaks

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<sup>75</sup> “Oddziaływanie propagandy na całość polskiego życia jest nie tylko złowrogie i fatalne w skutkach, jest także wielostronne. Przede wszystkim powoduje ona formowanie wyraźnie dychotomicznych wizji świata—i to nie tylko w tym sensie, że narzuca dobitnie przeprowadzane i jednoznaczne podziały na dobro i zło, na sfery słuszności i błędu. [...] Jej dychotomiczna wizja świata wywołuje jednak dychotomiczną wizję świata *à rebours*” (91).

the language of symbols and metaphors, serves as an ideal medium of resistance support because of its inherent ambiguity—much could be hidden, and then read, between the lines. The art of the allusion, double entendre, significant slips or omissions dominated quite a bit of the “first” and much of the “second circulation,” demanding different kinds of reception. Audiences were prepared (and eager) to decode messages veiled under the surface of words, to look beyond their immediate meaning. Recognition of those hidden meanings brought intellectual pleasure, but above all it bonded the decoders through the shared experience of mutual understanding, heightened by the thrill of relative secrecy. One could feel a part of the *in* circle, which tightened by *excluding* the other as enemy—enemy of liberty, democracy, and truth. The strongest bonds formed through direct contact, when nuances of language could be enhanced by facial expressions, meaningful silences, and personal charisma of the speaker. In live performances (discussed at length in the next chapter), sincerity and intensity supported the overbal ‘message’ metalinguistically; in print, it was enough for a text to appear via *samizdat* channels to gain almost automatic credence.

The supra-textual conditions of textual artifacts remind us how indispensable context is in comprehension and evaluation of any such piece. Rachel Platonov, in discussing *avtorskaia pesnia* (roughly, the Russian equivalent of Polish *poezja śpiewana*), emphasizes the contextual and emotive aspects of live performances and points out that the communicative function of words may become nearly subordinate to their “metacommunicative function.”<sup>76</sup> Under certain circumstances peculiar to the interaction between the performer and his audience, *what* the words overtly *say* may be

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<sup>76</sup> The term bristles with many meta- layers: I am quoting Rachel Platonov quoting Deborah Tanner quoting Gregory Bateson (105).

only as important as (or perhaps even less than) *how* and *where* they are uttered. Platonov follows Deborah Tanner's suggestion that, in the oral tradition, verbal messages tend "to convey something about the relationship between communicator and audience" (105), that is, they establish other than linguistic means of connection between the two. While most pronounced in live performances, this metacommunicative function also extends over texts read in silence, alone. Whenever we read something, what we make of it depends on many factors external to the page, including our goals and current attitude, the author's intentions (best guessed), knowledge of other related texts, etc. Irony, for instance, serves as a good example of a textual feature whose understanding requires us to perceive a productive slippage between two mutually exclusive readings. Someone who misses the subtle clues which lead beyond the 'face value' of a passage meant to be read ironically falls outside its projected audience, though of course part of the pleasure of 'getting' irony derives from the tension between the two. The ironic meaning draws its very potency from close proximity to its literal counterpart—there must be at least some danger that the text can be misunderstood, preferably by someone who does not share our values or intelligence quotient.

Virtually all oppositional materials circulating in 1980s Poland performed some metacommunicative function as they passed from hand to hand or appeared in public spaces. Certainly, many carried explicitly informative content, like the sprayed-on "21.10.1988 16.00" call for a mass demonstration organized in Wrocław by *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* [the Orange Alternative],<sup>77</sup> but even such terse messages meant more than they said. Their (often ephemeral) presence signified that the

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<sup>77</sup> Gluziński includes a photograph of the graffiti (122), which also sported a smiling *krasnal* [dwarf]. Incidentally, I attended the said demonstration and still have the pointy little red hat distributed to all willing participants on Świdnicka Street by Waldemar "Major" Fydrych's people.



underground continued to exist and operate, reaching out to the people through all available means. Word of mouth guaranteed positive acceptance of information at the grassroots level; cheaply made newsletters and badly typed photocopies of blacklisted books were read quickly and passed on to a friend. What mattered most was the perceived common purpose, unity in standing up to the regime. Everything was therefore subordinated to the ongoing battle with “the reds.”

I recall buying a grainy photograph of five men carrying a lifeless body of a sixth one. The photo bore no caption and no other information about the six figures that it featured (the year was 1987). While most of my friends had no idea who we were looking at, the distress visible on the faces of the five burdened runners *clearly* indicated that the wounded man must have been their comrade, most likely fallen during one of the clashes with the ZOMO (motorized riot police units). The fact that we received the photo from one of the local distributors of underground materials assured its authenticity and supplied additional semantic content, not immediately accessible to us visually. Back then, it was not apparent that the fallen man (named Michał Adamowicz) was fatally wounded; it was not until seventeen years later that I found out that the famous photo was taken on August 31, 1982, in Lubin by Krzysztof Raczkowiak.<sup>78</sup>

Habits of reading clandestine materials in such predictable ways relied on extensive exposure to underground activities featured in so many Polish movies and books through which patriotism and national pride are shaped from an early age. Sacrifices of those struggling for independence stamp and define Polish consciousness in fundamental ways, regardless of political climate. Not surprisingly, underground

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<sup>78</sup> Reprinted in Gluziński (83). The photographer also maintains his own website, titled “Lubin 31.8.1982,” where other photos can be viewed: <http://www.lubin82.pl/index.html>.

literature of the 1980s transparently rooted itself in recognizable patriotic traditions. The famous anchored “S” of *Solidarność Walcząca* [Fighting Solidarity], which became one of the most important symbols of organized struggle, re-worked the anchored “P” of *Polska Walcząca*, the paramilitary organization that fought against the German occupation in WWII. A representative collection of poetry from that era, titled Poezja stanu wojny [Poetry of the war state], makes these connections explicit, beginning on the first page with an epigraph from Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński. The poems included in the volume vary greatly in form and level of artistic achievement, some written by first-timers and others by esteemed poets. Any shortcomings in aesthetic value are augmented by raw authenticity, certified by appropriate titles and captions: “*Kielczanka, Cella 513*” [The Kielce Prison, cell 513], or “*Dziennik internowania. Grudzień 1981—luty 1982, Białoleka-Jaworze*” [A diary of imprisonment. December 1981—February 1982].<sup>79</sup> Pathos prevails in mood and register, though a few pieces, most notably “*Bluzg*” [Cursing],<sup>80</sup> also spew profanities, as if the high levels of exasperation choking the “nation” frustrated by its leadership justified the venting of hateful, foul language.

Harking back to tradition occurs in this literature on other levels as well. One entire section, titled “*Stabat Mater*,” contains religious poems, often in prayer form. The central figure reigning over those is *Matka Boska Częstochowska*, the grieving, scarred Mary of the Częstochowa sanctuary (whose image has been further popularized by its constant presence on Lech Wałęsa’s lapel), also known as the Mother Queen of Poland. Strong identification of patriotism with the Catholic Church once again pays homage to

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<sup>79</sup> Poems on pages 21 and 13, respectively, by Wiktor Woroszyński and an anonymous author.

<sup>80</sup> Anonymous “*Bluzg*” is full of rhyming gems like “*Cuchnący pierdzielu, pełzająca glisto/ Ponury skurwielu, czerwony faszysto*” [You stinking fartbrain, you creeping worm/ You sinister motherfucker, you red fascist] (121). It ends with a threat: “*Za naród sprzedany piekło cię pochłonie*” [Hell will swallow you for the selling of the nation].

the rhetoric of combative nationalists, who solemnly promised to serve *Bóg and Ojczyzna*, God and Fatherland.<sup>81</sup>

But the most striking parallel between both underground movements can be seen in poems set to music. For example, the volume contains three new versions of “*Siekiera, motyka...*” [An axe, a hoe...], a song which appeared in one of the very first post-war movies, Leonard Buczkowski’s *Zakazane piosenki* [Forbidden songs, 1947]. “*Pieśń internowanych kobiet*” [Song of imprisoned women] and “*Ballada o wronie*” [A ballad about the crow]<sup>82</sup> are likewise modeled on another familiar melody from that feature. Buczkowski’s film shows how the citizens of Warsaw survived the war in solidarity, and how they fought the Germans through small acts of verbal defiance. It blends street-smart humor with a bit of patriotic pathos, with many catchy tunes to boot. *Zakazane piosenki* remains one of the most popular Polish movies of all times, and attests to the enduring importance of song in the shaping of national identity.<sup>83</sup> Thus in poetry and song, the patriotic tradition that stretches back from the uprisings of the 1800s all the way to the days of Solidarity carries on almost uninterrupted. What Czesław Miłosz says in his introduction to the collection of wartime poems published in 1942, could just as well preface the 1983 “war state” volume. The national cause, writes Miłosz,

decidedly influences everything that comes out from under the Polish pen. Personal experiences of individuals are pushed aside or, rather, there are

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<sup>81</sup> The supporting role of the Church in Polish opposition, together with its subsequent rise as a separate political force after 1989, is a fascinating subject but one I unfortunately have no room to discuss here. The Częstochowa Marian Sanctuary remains a symbolic capital of Catholic Poland. It was there that, in July 2007, the spiritual leader of ultraconservative *Radio Maryja*, “Father-Director” Rydzyk, infamously divided the population into those who were present, or *Polska*, and the rest, presumably un-Polish. The President attended the pilgrimage and clearly seconded Rydzyk’s pronouncement, to the outrage of many Poles who saw this spectacle as a violation of the separation between state and church, as well as their patriotic feelings.

<sup>82</sup> Both anonymous, found on pp. 86 and 90-1. The crow symbolizes the communists’ presumed mockery of the national royal bird, the eagle.

<sup>83</sup> See Święch (1982) and Matulewicz (1987) for more detailed analyses of patriotic songs.

no exclusively personal experiences: each joy, each suffering of an individual reflects something common and broader; “to be or not to be” pertains in the first place to the national, not individual, existence.<sup>84</sup>

Similarly, at the height of oppositional activity after 1976,<sup>85</sup> the subordination of function of most disseminated materials to the needs of organized struggle for democracy flattened out many ideological differences among writers and readers alike. Issues as unrelated as environmental concerns, aesthetics, or gender roles could be brought under the common denominator of vague ‘opposition’ (and thus possibly neutralized in their own right). Padraic Kenney gives us a sense of those conflicting directions in A Carnival of Revolution. In focussing on the carnivalesque spectacles taking place on the streets of various European cities, together with other public manifestations of the prevailing mood, he leaves literary culture for others to explore. Kenney’s major claim is that “the carnival ruptured [an incessant] monologue—not with persuasive argument, but with a cacophony of insistent and derisive voices. And the result, if we look at Central Europe after 1989, was a dialogue between state and society that continues today” (5). Writing in the late 1990s, when clean breaks still seemed desirable and possible, Kenney was perhaps too quick to separate “state” from “society.”<sup>86</sup> As we have seen, “society” remained far from

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<sup>84</sup> From *Pieśń niepodległa*. The Invincible Song: A Clandestine Anthology. Originally published in Warsaw, 1942. Reprinted by Michigan Slavic Publications, 1981.

*Już to jedno wpływa w decydujący sposób na wszystko, co wychodzi z pod polskiego pióra. Przeżycia osobiste poszczególnych ludzi schodzą na plan dalszy, a raczej niema [sic] już przeżyć wyłącznie osobistych: każda radość, każde cierpienie jednostki jest odblaskiem wspólnej i szerszej sprawy; “być czy nie być” dotyczy w pierwszym rzędzie narodowego, nie jednostkowego istnienia. (7-8)*

Miłosz also adds that during times of armed struggle, poetry rarely includes “critical accents regarding newest history” (8), which should be added later for a more complete picture of the age. The cohesiveness of patriotic rhetoric necessarily excludes elements incongruous with the nation’s unified image.

<sup>85</sup> 1976 provides another historical milestone, marking, on the one hand, the wave of anti-Gierek protests and, on the other, the emergence of “second circulation, which cut through the binds of PRL censorship” (Balcerzan, *Śmiech* 7).

<sup>86</sup> Nor could he predict that the Prime Minister, Jarosław Kaczyński, would try to capitalize politically on this artificial division a few years later by condemning some of his oppositional colleagues to the ‘other

silent and formulated its own demands (“Telegram” to those in power: “We’ll get off the walls—stop—when we’ll enter the screens—stop—radio airwaves—stop”<sup>87</sup>). The struggle undoubtedly centered on the right to speak and possibilities of true dialogue between diverse social groups, but such discursive authority was never limited to the Party alone. Lastly, the same people who may have treated police officers with “a cacophony of derisive voices,” amped up for the needs of a memorable public spectacle, in the intimacy of their own private circles spoke at a much gentler pitch. Who did they speak to, and who listened? The following chapters will provide a few answers.

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side.’ Kaczyński pronounced at a 2006 meeting in the Gdańsk shipyards: “*My jesteśmy tu, gdzie wtedy, oni tam gdzie stało ZOMO*” [We are standing today where we stood then, and they—where stood ZOMO].

<sup>87</sup> From the archives of *Dział Dokumentów Życia Społecznego Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich* [The Department of Social Life Documents at the ZNiO], reprinted in Gluziński (68).

## CHAPTER II. POETRY ON THE MOVE

The preceding chapter outlined some of the problems in the production and reception of Polish literature during the time in which Stachura was active as artist. Even though many of Stachura's ideas and interests coincided with those of *Nowa Fala* writers, his refusal to "socialize" them in the way envisioned and approved by those cultural ideologues effectively removed him from the sphere of cultural influence to which they wished to lay claim. Because Stachura ridiculed and dismissed the very structures *Nowa Fala* activists fought to enter (in their attempts to discredit the legitimacy of the ruling regime with appeals to universalist ethics), he remained on the periphery of the Polish literary establishment. Willingly distanced from and by the principal culture makers of the day, he would be later "re-discovered" by readers eager to find a spiritual guide.

What makes Stachura really stand out among other Polish poets is his unique poetic idiom, and this is what the next two chapters will highlight. The poet manages to infuse most trivial, worn-out phrases and clichés with freshness and new-found profundity. To convey folk wisdom together with pathos reminiscent of Greek tragedy, he uses pedestrian, ordinary language of working class people, mixing registers and playing with syntax. For example, when he describes a scene where the harvest is brought in to be measured and sold, he depicts the scale master as a semi-divine ruler dispensing blessings (and money):

*wszystkie drogi prowadzą do rzymu*      [all roads lead to rome  
*do remizy—gdzie waga*                      to the fire house—where the scale  
*papieżem chłopskim dzisiaj był wagowy* the peasant pope today was the scale master

*on rozdzielał klasy gatunki rodzaje*      he divided up classes species kinds  
*i wedle tego pieniądźory*                      and the dough accordingly].<sup>88</sup>

The subject matter and diction in this passage reflect Stachura's literary method and philosophy. As a poet, Stachura wants to erase boundaries between art and life, to make one an integral part of the other. He attempts to "naturalize" language by removing it from the context of literary studies and by attuning the reader's ear to the "natural" rhythms of ordinary human speech. Aware of conventions, he often plays with them or blatantly breaks them. By fusing the commonplace with the transcendent, expressing tragic content in a ludic spirit, he is able to show that each ordinary life is significant and important, that each individual matters, deeply and unforgettably.

Like the scale master during harvest, when Stachura dons the writer's mantle he appears omnipotent. He manipulates time, brings inanimate objects to life, creates new selves and beings. But he also stoops over human imperfection, vulnerability, suffering. As a material being, he cannot bear the thought of his finality, inevitable dissolution in death. His idea of "life-writing" provides a utopian solution for the quandary of finite existence. When life becomes writing and writing becomes life, the inevitable decay of the body can be surmounted, in the eternity of fiction. Because he loves living so much, he must deny life (understood as a natural progression from birth to extinction); the "truth" of existence can only rest in the artificiality of its continuation in art. This is the paradox underlying much of Stachura's thinking: life "needs" literature to attain greater meaning (particulars attain the status of epitomes), and literature "needs" life to become more meaningful (when it affects real people). The "authenticity" that Stachura so ardently preaches does not, therefore, imply a seamless merging of the writer's self as a

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<sup>88</sup> "*Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza*" in the volume *Wiersze* (93). The fire house (*remiza*) is often the center of communal life in Polish villages, a gathering place for dances and meetings.

living person with his fictional characters. The poet must always be “true” to himself insofar as he admits he can only speak for himself, express his vision of reality through his own eyes, the only kind of lens available to him (like Witold Gombrowicz, who begins his diaries with: “*Monday. Me. Tuesday. Me. Wednesday. Me. Thursday. Me.*”).<sup>89</sup> The internal control that Stachura exerts over his writing belies its deceptive simplicity. He often hides his erudition and literacy, carefully erasing their tracks. But he clearly separates his authorial self—in multiple incarnations and guises—from the man named Edward Stachura.

This is one of the popular notions this chapter sets out to dismantle. The early critics of Stachura’s poetry were not equipped to deal with the novelty that it ushered in. It appeared unlike anything they had seen before; nonetheless, they still assessed it according to prevalent literary models of the day, and often found it wanting. Even if the poems were new and fresh, they condemned themselves into irrelevance by lack of sufficient socio-political engagement. The critics (with the notable exception of Ziemowit Fedeki, Krzysztof Karasek, and Jerzy Łukosz) more than anyone else should have urged resistance to oversimplifications that such strictly autobiographical readings provide. Stachura’s poetry, and especially his unique poetic style, thus remains sadly understudied.

### **1. LIFE, ONE PAGE AT A TIME**

Life is one thing, art is another—thus the young set think or at least feel—let us keep the two apart. The poet begins where the man ends. The man’s lot is to live his human life, the poet’s to invent what is nonexistent. [...] The poet aggrandizes the world by adding to reality, which is there by itself, the continents of his imagination. Author derives from *auctor*, he who augments. It was the title Rome bestowed

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<sup>89</sup> Dziennik 1953-1956 (9).



upon her generals when they had conquered new territory for the City.<sup>90</sup>

<i>byli tacy co się rodzili</i>	[there were those who were born
<i>byli tacy co umierali</i>	there were those who have died
<i>byli także też i tacy</i>	there were also those
<i>co im to było mało</i>	for whom this wasn't enough] <sup>91</sup>

To provide biographical information about Stachura is not a simple gesture of courtesy towards a dead artist whose life and legacy should be properly remembered; in the case of Stachura, the line between the author's daily subsistence and the public life of his words was so often blurred as to become almost entirely erased. The idea of *życiopisanie*, "life-writing," which Stachura ardently advocated and practiced, places the writer's body squarely behind all the words he either conjures up, speaks, or puts on the page. In Stachura's opinion, separating professional literary activity from so-called private life was irresponsible and created an unhealthy disconnect between authors and their audiences, which he sought to reduce and remedy in his own work. By redefining poetic "work" to include virtually all honest, hard labor, Stachura imagined the communication between the poet and the reader to flow more freely, as the two walked in step towards a common goal of self-fulfillment through various forms of discovery. That *życiopisanie* (life-writing) in Stachura's concept was more than merely a catchy phrase designed to start a new literary fad will become apparent soon enough.

In the curriculum vitae attached to his 1959 college re-admission application, Stachura summarized his early years in the following unconventional manner:

*Urodziłem się 18 VIII 1937 r. w Pont de Cheruy (dep. Isère) we Francji. Dzieciństwo miałem spokojne i piękne.  
Mając jeszcze 7 lat śniło mi się, że posiadam zdolność lotu. W tym czasie zacząłem uczęszczać do francuskiej szkoły elementarnej i sny*

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<sup>90</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (31).

<sup>91</sup> "Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza" in the volume *Wiersze* (112).

*zaczęły się zmieniać jak nowe obrazy w fotoplastykonie. Drugą wojnę światową pamiętam tylko ze smaku czekolady, którą obdarowywali nas Amerykanie. Pamiętam jeszcze pająka na suficie naszej piwnicy, w której musieliśmy się ukrywać przez dwa tygodnie. Kiedy miałem 11 lat, rodzice doszli do wniosku, że należy opuścić słodką Francję i powrócić do jeszcze słodszej Polski. Nie rozumiałem jeszcze wtedy słowa: nostalgia. Teraz dopiero rozumiem, ileż smutku się w nim zawiera. Z opowiadań i książek słyszałem dużo o wilkach grasujących w Polsce. W listopadzie 1948 r. przyjechaliśmy do Polski. Nie widziałem nigdzie wilków, ale nie mogłem się spodziewać, że tak małe będzie moje rozczarowanie. Osiedliliśmy się w ponurym miasteczku w Aleksandrowie Kuj. Było to kiedyś graniczne miasteczko i słynęło szeroko z przemytu. Tutaj skończyłem szkołę podstawową. Ponieważ wykazywałem wysokie zdolności, oddano mnie do „Gimnazjum” w Ciechocinku, żeby zrobić ze mnie „inżyniera” lub „doktora”. Po trzech latach przenieśliśmy się do liceum ogólnokształcącego w Gdyni, które ukończyłem i gdzie do tej pory otoczony jestem legendą, jak wyczytałem na tamtejszej szkolnej gazecie. Jeden rok, tzn. 1956, włóczyłem się po Polsce napotykać wszędzie ślady wilków, a nigdy ich samych. Potem zacząłem studiować filologię francuską na KUL-u, gdzie doskonała dobroć kilku osób wzruszyła mnie do głębi. Studia przerwałem przede wszystkim z własnej winy, a może z winy wierności tradycji moich wielkich „ancêtres.”*

[I was born on August 18, 1937, in Pont de Cheruy (dept. Isère) in France. My childhood was peaceful and beautiful.

When I was still seven, I dreamt that I had the ability to fly. At that time, I had begun to attend French elementary school and my dreams began to change like new pictures in photoplasticon. The Second World War I remember only from the taste of chocolate, which the Americans were handing out to us. I also remember the spider on the ceiling of our cellar, where we had to hide for two weeks. When I was eleven, my parents decided it was time to leave sweet France and return to even-sweeter Poland. I didn't understand the word: nostalgia then. Only now do I understand how much sadness is contained within it. From short stories and books I heard a lot about the wolves roaming Poland. In November of 1948, we arrived in Poland. I didn't see wolves anywhere, but I could hardly expect that my disappointment would be so slight. We settled in the grim town of Aleksandrów Kuj[awski]. It used to be a border town famous far and wide for its smuggling. It was there that I finished elementary school. Due to the exceptional talents that I exhibited, I was transferred to the “Gymnasium” in Ciechocinek, so that an “engineer” or a “doctor” could be made out of me. After three years, I transferred to a general high school in Gdynia, from which I graduated and in which to this day I'm surrounded by legend, according to the school newsletter that I read there. One year, i.e., 1956, I spent wandering around Poland, encountering tracks of wolves everywhere but never the wolves themselves. Later, I enrolled in the department of French philology at the KUL [the Catholic University

of Lublin], where the infinite goodness of a few people moved me deeply. My studies were discontinued mainly through my own fault, and perhaps through the fault of loyalty to the traditions of my great “ancêtres.”] <sup>92</sup>

This curious document reads in retrospect like a brief summary of Stachura’s future artistic concerns, and as such can be examined here in order to establish a few focal points for our discussion. The most striking feature of this statement is its refusal to conform to standard rules of the official *życiorys* (literally: “life-sketch”) style and content. While the narrative does contain some required “facts,” such as the date and place of birth, or the date of Stachura’s family’s repatriation from France to Poland, it wanders randomly and associatively among childhood memories (the spider on the ceiling), myths (the wolves roaming Poland), and personal impressions and emotions (disappointment at seeing no wolves, the goodness of people in Lublin). Moreover, Stachura’s scholastic achievements and potential for social mobility are underscored with the ironic quotation marks that bracket two stereotypically esteemed professions, those of an engineer and a doctor, both completely outside his sphere of interest. It is perhaps too early for the aspiring poet to betray his true vocation yet, but his determination to follow his own path comes forcefully through even then. The period of dependence on others, called by some blissful innocence, Stachura dismisses with two short and uncharacteristically clichéd sentences in the very beginning (elsewhere, he will refer to childhood as “an outright thievish sucking of brotherly blood and other juices, or the life of mistletoe”). <sup>93</sup> Sadness, nostalgia, and vagabondage, three major themes of his writing, crop up here as well, while the closing sentence invokes some vague “great ancestors” of

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<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Buchowski (43-4). [All translations of Polish originals in this dissertation are my own, unless otherwise indicated.]

<sup>93</sup> Citation from the short story “*Nie zląknę się*,” where Stachura asks: “[...] ‘*cudowny świat dzieciństwa*’? [...] *A czy to nie jest może zwykłe złodziejskie spijanie bratniej krwi i innych soków, czyli życie jemioly?*” (104).

the poet. It is precisely this emotionally charged affinity with the past, a construct molded by poetic imagination and sheer willpower, that constitutes one of the main subjects of my study.

But Stachura himself was a self-made man, the son of two peasants who had emigrated to France in the early 1920s in search of jobs, met and married there, and who later returned to the difficult conditions of post-war Poland with four children in tow. Young Edward<sup>94</sup> lunged towards independence early on, running away from home a few times and later moving away, from the small one-room family cottage to a dorm in Ciechocinek where he first went to high school. (For the rest of his life, he would never stay put in one place for longer than a few months, traveling extensively and compulsively over Poland, Europe, Middle East, and North America.) Having spent his childhood abroad, Stachura had problems with proper written Polish, and despite high intelligence and originality initially showed little promise as a writer. He did, nonetheless, decide that he must “carry further the noble and beautiful work of Norwid, Czechowicz, and Esenin,” and he began writing poetry around the age of seventeen.<sup>95</sup> His letters and diaries attest to a tremendous self-determination, exceptionally strong will, and unceasing hard work, the qualities that transformed this village boy into a unique artistic personality. After a couple of false starts, Stachura graduated from the University of Warsaw in 1965 with a Master’s degree in French literature. By then, he had already published a collection of short stories titled *Jeden dzień* (One Day: 1962) and a volume of poetry *Dużo ognia* (Much Fire: 1963). Other publications soon followed. Stachura’s

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<sup>94</sup> His full name, according to the French birth records, read Georges Edouard (Jerzy Edward) Stachura. Since he was most often called by his middle name, later in life he petitioned to have the first name officially dropped.

<sup>95</sup> From a letter quoted in Buchowski (31).

oeuvre includes two more short story collections: *Falując na wietrze* (Waving in the Wind, 1966) and *Się* (Itself, 1977); three long poem sequences: *Przystępuję do ciebie* (Kneeling down to Take You, 1968), *Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza* (In the Garden May the Locusts Roam, 1968), and *Kropka nad ypsilonem* (A Dot over the Upsilon, 1975); two novels: *Cała jaskrawość* (All That Glare, 1969) and *Siekierzada* (The Axesaga, 1971); hard to define pieces like “flower-essays” (his own term) titled *Wszystko jest poezją. Opowieść-rzeka* (Everything Is Poetry: A Story/River, 1975), *Missa pagana* (a kind of secular mass, 1978), and *Fabula rasa* (dialogues, 1979); plus a number of translations (Borges, Marquez, Cortazar) and original songs. He ended his life on July 24, 1979.

This short bio- and bibliographic resumé gives us few clues to the complexities of Stachura’s artistic development, through which he pushed relentlessly and unsparingly, all the way to the point of breaking, and then beyond it. His writings document and aestheticize that journey in much greater detail; the format of fact-laden *życiorys* was objectionable to Stachura precisely because its focus on hard data leaves out the specifics of the long process by which singular events—the so-called facts—acquire meaning. As a writer who reveled in the smallest details of everyday life, Stachura disliked all such de-personalizing forms of discourse because of “the indelicacy of abbreviation in the face of the non-abbreviatable, full days and nights, weeks, months, and years. The indelicacy of dryness in the face of fluidity: a dry riverbed of laconic, worn-out phrases against rushing streams of light, shadow, water, wind, and blood quick in the veins.”<sup>96</sup> Literature should

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<sup>96</sup> Stachura: *Wiersze, poematy, piosenki, przekłady*, Introduction by Z. Fedeki. “Zawsze odczuwałem jakąś niechęć [...] do spisywania życiorysu w formie najczęściej stosowanej i wymaganej, to jest personalno-ewidencyjnej. Ta niechęć, myślę, bierze się z dostrzegania niedelikatności tego zabiegu. Niedelikatności skrótu wobec nieskrótowych, pełnych dni i nocy, tygodni, miesięcy i lat. Niedelikatności suchego wobec

keep as far from pure formality as possible, show sensitivity to the rhythms of lived experience and strive to reflect it in appropriate language, content, and form. The goal of the artist, however, should not be mere imitation, no matter how faithful such a representation might be. Stachura firmly believed that art must be *actively involved* in the daily movements of human beings in order to be able to express any truths about the human condition; it must be fully engaged to help us understand the world, each other, and ourselves.<sup>97</sup> In the quest towards perfection, art must become both less and more important: it must leave the heights of the ivory tower and scatter among everyone down below, but at the same time it can never lower its standards or ever lose track of its noble mission.

In order to provide a hinge for the revolving door that will allow us to move back and forth between biography and myth, history and poetry, disparate temporalities and timelessness—movements necessitated by Stachura’s peculiar artistic philosophy—I would like to start with a short episode found in one of Stachura’s later texts, Everything Is Poetry: A Story/River. In the chapter titled “In Search of Unlost Time, Provoking the Dogs, Rome—Euclid Plaza, Uphill in the Mist,” the first-person narrator (whose complex identity we shall endeavor to unravel only a few short paragraphs later), stranded penniless on the streets of Rome, imagines meeting the literary giant Ezra Pound. The desperate Polish poet finds himself in such dire financial straits that he contemplates street entertainment as a way to earn those few coins needed for food and shelter; Pound

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*płynnego: suchego koryta lakonicznych, wytartych zwrotów wobec rwących potoków światła, cienia, wody, wiatru i żywej w żyłach krwi” (5-6).*

<sup>97</sup> I. A. Richards, similarly to Stachura, sees in poetry the modern man’s “only means of escape from chaos. Our impulses must have some order, some organization, or we do not live ten minutes without disaster” (40). Because modern life is bewildering in its constant movement and change, we must turn to poetry to still the disturbing upheavals in our souls.

appears as a benevolent sponsor who *demands* a poem, to be written on the spot in forty-five minutes, at the price of five thousand lira (“Five thousand lira, ladies and gentlemen! Stupid eight dollars!”<sup>98</sup>). The two men do not carry on a normal conversation—the Pole disappears to whip up his piece (“either in Spanish or in French, though he would have probably preferred Provençal, if not Chinese”<sup>99</sup>), and the rich American sips grog in a café, pleasantly killing time while waiting for the commissioned text to be produced. Upon reading, Pound breaks into Homeric verse and exclaims in Polish: “*Elpenorze, jakżeś tu przybił na ten ciemny brzeg?/ Przyszedłeś pieszo, dystansując żeglarzy?*”<sup>100</sup>

The vocative functions in this scene simultaneously as a cipher of recognition and misapprehension—it resorts to poetic convention to forge a bond between two kindred spirits, but it also borders on the “embarrassment” that Jonathan Culler suggests is often haunting the use of apostrophe in lyric poetry. “The apostrophizing poet,” says Culler, “identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces,” forces he calls upon to submit to his will.<sup>101</sup> The excessive emotive intensity decries the actual powerlessness and vulnerability of humans; the figure who summons such powers through the ritual of literary invocation may risk ridicule and discredit if his attempt falls short of readerly expectations. But who is the reader in Stachura’s piece, who the poet, and what kinds of hazards are involved?

Ezra Pound speaks Polish here solely for the benefit of Edward Stachura’s native audience; for all its famously polyglot inklings, Pound’s material-seeking gaze tended to

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<sup>98</sup> Chapter “*W poszukiwaniu niestraconego czasu, drażnienie psów, Rzym—plac Euklidesa, pod górę we mgle*” (64).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 65. I leave this quote (one of the first few verses of Pound’s *Cantos*) untranslated because it is already translated, first from Greek into English by Pound, and then from English into Polish by Stachura.

<sup>101</sup> Culler (60-1).

run East past and over the lands of the Slavs.<sup>102</sup> Stachura uses the older poet's mouth in the same way that Pound twists Homer's poetry into lines 47-8 of his first canto, so that Odysseus speaks a kind of antiquated King James English instead of his own Greek, as he pays Tiresias an unexpected second visit in the underworld. Meanwhile, someone (Anticlea? Tiresias? Pound himself?) enigmatically orders Andreas Divus, the Renaissance translator of Homer on whose Latin Pound depended—to "Lie quiet" (68). In Stachura's Story/River, Pound's Polish sounds poetic but lacks the archaic quality that Pound affects through his "Elpenor, how art thou come to this dark coast?/ Cam'st thou afoot, outstripping seamen?" The younger poet talks to the elder as if he were humoring a beloved but slightly senile mentor. He patiently answers all questions, never openly contradicts the confused master whom he affectionately calls Ezra, and spins a mildly cartoonish rhetoric expected of the Elpenor that he clearly plays up:

— *Nie, Ezra. Spadłem z nieba. Ze szczytów Antylibanu przeniosła mnie parę godzin temu machina "Super-Caravelle". Z żeglarzami nie ścigałem się. Kiedyś tak, kiedyś ścigałem się z nimi, ale nieczysty był pojedynek.*  
 — *Z czyjej strony, Elpenorze?*  
 — *... Z morskiej strony, Ezra.*  
*I tak dalej. (65)*

[‘No, Ezra. I fell from the sky. From the mountaintops of Anti-Lebanon, I was carried away a few hours ago by the mechanized vessel the “Super-Caravelle.” I did not compete against the sailors. Back in my day, yes, back in my day I did compete against them, but it was hardly a clean game.’

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<sup>102</sup> This is not to say that Pound leaves the largest country in Eastern Europe entirely forgotten. On the contrary—as Ben D. Kimpel and T.C. Duncan Eaves demonstrate in their illuminating article “Some Curious ‘Facts’ in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*”—he mentions its inhabitants on several occasions, either to point out the Poles’ disastrous hatred of the Germans (“Edishu added a zero to the number of Krauts murdered/ in Poland,” Kimpel 631) or to comment on their gullible stupidity (“‘help by the black sea’/ only a pollok could have swallowed that promise,” Kimpel 633). Another scholar who treats the subject of Pound’s historical (in)accuracy, Jerome J. McGann, attributes such mishandlings of factual data to the poet’s quest for an all-inclusive artistic form “elastic enough to take the necessary material. It had to be a form that wouldn’t exclude something merely because it didn’t fit” (from a 1960 letter to Donald Hall, quoted by McGann 8). McGann struggles to avoid all reductive readings of the poem, especially those that focus on Pound’s fascism or anti-semitism, and instead argues that the Cantos’ convoluted, accretive structure grants the reader other, more satisfying liberties. Thus with Pound, “contradiction is a summons to the reader to intervene” (17), to respond in a wide variety of ways.



‘From whose side, Elpenor?’  
‘... From the marine side, Ezra.’  
And so on.]

Whereas Stachura initially sets up the scene so that the stranded protagonist roams the streets like a modern Odysseus, with the gift of words the only return for his upkeep, Pound seems to invert the relationship by invoking the name of Elpenor and thereby donning the persona of Odysseus himself. Once called out, Elpenor’s shade dutifully obliges. And for a brief moment, we as readers forget that the situation we are witnessing is not only hypothetical but entirely made up. Not only did the two poets never actually meet, but by the time Edward Stachura gets to indulge in describing this episode, the person known to the world as Ezra Weston Loomis Pound is already dead. Dead or live, no matter; or perhaps, the deader, the better—for narrative purposes, Stachura’s imagination manipulates and reshuffles fictional characters along with the real. This tendency creates some serious problems for the scholar who tries to separate biographical data from literary figments. A notoriously difficult task under any circumstances becomes a maddening exercise in futility when it comes to Stachura. On the one hand, the poet can be intensely personal, always speaking through the first-person *I*, walking us through his daily activities and sharing his innermost thoughts. On the other, he remains stubbornly elusive, quoting a certain Edward Stachura in the third person as if the two were estranged, dissolving into indistinguishable poetic subjects and hiding behind fictional alter-egos. Well known are his battles with publishers over the removal of the author’s name from the covers of his books, or his attempts to erase the said *I* in the text titled *Sie* [Itself], which consistently employs the clunky third-person reflexive pronoun in order to de-personalize the speaking subject to the farthest possible degree.

The Pound episode serves as an epitome of complexity on several counts: questions of influence and intertextuality, authorial identity and authority, relationship between truth and fiction. At first, we find ourselves lost in a gallery of mirrors, with images bouncing off multiple surfaces, reflections of images, images of reflections, echoes of fading voices and mysterious footsteps, Pound mirroring Homer, glimpses of Divus transposed over both, Stachura mirroring Pound, other distorted faces appearing somewhere at the edges... Elpenor's ghost shimmers with the light of the uncanny, to unsettle and remind us that other presences in the text are equally spectral. Everything Is Poetry thrusts the reader *in medias res*, among imperatives and questioning verbs directed at the second person singular. The *you* of the reader is invoked confrontationally, as if demanding direct involvement. The *I* that occasionally comes through appears to refer to the person whose name is printed on the cover, whom we assume to be Edward Stachura, the respectable author of several books of poetry and prose. But that *I* dismantles his own authorial respectability soon enough: he ends the first chapter by turning his back on the "unknown Hypothetical Reader" in order to drink beer at a small outdoor joint, together with mere "poet-peasants, poets-laborers, poets-peasant/laborers, poets-absolutely-declassed individuals" (14). Here on par with Dante<sup>103</sup> and Pound; there a lowly Elpenor, who Homer says was "the youngest man, not terribly/ powerful in fighting nor sound in his thoughts," and who "had lain/ down drunkenly to sleep on the roof of Circe's palace."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> "Piszę o poezji, czyli o wszystkim. I tak jak Dante: dla wszystkich! Również dla kobiet i dzieci. [I'm writing about poetry, that is to say about everything. And just like Dante: for everyone! For women and children, too]" (WJP 15).

<sup>104</sup> The Odyssey of Homer (X:552-5), transl. by Richard Lattimore.

The figure of the poet that Stachura cuts for us always wavers between supreme power and extreme vulnerability, balancing precariously between pathos and mockery. Just as Stachura asserts the artist's independence and autonomy, he exposes his dependence on the audience's capricious largesse. The two are bound by an uneasy relation in which places can be switched at the drop of a hat. Even if an "absolutely declassified individual" can join the ranks of poets, his promotion nonetheless underscores the divide that exists between creators and readers. Moreover, when the down-and-out poet takes his leave of Pound in order to produce his piece, we realize how solitary and secretive the process of literary composition really is. The "dark shore" that Pound stares at with his mind's eye remains largely impenetrable, with the reader further distanced by the dismissive and elliptical "and so on" that closes off the dialogue before any substantial exchange could take place. Stachura concludes with a telling statement: "Everything in this scene with Pound could have looked this way. I know one thing for sure. That it *should* look this and not any other way" (65; emphasis mine). Strongly and unambiguously, the writer asserts his authority as creator and shaper of presented reality. Farewell, o shadowy Elpenor.

The last point is worth emphasizing to counter the common misconception of Stachura as "himself in everything"<sup>105</sup> that he published. The rise and popularization of legends cannot be always controlled, yet the critics who dealt with Stachura hardly helped in providing a more solid basis for understanding his work. Almost all the existing criticism, sparse as it is considering the poet's sizeable popularity, directs its attention *ad hominem* instead of his effects. Zygmunt Trziszka, for example, played a forensic therapist in his 1983 piece "Edward Stachura's Struggles with Himself: an Attempt at

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<sup>105</sup> Trziszka (30).

Psychography,” and claimed that the poet “constantly wrote one and the same book [...], basically only for himself” (30). According to Trziszka, “Stachura suffered from an illness/non-illness. If he hadn’t had the protection of his writing, [...] he would have been among those who can’t manage to live on their own” (38). Artur Sandauer, a personage of considerable literary clout, admitted that he had not yet “discovered him [Stachura] for himself”; nonetheless, despite such an openly professed lack of knowledge, he did not hesitate to use the poet’s name in the context of his pronouncement that in Poland “it’s enough to be a suicide or an alcoholic to ascend to greatness.”<sup>106</sup> One of the editors of the posthumous five-tome ‘denim’ collection, Ziemowit Fedecki, judged the critics’ “indolence in the case of Stachura” as

downright embarrassing. There appeared in Poland a writer utterly new, thoroughly autonomous, able to attract a wide variety of readers and discerning connoisseurs, yet nobody took the trouble to analyze in depth the components of poetic sensitivity of someone who, like Adam in paradise, called all the things of this world by their first names; nobody tried to analyze Stachura’s poetic method.<sup>107</sup>

The article from which the above quote is drawn aimed to analyze Stachura’s myth in order to dispel its unhealthy mystique. Thus any reader who chooses to view the poet as merely a “Saint Francis catcher in the rye” (131) does so either out of sheer laziness or torpidity. In Fedecki’s opinion, Stachura’s legend “proliferates almost exclusively outside the sphere of the literary, and most commonly outside the sphere of intelligence” (130). Another, similarly accusing finger pointed at indolent readers belonged to Krzysztof

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<sup>106</sup> What betrays the extent of Sandauer’s unfamiliarity with Stachura’s written output is the critic’s complaint (voiced on the same page) that contemporary Polish poets avoid socially responsible topics like “life—normal life” and “labor” (6). Then again, even if Sandauer had read such pieces as Stachura’s “Song for the Morning Shift Worker,” he probably would not have been satisfied. His attack on Stanisław Barańczak, who abandoned both his motherland and his vocation, clearly indicates that Sandauer did not want to read poems about “badly dressed people on crowded trams” (6), i.e., about the truth of ‘normal life’ in 1980s Poland.

<sup>107</sup> “Moda na Stachurę” (131).

Karasek, though Karasek's assessment of Stachura also accounted for the poet's complicity in blurring the boundaries between poetics and life. Even if Stachura did suffer from a peculiar "messiah complex" (68) which caused him to create "artificial paradises" (78) beyond the limits of reality or sanity, to see him as "some Miss Lonelyheart or a 'godly man,' a naïve saint walking barefoot on 'the cruel earth,' wounded by mere blades of grass, is very convenient but completely untrue" (84).

This brief review of critical literature allows us to appreciate the full significance of the Pound episode, in which Stachura demarcates the poet's sphere of influence and authority. While he carefully crafts the artist's image on the page, he insists on being judged only in the arena of writing, without unnecessary intrusion into private life. Stachura is clear and precise in expressing the idea that intellectual honesty does not translate into a confessional reality-show:

As it pertains to the autobiographic statement, here my distaste is absolutely certain and I don't believe that my attitude towards this kind of statement will change with the passing of time. To put it most succinctly: I can share my writing with anyone who has the desire, time, and curiosity to read me. I could share my private life with my best friend over a nice bottle, though I prefer not to do even that.<sup>108</sup>

Stachura thus asserts his right to retreat behind what Michel Foucault labels "author-function" (125), a feature of discourse that allows the speaking agent to be subject to a different set of laws governing existence and authentication than those of a living person. In essence, the poet willingly transforms himself "into a victim of his own writing" (117),

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<sup>108</sup> From Stachura's letter to the editors of the *Rodowody* almanac in response to their repeated requests for an autobiographical sketch (May 6, 1971):

*Co do natomiast wypowiedzi autobiograficznej, to tu moja niechęć jest absolutnie zdecydowana i nie wierzę, żeby mój stosunek do tego typu wypowiedzi uległ z biegiem czasu zmianie. Najkrócej powiedziałbym tak: moim pisaniem mogę podzielić się z każdym, kto tylko na to ma ochotę, czas i ciekawość mnie czytać. Moim życiem osobistym mógłbym podzielić się przy dobrej butelce z najlepszym przyjacielem, a nawet i tego wolę nie robić.* (Buchowski 121)

killing his personhood in order to save himself from death. According to Foucault, the *writer* must die (a fact that every living man must face, inevitably) so that an *author* may arise and persist in the continuity of literary discourse he engenders. This link between author-function and human mortality informs and illuminates discussions of Stachura's poetry that will follow.

Driven by his signature urge to categorize and classify, Foucault makes a clear distinction between 'great' literary authors, important exegetes, and founders of sciences. It seems that only the last two can play the "transdiscursive" (131) role he assigns to seminal authors (predominantly in social sciences) who initiate new strains of discourse. Somewhat arbitrarily, Foucault denies literary texts foundational or initiative function, perhaps betraying his disciplinary bias. But maybe Stachura-the-author would have agreed, if only to align his life project with 'the other side.' Each discursive domain necessitates a shared vocabulary, an overarching conceptual matrix that subsumes particularity in order to construct universal structures in historical time. In contrast, "strong poets make [...] history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves."<sup>109</sup> Not only do poets need to "swerve"<sup>110</sup> and refract in order to come into their own (following their own unique path and avoiding excessive fascination with "any one guy, even if he's Rilke"<sup>111</sup>), but they must also resist the totalizing power of discourse. What discourse abstracts, poets must literalize:

Where one lives is a complex occasion, both inside and out. [...] When a man walks down a street, he walks it only *now*—whether the date be 1860, 1960, or so-called centuries ago. History is a literal story, the activity of

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<sup>109</sup> From Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (5).

<sup>110</sup> "Swerving" and "misprision" (xiii) are key terms that Bloom borrows from Shakespeare to describe two actions that liberate poets from the devastating effects of excessive poetic influence.

<sup>111</sup> "Myślę teraz, że to źle być zafascynowanym jednym facetem nawet jeśli jest to Rilke" (qtd. in Buchowski, 38).

evidence. In short, the world is not separable, we *are* in it. The fact that “Apollonius of Tyana” is not *then*, so to speak—at some remove in time because its person is, as we might say, historical. Each moment is evidence of its own content, and all that is met with in it, is as present as anything.<sup>112</sup>

## 2. DISTANT LEARNING

Our world is a world of artifacts. (Whether we choose to believe that objects owe their existence to our perception is irrelevant in this regard, for we still distinguish two levels of creativity: what we imagine that we have inherited, and what we do with it.)<sup>113</sup>

The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory—there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.<sup>114</sup>

*Wszystko przemija, nawet najdłuższa żmija.* [Everything passes, even the longest viperesses.]

With reservations and ambiguities of the complicated relationship between Stachura the author and Stachura the man duly noted, we can now turn to the work itself. In the early series of poems and short stories Stachura establishes a persona that will accompany his verbal peregrinations under the guise of multiple alter egos throughout the rest of his career. This singular speaking subject is above all single—unique, deprived of all living kin, and acutely lonely. He emerges out of an archaic past into the unfamiliar territory of modern life, born miraculously from the labor of self-constitutive act of remembrance itself:

*Narodzony ja przez przerwy pomiędzy palcami  
Przez ujścia te musiałem wypluskać wytrysnąć musiałem  
Tak to nie dano mi zaznać wnętrza jak miękisz albo sobole  
Stąd też uznanie moje mają Lary i Penaty  
I łaźnia co lka kiedy mnie ukoi (Dużo ognia, 1-5)*

<sup>112</sup> Robert Creeley, Introduction to Charles Olson’s *Selected Writings* (9).

<sup>113</sup> G. Thomas Tanselle, *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989. (44)

<sup>114</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (192). New York: Picador, 1980.

[Born through the spaces between fingers  
Through these outlets I had to splash out had to spring out  
Not for me was to know the insides like the flesh or sobols  
And from thence my esteem for Lares and Penates  
And for public baths who weep having soothed me].

Stachura fashions a persona that resembles a misplaced refugee who cannot find his way home, a traveler who could tell many stories of faraway wonders but who himself begins to feel like an artifact of a bygone era with no connection to any real world. “I belonged once/ to high gardens/ with a gate Etruscan/ and slender,” the poetic voice recalls wistfully in “Composition”<sup>115</sup> as he launches his solitary archeological enterprise. The finds could easily become museum material, including “combs of ivory,”<sup>116</sup> diamond necklaces,<sup>117</sup> brass tubas,<sup>118</sup> an “earring like a handle for a jug,”<sup>119</sup> elaborate silverware,<sup>120</sup> “the big hearts of baobabs/ wagon wheels/ and also the heavy candelabra/ of antlers from the drowned deer.”<sup>121</sup> Even human bodies and features take on fragmentary, texture-rich materiality, sometimes undistinguishable from statues or ruins: “a shining stone of an eye,”<sup>122</sup> “tears/ like shards of Chinese porcelain/ [that] drown twirling slowly,”<sup>123</sup> “fur from lungs,”<sup>124</sup> or “soul [...] petrifying into a jealous state.”<sup>125</sup> The people whose names and parts are so lovingly handled by the remembering subject appear to be either long dead, suspended in a state of illustrious decay, or astrally distant.

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<sup>115</sup> From the poem titled “*Kompozycja*” (1-4):

*Należałem kiedyś  
do ogrodów wysokich  
z wejściem etruskim  
i smukłym.*

<sup>116</sup> “*Pejzaż*” (14).

<sup>117</sup> “*[Owoce wchodzą w głąb kamienia]*” (3).

<sup>118</sup> “*[Owoce wchodzą w głąb kamienia]*” (10).

<sup>119</sup> “*Noc albo oczekiwanie na śniadanie*” (6).

<sup>120</sup> “*Wielkanoc na moim zamku*” (4).

<sup>121</sup> “*Włosy*” (6-9).

<sup>122</sup> “*Lato w Alpach*” (7).

<sup>123</sup> “*Włosy*” (10-12).

<sup>124</sup> “*Wielki Testament.*”

<sup>125</sup> “*[Oczy nim dosięgły...]*” (10-12).



Yet the world from which they come has not simply ceased to exist. Rather, it could *never* have existed as a coherent environment, for the assortment of fragments and pieces collected here piles up into a haphazard archeological heap of anachronistic cultural motifs. And thus, in the same poem, a bracelet-laden Metisse woman can walk next to a Byzantine beauty called Solane,<sup>126</sup> as in another Persian rugs spread their legendary softness near an Etruscan gate.<sup>127</sup> Purely fictional characters and places like the garden of Hesperides, Atlantis, or “the cities of Orion”<sup>128</sup> further heighten the impression of un-reality. What unites these disparate places and time-frames is the eye of the beholder, the caressing gaze of the wanderer. It is his own sadness that thickens the air to a syrupy Mediterranean stillness; his own meticulously cultivated longing that smoothes all surfaces to a shimmery patina. By presenting himself as a disowned prince, a “child of the Sun”<sup>129</sup> inexplicably bereft of all kin, the poetic subject establishes for himself an eclectic but rich heritage that simultaneously explains his alienating uniqueness and elevates his status.

As a poet, Stachura invites his readers to share a few glimpses of his mental landscape, to contemplate the mirages that rise up in the hot atmosphere of his overactive imagination. These early poems often function as miniature studies in aesthetics and representation, describing raw materials, methods, and stylistic details—the tangible ‘stuff’ of artistic creation. The reader, as it were, stops by the workshop to catch the artist right in the midst of designing, before the final product is released for the multitudes to gape at and admire; that way, some of the artist’s dilemmas and anxieties come to the

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<sup>126</sup> “ [Na bransoletach u Metysek...].” The mysterious beauty Solane also appears in another poem, “ [Na początku były dzbany...].”

<sup>127</sup> “Kompozycja.”

<sup>128</sup> “ [Co noc...].”

<sup>129</sup> “ [Ja tobie poselstwa wysyłać...]” (8).

fore. The best example of this process can be found in the poem “Divorce,” which is a complaint of the sculptor afraid to be separated from the marvellous statue he considers making. If he carves her perfect beauty from ivory, the possessive viewers—“the seven museums” (4)—will immediately begin to vie for her favors, “to sightsee [her] profile and to walk over [her] back” (7). Moreover, everyone will soon strive to take advantage of her irresistible form, and the custodian’s “dry tongue” will run “over [her] belly both like sugar and salt all at once/ and the rats will then bite him because this is jealousy/ even though there was always a distance between them/ yet towards [her] they were sliding together” (11-5). Disgusted and saddened by the unsavory prospects of future dealings with the public, the creator sees no better option than to depart from his beloved object:

*a ja odejdę który cię uczyniłem odejdzie ten  
który cię począł i objawił nie tylko  
a żeby wiedział to już by wolał*

*omdlewać to mu zostało co krok (“Rozwód,” 16-9)*  
[and I will walk away I who have made you will walk away  
the one who conceived you and who revealed you not only  
and had he known he would have preferred to

to faint all he’s got left with each step].

The above poem dwells on the disjunction between the power of the artist who gives shape to a work of art and his subsequent powerlessness vis-à-vis the artifact for which he forfeits—or perhaps resignedly cedes—all rights. It could be said that the artist’s anxiety runs so deep that the work of art is never realized materially and exists only as a pure concept, given shape by words alone. In this and other pieces from the same period, Stachura portrays the artist as a Dionysian figure roaming the sun-drenched

countryside with a thyrsus of aesthetic ecstasy. The imagery of harvest and hunt-related plenitude<sup>130</sup> includes motifs of animal sacrifice and quasi-pagan ritual:

*Rozkoszne zdziwienie palców  
spada w pionowość pleców—mrocznych witraży  
do posadzki  
na której czerwień twych włosów  
zastyga w dymiący ochłap baranka* (“Kochankowie,” 6-10)  
[The ecstatic surprise of fingers  
falls into the back’s verticality—the dim stained glass windows  
onto the floor  
on which the red of your hair  
congeals into a steaming scrap of lamb].

Unlike immortal Bacchus, however, the human agent who performs almost equally impressive reality-transforming miracles has no train of devoted followers, and in his peregrinations lacks basic comforts. “I have just traversed the night and no one’s greeting me,” he complains with bitterness and hurt. “I have traversed the night I say and I’m tired/ no one visited me not a faun nor a guardian angel/ nor the tiniest lightning bug.”<sup>131</sup> With the tender skins of sacrificial heifers, soft tree bark, and the luxurious purple netting he unfolds, the poetic subject builds himself a cozy burrow where he can find at least a semblance of solace, a lair lined with intricate beauty. Likewise, with the powerful magnet of his imagination, Stachura bends the iron bars of reality and escapes inwards, to the made-up sunny islands where his will reigns supreme and he “too can know the justice of touch.”<sup>132</sup>

The short stories collected under the title *Jeden dzień* [One Day], written between 1960 and 1962, also talk of solitude, nostalgia, and rootlessness, but the narrative voice

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<sup>130</sup> “Do wodopoju szło się prosto/ albo na grzbietach lwic/ a niedosyt znało tylko źródło [To the watering place one would go straight/ or upon the backs of lionesses/ and only the well knew dearth]” (“Kompozycja,” 9-11).

<sup>131</sup> “ [Przebyłem noc właśnie...]” (1, 12-14).

<sup>132</sup> “ [Nachylcie plecy wasze...]” (3).

that carries those themes brings us back to the concrete reality of post-war Poland. These stories, like most of Stachura's pieces, add yet another set of pages to the ever-growing travelogue in which the wandering bard describes his passage through life. "Sometimes I write as if I were writing while walking,"<sup>133</sup> he tells us of his signature literary method. Stachura "writes himself" (to borrow his phrase from another poem<sup>134</sup>) in various places and situations in order to examine what happens inside and around him, which in turn will tell us something about the current state of humanity or the universe. Stachura's investigative wanderings on the page document his ongoing quest for knowledge and deeper understanding of just about anything, though most importantly of himself. He asks fundamental questions about the meaning of things in a style reminiscent at times of Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *Petit Prince*:

*Nie chciało mi się już spać i patrzyłem na gwiazdy. Byłem trochę głodny, ale więcej myślałem. Zawsze dużo myślę, ale wtedy bardzo dużo. Ale najwięcej tęskniłem. [...] Tęskniłem nieprzebranie, nieprzebranie i myślę, że ktoś tam daleko, po tym samym niebem, musiał też za mną tęsknić, a jeśli spał, to musiał się zbudzić, bo to niemożliwe, żebym nikogo nie trafił w serce w tamtym środku nocy, sercu nocy. [...] bardzo często tęsknię chłopca [sic] do mnie podobnego („Listy do Olgi,” 23)*

[I didn't feel like sleeping anymore and I was looking at the stars. I was hungry a little, but more I was thinking. I always think a lot, but then a whole lot. But most of all I felt longing. (...) The longing I felt was immeasurable, immeasurable, and I think that someone far away, under the same sky, must have been longing for me too, and if he had been sleeping, then he must have woken up because it's impossible that I wouldn't have struck a heart in that middle of the night, the heart of the night. (...) I very often long {sic} a boy who's similar to me] ("Letters to Olga").

Stachura cranks up the intensity of his longing to such a high pitch that he imagines it piercing other hearts like an arrow hitting a target, letting the "immeasurable" waves of emotion spill out of his own tortured soul.

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<sup>133</sup> "Jeden dzień" (15).

<sup>134</sup> "Śpiewanie przez sen" (1).

This passage, besides expressing (and perhaps indulging in) extreme loneliness, provides clues to Stachura's theory of the self. On the one hand, each individual is locked in the solipsistic prison of a single body and a single mind, from which he cannot escape. The pain of separation from other selves and from the world is palpable and concrete. On the other, however, because the thinking mind has the power to transcend the physical boundaries of the body, travel to the stars if it wants to, it can break through the prison bars in the act of "writing itself." What this action entails is encapsulated in the ungrammatical phrasing of "I long a boy," which elides the mediation of "for" and effectively turns an indirect object into a direct one. (Because Stachura fought his editors for "every comma and period," we can be sure that this oddity indicates deliberate authorial choice and not a mistake or a printer's error. Gramatically, the phrase works in English the same way it works in Polish.) When the mind thinks of an object, it attempts to penetrate and merge with it, eliminating the unbearable distance and separation. Moreover, in "writing himself" through the physical movement of the body in space, the author merges with the natural world as well. In a sense, the self spills out into nature, which thus makes it possible for the nameless boy's "heart" to become synonymous with "the heart of the night."

Another method of transcending individual limitations can involve sending out fictional "substitute selves" into the world. In later works, particularly in novels, Stachura fulfills that fantasy and creates characters who become not so much his mirror images—for it is a mistake to equate unproblematically the men who people Stachura's fiction with the author himself—but the idealized trusty companions he was so desperate to find. Krzysztof Karasek, a critic and poet who knew Stachura personally, suggests that

Stachura “constructed for his narrative purposes a model of partnership, creating a type of his own—and only one—hero.”<sup>135</sup> According to Karasek, Stachura obsessively searched for more genuine and profound interpersonal connections, and for new ways of expressing existential angst without compromising authenticity and freshness of experience. His fictional characters often appear in pairs, “connected to each other with strong supra-verbal ties, incomprehensible to others, exceptionally subtle, difficult to define” (78).

Invariably, these model couples are male, and the ties that bind them are based on choice rather than some natural (and thus random) affinity like kinship or sexual desire. Spontaneous and freewheeling as he may seem in his vagabond attire, Stachura the writer leaves very little to chance. If his quest for a more meaningful existence borders on obsession, its object remains in clear sight of a fully engaged, disciplined intellect. Stachura never tires of examining and questioning everything in a truly Socratic fashion, stripping away deceptive layers of common belief in search for primary truths, constantly aware that “illusion lurks everywhere with its tongue stuck out derisively.”<sup>136</sup> Like his Athenian predecessor, who famously professed that “to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living,”<sup>137</sup> Stachura starts with epistemological nothing in order to construct a knowing subject. For both thinkers, some form of dialogue becomes the preferred means of getting to know, just as it seems that each of them “writes himself” into conversations with a modified version of self, thinking

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<sup>135</sup> “Próba nowego dekalogu” (77).

<sup>136</sup> “Pragnienie” (196). Opowiadania.

<sup>137</sup> The Apology, 38a.

aloud in multiple voices, testing ideas and discarding those which appear less likely to be true. Dialogic wandering turns into the only way that life is worth living, and in the end even dying for.

Socrates was condemned to death by his fellow citizens for “corrupting the youth” and teaching them godless behavior. While he could have talked himself out of legal trouble, he chose to stick to his principles in front of the Athenian jury in a dazzling show of verbal virtuosity. Socrates loved to talk as much he loved to think, and he wanted all to listen so they too could understand the same basic truths about *philosophia*, the love of knowledge and the only path to enlightenment. In the Apology, he mentions the prerogative to lead others by his own example, and the mysterious *daimon*, a divine voice that steers him towards goodness and virtue. Stachura does not list Socrates as one of the “ancêtres” to whom he pleads loyalty in his c.v., but the two have surprisingly much in common, and would likely have had many decent discussions over Greek wine. As a self-professed descendant of ancient philosopher-kings and imaginary sun gods, Stachura insists on individual transformation through ceaseless internal interrogation. Although each individual must go through the process of enlightenment alone, writers—due to their unique social function and heightened sensibilities—perform it on a public forum:

*I żyłem. Tak, jak umiałem żyć. Z całej duszy z całych sił. Bez reszty. Nie oszczędzając ni siebie, ni innych. Między świętą Jawą i świętym Majakiem byłem w środku tego wiru. [...] Biorąc wszystko, dobre i złe, dawałem z siebie najlepsze. A tak próbowałem dawać, żeby nikt tego nie widział. Nawet sam obdarowany. Bo tak trzeba dawać. Jak biedna, ale ponad królami, pani Sierantowa. Co daje lewa ręka, prawa nie powinna wiedzieć. Gesty dobre są dla wiadomego rodzaju. My je rzucamy na złom.*  
[And I lived. The only way I knew how to live. With all my heart with all my might. Without stopping. Without sparing neither myself nor others. Between Saint Reality and Saint Delusion I stayed inside that whirl. (...) Taking it all in, good and evil, I was giving the best from myself. And I was trying to give in such a way that nobody would notice. Even the

recipient himself. For this is how one should give. Just like poor, yet above all kings, Mrs. Sierantowa. What the left hand gives, the right one shouldn't know. Gestures are good for the obvious kind. We throw them out to the scrap heap.]<sup>138</sup>

Stachura thus partly inherits, partly invents messianic tendencies that ultimately deepen his alienation and suffering. But, despite the high price he must pay for his mentally and physically exhausting lifestyle, he refuses to slow down.

Karasek blames Stachura's fatal problems on his inability to separate the private sphere from the domain of poetics, although one can easily see how such a separation could threaten the purported integrity of the entire truth-seeking project. In Stachura's world, poetry is not something one does in one's spare time, or even for a living—it is “a way of being, a way of living, a way of other, second living.”<sup>139</sup> Poems are hardly pieces of verbal trickery; they are records (as well as means) of continuous and relentless exertion to understand the world, other people, and—most importantly—one's own place among them. Once a person leaves behind the beguiling clouds of childhood and in full consciousness chooses to step on the *terra firma* of responsible adulthood, s/he must take full charge of the task lying ahead. Those whose craft consists of handling words gain a more comprehensive understanding of universal structures of being (“the unforgettable moment/ when I grasped a few silly details”<sup>140</sup>), and their sense of duty compels them to pour into writing whatever knowledge they may possess. Stachura takes his vocation very seriously indeed: unlike a baker or a doctor whose job ends with the end of the shift, a poet works around the clock and should be prepared to give his everything whenever necessary.

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<sup>138</sup> “*Czysty opis*” (215). *Opowiadania*.

<sup>139</sup> *Wszystko jest poezja* (22).

<sup>140</sup> “ (...) *niezapomiana ta chwila/ kiedy pojąłem parę głupich drobiazgów*” (“*Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza*,” 90).



The long piece “*Dużo ognia*” [Much Fire], written as a sequence of lyrical songs (*pieśni*), outlines some of the occupational hazards that dedicated poets—the “wandering Vestals”<sup>141</sup>—must contend with as they trudge along with a difficult task on hand. Stachura portrays the poet as a guardian of a sacred fire, a powerful elemental force that strikes him as equally awe-inspiring and deadly, “the plague and the locusts” and the “gift of open space/ which I have certainly that gift/ and it doesn’t drowse but rather it desires.”<sup>142</sup> The poetic imperative is fueled by an all-consuming drive for excellence (“but secretly I am much more proud/ and I want to equal that is I want to exceed/ and I’m chasing you your distinct mark”<sup>143</sup>), which brings constant growth and renewal but also threatens to destroy its free agent at every turn. Images of homely comforts are juxtaposed with those of exile and perdition, and the lingering presence of death adds weight and import to his every move:

*Czy można inaczej dorosnąć niż umiłowaniem  
umiłowaniem dali i chwili świeżej co krok  
a która nie jest padlina w sypialni i willach*

*Czy można inaczej uprawiać kult  
niż stopy swojej ta jest kadzidło i mirra  
i ją całować uprawiać żeby nieskazitelna*

*czy można jeszcze inaczej odkupić siebie*  
[Is it possible to mature otherwise than through love  
the love of distance and of moment fresh with every step  
that which is not carrion in the bedroom and villas

Is it possible to worship otherwise than through cult

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<sup>141</sup> “Pieśń: hymn do łaźni” [Song: A Hymn to the Public Baths] in *Wiersze* (15).

<sup>142</sup> “Pieśń: dziecięcia powaga” [Song: A Child’s Seriousness] in *Wiersze*:

*Przywołuję cię plaga i szarańcza  
jeśli dotkniesz mnie darem przestrzeni  
który mam na pewno ten dar  
i on nie tyle drzemie co pragnie (1-4).*

<sup>143</sup> “Pieśń: dziecięcia powaga” [Song: A Child’s Seriousness] in *Wiersze*: “ale w skrytości ja jestem dumniejszy wiele/ i pragnę dorównać znaczy pragnę przewyższyć/ i ścigam ciebie ślad twój wyraźny” (10-13).

of one's own foot that is incense and myrrh  
and to kiss it to cultivate it so that it immaculate

is it possible to save oneself still otherwise].<sup>144</sup>

In Stachura, the yearning for eternity and constant rebellion against mortality turn into a peculiar cult of all that is human, a pean to the choking beauty of the fragile and the impermanent. A free thinking agent is above all a *mobile* agent, whose peregrinations are elevated to a divine status (represented synecdochically by the revered foot) and designated as the surest way towards salvation (details and terms of which remain, however, largely unspecified). Movement thus figures as the principal value significant in and of itself, connected to positives like growth and freshness, while stasis by simple opposition becomes man's worst enemy, equated with decay and death. The poet cannot stand still but must constantly seek out new paths and novel sights outside the confines of familiar walls, for "a troubadour in a cloister is a wound."<sup>145</sup>

In a series of intriguing essays coupling erotic desire with the love of knowledge, Anne Carson describes a paradigm strikingly evocative of Stachura's "love of distance." Carson pairs up two dissimilar personages—Sappho and Socrates—and shows how their disparate activities are driven by a single directive:

In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space. To reach across it is tricky; a kind of stereoscopy seems to be required. [...] The same subterfuge which we have called an 'erotic ruse' in novels and poems now appears to constitute the very structure of human thinking. When the mind reaches out to know, the space of desire opens and a necessary fiction transpires.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> "Pieśń: trzynaście linijek" [Song: Thirteen Lines] in *Wiersze* (17-23).

<sup>145</sup> "Pieśń: odpływanie" [Song: Swimming Away] in *Wiersze*: "wiedząc że podróż tylko obmywa dusze/ i że trubadur w klasztorze to rana" (17-8).

<sup>146</sup> Chapter titled "Mythoplokon" in "Eros the Bittersweet" (170-3).

The impulse that makes us yearn romantically for another person and the epistemological drive that fuels *philo-sophia*, Carson suggests, are in fact one and the same. The “space of desire” that opens puts the desiring subject in a position both vulnerable and powerful: the risk of exposure or even erasure of individual distinctiveness is counterbalanced with opportunities for growth and enrichment. To vacillate between the two constitutes the very definition of *homo sapiens*.

The ever-present themes of spatial and temporal distance, with their link to the ambivalent affective charge of unfulfilled but somehow pleasurable yearning, point to Stachura’s chief interest in the project of literature. The indescribable, uncharted territories stretching between the familiar and the unknown, between the self and the other, between life and death—always in-between, never quite here nor there—constitute the poet’s rightful domain. Because of language’s expressive limitations (“*nie wszystko da się powiedzieć/ nie wszystko trzeba powiedzieć*” [not everything can be said/ not everything should be said]<sup>147</sup>) and the nature of poetry as an ongoing process (“*zaczęta moja robota jest nie skończona/ bo ona nieskończona jest*” [the work I have begun is not finished/ because it is infinite]<sup>148</sup>), writers can merely gesture towards that space but they can never describe it. When Stachura constructs mythical landscapes and imaginary friends one revels in longing for, he does not preach simple escapism. Through his insistent focus on the pervasive mood of these encounters—nostalgia—Stachura attempts to evoke the sublime quality that to him underlies all aesthetic experience. If the words “ *tęsknota*” (yearning) and “ *nostalgia*” return with astonishing frequency, it is because

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<sup>147</sup> “*Po ogrodzie...*” (*Wiersze*, 105).

<sup>148</sup> “*Po ogrodzie...*” (*Wiersze*, 115).

they bring with them a taste of eternity. Poetry ponders what lies in-between, what escapes definition, what eludes comprehension, what tempts and surprises:

*Tęsknij. Oczywiście nie za kimś i nie za czymś, lecz nie wiesz. Bo przecież nie wiesz. Tęsknij zatem—i to wszystko. Tyle prawdziwie twój, ile wy tęsknisz niemożliwego.*

[Yearn. Of course not for someone or for something, for you don't know. Because you don't know. Yearn, then—and that's all. There's only so much of what's truly yours as the impossible that you've been able to yearn.<sup>149</sup>

The poet's job is not to explain the mechanism of understanding or appreciating beauty, but rather to show it at work. In other words, the poet's duty is to inspire and cultivate nostalgia.

### 3. ONE MAN HAPPENING: STACHURA AND HIS TIMES

*(...) zawsze pragnęłam mieć konia do lotu  
i gwiazdę we wzroku—więc amen*  
[I've always wanted to have a horse for flight  
and a star in sight—so amen].<sup>150</sup>

*Poeta w czasie pisania* [During writing the poet  
*To człowiek odwrócony* is a man turned backwards

*Tylem do świata* away from the world  
*Do nieporządku* from disorder  
*Rzeczywistości* reality]<sup>151</sup>

A close reading of the pieces discussed on the preceding pages has identified a few of Stachura's major concerns: the unique function of poets, along with all attendant responsibilities and hardships; the role of poetry in human and social life; the peculiar positioning of the poetic subject in time and space, real as well as imagined. For Stachura, an author whose self-made precepts bring to mind what in the arts since

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<sup>149</sup> "Oto" (*Fabula...*, 268).

<sup>150</sup> "Przystępuję do ciebie" from the volume *Wiersze* (52).

<sup>151</sup> Tadeusz Różewicz, "Poeta w czasie pisania" (1-5), from the volume *Niepokój: Wybór wierszy* [Anxiety: Selected Poems].

Wagner's introduction of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* idea had become known as Total Art,<sup>152</sup> these issues appeared evidently interconnected. Loath as he ever was to associate himself with any recognized school or label, Stachura did live through the 1960s and 1970s, a highly galvanized time when definitions and goals of art (as well as those of society and individual) were being questioned, attacked, or upended. Conditions in communist Poland did not allow for a full blossoming of hippie culture, but some of the features of Stachura's work—the vagabond lifestyle, admiration and deification of the simplicity of nature, emphasis on personal freedom, rebellion against social constraints, interest in indigeneous peoples and folk art—could be recognized as markers of that movement. On the other hand, Stachura remained completely outside the drug and sex-induced psychedelic haze that enveloped those years of experimentation in some places, and was too much of a pained individual to join hands in a circle of happy flower-children. Instead, he saw himself as anti-fashionable and counter-trendy, preferring heightened mental clarity to altered states of consciousness; his fertile imagination hardly needed artificial stimulants to push itself further.

Stachura's ambivalent attitude towards protest communities, stemming from his individualistic aesthetic vision and personal views, reflects in some ways the official party line developed in response to them in Poland. The waves of social and cultural contestation in the Eastern block rose and spread in different patterns than they did in the West (or in South America, or Spain, or China), causing diverse ideological and political results. In Poland, their significance as a measure of widespread public dissatisfaction with the communist regime was largely downplayed and dismissed, since any form of

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<sup>152</sup> "Whereas the public, that representation of daily life, forgets the confines of the auditorium, and lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole World" (Wagner in Bayreuth).

protest clashed with the dominant image of purported, or at least imminent, success. A brief sampling of academic work on the subject provides a telling commentary. For instance, Aldona Jawłowska's sociological analysis *Drogi kontrkultury* (The Paths of Counterculture, 1975) relegates "youth rebellion" only to countries like the U.S.A, Great Britain, France, Holland, Italy, and West Germany, on the premise that

the youth movement consists—despite its multiple forms of expression and its ideological inconsistencies—in entirely questioning the capitalist system, the achievements and developmental objectives of the so-called technological civilization and culture. The latter are questioned in the name of such values as egalitarianism and communality but also freedom and inviolability of individual life, self-actualization, and self-expression as opposed to the stiff rules of the game obligatory in the social system against which the fight is launched, consumer attitudes, and the prevalence of possessions which limit relationships with nature and with other human beings (321).

Nowhere in the book does Jawłowska mention the local drama of 1968 student marches or anything even vaguely suggestive of homegrown unrest, though she does—very surreptitiously—launch a veiled critique of the educational system as a kind of "knowledge industry" (178) that shapes individuals through reifying indoctrination and oppression.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, Kazimierz Jankowski's *Hipisi: w poszukiwaniu ziemi obiecanej* (The Hippies: In the Search of a Promised Land, 1972) defines the hippie movement in terms of a psychological disorder whose sufferers (invariably affluent and bored) require "rehabilitation and resocialization" (11). The exchange between the Polish therapist and an older American woman he meets on the street sounds uncannily emblematic of Cold War mistrust and misunderstanding, and gives us a taste of the propaganda spewed from both sides of the Curtain:

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<sup>153</sup> Jawłowska went on to write a book on alternative Polish theater, understood as part of oppositional student movement and growing social awareness, in the more permissive late 1980s: *Wiecej niż teatr* (More than Theater, 1987).

‘Why can’t the Russians do some real work, instead of spending all their energy on destroying us? I assure you that, not being able to destroy us directly, in open combat, they are trying to destroy us from within: through the depravation of youth and through drugs. (...) It’s all done by the agents of Mao.’

‘But dear lady, in Poland it is believed that youth rebellion and the fashion for hipping have come from nowhere else but the USA! Nobody likes the hippies in Poland!’

‘Of course,’ the widow agreed, ‘who would want to tolerate such people in their own country! It’s a Trojan horse brought in here by the communists. There’s proof: who would ever believe one can find happiness in poverty. It’s almost like they’re hypnotized. What I’d like to know is who’s paying for corrupting our youth and how much!’ (39)

By banishing expressions of contestation of the established status quo outside the margins of normal behavior or familiar geography, the dominant discourse neutralized them and denied any wider impact such phenomena might have had back home.<sup>154</sup>

For an author who so insistently calls for awareness, involvement, and responsibility, Stachura may appear strangely uninvolved in the fate of his contemporaries, reproducing avoidance patterns like those practiced by the government. Indeed, explicit references to recognizable socio-historical contexts are hard to come by in his writings; it seems that he turns his back on reality and retreats inwards. Is his stance thus disdainfully, or perhaps neglectfully, apolitical? While Stachura insists on acting in his capacity as an *artist* (i.e., someone purportedly unconcerned with the practical application of his ideas) interested in pushing the boundaries of poetic expression, I will argue that his profoundly ethical humanism, pacifism, and unflinching concern for truth dovetail in such a manner that a cohesive ideological statement can be deciphered. And it

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<sup>154</sup> Minimal commentary and deflection ruled in official press coverage. For example, following the violent December 1970 upheavals that left scores of shipyard and coal mine workers dead at the hands of the riot police, the weekly journal *Polityka* included only one article on the subject, in which it merely alluded to the event and cited fragments of Edward Gierek’s public statement. For the next several weeks, the magazine continued to treat run-of-the-mill social and cultural issues without mentioning the trauma of the workers’ protest again.

will be not as a poetic innovator but rather as a subversive symbol that Stachura will be exploited by a generation of readers and followers in the 1980s. But first, to pave way for a satisfactory answer to this question, one that gives justice to its full complexity, we will examine the manner in which Stachura's artistic vision presents materiality and temporality. What potential dangers does historical time pose to induce such escapism, and what benefits does one gain from stepping outside "real time"? How does the poet's body appear and function in his imaginative framework, and what implications arise for the readers from this particular setup?

We have seen earlier that in one group of poems Stachura establishes for his poetic subjects and alter egos an eclectic, anachronistic heritage, a fictional open space charged with both positive and negative ions of yearning. This move allows him to accomplish several things at once. First of all, the poet's voice can be linked to a worthy, semi-divine ancestry that elevates his status among other mortals. Secondly, his reflections and observations acquire an element of supra-temporal universality. Moreover, interiority may be strongly emphasized. Finally, the artist's creationist power can unfold its full potential, recalling any imaginable prop from the vast storerooms of history. The act of remembrance uncovers traces of the past just as it invents them, but the construct as such holds limited appeal for Stachura. Looking back on what has already come and gone, the poet takes care not to find himself there—he not so much escapes *into* the past as tries to escape *from* it. Much of Stachura's oeuvre reads like a continuous protest against and challenge of death, that "common madwoman" with a "sharp weapon."<sup>155</sup> His evasive maneuvers resemble the trickery of familiar home-

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<sup>155</sup> „(...) *kto ci dał do ręki ostrą broń, zwyczajna ty wariatko?*” (112). „*Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza*” in the volume *Wiersze*.



grown heroes whose exploits are praised in folk legends—if the wanted man disguises himself or hides in unexpected places, plants misleading evidence or even bribes, Lady Scythe will knock on a series of wrong doors before she finds him, which will buy our hero some valuable time to enjoy life in the meantime. He will have to succumb in the end, of course, but he will manage to leave an indelible mark of his presence in the world:

*Co do niektórych zwiewnych śladów  
mówi mi wiara niezależna  
że nie zetrze ich nic*

*ni ogień ni woda  
ni głód ni wojna  
ni morowe powietrze*

*ni trzęsienie ziemi*

*ani też sunące  
z borealnych rogatek  
śmiertelne prześcieradło lodowca*

*one w każdej sferze  
niezawodnie wokół słońc kołować będą*  
[As to some of those wispy traces  
my independent faith tells me  
that nothing will erase them

neither fire nor water  
neither famine nor war  
neither pestilential air

nor an earthquake

and neither the mortal  
sheet of ice that advances from  
the boreal gates

in each sphere they  
will circle around the suns unfailingly]<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> „Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza” in the volume *Wiersze* (112).

For mortal creatures constantly threatened by extinction by the overwhelming multitudes of natural forces, only oppositional, dedicated exertion can provide methods of deliverance. To save oneself means to face death and to throw the glorious burden of human frailty in her face, laughing.<sup>157</sup> To save humanity, one has to create an alternative universe of incorruptible beauty to endure in. And this is precisely what the labor of poets consists of.

The most detailed descriptions of that labor can be found in three long poems, *Dużo ognia*, *Przystępuję do ciebie*, and *Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza*. All three operate on the principle of cyclical repetition: through a series of seventeen “songs” (*pieśni*) on assorted but related subjects, through forty one prayer-like pieces starting with the same words (“*Przystępuję do ciebie...*”), or through a number of refrains. On the one hand, such structural regularity recalls the seasonal changes in nature. As a great proponent of the outdoors (and someone intimately familiar with seasonal physical labor), Stachura is certainly attuned to the agricultural and natural transformation of land and sea, and he describes humanity as part of that movement. For example, an ice skater wearing a short skirt and stockings “as red as live blood” who glides upon a frozen pond in the dead of winter, blooms brightly as “spring of life.”<sup>158</sup> On the other hand, while the turning of seasons brings joy and renewal to all creation, the sequence of days and nights

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<sup>157</sup> „*Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza*” (100):

*idź*  
*ubierz przystroj to wszystko*  
*cały ciemny ten teatr*  
*kształtem człowieczym*

[go on  
 clothe adorn all this  
 this whole dark theater  
 in human shape

*idź*  
*i pokaż im*  
*i pokaż jej: gasnącej jesiennej planecie*  
*jak płoną ci źrenice*

go on  
 and show them  
 and show her: to that dimming autumnal planet  
 the fire in your iris]

<sup>158</sup> „*Po ogrodzie...*” (111).

for each individual living thing ends abruptly at the completion of its designated life cycle. And this is where Stachura's otherwise expansive admiration of nature stops as well:

<i>Dlaczego usiadłem teraz popod niebem i bić pięściami począłem ziemię</i>	[Why I sat down presently underneath the sky and with my fists started to beat the earth
<i>bo zabolalo mnie z tym sobie nigdy nie dam rady</i>	because it hurts me with that I'll never come to terms]. <sup>159</sup>

Against the order of things that lets breathing, feeling creatures expire, one can raise nothing more than an impotent rage. But whereas the laws of physics perpetuate this cruel regularity in earthly affairs, the poetic subject is not merely “surrounded by nature” or “even holding her in his hand”—he strives to seek “new ways beyond her.”<sup>160</sup> To that end, he unleashes the power of the metaphysical, and from the depths of destruction he emerges, going “against the wind/ supporting [him]self with the arms widely spread/like a limping wounded crane with her wings.”<sup>161</sup>

Is it not how Jacob walked after wrestling with God in the darkest hour of the night, with his hip socket out of joint but having won a promise of everlasting life?<sup>162</sup> Stachura presents this struggle in *Przystępuję do ciebie* as an ongoing fight against a

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<sup>159</sup> „Po ogrodzie...” (95).

<sup>160</sup> „Po ogrodzie...”:  
*można mówić: szalony  
ale kto może wiedzieć*

*może trzeba powiedzieć: natchniony  
otoczony naturą  
i nawet ją trzymając w ręku*

*szuka nowych dróg poza nią* (107).

<sup>161</sup> „Po ogrodzie...”:  
*Z ostatniej powodzi  
co ją rozpętałem pod wiatr idąc  
szeroko rozłożonymi ramionami podpierając się  
jak skrzydłami kulejąca ranna czapla* (101).

<sup>162</sup> Genesis 32:22-30.

clever and fierce enemy. Playfully evocative of courtly literary ideals, the poem brims with knightly metaphors and represents a sequence of skirmishes featuring a lone hero who gallantly throws a glove to challenge his opponent, even as his bare hands tremble in fear and confusion (70-71). At the behest of a mysterious, unnamed lady (a “sister of mercy”) to whom he owes “death-dealing service,” he sets out on a dangerous quest from which he may not return.<sup>163</sup> Once again, mobilized carnality works as an armor against the inexorable enemy (“I stand here before you my blood boiling magnificently/ the glowing crimson my warrior dress”<sup>164</sup>), but despite such a convincing façade of bubbling vitality the knight himself admits that he hails from another era, that he does not dwell “among contemporaries” (72). His vulnerable body becomes a strange dispensary of body parts that serve as military accessories and... conversation pieces. At times, this technique imbues the text with a tinge of black humor, particularly in “*Po ogrodzie...*,” as it lightens up the mood of pervasive solemnity. Our solitary knight seems to play the part of a B-movie warlock, a powerful spirit disguised under human form which he finds rather useless and which he dismembers piece by piece, hurling them at his adversary. “I

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<sup>163</sup> *[K]iedy przejdę kiedy skończę nockę tam  
kiedy już rozpruję żywot mój i tam  
w twojej służbie śmiertelności*

*czy będę mógł czy będę jeszcze mógł  
tu na szosy skraj jak stoję  
wrócić zdrów (66).*

<sup>164</sup> *Przystępuję do ciebie—w pełnym uzbrojeniu  
bo chciałbym jeszcze rzecz bardzo niecierpliwą  
napisać*

*że nadchodzi godzina*

*stoję tu przed tobą krew mi wrze przepyszenie  
cały w pąsach strój mój wojowniczy (79).*

was just pushing ahead my flaxen pate/ like a round of melon on two wheels/ whoever wants it/ let him gorge,”<sup>165</sup> he quips.

But if Stachura’s portrayals of people sometimes border on grotesque playfulness, they hardly evade realism. On the contrary—we find vivid and accurate descriptions of hunger, pain, tiredness, blisters on the hands, even snot. Particularly moving are Stachura’s peans of the Polish worker. Sheer materiality or even beauty of the body, however, offer limited insights into the inner structures of being; it is the human heart—or soul—which interests poets the most. Because physical destruction equals death of the mind (for one would be hard pressed to find any definite promise of salvation of the soul in Stachura), the poet cannot accept carnality as fully binding. Literature affords human beings another kind of life, and that is why Stachura explores its possibilities at such length. Within the universe of a poem, time passes differently than in real life: it is cyclical rather than linear. Spun into motion by the omnipotent hand of the author, everything inside that miniature world circles around its own independent center of gravity, governed by its own set of independent rules (“The order of things events/ the agreement of tenses and so on/ what do we need this sandbag for”).<sup>166</sup> Every time a poem is read, it will happen again and again, till the end of time:

*można-li skończyć piękniej i staranniej  
niż u stóp nowego początku  
w istnej kolebce kwilącego poranka*

*to przecież tak jakby końca nie było  
jest: i tak dalej*  
[is it possible to end more artfully and carefully  
than at the feet of a new beginning  
in the very cradle of a whimpering dawn

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<sup>165</sup> „Ja tylko pchałem naprzód mój płowy łeb/ jak owoc melonu na dwukółce/ kto chce/ niech zje” (94).

<sup>166</sup> „Kolejność rzeczy zdarzeń/ następstwo czasów i tak dalej/ po co nam ten worek z piaskiem/ po co nam ten gips” (94).

it's as if there were no end  
it is: and so on] (101)

The past understood this way ceases to be past: it is appended to the fictional present and thus no longer threatens. The poet's will and power rest supreme: the only limitation becomes the reader's ability to keep up with the internal pace of the poem.

This particular manner of composition/exposition both mimics and transforms natural rhythms and processes, subjugated under the aegis of artistic creation. It elaborates on and sets out to transcend human limitations in experiencing the world. The poetic subject rises out of the physical environment in a decisive push of mental realization; as he turns back to nature, nothing is the same anymore, neither man nor nature. A tree may be falling in the forest without anyone hearing it, but the movement of man among the trees will no longer go unnoticed. The poet acts "So consciously that it becomes subconscious,"<sup>167</sup> developing a kind of second nature that forms new habits of mind and perception.<sup>168</sup> Stachura seemingly wishes to seize every moment before it escapes, yet he carefully screens experience to impose aesthetic order on what would otherwise be inchoate and random. To capture an occurrence one must first pick it out among others, i.e., one must imbue it with meaning, all the while maintaining the illusion for the secondary observer that the experience re-creates itself. Immediacy and flux take

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<sup>167</sup> From the chapter „Złota żyła, ilość i jakość, sen o trzęsieniu ziemi, ogrodnik, mordercy”: „Poetą się jest, a nie bywa. (...) Nie bywa nie-poetą, lecz jest zawsze poetą ten, który po prostu jest poetą i nie musi o tym pamiętać ani sobie przypominać, kiedy o tym zapomni. Bo nie zapomina. Bo nie pamięta. Bo jest. Tak świadomie, że już podświadomie” (WJP 34).

<sup>168</sup> Some critics found Stachura's method cumbersome and ineffective. An anonymous reviewer signed "Zet" in the journal *Twórczość* derided Stachura's "apotheosis of everythingness" and stylistic "nostalgia for naturalness" as stilted and contrived. In Zet's opinion, that coveted spontaneity and simplicity comes off instead as "arch-artificiality" (162) and self-conscious mannerism. *Twórczość* 368:3 (1976): 161-2. Even a more positively inclined critic, Bohdan Zadura, wondered "where freshness and inventiveness of language begin and where they end, how blurry the boundaries between them and mannerism are." "Rodziewiczówna w dzinsach?" *Twórczość* 328:11 (1972): 108-9.

precedence over other considerations in artistic production, so when a piece comes into being it *happens* as if by itself, it *does* something akin to a bud that opens into a leaf. Stachura's literary project will soon spill out from the page into other realms of existence, just as in painting in the 1960s figures would leave the canvas during staged happenings in order to involve viewers in unexpectedly novel ways:

What has been worked out instead is a form that is as open and fluid as the shapes of our everyday experience but does not simply imitate them. (...) this form places a much greater responsibility on visitors than they have had before. (...) If we admit that work that 'succeeds' on some days fails on other days, we may seem to disregard the enduring and stable and to place an emphasis upon the fragile and impermanent. But one can insist, as many have, that only the changing is really enduring and all else is whistling in the dark.<sup>169</sup>

As Stachura matured artistically, the experiential dimension of poetic space he so insistently crafted began to challenge the very definition of literature, leading him far afield beyond the written word, and into the less tangible realm of music.

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<sup>169</sup> Allan Kaprow: "Notes on the Creation of a Total Art" (12). Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life.

### CHAPTER III. BEYOND AND BETWEEN WORDS: A FLUID POETICS

If the preceding chapter focused on the poet's power as *auctor*—creator and pretender to immortality—this one will offer a negative reading of the same, calling attention to what poetry should not and cannot do. It will tackle the issue of ethics, possibilities of language, and will move from the lyric and music to their antithesis—silence. As Stachura continued to test the full range of possibilities that literature affords, he also began to take stock of its limitations and to seek other options. The poet's unceasing efforts to investigate the perplexing nature of aesthetic experience inevitably led him into the no-man's-land of the unspeakable, where he deliberately pattered and lingered. If, as Sharon Cameron contends, "all lyrics oppose speech to the action from which it exempts itself, oppose voice as it rise [sic] momentarily from the enthusiasms of temporal advance to the flow of time that ultimately rushes over and drowns it" (23), then we should be able to trace this movement from sound to silence in Stachura's work.

Death, that "smudge of shadow," lurks at the margins of almost everything the poet ever wrote. Stachura challenges and fights it, but he sees its premature arrival presciently, like Achilles having made his fateful choice. His poetry celebrates life as constantly as it mourns its end:

*zanucę wtedy  
w tej mojej coraz i ostatecznej*

I will hum then  
in my increasingly and the final

*coś bez słów  
zanucę lub zagwiżdżę przez zęby*

something without words  
I will hum or whistle through my teeth

*pieśń bez słów  
samą jedynie nieodzowną melodię*

a song without words  
only the ever-present melody



<i>nie wesolą nie smutną</i>	neither jolly nor sad
<i>niemniej jednak rzewną</i>	nonetheless a heartrending one
<i>coś takiego jak u ujścia rzeki nurt</i>	something like the charming current at the
<i>[powabny</i>	<i>[river's mouth</i>
<i>coś takiego jak rozlewnie krew</i>	something like the estuary of blood flowing
<i>[płynąca z rany</i>	<i>[from a wound.<sup>170</sup></i>

Grappling with such hopeless finality, Stachura the author must come to terms with the materiality of the body from which his voice will soon cease to speak. Increasingly, he gestures towards intangible forms outside verbal communication—pure music and silence—as his efforts to express the inexpressible begin to falter. This chapter will map Stachura’s excursions into those areas and read his songwriting period as an example of what Edward Said calls “late style.” I argue that only a refractory and catastrophic hermeneutics can explain how Stachura’s songs fit in the corpus of his work. “Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present” (14), writes Said. Because Stachura’s songs extend into a kind of “post-textual” phase the poet reached in the last few years of his life, they provide a different kind of key for interpreting the rest of his work *a posteriori*.

## 1. WHAT’S IN A WORD, AND WHAT NOT

*Jeżelim, Stwórco, posiadał Słowo, dar Twój święty,  
Spraw, by mi serce było gniewem oceanów,  
Bym, jak dawni poeci, prosty i szlachetny,  
Wichurą krwi uderzał w możnych i tyranów.*  
[O Creator, if the Word, Your precious gift, is mine,  
Make my heart beat hard with the oceans’ wrath,  
So, like poets of old, simple and just,  
I’ll strike the tyrants and rich with the tempest of blood.]<sup>171</sup>

*... i te miliony ażurowych, koronkowych, dżinsowych, pustych i  
brudnych słów, jak miliony damskich majtek.*  
[... and those millions of cut-out, lace, denim, empty and dirty  
words, like millions of women’s panties.]<sup>172</sup>

<sup>170</sup> From the long poem “Przysięgam do Ciebie” [Kneeling down to Take You] (*Wiersze, poematy*, 133).

<sup>171</sup> Julian Tuwim: “Prośba o piosenkę” [A Plea for Song] (1-4), from the volume *Wiersze zebrane*.

To immerse oneself in the flow of Stachura's writing means to allow oneself to be carried along by its idiosyncratic rhythms, whose peculiar cadences produce a unique reading experience. The critics latched on to it immediately, recognizing melodiousness as the young artist's distinguishing feature. In his "private letter" to the poet, published in the short-lived literary magazine Kamena, reviewer Tadeusz Kłak puzzles over the enchanting quality of Stachura's poetry:

It remains the poet's secret why words without poetic value (pronouns, conjunctions, etc.) are imbued here with such music, from whence comes suddenly their poetic value? [...] I could feel its melody, but I could not define how it comes about. [...] it was apparent with you that the word itself does not have an inherent value but instead becomes subjugated to rhythm, music, melody.<sup>173</sup>

The seductive beauty of poetic language appears here to be almost independent of the words' semantic import; it is their sequential repetition and some undefinable *je ne sais quoi* that together give off an air of sublimity. The poet moves in mysterious ways like a mendicant charmer, gaining instant following from among those who gather round to listen. The prose also imposes a similar rhythmic formula, as Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz remarks in his review of the debut short story collection *Jeden dzień*:

This peculiar prose, this deceptively naive grammar, purest sentences with strange repetitions, this melancholy—and the deep, inner admiration of life, the enjoyment of everything that it brings to the supposed vagabond, the attunement to the Polish countryside and to the Polish everyday, the yearning for love and the faith in love—how young all this is and how full of rapture. [...] It is best to give in to the monotonous, peculiar flow of this prose, which works on you like softly played music."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Z wypowiedzi rozproszonych, 381.

<sup>173</sup> Tadeusz Kłak, "Do Edwarda Stachury list prywatny," Kamena (15-16:1960), also quoted in Buchowski (40): "Tajemnicą poety pozostaje, dlaczego słowa bez wartości poetyckiej (zaimki, spójniki itd) nabierają tutaj takiej muzyki, skąd nagle ta ich poetycka wartość? [...] Wyczuwałem jej melodię, ale nie potrafiłem określić, co się na to składa. [...] U Sadowskiej jak i u Pana widać było, że słowo nie ma samoistnej wartości, podporządkowane zostaje rytmowi, muzyce, melodii."

<sup>174</sup> From a review in the daily Życie Warszawy (304: 1963), quoted in Buchowski: "Ta osobliwa proza, ta niby naiwna składnia, przeczyste zdania z dziwnymi powtórkami, ta melancholia—i głębokie, wewnętrzne

Once again, the affective dimension leaps out from the page: the reader is asked to partake of the sadness, the joy, and the youthful enthusiasm and hunger for worldly experience. These pleasures appear as sensual as they are textual—in the act of reading, one’s senses “give in” to the caresses of speech like skin that yields to the luxury of touch. If we recall here “the justice of touch” sought by the poetic subject in one of the pieces discussed earlier, we soon realize that both he and the reader share some of the same pleasures while dwelling in literature. For the duration of a reading they remain, as it were, in tune with each other.

Implicitly present in between the lines and verses from the beginning, vocalized music begins to feature more directly and prominently in Stachura’s later work. On the most fundamental level, songs elevate the mood of dejected characters, chasing away their blues. Indeed, a happy tune can work wonders on a lonely, tortured soul—it provides the kind of relief that nothing else seems capable of. When a traveling companion in one of the short stories fills the air with cheerfully catchy songs, he unwittingly teaches his listener “many practical things, but mostly humor,” for “he sang away [...] everything disquieting.”<sup>175</sup> The words of the songs he performs are trivial, yet the series of interactions between the singer and his audience, asked to finish the final lines of each verse he leaves hanging, bring unexpected and unparalleled joy to both. In addition to passing the time pleasantly on a long train ride, these two people thrown

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*umiłowanie życia, radość ze wszystkiego co ono przynosi mniemanemu wagabundzie, wycucie pejzażu polskiego i polskiego codziennego dnia, tęsknota do miłości i wiara w miłość—jakie to wszystko młode i pełne zachwyty. [...] Najlepiej jest się poddać monotonnemu, dziwacznemu tokowi tej prozy, która działa jak przytłumiona muzyka” (57).*

<sup>175</sup> *Opowiadania* “Jak mi było na Mazurach”: “Przyjechałem tam z jednym człowiekiem, który mnie uczył wielu rzeczy praktycznych, a najwięcej humoru. (...) Może dlatego się zasępiłem, że on przestał śpiewać na chwilę, bo kiedy znowu zaczął: ‘Galerami na Florydę’, to wszystko niepokojące mnie odleciało, jakby ręką odjął, albo śpiewem odśpiewał, choć przedtem bardzo często byłem zasępiiony w samym środku różnych śpiewów i śmiechów. Najczęściej właśnie” (31-2).

together by chance forge a profound connection through storytelling, laughter, and simple togetherness. Everything that happens on their subsequent vacation appears “extraordinary” (35), in stark contrast to the pathetic moments of stolen bliss in which the main character leans against the wall under strangers’ windows, inhales domestic smells of coffee and fresh bread, and merely *imagines* being inside with other people. In those latter scenes, he also recalls listening to the music on the radio, but inevitably “the music stops and they start talking about the war, about new mitigating developments, about conferences, about rockets, and then I want to cry or bite into metals.”<sup>176</sup> Singing along provides an escape not only from depressing world news but also from otherwise overwhelming solitude and despair.

Stachura applies this “practical lesson,” inadvertently derived from the encounter with the anonymous singer, to his own authorial practice: what songs do for listeners, texts should do for readers. Thus Stachura—repeatedly and almost obsessively—advances the idea that poetry must *do* something. But what would that “something” be, precisely, and how does the doing get done? In “Projective Verse,” American poet Charles Olson explains this notion of poetic energy, “peculiar to verse alone,” calling it “the *kinetics* of the thing” (16). Olson talks of poems as “high energy-constructs” that gather and discharge energy, both in the process of composition and reception. In the case of Stachura, the injunction for action becomes clearer as we trace its appearance and development over several texts. First of all, as many early pieces suggest, poems must create independent (primary) worlds that come alive every time their verbal sequences unfold, opening up space hospitable to those willing to undergo self-probing and to

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid. “*Ale potem muzyka przestaje i zaczynają mówić o wojnie, że nowe posunięcia łagodzące, o konferencjach, o raketach, i mnie się wtedy płakać chce albo gryźć metale*” (35-6).

achieve another level of understanding. In addition, those individual fictional universes should be inviting enough to provide shelter to lost souls yearning for a home, to offer solace and temporary protection:

<i>Rozdzierający</i>	[Like a tiger's claw
<i>Jak tygrysa pazur</i>	Tearing through
<i>Antylopy plecy</i>	An antelope's back
<i>Jest smutek człowieczy.</i>	Is human sadness.
<i>Nie brookliński most</i>	No, not the Brooklyn bridge
<i>Ale przemienić</i>	But to change
<i>W jasny, nowy dzień</i>	A night most sad
<i>Najsmutniejszą noc—</i>	Into a bright, new day—
<i>To jest dopiero coś!</i>	That is really something!] <sup>177</sup>

Stachura's unabashed humanism subordinates everything to the needs of individuals. And so the pinnacle of human achievement does not rest in an intricately engineered structure; to make another person *feel* better would be much more impressive indeed.

In Everything Is Poetry: A Story/River, a cross-generic work whose meanderings live up to the book's subtitle, Stachura lays out his views on the function of poetry more explicitly. Through snippets of remembered dialogue, quotes from his own poems and from the books of others, series of musings, impressions, and commentaries (not stopping short of train schedules), Stachura traces his development as a writer—i.e., as a thinking subject. While he claims that his task is not to “write about poetry” (this belongs to “poets”; he can only “feel its lack”<sup>178</sup>), he spends much time trying to explain the nature of artistic endeavor. The chapter “In the Land of Childhood, Entrophy, through the Delphiniate, a Probe-Balloon or Who Knows, a Fascist Earthquake in Chile, Science and Poetry” delineates—though not in a particularly linear manner, as could be guessed from

<sup>177</sup> “Nie brookliński most” from Wiersze, poematy, piosenki, przekłady (256).

<sup>178</sup> “Nie jest moim zadaniem pisać o poezji. Niech o poezji (w tym miejscu zadzwonił głuchy telefon) piszą poeci, ja tylko odczuwam jej brak” (WJP 158).

the title—the divergent roles of science and poetry in human life. The first one constitutes “our ability to analyze”; the latter “is synthesis” (159). Stachura struggles here to find adequate vocabulary to describe and understand something “COMPLETELY DIFFERENT” (159; emphasis in the original), something that resists distillation into abstraction by its very nature. To define poetry with the use of scientific verbiage necessarily truncates its robust vitality, the elusive quality that stems from and thrives on ineffability. Poetry works like a metaphor—all attempts to categorize or explain its mechanisms flatten it out or kill it altogether, since the cognitive jump from words to effect occurs outside the realm of direct verbalization. Poetry dwells somewhere in-between, it “wants to look into the chasm that divides being and non-being” (158).

The crucial division of roles between poetry and science, Stachura purports, hinges on their divergent attitudes towards temporality and presence. Each discipline helps us understand our surroundings in a different way, so ideally they could work in tandem to deepen human knowledge. In the modern world, however, science has been accorded epistemological superiority to such an extent that we are now “sentenced” to it, conditioned from an early age to accept its value almost unthinkingly, “because we were caught in the web of scientific learning as beings still unconscious of ourselves and defenseless, and we’ve been already shaped to use our knowledge like a simple tool, designed for the fastest consumption of the world.”<sup>179</sup> What anti-positivist<sup>180</sup> Stachura

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<sup>179</sup> “*Wszyscy my, żyjący w drugiej połowie dwudziestego wieku, nie mamy wątpliwości co do znaczenia nauki, bo w sieć poznania naukowego schwytni zostaliśmy jak twory nieświadome jeszcze siebie i bezbronni i wykształceni już jesteśmy w posługiwaniu się naszą wiedzą jak prostym narzędziem, służącym do najszybszego konsumowania świata*” (WJP 158).

<sup>180</sup> One of the most entrenched debates in Polish cultural history is the juxtaposition of realism and idealism. The implications of each ideological stance has everything to do with national interests and struggle for independence. The realists, or positivists, advocated “organic work” of increasing the nation’s strength through education and economic growth, which sometimes meant cooperating with the oppressor. The idealists, or romantics, saw political opposition, especially in the form of popular uprising and armed

seems to insinuate is that in recent history the role of poetry as another, parallel source of knowledge has been not so much neglected as deliberately reduced, to our detriment. Science “grips us tightly and settles our destiny without our consent, depriving us of the right to choose,” while poetry “maintains that which exists. Through touch. In order to preserve it.”<sup>181</sup> Through its unrelenting focus on advancement and optimization—“to mold the future into an efficiently functioning system of production”<sup>182</sup>—science has failed to live up to its fundamental commitment: to work for the betterment of the human race. Instead of creating a more hospitable environment, it has alienated human beings from the world and from themselves.<sup>183</sup> Like a tyrant who fixes his gaze on the distant future of his own imagined empire over and above the heads of the subjects whose labor he exploits, science shirks responsibility for the urgent problems of today’s people.

It is hard not to see in this negative personification of scientific progress a veiled critique of materialist ideology. Socialist Poland of Stachura’s time, where successions of party officials spun visions of a glorious future based on continued industrial development, asked individual citizens to look ahead, often at the expense of personal happiness. “Together we will build a better tomorrow,” proclaimed so many propaganda banners. The purported superiority of scientific outlook, implanted into social consciousness and individual minds under the guise of inevitability of progress, hints at pernicious political indoctrination. While Stachura stayed away from politics proper and

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struggle, as nobler and more effective. See Adam Bromke’s *Poland’s Politics: Idealism vs. Realism* (1967) and *Romantyzm czy realizm? Polska w latach 80-tych* (1982). Stachura wants to find a way to reconcile the two, and his idea of poetry as “everything” is an attempt to do so.

<sup>181</sup> “*Nauka chwyta twarzo i utrwała nasze przeznaczenie bez naszej woli, pozbawiając nas prawa wyboru*” (WJP 158).

<sup>182</sup> “*Zadaniem nauki jest raczej przekształcenie przyszłości w sprawnie działający system produkcyjny niż ukazanie świata jako natury bliskiej nam, zrozumiałej i pełnej wytchnienia*” (WJP 159).

<sup>183</sup> William Barrett attributes this split to the influence of Platonism on the Christian West. See his *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1962.

concerned himself only with literature, his programmatic distaste for all kinds of enforced, sweeping systems of thought offers a pointed critique of contemporaneous reality. From this trenchantly a-political stance, a clear political statement emerges: nations must be built one soul at a time, with personal attention and full participation, from the inside out and never the other way around. Stachura remains anti-programmatic on principle, wary of all ideologies that favor de-personalization and control from above, all organizations armed with heavy-handed rhetoric that lose track of individual human lives. “*Pomóż wspomóż dopomóż wyjątku czuły/ odeprzeć tłumne armie reguły*” [help aid assist o tender exception/ to ward off the numerous armies of rule],<sup>184</sup> he pleads in the poem “A Dot over the Upsilon.”

One of such organizations is the literary establishment, which Stachura confronts mercilessly. In his short story “Pure Description,” Stachura vows never to become “a professional artist, either, to perform tricks and nicey-nice, to beguile, to throw sand into the eyes of other people and into my own.”<sup>185</sup> Stachura suffocates in the atmosphere of a poet’s club and cannot stand it: “*pół dnia zmarnowałem dzisiaj, jaka zmaza/[...] w nielatającym tkwiłem fotelu/ w poet-klubie siedząc gnijąc i nawet nie pijąc*” [I wasted half a day today, what a shame/ I was stuck at a poet-club in a non-flying armchair, rotting and not even drinking].<sup>186</sup> His critique cuts most deeply into the area of literary studies, which he attacks vehemently:

*Przez jakiś czas podziw mój nawet wzbudzali ci, co tak swobodnie,  
ładnie – zgrabnie rozprawiają o poezji w mowie i piśmie. Potem podziw  
ten przestał być podziwem. Potem to, co przestało być podziwem, stało się  
powątpiewaniem. Ale co o poezji powiedzieć i jak tu mówić, kiedy*

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<sup>184</sup> *Wiersze, poematy...* (169).

<sup>185</sup> “*Artystą zawodowcem też być nie chciałem, władać sztukami i cacy-cacy, mamić, sypać piasek w oczy ludziom i sobie*” (“Czysty opis,” 219).

<sup>186</sup> “*Przystępuję do ciebie*” (63).



*człowiek boi się. Nie tego, że uznają za wariata, bo to by było wprost normalne, ale tego, że uznają za pozera, mitomana, komedianta, gracza, że szczerości się naśmieją, o skromności powiedzą, że wyrafinowanie lub minoderia, będą strzykać dowcipną śliną panowie i damy krytyczne.*

*Ikra i mięso brzany są w okresie tarła trujące. U tych, o których tu na razie mowa, tarło trwa bez końca: dyskusje długie, niby to namiętne, niby to żarliwe, spory wieczne o to samo lub o nic, lub o to, co zawsze pozostanie sporne, trajlowanie, migdalenie, wrodzone popisy nabytej erudycji, kluby, szkoły, szkółki, teorie, systemy, metody, wielkie słowa, gromkie nazywanie prądem tego, co jest zaledwie minimalnym jakimś ruchem wiatru po mętnej kałuży; co dwa, trzy lata nowe pokolenie, nowe generacje, nowe zmiany warty. Umieć czytać i nie jestem chłodnym esteta. Kiedy przeczytam coś prawdziwego, wiersz jakiś piękny, już bym leciał całować po rękach tego, który to napisał; już bym był u niego trzy dni niewolnikiem. Bo wiem, ile go to musiało kosztować. Umieć czytać i nie jestem majowy. I kiedy widzę, ile tego czarnego druku zwala się bezczelnie na biały papier, to mnie się zdaje, że coś tu się nadużywa zdobywczą wolność słowa. Są ludzie, którzy „zajmują się” literaturą, są drudzy, którzy próbują coś zrobić. O nic mi tutaj innego nie chodzi, tylko o to, ile to kosztuje jednych, a i ile to kosztuje drugich. Drugich to kosztuje sporo: ognie trawiące, żal i niespokoję/ łany płonące tęsknot transcendentalnych.*

[For a while, I admired those who could discuss poetry with such ease, beauty – skill, both in speech and writing. Then, my admiration had stopped being admiration. Then, that which stopped being admiration has turned into doubt. But what can one say about poetry, and how to say it, when one is afraid. Not afraid one could be taken for a loony, because that would be quite normal, but afraid that they would take one for a poseur, a mythomaniac, a comedian, a player, that they would laugh at honesty, call modesty calculation or *minauderie*, they would spray their ridiculing spit, those critical gentlemen and ladies.

The roe and meat of river barb are poisonous during spawning. For those of whom I'm now talking, the spawning season lasts without end: long discussions, supposedly passionate, supposedly heated, endless arguments about the same thing or about nothing, or about that which will always remain arguable, chitter-chatter, small talk, innate displays of learned erudition, clubs, schools, little schools, theories, systems, methods, big words, loudly calling a movement what is barely a light motion of wind over a murky puddle; every two, three years a new group, new generations, new changes of guard. I can read and I'm not a cool aesthete. When I'm reading something true, some beautiful poem, I want to rush to the person who wrote it and kiss his hands; I'm ready to become his slave for three days. Because I know how much it must have cost him. I can read and I'm not a greenhorn. And when I see how much black print drops rudely on the white paper, I think that our hard-won freedom of speech might be getting somewhat overused. There are people who “work with”

literature, there are others who try to do something. What's at stake here is nothing other than how much it costs the former, and how much it costs the latter. For the latter the costs are high: "the consuming fires, grief and disquietudes, the burning stretches of transcendental longings." ] (V 289-90).

Such harsh words could hardly make Stachura the critics' darling, although his stabs at all kinds of establishment will later raise his stock in more populist circles. Stachura's scathing condemnation of institutionalized study of writing seems to rest mostly on its secondary (meta-) status vis-à-vis original poems (though curiously, the issue of originality per se does not enter here at all), which should be called to lead a different—better—kind of life.<sup>187</sup> "Good" criticism could possibly exist, too, if the effort put into it would remain commensurate with the greatness of the task, but people who *talk* about poetry instead of *living* it through honest labor equal to their given abilities could never earn Stachura's respect, and deep down he seems unwilling to concede any actual need for meta-writing.

But the central issue that underlies his protest has less to do with aesthetics than with ethics—in the passage quoted above, Stachura zeroes in on *intention* and *experience*, two leitmotifs that weave through his entire oeuvre. The old battle between form and content acquires yet another crucial dimension: that of context, a wide web stretching over authorial commitment, anticipated and actual audience response, as well as interaction and interdependency between the writer and reader. For Stachura, the fact that

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<sup>187</sup> Martin Heidegger makes a similar remark in "The Origin of the Work of Art" chapter of his Poetry, Language, Art treatise. Heidegger accords precedence to the creative discovery that all original works of art actualize and give form to, on the premise that "The establishing of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again" (62). In contrast, "As soon as the thrust into the extraordinary is parried and captured by the sphere of familiarity and connoisseurship, the art business has begun. Even a painstaking handling on of works to posterity, all scientific efforts to regain them, no longer reach the work's own being, but only a recollection of it" (68). Stachura chooses to see nothing positive in this secondary process, unlike Heidegger who admits that "even this recollection may still offer to the work a place from which it joins in shaping history" (68).

a piece was written on the moon could not add anything of value unless said piece already conveys some vital, hard-gotten truths about the human condition. A man “perfectly united with his writing, existing exclusively in literature and for literature,” Stachura enters into conversations with such thinkers as Nietzsche and Brecht, to become arguably “the worthiest child of Kafka born of late in the Polish sphere of artistic word.”<sup>188</sup> If from the last war he chooses to remember only “the taste of chocolate, which the Americans were handing out to us” and “the spider on the ceiling of our cellar where we had to hide for two weeks,” he does not turn his back on matters of life or death but rather turns all his attention to where (in his mind) it rightly belongs, on the single suffering soul.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, his relentless focus on human dignity and autonomy provides a direct answer to Theodor Adorno’s “question whether any art now has a right to exist; whether intellectual regression is not inherent in the concept of committed literature because of the regression of society.” Stachura forcefully agrees with Adorno, though by different means, that “literature must resist this verdict, in other words, be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not a surrender to cynicism”<sup>190</sup> because “it is now

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<sup>188</sup> Jerzy Łukosz, “Wpływ Kafki na literaturę polską [Kafka’s Influence on Polish Literature]. *Twórczość* 479:10 (1985): 60.

<sup>189</sup> In the barrage of documentaries, memoirs, films, books, and other kinds of commemorative efforts that dominated at least the first three decades of Polish public life after 1945, Stachura’s absolute refusal to acknowledge the purported centrality of war to individual experience seems particularly remarkable. In his mind, “the remembering, reminding, ruminating, cultivating, celebrating any kind of atrocity is committing it again; now in the role of the victim, now in the role of the perpetrator” (Oto, 207).

<sup>190</sup> Adorno’s comment about poetry after Auschwitz remains one of the most misappropriated and misquoted in recent history. Many who have used it take it out of context, omitting the qualifying second part of the thought. Adorno himself responded to this unanticipated “discussion” in an essay written near the end of his life, where he defended his right to write as a philosopher. Because “[p]hilosophy always relates to tendencies and does not consist of statements of fact,” he explained, “nothing is meant quite literally.” Therefore, Adorno continued to say:

I would readily concede that, just as I said that after Auschwitz one *could not* write poems—by which I meant to point out the hollowness of the resurrected culture of that time—it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one *must* write poems, in keeping with Hegel’s statement in his *Aesthetics* that as long as there is an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be art as the objective form of that awareness. And, heaven knows, I do not claim to be able to resolve this antinomy, and

virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.”<sup>191</sup> That is why finding new ways of describing what people feel and think serves a purpose higher than mere formal experimentation.

Such rigorous questioning of art’s definition and role in society was forced on Europe in the aftermath of two devastating wars, and in the face of rapid development not only of mass weaponry but also of mass culture. Oppressive regimes that used everything in their power, including technology and art, to strengthen their grip on the populace caused a serious crisis of faith and credibility. Some artists withdrew from public life altogether—Polish literary circles abounded in examples of ruined careers and personal tragedies.<sup>192</sup> A great example is served by Aleksander Wat (1900-1967), a poet who rose on the wave of futurism in the 1920s and then turned to communist activism, and who stopped writing poetry altogether for nearly three decades. He sincerely believed during his early years that with the ascension of communism art would become superfluous, and later, as his disillusionment with Stalinism intensified into repugnance, he refused to produce the kind of low quality pulp that so-called ‘literature’ in his opinion inescapably constituted. Shaped by many torturous years spent in incarceration centers where he was held a political prisoner and only miraculously spared, Wat re-formulated his stance on

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presume even less to do so since my own impulses in this antinomy are precisely on the side of art, which I am mistakenly accused of wishing to suppress. (Lecture Fourteen, 110)

<sup>191</sup> Adorno, Theodor. “Commitment.” *Aesthetics and Politics*. Ed. Ernst Bloch et al. London: NLB, 1977. I am not suggesting that Stachura responds *directly* to either one of these writers or artists, but they do seem to concern themselves with parallel problems, though with different literary results.

<sup>192</sup> Carl Tighe’s 1999 study *The Politics of Literature: Poland 1945-1989* provides a good overview of the changing fates of Polish writing professionals and the kinds of pressures put on them by the government. Among other things, Tighe discusses various aspects of the publishing industry, employment control, financial pressures, changes in the educational system to promote mass literacy, etc. He also provides a few individual sketches of literati (J. Andrzejewski, J. Kott, S. Lem, K. Brandys, R. Kapuściński, T. Konwicki, A. Michnik) to illustrate his analysis with specific examples.

literature to accommodate his own traumatic experiences, as well as the crises of twentieth-century poetry:

In the past the profession's canons and rigors were easy to grasp; the poet's job was to fascinate, to infect with emotion, to convey logical thought, discourse, "matter." Today (that is to say, for about a hundred years now) all that has been exposed as bankrupt, old, and used up, it has lost its *raison d'être*. I think that today the only standard of judgment is the poet's face, that is to say the poetic personality and fate, a matter—unfortunately—outside poetry itself. The only tangible guarantee is honesty—therefore, a moral quality. And the price that the poet has paid with himself for the poem, the issue of biography, that which according to the critics shouldn't concern anyone.<sup>193</sup>

Remarkably, despite many differences—Wat's extreme activism vs. Stachura's aversion to politics, generational and ideological disparity—they independently reach similar conclusions about the value of their craft.<sup>194</sup> Both disregard the critics' opinion as out of touch with the actual circumstances and problems of writers, and both isolate sincere authorial intention and honest effort as the sole guarantor of artistic worth.

On the one hand, their dismissal reflects a justified mistrust of the literary establishment's implication in the oppressive machinations of the state apparatus. Wat experienced its extreme pressures more than once: having survived Soviet prisons (where he still managed to lead a movement that resisted forced Russian citizenship for Polish exiles), finally reunited with his wife and son who had been sent to Kazakhstan, he

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<sup>193</sup> "Dziś (to znaczy od lat bodaj stu) to wszystko jest skompromitowane, stare i zużyte, straciło sens istnienia. Myślę, że jedynym dziś kryterium jest twarz poety, to znaczy osobowość poetycka i los, rzecz—niestety—spoza samej poezji. Jedynym uchwytym gwarantem jest szczerłość—właściwość tedy moralna. I cena, którą poeta zapłacił sobą za wiersz, sprawa biografii, która według krytyków nie powinna nikogo obchodzić" (*Dziennik bez samogłosek*). Aleksander Wat.

<sup>194</sup> This difference can be explained by the generational gap, during which communism had taken on a very different role in social and political life. Marci Shore brilliantly explores the tragic quandaries of the "Warsaw Generation" (to which Wat belonged) in *Caviar and Ashes*, one of the first studies that took advantage of the newly opened archives after the fall of communism in the Eastern bloc. Shore traces the Polish intellectuals' initial intoxication with the possibilities that leftist activism afforded, all the way through disillusionment and guilt. She focuses on the private sphere—friendships and relationships—to explain the peculiar subjectivity and agency of intellectuals to whom only two radical choices were available: full engagement or withdrawal. Shore's book demonstrates what price the Polish avant-garde artists paid for intellectual "decadence," or lack of political foresight.

returned to Poland to enjoy only a brief period of happiness. Increasingly alienated from his colleagues, Wat was publicly denounced as an ‘enemy’ at a mass meeting of the Literati Association in January 1953, after which his career practically ended.<sup>195</sup> And while Stachura’s outspoken disinterest in politics and careerism saved him from equally harsh recriminations, he nevertheless also felt the sting of negative critical attention. For both artists, the focus on personal integrity of the poet—in other words, what remains outside the work or art as much as what the censors allow the public to have access to—could alone salvage poetry from the compromised position into which it had been thrust. When Jean-Paul Sartre pondered the new function and duties of literature in the immediate aftermath of WWII on the other side of the Iron Curtain, he noted that books should now serve as “liberal appeals to the liberty of readers,” evoking universal ideals of freedom and offering critiques of traditional institutions and governments.<sup>196</sup> Sartre insisted that “to write is to give,” which implies that readers have come to expect writers to produce something socially valuable if they are to avoid being accused of “parasitism” in the modern culture of labor.<sup>197</sup> But when the terms and conditions of this barter are disrupted, the writer may find himself in a potentially intolerable situation: in place of his books, he may have to offer nothing less than his person.

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<sup>195</sup> From Anna Micińska’s introduction to *Collected Poems*. “Aleksander Wat—elementy do portretu” (50). Wat managed to publish an acclaimed collection of poems in the post-Stalinist thaw of 1957, but his success was short lived, and he and his family were soon asked to ‘choose freedom’ as political refugees in France and the United States. He was first sent abroad in an attempt to cure the debilitatingly painful neurological disorder he blamed communism for contracting (he began to develop symptoms immediately after that fatal meeting), but later remained there in virtual exile until his suicide in 1967.

<sup>196</sup> From *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*: “*Ainsi le bouleversement de son public et la crise de la conscience européenne ont investi l’écrivain d’une fonction nouvelle. [...] il a désincarné le spirituel et a séparé sa cause de celle d’une idéologie agonisante; ses livres sont de libres appels à la liberté des lecteurs*” (139). For Sartre, only prose writing can be truly committed, since poets hide behind metaphors and other potentially duplicitous language structures (*What Is Literature?* 29). This linguistic claim seems rather tenuous, given that prose can be as enigmatic and veiled in double meaning as poetry.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* “*Écrire, c’est donner. C’est par là qu’il assume et sauve ce qui’il y a d’inacceptable dans sa situation de parasite d’une société laborieuse, par là aussi qu’il prend conscience de cette liberté absolue, de cette gratuité qui caractérisent la création littéraire*” (137).

Ideally, this dynamic shift could promise to revitalize and strengthen the relationship between authors and readers, with a redefinition of literature to boot. As readers become more intimately involved in the process of artistic discovery and judgment, writers would step up their efforts to forge bonds based on honesty and responsibility, while books would respond more closely to the needs of those who read them. But in the less perfect world we all live in, reality intrudes with a host of doubts and complications. How can a reader be ever fully certain that the “poetic personality” s/he confronts is not a mask put on to beguile and misguide, or a perversion of the one personality the official propaganda machine might be working hard to discredit and distort? Is it possible for an average reader to access the purported proof of authorial moral integrity s/he is asked to evaluate, since it admittedly resides somewhere beyond the poem itself? Can the pitfalls of idolatry inherent in most cults of personality among idol-starved communities be successfully avoided? And finally, what is the value of clinging to the “author” idea since the ilk of Roland Barthes have widely proclaimed the author’s death? The above questions need to be kept in mind as we attempt to understand the innovations that poets sought to implement in response to the changes in cultural and political climate in Poland and abroad, as well as the gamut of perceptions and reactions at the level of the individual and society. Chapter IV will provide more specific answers as to how these issues were dealt with in the genre of *poezja śpiewana*; for now, we will return to the artistic development of Edward Stachura.

## 2. POST-TEXTUAL LEANINGS

*Głowa moja kopuła wyżej położona  
ona jest kiść winogron tego kontynentu  
ona jest jedna na tysiąc niezrównana  
tak mówię*

[My head this dome placed on higher  
it is this continent’s grape bunch  
it is unparalleled one in a thousand  
so I say

<i>Umiarkowani rabują światło nie kto inny</i>	The moderate steal the light no one else
<i>oni są gnilne owoce tego kontynentu</i>	they are this continent's putrifying fruit
<i>oni są jeden za drugim wicekróle</i>	they are the vice-kings one after the other
<i>tak mówię</i>	so I say] <sup>198</sup>

<i>wiersz</i>	[a poem
<i>pisze się</i>	gets written
<i>aż do milczenia</i>	all the way through silence
<i>ale o tym dowiesz się</i>	but of this you will learn
<i>na końcu</i>	at the end] <sup>199</sup>

The preceding pages have mapped out Stachura's incursions into a number of territories within the realm of poetry and prose, following the trajectory of the poet's profound commitment to writing but also his growing dissatisfaction with the written form. Increasingly, Stachura insists on moving away from the rigid artifact-ness into which works of art (in his opinion) were being locked, focusing instead on the performative and conceptual aspects of literary gestures. And while the colors, shapes, and textures of everyday experience feature prominently in his writing, it is in the modalities of sound and mood that his genius shines through the brightest. The unusual singsong qualities of Stachura's compositions have been already noted. Anyone who has ever read such gems—to use the obvious example of “The Dot over an Upsilon,” where the poet promises to “take the alphabet/ and pack it into a vise”<sup>200</sup>—as the nearly untranslatable “*zzygzakowatym gdakaniem gzagdaknąć*” or “*lukrowatym lakierem landszaftnąć*”<sup>201</sup> will agree that Stachura's almost childish delight with how words sound together can sometimes overshadow other dimensions of verbal expression. Sheer tongue-twisting absurdity gears up to break the habit of passive expectation and aims to

<sup>198</sup> “*Pieśń: Świętokradztwo*” [Song: Sacrilege] from “*Dużo ognia*” (*Wiersze*, 32).

<sup>199</sup> Tadeusz Różewicz, “Rozmowa” [Conversation] (4-8), from *Niepokój...*

<sup>200</sup> *Wiersze, poematy...*: “*lecz my bierzemy abecadło/ i pakujemy je w imadło*” (168).

<sup>201</sup> In this section the poetic subject launches an attack on “the schema,” the constricting rule of majority and bland normalcy. Fortunately, the threatening schema cannot perform certain acts, listed alphabetically in a style reminiscent of Jabberwocky. These two quoted examples could be loosely translated to mean something like: “to begock with zigzag clucks” and “to landshaft with laquerous lac” (Ibid, 167).



shock the reader into attention. Yet the occasional playfulness and humor should fool no one—the overall tone of this piece rings ponderous, and the verbal contortions resemble a string of incantations frantically put together to ward off some mortal danger. The effervescent palaver collapses with a thud of “dead meat” as the dreadful apocalyptic mushroom shoots up in the sky, marking “the general and universal disappointment and the great and unpardonable shame”<sup>202</sup> of total and utter destruction. Soon enough, in his quest to find a poetic form more suitable for returning the blank stare of “the Absolute,” Stachura begins to consider abandoning written language itself.

Language becomes suspect for a number of reasons. Aside from the usual complaint about the representational limitations of verbal signs as stand-ins for the objects they describe, Stachura also worries about what we could term the Foucauldian power of discourse. As discussed in previous sections, Stachura’s protests against large mechanisms of control—be it governmental, social, or literary—often focus on the ‘classify and divide’ authority of specialized jargon. In the era of mass communications, words become dangerous tools of manipulation, exploitation, or (at best) condescension; they should therefore be handled with care and responsibility. The poet illustrates the near-magical power of speech acts with images of material literalization,<sup>203</sup> just as he bemoans the parasitic proliferation of empty verbiage. Commenting on the humanitarian crisis of hunger in the world, for instance, he fails to come up with an appropriate expression of indignation:

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<sup>202</sup> *Wiersze, poematy...*: “*i padło jak padło jak padlina (...) i ostateczny apokaliptyczny rozległ się huk i nie zostało z globu nic tylko ogólne uniwersalne rozczarowanie i wielki i bezpardonowy wstyd*” (180).

<sup>203</sup> For example, during a serious illness he wonders if Death, whom he so carelessly anthropomorphized and insulted by the name of “a common madwoman,” would now arrive at the hospital to take her revenge (*WJP*, 56-7). Elsewhere, he imagines that “a string of organic profanities should impregnate the air and breed a bunch of flying monsters from the revived moths painted on the walls” (*WJP*, 52).

When I wrote that I can't find words, I also didn't mean literally that I can't find words. Words could have been found. Words can always be found, as the innumerable books on the innumerable shelves of the innumerable libraries attest. Words, therefore, can always be found. But does this "always" speak positively on behalf of words? That is a separate matter and we'll talk about it some other time (unfortunately, also with the help of words).<sup>204</sup>

The negative dimension of verbal communication has thus as much to do with its force of actualization as with its failure to exert power, since willful omission and neglect may constitute a higher class of cruelty than brute force. For Stachura, the *misuse* of language by those trained or appointed to wield its double-edged blade is a crime that cannot be excused. To avoid the pitfalls of what Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman called the "lie potential" inherent in words,<sup>205</sup> one may be forced to circumvent language altogether.

A journal entry, dated Thursday, April 22, 1971, marks an important caesura in the poet's life:

*Na dworcu w Aleksandrowie Kujawskim. Czekam na pociąg do Torunia 15.26. Wypilem małe piwo, palę papierosa. Chyba jednak już nie będę więcej pisał poezji. 14.55. Wjeżdża pociąg z Torunia do Włocławka. Tak siedząc na ławce, na peronie, ze słońcem twarzą w twarz, dość jasno widzę to, co przeczuwałem od dawna, to, że wszelka poezja pisana jest poezją niekonkretną, abstrakcyjną. Poezja konkretna—to jest poezja niepisana, czyli, poza napisanym wierszem, wszystko inne, całe życie, cały świat i wszechświat od początku do końca, lub bez początku i końca. Coś mruczy, coś belkoce przez sen: półsiedzący, półleżący obok mnie na ławce zawiany facet. Będę pisał: komponował piosenki. Żeby było na życie: na chleb i wino.*

[At the train station in Aleksandrów Kujawski. I'm waiting for the 15:26 train to Toruń. I drank a small beer, I'm smoking a cigarette. Maybe I won't write poetry anymore. 14:55. The train from Toruń to Włocławek rolls in. Sitting on a bench like this, on the platform, with the sun face to face, I can see pretty clearly something I've felt for a long while now, that

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<sup>204</sup> WJP (192):

*Gdy pisałem, że nie mam słów, nie szło mi też dosłownie o to, że nie mam słów. Słowa by się znalazły. Słowa zawsze można znaleźć, o czym zaświadcniają niezliczone książki na niezliczonych półkach niezliczonych bibliotek. Słowa więc zawsze można znaleźć. Ale czy to "zawsze" przemawia na korzyść słów? To jest inna sprawa i pomówimy o tym innym razem (niestety też przy pomocy słów).*

<sup>205</sup> Quoted by A. Barańczak (31).

all written poetry is non-concrete, abstract poetry. Concrete poetry—that is unwritten poetry, or, beyond a written poem, everything else, the entire existence, the entire world and the universe from beginning to end, or without a beginning and end. Something’s grumbling, something’s muttering while asleep: a half-sitting, half-reclining drunk on a bench next to me. I will write: I will compose songs. To make a living: for bread and for wine.]<sup>206</sup>

Every element of the scene recreated in this description contributes to the making of the final decision: the train’s arrival and imminent departure in the opposite direction, the sun’s luminous approval, even the drunk man’s noises that bring everything back down to earth, to concrete reality of the station in the middle of a spring afternoon. What at first appears as an offhanded and extempore remark quickly settles into certainty, less in the manner of a flashy epiphany than quiet acceptance of something long anticipated and foreseen.

But what does it really mean for a poet to stop writing poetry? To approach this question, we must first define *what* is being abandoned, and what it is being replaced with. On the one hand, we note that Stachura’s gradual motion away from written poems follows the direction in which his ideas on art’s form and function were evolving. Predictably, he once again sets up a dichotomy between the concrete and non-concrete, between active and passive, privileging the former of each pair as more fittingly expressive of the truth of life as he sees it. It seems that in Stachura’s view a poem does not merely *describe* whatever state it attempts to convey; rather, it must *create* that state by mimicking its affective aura with an appropriate rhythmic structure. To understand what a poem ‘says,’ then, has more to do with listening to the currents running just below the surface of words than with comprehending the linguistic ‘message’ they ostensibly

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<sup>206</sup> „Miłość czyli życie, śmierć i zmartwychwstanie Michała Kątnego zaśpiewana, wyplakana i w niebo wzięta przez Edwarda Stachurę” (Z wypowiedzi rozproszonych, 325).

carry. We are strongly reminded here of what Ezra Pound coined “an absolute rhythm,” the belief that “every emotion and every phase of emotion has some toneless phrase, some rhythm-phrase to express it.”<sup>207</sup> Stachura wants his poetry to approximate the characteristics of pure music, which taps into other than verbal layers of understanding, emotional instead of intellectual. And when he talks about “concrete poetry” being in sync with the “entire existence,” we realize just how far the reach of poetry must extend. The task Stachura charges poetry with is enormous: to capture “the absolute,” the whole truth of the universe. Of course even the wildest dreamer knows how outrageous such a proposition is, for a mere poem to encapsulate everything that exists (or for any referents to align themselves fully and seamlessly with the meaning of the objects they replace). But Stachura does not ask poetry to express everything all at once; instead, he posits that by *doing* that indefinable ineffable “something” that poems do they nonetheless grant us a glimpse of the whole. Because the universe constantly changes and fluctuates, only dynamic, fluctuating event-pieces can mimic its *panta rei* nature. A small wave splashing in an ocean does tell us something essential about the great heave of the whole aqueous body.

The 1975 book appropriately subtitled “A Story/River” comes closest to providing a theoretical framework for Stachura’s fluid poetics than any other work. Though far from rigorous theorizing, the text nonetheless provides a record of the kinds of thinking and reading that sustained the poet’s growth. In the usual paradoxical way, the text manifests Stachura’s profound and up-to-date immersion in literary culture (as an

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<sup>207</sup> Pound, Ezra. *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*. New York: New Directions, 1970 (84). Stachura’s extensive indebtedness to Pound demands a separate study; all too often the readers trick themselves into imagining that Stachura drew everything he has ever written directly, as it were, from the open Polish landscape instead of other people’s books.

avid reader, translator, and critic) as well as his frantic attempts to escape its hold and remain on the fringes. It is also there that Stachura makes his most famous and oft-quoted pronouncement: “Everything is poetry, and a written poem is poetry the least; everybody is a poet, and a poet writing a poem is a poet least of all” (5), a slogan whose first words will appear on the banners held aloft by the knights of *poezja śpiewana* for years to come.

In its de-contextualized short form, the phrase “Everything is poetry” runs the danger of encompassing and justifying just about everything. Understood in the context of the work in which it appears, however, it does summarize two decades’ worth of rigorous thinking. By this time, Stachura is a relatively mature writer who has forged his own path and who has followed it uncompromisingly. He is certain of his goals and he freely dispenses programmatic formulations. And even as his distancing from others (be it literary figures, friends, or family members) becomes more pronounced, he is hardly alone in the conclusions he draws about the nature of artistic and human endeavor. At least three major issues he takes on— the preoccupation with time and death, the insistence on truth, the primacy of poetry—feature quite prominently in the work of other important twentieth-century thinkers, most notably Martin Heidegger.

Whether consciously or not, Stachura parallels Heidegger in strikingly numerous ways. While it would be impossible to ascertain if Stachura read anything by the German philosopher, let alone what he thought of it,<sup>208</sup> the connections between the two in certain areas are so remarkable that they almost force themselves upon the reader. Even when we take into account respective differences in vocabulary or discursive methodology, an

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<sup>208</sup> The question of politics would cause even more problems. It is clear that Stachura showed very little interest in the extra-literary lives of his mentors. To use the most obvious example, he remained either ignorant or unconcerned about Ezra Pound’s involvement with Italian fascism, Pound’s subsequent trial for treason, and imprisonment. He may have had been similarly uninterested in Heidegger’s Nazi past, if indeed he ever delved into any of it at all.

analogous sense of urgency and import translates into a similar prioritization of issues. In Time and Being, for example, Heidegger seeks to explore the “*question of the meaning of being*,”<sup>209</sup> which is patently the task that Stachura sets for himself (and epitomizes in his term “*cała jaskrawość*”).<sup>210</sup> Most relevant here, however, are Heidegger’s thoughts on the nature of poetry and its ability to manifest truth. The philosopher privileges poetic language as the instrument best suited for uncovering truth about the essence of Being: “*All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry.*”<sup>211</sup> According to Heidegger, art opens up a space where knowledge about existence can be uncovered experientially; poetry reveals it most fully. Truth does not simply lodge in poetry; language “unconceals” it, i.e., “lets it happen.”<sup>212</sup>

Stachura strives to achieve similar movement in his work. For him as well, the truth of human existence must involve realization of finality. One of the best description of these processes can be found in “*Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza*” [In the Garden May the Locusts Roam]:

<p><i>Szedłem szła też ta narośl co we mnie rosła jak pochód triumfalny jak bluszczu obłęd po akacji</i></p>	<p>[I walked and that growth that’s in me also walked it grew like a triumphant march like the madness of ivy on the acacia</p>
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<sup>209</sup> From the epigraph on page 19.

<sup>210</sup> *Cała jaskrawość*, one of Stachura’s key recurring phrases, is very difficult to translate into English. “*Cała*” implies wholeness, totality; “*jaskrawość*” can mean “glare,” “extreme illumination,” “starkness.” All these meanings are simultaneously present in Polish, especially thanks to all the rich contexts in which Stachura places the term. His readers quickly learn to recognize it as a kind of *mot-clé*.

<sup>211</sup> Poetry, Language, Thought (72; emphases in the original).

<sup>212</sup> Patrick McHugh offers an excellent analysis of Heidegger’s ideas about emergence of truth in “Ecstasy and Exile.” He writes:

Being cannot be investigated scientifically, especially since it is not a thing like other things, if indeed it is a thing at all. [...] Dasein’s everyday existence of routine alienation contrasts markedly with its “ecstatic” experience of truth as *aletheia*, and the profound implications of that experience for fate and destiny. The event of *aletheia*, analyzed after *Being and Time* not in terms of experience but in terms of truth, establishes the human relation to things (124-6).

McHugh draws out political implications of these ideas and their impact on an individual’s actions in the world.

<p><i>blado w nowiu świeciła sprzączka</i>  <i>[u pasa</i>  <i>w pełni nocy drogę torował mi</i>  <i>szum ponad głową</i>  <i>napowietrznie płynącego nurtu żywota</i></p>	<p>pale in the new moon the belt buckle  [shone  my path was cleared in the full of the night  by the noise over my head  of the current of life streaming through  [the air</p>
<p><i>szedłem niepomny</i>  <i>ani przeszłych ani przyszłych do</i>  <i>[przejścia dni</i></p>	<p>I was walking not heeding  neither past nor future days still to walk  [through</p>
<p><i>takim mnie przywalila ciężarem</i>  <i>najbłahsza ta chwilka</i>  <i>że czułem jak dudni byt</i>  <i>gdzieś blisko bliżuteńko</i></p>	<p>such was the weight that this  most insignificant moment thrust on me  that I felt Being rumble  somewhere near so near</p>
<p><i>—w kruchych moich piersiach—</i></p>	<p>—in my brittle chest—</p>
<p><i>i tak jeszcze było</i>  <i>jakby mi po żebrach</i>  <i>po szczeblach drabiny</i>  <i>lazło to w górę—do gardła</i>  <i>gdzie schodzą się nici</i></p>	<p>and what’s more it was as if  that thing were climbing up my ribs  up the rungs of the ladder  —up to my throat  where the threads converge] (99).</p>

“*Po ogrodzie...*,” a long poem featuring one central thinking subject, depicts a phenomenological inquiry. The subject undertakes a long journey (through recognizable, real Polish landscapes), in order to arrive at the truth of his existence. Neither the journey nor the task is fully accomplished (since human life can only achieve its fullness in death), but truth does unfold in moments of stark enlightenment, such as the one narrated above. Being flows in streams through the air and “rumbles” in his chest like an echo of something larger, more powerful, but something that is contained inside him. For the conscious subject, it is a moment of clear vision, but also a moment of fright. Truth is an experience of movement, it grows “like a triumphant march” and “climbs the ladder of ribs.” It is felt in the body of the speaking subject, but it unfolds for the reader through language.

Because the word “poetry” refers to the process of discovery and not, strictly

speaking, to the writing itself, it can be carried over to other areas of life. Stachura suggests that everyone can be a “poet” through hard, honest labor in whatever line of work s/he chooses. The inverse also holds true—a careless nurse who does not properly care for her patients is “a sorry graphomaniac, and dangerous” (WJP, 19). “Poetry” thus begins to mean “perfection” or “realizing one’s essence.” The work of the imagination and the work of the hands attain equal social status, and the artificial division between art and science ceases to hold. Stachura’s vision rings decidedly utopian, a Platonic harmony of diverse occupations in which everyone strives for his/her own kind of perfection. At the same time, it sounds appealing, almost doable.

For Stachura, poetry should spring up daily and everywhere, he urges us to breathe it in and out like air. Its preferred forms are therefore those that occur organically, growing out of quotidian human activity and labor, rather than those reified into stilted pieces with the force of literary context alone. Leszek Bugajski, who reviewed Everything Is Poetry for the journal Twórczość, marvels at the unusual intensity with which Stachura “praises the joy of life” and promulgates his unique “existential model” of simplicity and spontaneity. Bugajski ventures to say that Stachura propagates this way of life “so clearly and openly” and “with such desperation” that at times the book reads like a kind of “catechism.”<sup>213</sup> One of the principal commandments in this peculiar catechism would read: thou shall be aware; thou shalt examine thyself with all thy might; thou shalt not let thy life pass thee by.

The ardor with which Stachura provides expert advice on the righteous lifestyle of a secular enlightened man is tempered by the confounding power of contradiction on which the project admittedly thrives. Almost all of Stachura’s later work (Fabula rasa and

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<sup>213</sup> “Poezja według Stachury” [Poetry according to Stachura]. Twórczość 371:6 (1976) 95-96.



Oto particularly) offers paradox as the guiding principle of human existence. As a result, one should not be surprised to find out that the poet's resolve to quit writing poetry appears next to overwhelming indications of his continuing and utter preoccupation with all things literary. Indeed, nowhere does Stachura sketch his own portrait of a functioning man of letters more convincingly than in Wszystko jest poezja. Descriptions of professional friendships, stabs at theory, literary influences and discoveries alternate with travelogue entries and other notes. A consistent picture that emerges out of this tangle features our reluctant author as someone who lives with and for literature every waking moment. It is someone who declares "*Trzeba pisać*" [One must write] in the very first line of his book, despite claiming several sentences later that "a train ride would be much more interesting poetry" (5-6). It is someone who praises a recent debut of a young poet, unexpectedly cognizant of the group designation chosen for him by the critics he so openly denounces.<sup>214</sup> It is someone who collects newspaper clippings and pithy quotes, who reacts to humanitarian crises and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, someone who reads profusely in a few languages.

Stachura's fusion of the literary with the quotidian runs so deep that fictional personae gain nearly equal footing with historical figures and contemporaries. Ubiquitous characters like Jan Pradera or Edmund Szerucki, Stachura's own creations, are invited to cross over from the pages of the novels in which they appear to offer us words of their wisdom, as if somehow they had managed to sneak out of their paper prisons and learned to function independently while we were not looking. They rub shoulders with "a certain young man, morose and impetuous—Arthur Rimbaud—the same one who, before

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<sup>214</sup> The volume in question is Adam Zagajewski's *Komunikat*. At the time, Zagajewski belonged to the Kraków group "Teraz" [Now], whose members, as Stachura reports, were called "the contesters" (WJP, 23).

abandoning writing forever, proclaimed: ‘I know now how to greet beauty’.<sup>215</sup> Other contributors, often indicated by nothing more than a passing remark or a decontextualized citation, add to this incongruously eclectic bunch, including—in no particular order—Ezra Pound, Mrs. Tolstoy, François Villon, “a ten-year-old girl from Aguascalientes, Mexico” (180), Andrzej Moszczyński, Comte de Lautréamont, a potato-eating customer from “a certain diner” (81), Gabriel García Márquez, *et multi alii*.

While it would seem that the author simply too happily adheres to his own rule that “Everything interests the poet, and that which doesn’t interest him is uninteresting,”<sup>216</sup> the compendial structure of WJP in fact imitates the organizational pattern of Pound’s ABC of Reading. Stachura’s handling of the manual remains respectful but hardly reverential; more often than not, the younger poet revises the lessons of his elder with tongue-in-cheek wit. It also becomes apparent that to “Make It New” his own way, Stachura leaves the canons of modernism behind, replacing them with a collage of doubtful authorities<sup>217</sup> and practices. His work bears all the marks of early postmodernism: “being open, antielitist, antiauthoritarian, participatory, anarchic, playful, improvisational, rebellious, discontinuous—and even [...] ecologically active, otherwise known as Green”—as delineated by Ihab Hassan in The Literature of Silence (1967).<sup>218</sup> Marjorie Perloff notes that before postmodernism ushered in the age of big

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<sup>215</sup> “Młodzieniec pewien, posępny i porywczy—Artur Rimbaud—ten sam, który przed porzuceniem na zawsze pisania wypowiedział: ‘Umiem już odtąd pozdrowić piękno’ (‘Je sais désormais saluer la beauté’), czy przebił się do polany?” (WJP, 12). Interestingly, Stachura provides the French original for this quote, as if to allow his readers to notice that his translation chooses to ignore the more likely (given the context of the anecdote) connotation of the verb *saluer*, “to say goodbye” rather than “to greet.”

<sup>216</sup> “Poetę interesuje wszystko, a to, co go nie interesuje, jest nieinteresujące” (WJP, 51).

<sup>217</sup> On the subject of authorities, he says: “I studied it for a long time in public libraries, and I think, and I know that the greatest ones aren’t the ones highest up, but those who are the lowest” (“*Falując na wietrze*,” Opowiadania, 97).

<sup>218</sup> These are not Hassan’s own words, but rather Marjorie Perloff’s summary of all the major categories of distinction that Hassan lists, included in her Poetry On & Off the Page (7).

theorists (like Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, or Deleuze), its main area of interest and first target of revisionist action was poetry. The new model of the poetic text “was to be understood less as an object than as a ‘score’ or ‘notation’ to be actualized in performance.”<sup>219</sup>

Stachura’s own radical redefinition of poetry began to lead him further and further away from the written word, and closer to performance. If “everything” was poetry, it necessarily ceased to mean “written text” only. A poem could be simply a change for the unexpected, like a leap out of a moving train: “*Taki skok z pociągu [...] jest przepięknym wierszem, [...] zapisanym w powietrzu*” [This jumping off a train ... is a most beautiful poem ... written on air] (WJP, 6). It becomes a trace, a gesture, a pregnant pause. What this means for the reader (or observer, or participant) is that s/he must notice the difference.

### 3. FLIGHT, OR FALL, INTO SONG

*Poets who are not interested in music are, or become, bad poets. I would almost say that poets should never be too long out of touch with musicians. Poets who will not study music are defective.*<sup>220</sup>

*czy ja pamiętać muszę o wszystkim  
i o tym że dla zwanych czytelników  
zarządzić trzeba odpoczynek  
u podnóża kolejnego wzgórza  
bo są oni leniwce bo są oni nygusy*

[do I have to remember everything  
and that the so-called readers  
will need a rest  
at the feet of yet another hill  
for they are dawdlers for they are slackers

*tak więc:  
papieros herbatka chwila lekkiej muzyki*

so here goes:  
a cigarette a cup of tea a bit of light music]<sup>221</sup>

<sup>219</sup> Poetry on and Off the Page (4). Perloff also reminds us there of the somatic, experiential dimension that the early American postmodernists wanted to re-introduce in poetry by quoting David Antin’s “conviction that poetry was made by a man on his feet talking” (Antin wrote the seminal essay “Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry,” from which this statement is excerpted). Antin’s description strongly resembles Stachura’s technique of “writing himself while walking.”

<sup>220</sup> Ezra Pound: “Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch,” which originally appeared in The Egoist in July of 1917 (qtd. in Schafer, 42).

<sup>221</sup> “*Po ogrodzie...*” (95).

How to read the corpus of Stachura's lyrics set to music? Fifty-six of them have been published, and songs remain what Stachura's name is most often associated with. The poet had no musical training, and when he composed music he jotted down "notes" which he then would take to a friend to "translate" into musical notation for him. As we remember, he decided to "stop writing poetry" and begin writing songs instead. Of course, what he meant by this was not a complete cessation of poetic activity but rather finding new forms of expressing what he understood poetry to be. His turn towards music seems like a logical next step. But if Stachura felt he knew what poetry was, even if he could not satisfactorily describe it, music baffled him:

Three questions, for example. Usually three normal questions. What is, for example, music? What is this thing, music? Not who is playing and what: the harp, the violin, the trumpet, the drum. Not that, but what is it that is playing in such a way that it makes you fly up, or down, or everything scatters, the whole structure crawls and suddenly everything goes up, the wind, the leaves return to the trees, the gates go up, the arches, the hands fly up in the air by themselves, the weeping of joy shakes the foundations. Ah.<sup>222</sup>

These questions are placed in the mouth of a curious young man, and his naiveté underscores how simple, yet also how fundamental they truly are. Stachura talks here about pure music and its potential to move, illustrating the rise and fall of the listener's emotions through the literal upending of his surroundings. Pure music takes the world apart, then puts it back together, wondrously. While pure music seems to come close to poetry in expressing the *experience* of the Absolute, it does not carry intellectual content

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<sup>222</sup> From the short story "Strzeżcie mnie, zorze miłe" [Guard me, dear auroras]:

*Trzy pytania na przykład. Zwykle trzy pytania normalne. Co to jest na przykład muzyka? Co to jest takiego muzyka? Co to takiego gra? Nie kto gra i na czym: harfa, skrzypce, trąbka, bęben. Nie to, tylko co to takiego gra, że albo się leci w górę, albo w dół, albo się rozsypuje wszystko, czolga się cała struktura i naraz podnosi się wszystko, wiatr, liście wracają na drzewa, bramy się podnoszą, łuki, ręce się same w górę wyrzucają, płacz radości wstrząsa podwaliny. Ach. (Opowiadania, 155)*

(or, in Anna Barańczak's words, it is "decidedly asemantic").<sup>223</sup> It works on human emotions, unsettling and disturbing them; poetry affects the heart, but it also interacts with the mind.<sup>224</sup> The sigh at the end of the passage signifies defeat of the analyzing mind—the precise mechanism of this process eludes him. As a musician, the poet is perhaps only a "sorry graphomaniac."

Other statements on the topic deepen the impression of ineptitude. During one of the "evening with the author" events (combined with a live performance, which he increasingly insisted on including in the programs), Stachura asks his audience to be lenient in judgement:

I don't sing well, and I play the guitar even worse. I'm not a professional musician; I simply write. And these songs provide a sort of continuation of my writing. They haven't sprung out of nothing but from what I've been doing up to this point. I don't aspire to sing and play an instrument like a professional singer and musician. I am only saying this so that my audience would listen to them with kindness and wouldn't take them too seriously.<sup>225</sup>

During another performance the poet describes in *Everything Is Poetry*, at the *13 Muses Club*, he was laughed at.<sup>226</sup> Romana Konieczna, writing for the *Opole Tribune*, commented on Stachura's poor vocal (*and* reading) skills in her November 1970 review of his recital. She expressed surprise at his willingness to subject the audience to "a trial of patience, scolding them for lack of appropriate focus," as well as at his disarming

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<sup>223</sup> *Słowo w piosence* (27).

<sup>224</sup> Susan Langer suggests that "the forms of human feeling are much closer to musical forms than to linguistic forms" (qtd. in Barańczak, 29).

<sup>225</sup> Quoted in Buchowski:

*Ja nie śpiewam dobrze, a gram na gitarze jeszcze gorzej. Nie jestem zawodowym muzykiem, ja po prostu piszę. I te piosenki są jakimś dalszym ciągiem mojego pisania. One się nie wzięły z niczego, ale z tego, co do tej pory robiłem. Nie mam pretensji do tego, żeby śpiewać i grać jak zawodowy śpiewak i grajek. Mówię to tylko po to, żeby słuchacze zechcieli laskawie słuchać tego i patrzeć na to z przymrużonym okiem* (118).

<sup>226</sup> Also quoted in Buchowski (118).

admission that the honorarium was the main reason why he performed.<sup>227</sup> Yet, as evidence from his letters and diary entries suggests, Stachura stubbornly continued to *want* to sing in public.

The lyrics offer another piece of the puzzle. Waging battles against various institutions and conventions constitutes *raison d'être* of a lot of Stachura's writing. The long poem A Dot over the Upsilon, for example, is devoted almost entirely to opposing "schema," with the refrain "*pomóż wspomóż dopomóż wyjątku czuły/ odeprzeć tłumne armie reguły*" [help aid assist o tender exception/ to ward off the numerous armies of rule] repeated as if in prayer to ward off the vilest of evils. Most songs, on the other hand, are exercises in convention—the lyrics are fairly simple, their content predictable,<sup>228</sup> and they rhyme. With the exception of A Dot over the Upsilon, rhyme almost never appears in Stachura's poems. Free verse becomes as natural as breathing. Why does Stachura, the great innovator, resort to such easy tricks? And, are they quite as easy as it appears at first glance?

In his socio-linguistic study of poetry and song lyrics, "Popularity of literature and 'popular literature,'" Edward Balcerzan argues that a "weak poem [...] has the best chances for a union with music. A poem which easily resigns from poetic surplus of meaning, one which reveals its attractiveness only in verbal-musical realization, in song. A strong poem resists music" (246). Given the "resistance" of the material s/he works with, a songwriter is forced to narrow the range of semantic possibilities in order to squeeze words into the structures of musical rhythm. Michał Głowiński terms this

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>228</sup> Out of the fifty-six published lyrics, more than a third (twenty one) give voice to a jilted lover's plaint (a theme largely absent from the rest of his work), ten offer words of wisdom on life, while another significant portion speak of loneliness and vagabondage.

necessity “the drive to get inside the matter [*tworzywo*], or more precisely—into one of its layers: sound.”<sup>229</sup> The exigencies of line duration, the potential and limitations of vocalization of certain sound combinations all contribute to the specific conventions of songwriting. Some critics see the demands of the mass market as direct cause of verbal impoverishment prevalent in popular songs. Anna Barańczak, author of the only book-length critical study of contemporary Polish pop song lyrics available, notes “a tendency for entropy, elimination of surprises in reception” typical, in her view, of popular culture.<sup>230</sup> Balcerzan is more careful in his assessment of what “popular” means or entails, and he polemizes with the elitist notion of *inherent* opposition of “banal” and “easy” song with “difficult” and “epistemologically revelatory” poem (226). He even suggests that in some situations poetry may be “easier” to write than music, since it draws on verbal skills available to anyone, unlike music, which requires at least some specialized training. What Balcerzan says about reception, however, applies most readily to Stachura and deserves to be quoted at length:

A song both is and is not entertainment. [...] A poem, inversely, in its proud autonomy, in its drive to function as a unique, supremely integral world—assumes a somewhat limited number of situations in which its reception could be realized. University seminar, a lesson of Polish at school, a reading, an actor’s recital, recitation contest—this is more or less where the actual possibilities of communal play with the “living word” conclude. (231)

With Balcerzan’s insights in mind, we could look at Stachura’s songwriting (and singing) practice as an attempt to reach wider audiences. In his prose and poetry, Stachura creates the narrator’s trusty companions through duplication, as if by turning the mirror on himself (other addressees are abstract, distant beings, such as a mysterious

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<sup>229</sup> “Literariness of music—musicality of literature” (76).

<sup>230</sup> A. Barańczak, 82. *Słowo w piosence: poetyka współczesnej piosenki estradowej* [The word in song: poetics of contemporary popular music] (1983).

“sister of mercy” in Kneeling down, or Death). The audience may identify with the poetic subject but formally is excluded as an observer, always outside as a non-participant, merely “eavesdropping.” In songs, the listener become integrated into the system of exchange at a more direct level when the singer refers to her by the second person singular, directly requesting her individual attention and/or sympathy. Sometimes Stachura invokes actual people like Rafał Urban (a folk tale master and a father figure) or Potęgowa (his elderly and almost legendary aunt, an important character in some short stories and poems); when he switches to “you” in other songs, the listener may feel equally singled out.

As the last example demonstrates, Stachura’s songs establish many intertextual ties with the rest of his writing. Phrases like “*smuga cienia*” [the smudge of shadow] or “*cala jaskrawość*” cannot be understood without reading the other texts where they first appear. Through this self-reference, Stachura not only invites but rather enforces intertextual reading of both. I want to propose that the poet uses the convention of the song as a way of passing on his legacy to the audience, a message which the format of the poem did not fully accommodate. While he often insists on the uniqueness of his own path, he also assumes leadership in clearing the path for others:

<i>drzewa sadzimy</i>	we plant trees
<i>owoc zrywają inni</i>	others gather the fruit
<i>my dla siebie nic</i>	we nothing for ourselves
[...]	
<i>drogi budujemy</i>	we build roads
<i>chodzą po nich inni</i>	others walk on them
<i>my dalej mamy iść</i>	we must farther go. <sup>231</sup>

The uncompromising route that Stachura had chosen for himself tended to alienate him from other human beings, and as he struggled to maintain its lonely course his position

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<sup>231</sup> “Through the garden...” (113). “We” includes another poet character, Witek.



became increasingly precarious. The rift between the “poetic personality” he painstakingly created and the daily existence he was leading widened to the point of irreconcilability. The diary evidence clearly indicates that Stachura’s life began to unravel. In the last few years, personal disasters struck one after another—divorce, psychotic episodes, a train accident in which the poet lost his right (writing) hand. Music provided solace, but proved to be only a kind of consolation.

“*Piosenka dla juniora i jego gitary*” [The song for junior and his guitar] serves as an excellent example of what I have in mind:

*Gdy pokłócisz się z dziewczyną  
(Nie życzę ci, lecz różnie jest),  
Nie chciej zaraz marnie ginąć;  
Zaufaj mi, przekonasz się:*

After you’ve had a fight with your girlfriend  
(I hope you don’t, but things can happen),  
Don’t wish to die a sorry death on the spot;  
Trust me, you’ll find out that I’m right:

*Skocz w pudło gitary  
I tam rozłóż się obozem.  
Skocz w pudło gitary,  
Ratunkowym ona kołem.  
Przeczekaj nachalną nawałnicę,  
Wyjdź potem ze słońcem na ulice!*

Jump inside the box of the guitar  
And set up your camp in there.  
Jump inside the box of the guitar,  
For it is your lifeboat.  
Wait out the persistent storm,  
Then come out with the sun onto the streets!<sup>232</sup>

The song is addressed to “junior,” presumably someone from the younger generation (though also possibly to Stachura’s nephew, whom he called “Junior” as well). The person dispensing advice acts as an experienced guide to life’s many dangers and obstacles. He identifies with junior’s struggles, but he also places himself above them, in the been-there, done-that sort of manner. He presents the guitar box as a miniature house, a safe haven, and a floatation device. When danger threatens, one can “jump inside” and “wait out” many a disturbance until it is safe to come out again. All storms pass, he seems to say, and the sun always returns in the end. Have courage, young man. Music, symbolized by the guitar, will provide comforts of temporary shelter.

<sup>232</sup> Wiersze, poematy, piosenki (253). I did not try to reproduce the rhymes in my translation in order to convey the most literal sense of the lyrics.

The older, wise man, however, will perhaps remain unconsolated. In his late writing, Stachura reverts to silence as the most natural state. Krzysztof Rutkowski describes Stachura's fundamental discovery of that period, expounded in the last two major works *Missa Pagana* (1978) and *Fabula rasa* (1979), as the necessity to

“get outside the circle,” as Stachura used to say after Borges. Through the constant questioning of norms, conventions, and rules of the game with the world, through dialogue with Edward Stachura, man-nobody has arrived at the truth which could not be further taken apart. This obvious truth is experience of carnality, of matter, of Itself. It is indivisible, but also guarantees all intersubjectivity. In this way the worth of poetic expression finds its realization, or materializes in a tense, significant silence.<sup>233</sup>

To be noticed, silence can be only “expressed” by an absence of something that we have previously registered. Like pure music, it works on emotions, must be processed somatically inside the listener. In that sense, it becomes a part of the listener through the internalization and memorization of the impression that the sound (or its absence) produces, before it irrevocably vanishes. “Lateness,” Said says of the unsettling “late style” of artists on the brink of death, “is a kind of self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable, coming after it, and surviving beyond it” (16). In songs, Stachura asks his listeners to keep his memory alive as he resigns to slide into bodily un-being, as he struggles to accept matter's victory over spirit and finally capitulates. The conventionality of his plea renders it all the more poignant and moving. As Allan Kaprow reminds us, “Leaving art *is* the art. But you must have it to leave it.”<sup>234</sup> What Stachura leaves us with echoes softly like the song of a swan.

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<sup>233</sup> From Rutkowski's introduction to the first volume of the “denim edition” of Stachura's collected works (21). The phrases “*człowiek-nikt*” [man-nobody], *Się* [imperfectly translated as Itself], and miniscule “*Edward Stachura*” all refer to new concepts of subjectivity that Stachura introduces in these books.

<sup>234</sup> “Preface to the Expanded Edition: On the Way to Un-Art” (Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, xxix).

## CHAPTER IV. THE BARD BATTLES

One of the most impressive achievements of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s was its ability to unite, with its namesake quality, all classes of Polish society. Over three quarters of the workforce joined the Independent Union, making it not only the first of its kind in the Eastern bloc, but also nearly universally represented in membership. Along with affiliated organizations, the Independent Student Union (*Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów*, created in September 1980), the Independent Farmers' Trade Union (*NSZZ Rolników Indywidualnych "Solidarność,"* created in May 1981), and the Independent Craftsmen's Trade Union (*NSZZ Indywidualnego Rzemiosła "Solidarność,"* created in March 1981), Solidarity cut through all the existing social strata. While the prevailing impression of 'being in it together' forged genuine bonds between diverse groups of people and facilitated groundbreaking political transformations, unity in opposition to the communist regime hid many differences in expectations, level of commitment to change, and general worldview. Chapter I traced select lines of such potential bifurcations, focusing on the efforts of poets and the needs of the public they vowed to shape and to guide. This chapter will continue the inquiry, shifting attention to live performers and audiences, with the assumption that different types of music tend to form clusters of like-minded followers, gathered around shared visions and attitudes towards reality.

Poland of the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s witnessed a veritable explosion of popular music. From loudly defiant *muzyka rockowa*, introspective and lyrical *poezja śpiewana*, light entertainment of the *kabaret*, all the way to the soothing religious *Oaza*

tunes, a dizzying number of options presented themselves to the listening public. Each of these types used distinct techniques of sound engineering, envisioned different contact with audience, and presented lyrics that reflected its home base's experience and idiom. Different kinds of idols emerged as well, spurring strong emotional attachment and identification. But interest in music was only one component in that complex puzzle. As people attended concerts, they bonded through the unforgettable memories such events provided. When they exchanged recordings, they also exchanged ideas and passed around contraband texts they later discussed. In the chaos and hopelessness of the years leading up to the dissolution of communism, young people in particular searched for guidance and role models. Not finding them in schools, they turned elsewhere, often simply to each other. In a sense, the stress on personalism and individual responsibility preached by the *Nowa Fala* writers (and the Catholic Church in other contexts) had borne its fruit: the generation coming to age in the eighties made its own home-grown heroes. Long ago, John Dewey astutely observed: "The values that lead to production and intelligent enjoyment of art have to be incorporated into the system of social relationships."<sup>235</sup> In the eighties, such relationships thrived and functioned as a kind of self-help *edukacja drugiego obiegu*, or education in the second circulation. Much of this happened within institutional structures of schools, universities, or parochial centers, but outside (and sometimes against) the curriculum these institutions offered. Ideologically, too, this generation set itself apart from what came before, including some of the precepts of

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<sup>235</sup> From the chapter titled "Art and Civilization," in which Dewey urges that no revolution should stop "short of affecting the imagination and emotions of man" (344). Similarly concerned with the usability and quality of art within changing societies, Walter Benjamin (in his ardent Marxist revolutionary outfit) also talks about transformations in artistic forms in terms of changing means of production and social organization. See his essay "The Author as Producer" in *Reflections* (220-38).

*Nowa Kultura*. Mirosław Ratajczak expressed the sentiment of many when he excitedly proclaimed:

We cannot forget that “culture” does not equal “art,” that their respective objectives can be at times contradictory: that art is closer to life, and culture closer to convention. Culture softens contradictions, art reveals and accentuates them. It does not provide a solution, it does not solve anything. The artist has to live “recklessly” [...].  
Morality. Freedom. Democracy. Beautiful words, but words aren’t enough for us anymore.<sup>236</sup>

The generation of young adults who faced long years in the unstable, dreary realities of the 1980s Poland yearned for role models who would lead them to something experientially authentic and beautiful. The writings of Stachura, who preached relentless quest for truth and who remained (at least in the eyes of young readers) untainted by compromise, seemed to answer that perceptible need. What Stachura’s legend represented for Polish youth was a kind of “living text”—an imagined space where art and life seamlessly merged. In this function, he resembled Walter Benjamin’s storyteller, whose threatening disappearance the critic bemoaned earlier in the century: “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience [...]. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening” (87). As a supremely committed artist, Stachura embodied praiseworthy values: he was intrepid, honest, and wise. As a free agent, he also remained unbound, elusive, un beholden to anyone except his Art. Unimitable, he both inspired and defied imitation. In short, he was a different, higher type of being—an idol.

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<sup>236</sup> From Ratajczak’s article “*Mało czasu na życie*,” published in November 1980:

*Nie można zapominać, że “kultura” nie równa się “sztuce”, że w tym miejscu interesy obu są nieraz sprzeczne: że sztuka bliższa jest życiu, a kultura konwencji. Kultura łagodzi sprzeczności, sztuka je ujawnia i akcentuje. Nie podsuwa rozwiązań, w ogóle nie rozwiązuje. Artysta winien żyć “ostro” [...].  
Moralność. Wolność. Demokracja. Piękne słowa, lecz nikomu już słowa nie wystarczają.* (80-1)

His vagabond lifestyle, while seemingly anti-social, could be valorized didactically for those of more ordinary ambitions, his quest transformed into a metaphor of becoming.

## 1. THE BARD AS STORYTELLER

*Naród, który niczego już po sobie nie oczekuje  
Słucha tylko piosenki.  
[A nation that no longer expects anything from itself  
listens only to songs.]<sup>237</sup>*

Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humor? No, the world must be peopled.<sup>238</sup>

A sound accomplishes nothing; without it life would not last out the instant. Relevant action is theatrical (music [imaginary separation of hearing from the other senses] does not exist), inclusive and intentionally purposeless. Theatre is continually becoming that it is becoming; each human being is at the best point for reception. Relevant response (getting up in the morning and discovering oneself musician) (action, art) can be made with any number (including none [none and number, like silence and music, are unreal]) of sounds. The automatic minimum (see above) is two.<sup>239</sup>

During Polish national elections of 2005, an interesting figure emerged: Tolek Jabłoński, “*bard podlaskiej Solidarności*.” The epithet, which seems to accompany Jabłoński’s name so invariably as to take on the function of a title, distinguishes him from *the other* Solidarity bard (without a local designation), the late Jacek Kaczmarski. Jabłoński made public appearances in support of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* party (“Law and Justice,” often shortened to PiS), performing inspirational songs at rallies and conventions. Author of many religious songs, a tribute album dedicated to the Pope titled *Odnawiciel* (“He Who Renews”; 2007), he also composed the PiS party anthem.<sup>240</sup> Born in 1960 and from an early age actively involved in various Church activities, Jabłoński

<sup>237</sup> Krzysztof Karasek, poem “Krytyka poezji” in the volume *Czerwone Jabłuszko* (7).

<sup>238</sup> *Much Ado About Nothing*, II:3.

<sup>239</sup> John Cage, “Experimental Music: Doctrine.” (*Silence* 14).

<sup>240</sup> The anthem’s words are straightforward and simple, and rely on repetitions:

<i>My chcemy prawa i sprawiedliwości, IV Rzeczypospolitej jest już czas. [refrain] Prawo i Sprawiedliwość dziś prowadzi nas, A solidarność dzisiaj łączy nas. Dlatego wznieśmy ręce, podajmy sobie dłonie, Honor i Ojczyzna niech zabrmi w nas.</i>	We want law and justice, It is time for the IV Polish Republic. Today Law and Justice is leading us, And today solidarity unites us. Let us raise our hands and join them, May Honor and Fatherland sound within us.
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“betrayed the Celestial Blue for the White-and-Red”<sup>241</sup> in joining PiS’s campaign. In his capacity as bard, he not only inspires but apparently also teaches. Describing one of Jabłoński’s live appearances on the Catholic television channel *Trwam*, Tadeusz Moćkun said the performance promises to be “a musical lesson in most recent history. History which so many are exploiting today in advancing their political careers.”<sup>242</sup> Rather than dismiss Jabłoński as an easy target of critique, given PiS’s strategic pandering to the religious right in the party’s efforts to widen its electorate, we had better ask a few pointed questions that will help us understand the role of song in contemporary Polish society. How does one teach history using music? Who is a “bard,” exactly, and whom does he serve?

In the introduction to one of the very few publications exclusively devoted to the subject, the editors remark that both the term “bard” and the cultural phenomena associated with it, never quite precise or fully discrete, are increasingly harder to define (due to the popularity of many different kinds of sung poetry, they are often mis-applied and mis-appropriated). Sawicka and Paczoska nonetheless come up with a working definition, the first part of which obtains the following:

A bard—most generally speaking—is a singing poet. The category of personality is particularly important here. The author takes responsibility for the entirety of his performance: words, music, execution. We often designate his work as “authorial song” [*pieśń (piosenkę) autorską*<sup>243</sup>].

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<sup>241</sup> The celestial blue is the color of the 10<sup>th</sup> group in the Warsaw Foot Pilgrimage to Częstochowa, which Jabłoński participated in for several years; the white and red are the colors of the Polish national flag ([Warszawska Pielgrzymka](#) online).

<sup>242</sup> Moćkun’s electronically published piece from August 25, 2007. Also a native of Suwałki and proud of their common provenance in the Podlaski region, Moćkun unabashedly calls Jabłoński “the bard of Solidarity and PiS.” 14 Apr. 2008. <<http://www.Suwalki24.pl>>.

<sup>243</sup> It is difficult to translate the difference between the word *pieśń* and its diminutive cognate *piosenka* into English. The former often describes more serious, formal pieces (the national anthem, for example), while the latter designates less formal, lighter in subject matter, or more popular ones. Another difficulty is presented by *song*, which also functions as a Polish word, somewhat nearer in meaning to *pieśń*, and quite closely associated with bard-related activities.

Authors of that circle pay most attention to the word, which must reach the audience—hence the usual subordination of the musical layer, which functions mostly as carrier for the lyrics (not particularly rich instrumental scores, simplistic arrangements). (*Bardowie* 6)

Because words take priority in this paradigm, it is clear that performance serves as a vehicle of literary expression for the bard. But if the verbal message were all that matters, the bard could simply read his poems aloud, without instrumental accompaniment. (And indeed in Poland, where “recitation” contests are held and records of actors’ interpretive poetry readings still sell, such activity boasts some following.) Musical arrangements, while “not particularly rich” and even “simplistic,” are therefore as integral to the genre as the lyrics. In song, verbal and musical components cannot be separated. Anna Barańczak presents this semantic coupling as a fundamental tenet in understanding the song’s unique dual-code manner of communication, where meaning “does not arise from simple addition of two texts, but rather at their touching point [...]”; it is not a sum but a relation between the verbal text and the musical text” (8).

Another crucial issue is the bard’s “personality,” which complements the other two aspects of performance, or perhaps even constitutes a third, equally essential. Primarily, the singer’s personality comprises his stage behavior—the quality of his voice, his corporeal presence, mannerisms, and attitude. These elements are part of the image the bard projects and cultivates, though in the case of *poezja śpiewana*, any suspicion that they could be in any way “performed” or “rehearsed” might undermine his credibility (and thus affect the “meaning” of his performance). The simplicity of the musical arrangement, sometimes combined with the singer’s untrained voice, enhance his “authenticity” and power. That these elements work in tandem, and not as a sum of predictable parts, comes clearly through in Rachel Platonov’s analysis of three major



Russian bards: Aleksandr Galich, Bulat Okudzhava, and Vladimir Vysotskii. Each one exhibited a vastly different vocal style. Galich's was "strangely reminiscent of the storytelling of a forgetful and easily fatigued old man," half-singing, half-reciting, at times even bordering on "antivocal" (89-90). Okudzhava's restraint set him apart, as did his "inexpert tremolo [...] so pronounced that an uncharitable listener might even be tempted to accuse him of warbling" (89). In contrast, Vysotskii's voice was famously hoarse and intense, given to dwell on certain sounds, like "his exuberantly drawn-out pronunciation of the resonant Russian rolled [r]" (90). Stretching from barely audible to aggressive, these styles have little in common outside their respective idiosyncrasies, but each perfectly complements the author's choice of texts.

There exists an unspoken agreement between the bard and his audience that because he has something important to say, and that the saying of it costs him a great deal, any shortcomings in delivery will be forgiven. This, too, is part of the bard's "personality" and function. The allure of live performances depends on the right combination of intellectual work and emotional involvement, created through experiencing something important together. The bard, like Benjamin's storyteller, "is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story" (108-9). His subject, human life, supplies the raw material, while his art lies in the ability to present it in such a way as to move his audience to experience it, profoundly and intimately. Each bard has his own distinct method, just as his own life experience is unique. Benjamin says that "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (92).

In live performance, therefore, the singer combines the imaginative and the didactic. He projects a kind of stereoscopic vision, bridging the past and the present in the form of a story, which is in turn experienced by his listeners, who adjust their own perception accordingly. The depth of aesthetic experience, its power to move and transform, comes from an element of risk inherent in such an undertaking, called by Dewey “a venture into the unknown” (272). The performer must remain spontaneous, free to improvise, but also vulnerable. His bodily limitations once again augment the overall ‘message.’ When he pours everything into the performance, reaches the limits of human endurance, seems on the verge of wasting away—that is when he is most believable, drawing upon resources that seem beyond this world.<sup>244</sup> When, on the other hand, “past and present fit exactly into one another, when there is only recurrence, complete uniformity, the resulting experience is routine and mechanical; it does not come to consciousness in perception” (Dewey 272). The history lesson the bard offers must actively involve the listener’s imagination.

It is, no doubt, with the hope of fulfilling an important social function that Tolek Jabłoński, as *bard podlaskiej Solidarności*, stepped out with his guitar to greet the crowds. In his capacity as PiS’s inspirational frontman, however, Jabłoński may be playing quite another kind of role. Many of the songs he performs are pieces that defined the 1980s generation. His rendition of at least one of them, Jacek Kaczmarski’s “Mury” [Walls]—with a modified ending—caused a controversy worth investigating. A fresh look at these events will help us gain a better understanding of one branch of *piosenka autorska*, the historical-oppositional model based on the work of Okudzhava and

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<sup>244</sup> Benjamin is even more blunt: “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (94). Could this explain the attraction and the fascination with dying (or already dead) artists?

Vysotskii. It will also provide us with a lens through which its long-term legacy can be assessed.

## 2. WALLS OF SONG

*La race des gladiateurs n'est pas morte, tout artiste en est un. Il amuse le public avec ses agonies.* [The race of gladiators isn't dead; every artist is one of them. He amuses the public with his agonies.]<sup>245</sup>

They said, "you have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."  
The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."  
And they said then, "but play, you must,"  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,  
A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are."<sup>246</sup>

The controversy erupted in the fall of 2005, when Tolek Jabłoński began to perform a modified, unauthorized version of "Mury" in support of PiS. The song has a rich history worth repeating. Its melody comes from a Catalonian piece titled "L'Estaca" [The pole], written in the early 1970s by Lluís Llach, an anti-Franco dissident active in *Els Setze Jutges* [The Sixteen Judges] movement. The lyrics talk about uprooting a pole to which people are bound, and the refrain gains force from the voices of ten thousand people. When Kaczmarek heard the song, he wondered what the singer must have felt facing the masses in front of him, and he imagined "ten thousand people with a beautiful song on their lips destroying their opponents, breaking glass in windows."<sup>247</sup> He obtained Llach's permission to use the melody, and in 1978 wrote his own words about the relationship between the performer and the crowds who use him for their own aims. In

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<sup>245</sup> Flaubert, Gustave. *Correspondance*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

<sup>246</sup> Stevens, Wallace. "Man with the Blue Guitar." *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1964.

<sup>247</sup> Kaczmarek, Jacek. "Chcę konfrontacji: słowiańska histeria i polski romantyzm" [I want confrontation: Slavic hysteria and Polish romanticism]. Interview with Waldemar Maszenda. *Tygodnik Solidarność* 85 (1990): 8.

Kaczmarek's "Mury," originally performed with Przemysław Gintrowski and Zbigniew Łapiński as part of a set with the same title, the artist wanted to express "distrust in the morale of mass movements."<sup>248</sup> That is why Kaczmarek wrote that "the singer was always alone" ("*śpiewak zawsze był sam*").

With the irony of ironies, the song was picked up by the fledging Solidarity movement and turned into its informal anthem. While the first refrain in "Mury" gives hope that the walls will be torn down, the last stanza takes it away:

<i>Wyrwij murom zęby krat!</i>	[Pull out the teeth of bars from the walls!
<i>Zerwij kajdany, połam bat!</i>	Shake off the chains, break the whip!
<i>A mury runą, runą, runą</i>	And the walls will fall down, fall down, fall down
<i>I pogrzebią stary świat!</i>	And they will bury the old world!
[.....]	
<i>Patrzył na równy tłumów marsz,</i>	He looked at the masses' even march,
<i>Milczał wsłuchany w kroków huk,</i>	In silence listened to the pounding steps,
<i>A mury rosły, rosły, rosły,</i>	And the walls grew, grew, grew,
<i>Łańcuch kołysał się u nóg.</i> <sup>249</sup>	The chain was swinging at the feet.]

Kaczmarek was surprised that this particular song reached such heights of popularity in the context of political opposition, given the ambivalent message it conveys and the fact that his identity as "Solidarity's bard" was largely thrust upon him and unwanted.<sup>250</sup> The success of "Mury" was a source of both "stress and satisfaction"—he felt proud of his accomplishment, but did not like the way the song was used. He was also tired of labels—"national, Solidarity, and any other kind. [...] An artist, if he's honest, always expresses only himself. He appears in defense of people, not slogans."<sup>251</sup>

When Kaczmarek emigrated (1981), first to Western Europe and then to Australia, he did so in part to evade censorship, and in part to escape the legend that was

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Polish text available via the [Jacek Kaczmarek](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl) website.

<sup>250</sup> Kaczmarek, "Chcę konfrontacji" (8).

<sup>251</sup> From an interview with Anna Bilka published in *Polityka* 21 (1990) under the title "Sztuka bez hasel" [Art without slogans], available electronically at: [Jacek Kaczmarek](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/media/wywiady/1990/sztuka_bez_hasel.php). 14 Apr. 2008. <[http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/media/wywiady/1990/sztuka\\_bez\\_hasel.php](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/media/wywiady/1990/sztuka_bez_hasel.php)>.

growing around him and beginning to limit his choices as an artist (though his absence most likely contributed to the intensification of said legend). He wrote hundreds of songs and poems (as well as essays and a few novels), immersed in and affected by Polish affairs, but he never permanently returned to Poland, even when he was finally allowed to do so in 1990,<sup>252</sup> to the puzzlement and disappointment of many fans. He died of throat cancer on April 10th, 2004 (at the age of 47) and was buried with honors at the Powązki cemetery in Warsaw.

Meanwhile, the most famous song Kaczmarek ever created has continued to live a life of its own. It is now routinely played or performed at commemorative or patriotic events. The year marking the 25th anniversary of Solidarity's inception proved particularly remarkable. On August 26, 2005, Jean Michel Jarre, supported by the Gdańsk University Academic Choir and the Baltic Polish Philharmonic Orchestra, presented a new arrangement of the song at a giant concert titled *Przestrzeń Wolności* [Space of Freedom]. Over 100,000 fans gathered at the now-defunct Gdańsk shipyard to participate in the spectacle, framed by its eerily post-industrial setting, with three tall crosses of the Fallen Shipyard Worker Monument in the background. In March 2007, the band Habakuk released "*A ty siej*," a reggae album covering Kaczmarek's songs and featuring Patrycja Kaczmarek, the poet's daughter.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Kaczmarek was in France when martial law was announced and the borders sealed. He was granted asylum as a political refugee. While in exile, he performed for immigrant communities all over the world, worked for Radio Free Europe, and wrote prolifically.

<sup>253</sup> Raised in Australia, Patrycja Kaczmarek returned to Poland to find a new life and maybe to follow in her father's footsteps. She talks about the difficult relations with her father, the toll his legend (and his alcoholism) took on the family, and her discovery of Jacek Kaczmarek as a public figure, previously unknown to her. Strangely enough, she remains without access to Polish citizenship (her mother renounced it on her behalf when they emigrated to Australia) and her case is still pending, despite the fact that her father's former friends now hold highly influential posts in the government. See Ewa Milewicz's article, "*A mury runą, runą, runą?*" *Gazeta Wyborcza* 21 March, 2007: 2.

Tolek Jabłoński's version of "Mury" is not, admittedly, fully his own. He says he found the alternative, optimistic ending in an '80s songbook, liked it more than the original, and has been performing it this way "for years." Jabłoński claims that "it would make Jacek happy. He wrote new endings to his own songs."<sup>254</sup> Blessed with his party's benediction, the bard did not obtain, however, the artist's permission to sing the modified ending, which reads:

<i>Nie, nie umarł dla nas świat, jest tyle piękna wokół nas. Bo trzeba wierzyć, wierzyć, wierzyć, by gdzieś dojść, by żyć, by trwać.</i>	No, the world has not died for us, There is so much beauty around us. Because we must believe, believe, believe, So we can get somewhere, persist, and live.
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Przemysław Gintrowski, who composed music to many of Kaczmarek's songs and often performed with him, considers "the addition of this optimistic ending inappropriate. I think Jacek would not be happy, he would be indignant."<sup>255</sup> One does not need to guess Kaczmarek's feelings on the subject, since he explicitly expressed them in several interviews. He also wrote his own alternative version of the entire song, titled "Podwórko (Mury '87)," a melancholic self-parody in which the walls are falling down as crumbling ruins.<sup>256</sup> Writing "Podwórko" was an attempt to reclaim ownership of the song that various groups "took over,"<sup>257</sup> as well as to provide a commentary on the decay the artist observed when he visited the country for the first time in six years.

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Cezary Polak's interview with Kaczmarek: 14 Apr. 2008.

<[http://www.dziennik.pl/kultura/muzyka/article25068/Patrycja\\_Kaczmarek\\_Mojemu\\_ojcu\\_ciazyla\\_legenda.html](http://www.dziennik.pl/kultura/muzyka/article25068/Patrycja_Kaczmarek_Mojemu_ojcu_ciazyla_legenda.html)>.

<sup>254</sup> Roży, Anna. "Jacek Kaczmarek à la PiS." *Gazeta Wyborcza* 8 Sept. 2005: 1.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> The full text of this song can be found on the [Jacek Kaczmarek](http://www.jacek-kaczmarek.pl) website.

<sup>257</sup> Kaczmarek talks about this in an interview conducted in 1987 at the Munich airport, later published in the student magazine INDEX, also available at:

<[http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/tworczosc/zapowiedzi/mury\\_podworko.php](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/tworczosc/zapowiedzi/mury_podworko.php)>.

The politicians from PiS consider the song public property, or rather, the property of those with Solidarity roots. The party's representative, Przemysław Gosiewski, defended its moral right to capitalize on the movement's legacy:

“*Mury*” is a great work of Solidarity. We are an organization with roots in Solidarity's past and I think that presenting it during our convention is not a misappropriation [“*nadużycie*”]. If this happened at an SLD [*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*, the Democratic Left Alliance] convention, *that* would be a misappropriation.<sup>258</sup>

PiS thus makes itself an heir to a specific historical narrative about the past, based on the collective experience of oppositionality and activism, presumably paid for with personal sacrifices. In its rhetoric, the party often relies on the familiar “us and them” strategy, separating itself from other, less noble actors in the 1980s events, and from their experiences. The word “solidarity” itself became one of the main catchphrases of PiS's political campaign, though in the end seemed to awaken a sense of camaraderie only among those willing to accept a unified, monolithic narrative of the meaning of Solidarity's struggle, instead of bringing together the entire nation.

What the “*Mury*” debate clearly demonstrates is the uneasy relationship between art and politics, and the artist's relative lack of control over the future of his work, once it enters the public sphere. For artists who are active in any capacity during times of great political turmoil, some form of politicization becomes unavoidable. Czesław Miłosz knew it well when he predicted, in 1983:

In the future, as has happened so often in the past, Polish literature will probably witness an unresolved conflict between writers' commitment to the common cause of resistance and personal aspirations to express themselves as individuals.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Roży (1).

<sup>259</sup> These are the last words of the epilogue to the 1983 edition of The History of Polish Literature (540).

For Jacek Kaczmarski, this conflict stayed at the center as his work matured and evolved, and as he tested new avenues of artistic expression. He did, in a way, contribute to the politicization of his work—by his choice of subject matter and mode of communication, and by the ideological allegiances to which he remained loyal.

Many of Kaczmarski's songs betray deep engagement with history, either through invoking place names like the Kremlin, Samosierra, Afganistan, Rome, or through discussions of representative figures or events. He wrote pieces about Catherine the Great's dreams of conquest ("*Sen Katarzyny II*," 1978), the coal miners killed during strikes ("*Górnicy*," 1982), infamous doctor Mengele ("*Szkielet Mengele*," 1990), the Polish-Russian war of 1920 ("*Ostatnia mapa Polski*"—The last map of Poland, 1983), among countless others. It seems natural that references to such recognizably symbolic cases would connect his analyses to political critique and oppositional struggle. Kaczmarski was aware that his musings on the fate of the individual threatened by History could be—and, inevitably, will be—read as political statements. The immediate context of the situation in Poland necessarily "determined the quality of reception. As usual, in the heat of the moment, people hear only what they want to hear. Of course, that element was there, but it didn't dominate."<sup>260</sup> In other words, Kaczmarski did not want the political reading to blot out all other kinds of interpretation of his texts, though neither did he dissociate himself from the political debates which they sparked.

His interest in everything Polish was keen, even if he worried that, with his choice of subjects, he was often "knocking on 'a closed door'."<sup>261</sup> This shared heritage called tradition, together with its complex web of symbols and myths, was for Kaczmarski both

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<sup>260</sup> Kaczmarski, Jacek. "*Nietolerancja jest dzieckiem słabości*" [Intolerance is a child of weakness]. Interview with Michał Jaranowski. *Życie Warszawy* 88 (1990): 6.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*



a source of inspiration and a burden, something that “pinches the left side/like the blackmail of conscience.”<sup>262</sup> Personal and national identity consists of a set of givens, conditions one inherits by the virtue of being born into them. Their determinist force does not preclude—and should compel—questioning and analysis. The historical perspective thus engages our modern Cassandra<sup>263</sup> primarily in terms of the individual, his role and position as actor in the setting he could not choose. For the poet, man is the only conduit through which the past can be accessed and understood, and it is his suffering that is the true measure of history. The introspective gaze of an artist, filtering experience through his own unique lens, provides the governing principle for the majority of Kaczmarek’s compositions (a remarkable number of them enters the world of paintings and other visual works of art). Profoundly steeped in tradition, he nonetheless tries to avoid its traps of easy identification. As Adorno remarks,

The world is unique. The simple repetition of the aspects which constantly recur in the same way is more like a vain and compulsory litany than the redeeming word. Classification is a condition for cognition and not cognition itself; cognition in turn dispels classification.<sup>264</sup>

To accept any category that makes up identity without questioning it, or to divide the world according to questionable categories, constitutes an intellectual failure.

In the Adornian spirit of curious scepticism, whenever Kaczmarek invokes patriotic issues, he seeks to re-evaluate them. Pieces like “*Czerwony autobus*” (The red bus, 1981), which deals with anti-semitism and social upheavals in communist Poland, or anti-populist “*Patriotyzm*” (1989) expose the ugly side of Polish nationalism. Arguably one of the best patriotic poems he wrote, “*Zbroja*” (The Armor; 1982), transforms

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<sup>262</sup> From the poem “*Zbroja*” [The Armor]: “*jak sumienia szantaż/ uwiera lewy bok.*”

<sup>263</sup> Kaczmarek’s favorite pseudo-historical character, to which he often compared himself.

<sup>264</sup> Fragment titled “Classification,” from notes and drafts published with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (220).

antiquated, battered medieval battle gear into a metaphor of national memory, “*pamięci pancierz nasz*.”<sup>265</sup> This God-given armor is dented and covered in ancestral blood. While ill-fitting and inconvenient, useless as protection against real weapons, it does exude some kind of supernatural power:

<p><i>Magicznych na niej rytów</i>  <i>Dziś nie odczyta nikt</i>  <i>Ale wykuta z mitów</i>  <i>I wieczna jest jak mit</i>          [...]  <i>Lecz choć zaginął hełm i miecz</i>  <i>Dla ciała żadna w niej ostoja</i>  <i>To przecież w końcu ważna rzecz</i>  <i>Zbroja</i>  <i>A taka w niej powaga</i>  <i>Dawno zaschniętej krwi</i>  <i>Że czuję jak wymaga</i>  <i>I każe rosnąć mi</i></p>	<p>[Nobody can decipher today          The magic letters carved on it          But it is forged from myths          And is as myths eternal            And though both helmet and sword are lost          And it offers no protection for the body          In the end it's an important thing          The armor          Through its solemnity          Of dried blood of old          I feel that it demands          And that it asks me to grow].</p>
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Even if a glorious past is a burden, and patriotism nothing more than the last resort of a despairing people, higher ideals are important because they inspire self-growth and responsibility. And the cautious, customary single “I” of the individual merges with the collective “we” by the end of the poem. Is it any wonder the the right wanted to enlist Kaczmarek as their myth-maker?

Intellectually, Kaczmarek identified most strongly with the secular left, with its humanism, championing of personal liberty and responsibility, focus on ethics and truth. In some circles today this stance is called, disdainfully, “*micznikowszczyzna*.”<sup>266</sup> The

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<sup>265</sup> Full text available on the [Jacek Kaczmarek](#) website.

<sup>266</sup> The phrase was coined by Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz in his recent book [The Michnikons: diagnosis of a disease](#). Ziemkiewicz speaks on behalf of those who feel that the 1989 Round Table talks resulted in betrayal, a pernicious compromise between two camps of elitists who joined forces after the fall of communism in order to exploit the unsuspecting nation. Adam Michnik, according to Ziemkiewicz, was one of the engineers of the III Polish Republic and “the chief ideologue of postcommunism” (9). As chief editor of the influential daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Michnik purportedly spreads his propaganda far and wide. His minions include “Polish intellectuals and, in greater numbers, half-wits [wordplay on “*inteligenci*” and “*pół-inteligenci*”], who worship him to the point of insanity [...] as their ethical, political, and intellectual oracle” (10). Ziemkiewicz, Rafał A. *Michnikowszczyzna: zapis choroby*. Opole: Red Horse, 2006.

historical moment in which he arose, defined by the events of August '80, branded him as a Solidarity man. He disavowed neither allegiance, seeing them as complementary. The 1990s exposed a deepening divide between various epigones of Solidarity, previously seemingly united under the aegis of common struggle for independence, who have since been competing for exclusive rights to the movement's legacy. As part of that contested heritage, the bard's œuvre is being fought over as well.

Initially exhilarated by the immediacy of response and intensity of interaction that live performances afforded, Kaczmarek eventually realized their limitations. "Vysotskii taught me that song can be a serious thing, that through song one can express oneself. And that was true,"<sup>267</sup> he spoke of his major artistic influence. Kaczmarek's decision to enter the scene was timed perfectly, as it coincided with an enormous spike in sung poetry's popularity. The political context sharpened his pen and added extra layers of solemnity and importance to his texts. Live contact with receptive audiences fulfilled him as an artist and satisfied what he called "a kind of didactic contamination," or his "temptation to teach. [...] My grandfather was a communist and from an early age I knew one had to try to fix the world."<sup>268</sup> In performance, he was unmatched and electrifying—intense to the point of exhaustion (he once bled onstage), relentlessly tearing at the strings of his guitar,<sup>269</sup> singing his insides out. But the medium *was* limiting. For once, it

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<sup>267</sup> Kaczmarek met Vladimir Vysotskii in 1974 in someone's private apartment during one of the intimate, informal concerts the Russian gave in Poland. He felt immediately spellbound and deeply affected, and decided to become a singer himself. Many of his songs, most notably the famous "*Oblawa*" [The wolf-hunt] which he wrote at the age of 17, are inspired by or directly based on Vysotskii's compositions. Quote from an interview with Piotr Gruszczyński, Jacek Królak, and Filip Łobodziński, published in *Res Publica* 11 (1990) under the title "*Zniszczyć mit*" [Destroying the myth], available electronically at: <[http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/media/wywiady/1990/zniszczyc\\_mit.php](http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/media/wywiady/1990/zniszczyc_mit.php)>.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Most guitar players consider Kaczmarek's technique impossible to imitate. He played 'upside-down,' strumming with his left hand using a guitar strung for a right-handed person. Moreover, he could play sets

is hard to convey textual complexity shouting in front of a microphone, with audiences who ignore ambiguous or difficult aspects of poetic communication. Moreover, if a song is performed several times in the same way, it can lose its power and become routine. Exhausted, the poet started looking for new forms of expression. By 1990, Kaczmarek saw the end of an era—for himself as performer and for the genre (under the formula “a boy with a guitar onstage”<sup>270</sup>) in general. The social and political conditions that made them both possible had changed.

### 3. THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE, OR, THE GOD OF TRUTH

*Teraz oczy moje napotkały gitarę opartą o ścianę. Ty mi też ogromnie dopomagałaś, wierna przyjaciółko. I wielkie dzięki Ci składam. Bądź mi dalej wierną towarzyszką, proszę.* [My eyes have now rested on the guitar leaning against the wall. You too, my loyal friend, have helped me immensely. And I thank you very much. Please continue to be my loyal companion.]<sup>271</sup>

*Nachylony nad tą Księgą, z twarzą płonąca jak tęcza, gorzałem cicho od ekstazy do ekstazy. [...] Nie omyliło mnie przecucie. Był to Autentyk, święty oryginał, choć w tak głębokim poniżeniu i degradacji.* [Hunched over this Book, with my face on fire like the rainbow, I was glowing quietly from ecstasy to ecstasy. (...) My intuition haven't misled me. It was the Authentic, the holy original, though in such deep humiliation and degradation.]<sup>272</sup>

With such much presence of Kaczmarek's work in the public domain, and abundance of recent critical literature that accords him so much influence and power over the '80s generation, it is almost impossible to remember that the poet was absent from Poland for most of that formative decade. After he lost his return ticket home in December '81, he disappeared from the pages of official magazines and from state-controlled airwaves, very soon after his large-scene debut at the Opole Music Festival.

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of several songs with some lasting longer than eight minutes, a truly gruelling physical feat for a guitar player.

<sup>270</sup> In “*Chcę konfrontacji*” (8).

<sup>271</sup> Stachura, *Z wypowiedzi rozproszonych* (380).

<sup>272</sup> Bruno Schultz, “*Księga*” (72). Excerpted from *Sklepy cynamonowe. Sanatorium pod klepsydrą*. Kraków: GREG, 2008.

The title of Wiesława Czapińska's article in *Ekran*,<sup>273</sup> borrowed from Kaczmarek's 1980 song "Noah's Ark," proved as eerily prophetic as the poet's own Cassandra cry: "Build an ark before the flood!" For his fans in 1980s Poland, Kaczmarek existed only in illegal recordings, second circulation publications, as a voice in American-sponsored Radio Free Europe programs<sup>274</sup> (for those lucky enough to get reception), and, of course, in countless imitations played by countless bard wannabes over the years.

This kind of formidable presence-in-absentia will suffuse our background with spectral light, though our analysis will now turn to another major figure of the same time period—Edward Stachura. His absence in the *Nowa Fala* discussion was certainly conspicuous; simply put, for the majority of *Generation 68* writers, Stachura did not count as someone to reckon with. Neither Zagajewski nor Kornhauser mentioned him, not even as a negative example of 'bad' writers who failed to represent the world. Krynicki and Stabro were equally reticent. Very curious indeed, considering that some of Stachura's best work was published at the break of the decades—volumes of poetry *Przystępuję do ciebie* and *Po ogrodzie niech hula szarańcza* (both 1968), *Kropka nad ypsilonem* (1975); two novels: *Cała jaskrawość* (1969) and *Siekierzada* (1971). Where was Stachura when he wasn't there? And also, why does he suddenly come back to dominate the eighties' youth culture?

When we look at the context of one situation where Stachura's name does appear, we will be somewhat better equipped to approach these questions. In 1974, Stanisław Barańczak wrote "Song and the theme of freedom," an essay which deals with the

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<sup>273</sup> Czapińska, Wiesława. "Budujcie arkę przed potopem—czyli Jacek Kaczmarek." *Ekran* 26 (1981): 10-11.

<sup>274</sup> Kaczmarek was invited to work for the radio by Zdzisław Najder, who suggested it as the best way for the poet to keep in touch with Polish affairs. He led his own "Kwadrans Jacka Kaczmarek" ["Kaczmarek's Fifteen Minutes"] and worked as part of a team on other programs as well.

problem of mass culture reception. To counteract claims of those who say that popular culture reaches much wider audiences than its “high” or “ambitious” (116) varieties merely because the former relies on more effective modes of distribution, Barańczak argues that the creators of mass culture commodities intentionally ‘program’ passivity into them. In Barańczak’s semiotic paradigm of mass culture operation, the reader is not given “tasks” that require his or her active participation, nor the freedom to wander in the “labyrinth” of meaning. Instead, s/he receives overhead “orders” (116). Barańczak uses examples of pop songs to illustrate the technique of “brainwashing” (“*ubezwłasnowolnienie*,” 117), which works by limiting interpretive options and eliminating ambiguity, effectively steering the listener in a single direction. In order to expose how sly and dexterous this kind of manipulation really is, Barańczak pursues the theme of freedom in song lyrics, only to show that, despite their extensive reliance on the idea of liberty, in the end they instruct the audience to run away from it. Mass culture manipulates *and* mirrors social attitudes, he opines, and as such can identify problems of specific historical moments. In his time and day, Barańczak sees the “question of freedom” as central, and he worries that the simultaneous “yearning for freedom and for ‘escaping from freedom’” creates such an internal conflict that it often results in “choosing that last option, a safer and easier one” (139).

(E. Stachura) makes his way into the essay by way of a parenthetical caption, when Barańczak quotes the lyrics of “*Za dalą dal*” [Distance beyond distance], which Stachura happens to have written. Here his contribution ends—Barańczak moves on to another song. While not mentioning the poet directly, however, Barańczak describes one of Stachura’s principal tropes: wandering. His reading of the word “*włóczęga*” intimates

that he has deep reservations about its social value, since “it symbolizes a nostalgia for anarchic freedom and for completely pointless striving.” As a lifestyle option, it is “relatively rare,” involves hardship, and can be linked to “those who make it, as it were, their vocation” (123), i.e., the Gypsies, who embody anti-social tendencies anywhere. What we can glean from this allusive analysis is that writers who promote such socially irresponsible activities encourage dangerous tendencies. Because Stachura refused to accept 1968 as a transformative year—that high-water mark which should have forced everyone to run for the levees and start fixing them—and instead continued to “cultivate his own garden,” he willed himself to become irrelevant. The *Nowa Kultura* poets punished him with silence.

When he returned, as an idol of many, it was after committing an act for which most societies used to mete out additional penalty, that of banishment in death—suicide. For young people in Poland at the end of the seventies, self-inflicted death of a tortured poet who seemed to be against pretty much everything nearly *guaranteed* his revival. Almost overnight, he gained enormous following. I say “he” and not “his work” because Stachura inspired such profoundly personal emotional attachment that enthusiasts of his writing often had a hard time distinguishing between the man and his work. Jorge Luis Borges complicates this peculiar predicament of writers in his poem “*Borges y yo*” [Borges and I], when he talks about tyrannies of self-creation in the following way: “I must remain in Borges rather than in myself (if in fact I am a self), and yet I recognize myself less in his books than in many others, or in the rich strumming of a guitar.”<sup>275</sup> The

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<sup>275</sup> In Kenneth Krabbenhoft’s translation (93). Borges, Jorge Luis. Selected Poems. Ed. Alexander Coleman. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

strumming of various guitars will accompany Stachura's triumphant comeback in the 1980s, for it is through song that his poetry gained new life.

My focus on circumstances and methods in which Stachura's texts entered circulation accords these factors their due importance in the processes of reading and interpretation. The claim that technologies of writing and distribution, together with other aspects of textual materiality, affect the way literature is received and understood, organizes Peter Middleton's book Distant Reading. Texts do not possess metaphysical qualities or magical powers outside the heads of their readers; they require active involvement of people in order to thrive and persist:

Readerships do not spring into life as a new poem rains down upon them. They need training, they need to be brought into being as economies of affect, memory, and interpretation. (xv)

Stachura's case provides particularly rich material for observing how readerships are formed and cultivated, given the number of people devoted to the preservation of his literary legacy. The poet enjoyed renewed popularity largely because of the efforts of several enthusiasts persistent enough to spread the word around, copying poems by hand until his entire life's work has been re-published in the form of the famous five-tome denim collection of 1982. Hundreds of different musical scores have been composed to complement Stachura's words, by performers who have sung at intimate parties and in commercially produced concerts. Communities of faithful followers developed as a result. Attention of literary critics finally caught on to document these practices, though too often to disparage them as an unhealthy fad. Their contributions form part of Stachura's canon as well.



In the 1980s, most of Stachura's admirers clustered around schools and universities. Many of the performers, just like early Kaczmarek, emerged from the thriving student culture of the time, which championed the "boy with a guitar" model by bestowing fame and favors on the best singers and players.<sup>276</sup> The connection between cabarets and all varieties of sung poetry was also particularly strong. Without making rigid, artificial distinctions, I would like, nonetheless, to divide the audiences of sung poetry into two groups for the sake of this discussion: one that identified more closely with Kaczmarek's aggressive approach and believed art could be used as an instrument of political action, and the other more introspective and lyrical, gravitating towards poetry on the premise that "insofar as [it] has a social function it is to awaken sleepers by other means than shock."<sup>277</sup> While the overlap between the two approaches was considerable, there were enough subtle differences to warrant making a distinction. The values were similar, but the stance on how far to take action differed. The latter group was Stachura's "readership," united by their admiration for the poet.

It may be useful to recall here Brian Stock's idea of "textual communities." Stock's nuanced analysis of intellectual developments in late 11th and 12th century, when Europeans tried to grapple with substantial changes in many areas of life and struggled to find new ways of understanding their own experience, underscores the unifying power of certain important texts. For the Europeans in question, that text was the

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<sup>276</sup> Kaczmarek's description of his "epicurean lifestyle" as a student belies his serious demeanor as an artist:

We went out constantly—to drink, to eat or to dance, we called ourselves kings of life, the elite. My parents were really miffed. People from our year looked at us with envy and resentment, and we were having a ball! Staszek had a car, Wojtek had a car. I had a guitar. Girls competed for our attention. [...] Jan Pietrzak invited me to work for the *Pod Egidą* cabaret—all that created an aura of a joyful and rather sensuous youth, not a rebellious-ascetic one. Twenty years ago one would call this behavior banana youth.

From an interview with Grażyna Preder, at: <http://www.kaczmarek.art.pl/zyciorys/zyciorys.php>.

<sup>277</sup> Denise Levertov, from her essay "I believe poets are instruments" (*Strong Words* 244).

Bible, and in the time period Stock refers to, intense debates centered around not only exegesis, but also around questions of everyday practice based on the results of textual interpretation. Like-minded people tended to stick together:

From reading, dialogue, and the absorption of texts, therefore, it is a short step to “textual communities,” that is, to groups of people whose social activities are centered around texts, or, more precisely, around a literate interpreter of them. [...] the group’s members must associate voluntarily; their interaction must take place around an agreed meaning for the text. Above all, they must make the hermeneutic leap from what the text says to what they think it means; the common understanding provides the foundation for changing thought and behavior. (522)

Stock’s interpretive model translates surprisingly well into 1980s Poland, where such communities clearly formed in defense against chaos and upheaval. Their self-didactic function is worth emphasizing. And the fact that some of the groups Stock describes consisted of heretics adds strength to the tenuous link: Stachura’s followers often resembled a kind of religious cult, seeing themselves as radically different from the rest of society. Each performer acted as an *interpre*s, gathering around him those who accepted his specific interpretation of what the poet said.

Truth and authenticity were two principal issues which attracted readers to Stachura. When Jan Z. Brudnicki asked “mature young people” in the late 1980s who their most important poet was, they mentioned Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński because among the pervasive “ironic literature” he “appeared a fanatic of truth, in matters both small and large, in matters of ideology, of patriotism, of family, and of friendship. We were hungry for all that truth because everywhere else we saw half-truths.”<sup>278</sup> Asked again if their own enthusiasm for Baczyński carried over to the younger generation, the

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<sup>278</sup> “The language battles” (99-100).

same respondents answered: “No, they completely turned away from Baczyński and went into an entirely new direction... towards Stachura.”<sup>279</sup>

Somehow, the power of Stachura’s words was such that it affected his readers in intensely personal ways. Jan Kondrak’s experience can serve as a matrix for many similar encounters:

It was less than one year before Stachura’s death. I was enrolled at the Ludowy University in Wzdowo, Podkarpacie. One of my friends, Anka Popławska, from Wrocław, during lecture passed me a poem written on toilet paper. I guessed she was not the author thereof. I asked whose poem it was, and she was surprised I didn’t know. [...] That text was a fragment of *Missa Pagana*. That friend also gave me the entire long poems. [...] I read everything I could by that author and was “shot down.” I realized he was the most important author and that he wrote what I wanted to say to people.<sup>280</sup>

Kondrak’s reaction to the text approximates religious conversion, even if its circumstances are not particularly holy (note the “toilet” quality of paper and the “pagan mass” part). He is “shot down”—conquered once and for all. The surprise of Kondrak’s friend that he did not immediately recognize the author suggests that by then Stachura’s sway must have already extended over many groups of young people. She passes the poem on to Kondrak as a badge of belonging, in the manner of a Christian who sticks a fish symbol on the bumper of her car for others to see. (One can only wonder why “Anka” chose to copy the poem on a scrap of toilet paper—did she want to make a statement of irreverence? There must have been another reason than convenience, since the texture of toilet paper makes it such a poor choice for one’s stationery needs.) Kondrak fell for the poetry first; with Stachura’s songs he experienced a bit of resistance and was not “immediately impressed. Only after hearing Stachura sing them himself I

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid. (100).

<sup>280</sup> <http://www.stachuriada.prv.pl/>

appreciated that howl of a suffering soul. I understood that the songs are a hologram of Stachura's proses [sic] and they attain full and overpowering meaning with the reading of the prose."<sup>281</sup>

That "full and overpowering meaning" clearly tops anything Kondrak could have learned at the university (the famous exchange of toilet paper occurs during lecture, which seems far from enthralling). Kondrak discovers Stachura's words as something that lay dormant in himself, which the text "activated" and helped unfurl.<sup>282</sup> He decides to take on the mission of "spreading the message." Endowed with a rich voice, Kondrak set many of Stachura's poems to music and, over the last two decades, "has sung every single song by Stachura." He recorded four albums with compositions based on Stachura's texts. Recently, he was awarded the "Golden Diploma" at the 40th anniversary of the Student Song Festival for "creating a kingdom of art-song in Lublin."<sup>283</sup> He also co-founded the Lublin Federation of Bards (*Lubelska Federacja Bardów*).

The exact nature of Stachura's legend (the crest of the popularity wave reached its highest point between 1981-1983) has been discussed in such excruciating detail elsewhere that we had better skip over it here. Marian Buchowski's book *Edward Stachura: biografia i legenda* (1992) provides the most thoroughly researched and comprehensive account of Stachura's life (and afterlife in fanhood), and can be safely recommended as a reliable source of information. Stachura's death, on the other hand, is

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> In a conversation with Bogdan Chorażuk, an author of popular song lyrics, Jan Marx remarks that modern bards help us understand the world and ourselves by giving names to universal feelings:

Regarding the tradition of the troubadours, trouvères, Minnesängers, minstrels, rybaltś— or whatever else one calls itinerant singers in various languages and cultures—the contemporary classics of the genre, Dylan, Cohen, Vian, Brassens, Brel, Okudzhava, Vysotskii, simply describe and comment on reality and everyday life. They *give name* to what we feel, what we realize, but what we cannot name ourselves (Marx 26; emphasis mine).

<sup>283</sup> Jan Kondrak's official website: <http://www.lfb.lublin.pl/jan.htm>.

such a formative event that a few words should be mentioned. In Kondrak's account related above, the first sentence "It was less than one year before Stachura's death..." gives us a sense that history seems to be divided into "before" and "after" periods for Stachura's fans, not unlike the beginning of the Christian era for the followers of Jesus. Even serious critics succumb to this paradigm. For instance, *Poezja* magazine published two special issues devoted to Stachura and his friends in 1981, one titled Sted (189) and the other, questioningly, *Poètes maudits?* (190). The overwhelmingly elegiac mood of these two issues steeps the reader in melancholia and unease. Since the articles appeared two years after Stachura's death, they cannot simply serve as obligatory obituaries, but, more likely, respond to the surge of public interest in the poet in particular and the genre of sung poetry more generally. A year later, two more special issues appeared—*Trubadurzy* (198) and *Gwiżdżąc na Gutenberga* [Having Gutenberg for nothing] (199), which presented work (in bilingual form, impressively) of foreign singers popular in Poland: Charles Aznavour, Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, Leonard Cohen, Boris Vian, Bulat Okudzhava, Vladimir Vysotskii, and, somewhat strangely, John Lennon. The Troubadour issue also re-printed Ezra Pound's article on the subject. It is clear that Stachura started a trend that sparked interest in other related issues.

Another member of Stachura's "cult," Marek Gałązka, describes a strikingly similar experience to the one that changed Kondrak. Inside the cover of Stachura's original recordings compiled into the album "*Nowy Dzień*" (New day, 1995), we can read the following:

One and a half years after Edward Stachura's death, I heard for the first time the original recordings of Sted's songs. The singing was phantasmagoric—a howl of the wolf in the endless, over-illuminated steppe. A few moments later (which passed, as usual, in wondrous and

frightening tension), I found out that the only book that Stachura carried in his bread bag was “Steppenwolf” by Herman Hesse. And suddenly I discovered the Whole Illumination [*Cała Jaskrawość*]<sup>284</sup>—that all that matters is love, friendship, the path, but also lack of all that, and again all that. Listen, my dear friend, forsaken by all that. Marek Gałązka.

This statement was written fairly late, when Stachura’s popularity had been firmly established. We notice again the atavistic “howl” and the intensity of understanding “everything” in one brilliant flash. What both Gałązka and Kondrak underscore is the enormity of perceived suffering, unfiltered and real. This high-voltage emotive charge electrifies and illuminates all their subsequent experiences of reading Stachura’s texts. Gałązka also references ‘Stachurian’ terms, such as *cała jaskrawość*, “wondrous and frightening tension,” and the name of his literary persona, *Sted*, as tokens of familiarity and insider’s knowledge he expects to share with the record’s target audience.<sup>284</sup> His own name at the end, finally, certifies the experience as iconic (not just anyone’s) by the virtue of his reputation’s authority.

Gałązka’s entire career is based on Stachura-related activities; he was one of the first truly devoted fans, who did much to popularize Stachura’s work. He debuted in 1979 with a dramatic adaptation of Stachura’s prose titled “*Wędrowanie*” [Wandering]. In 1980, he formed the band *Po Drodze* [On the Way], whose name invokes “the theme of endless wandering of man in search of himself, of his place, wandering which is an inspiration, meaning, and sometimes a goal in and of itself.”<sup>285</sup> He still tours the country with his recital “*Stachurę śpiewa Marek Gałązka*” (Marek Gałązka sings Stachura; in Polish the word order is reversed to highlight priority of the poet’s name over that of the

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<sup>284</sup> *Sted* is a shortened name Stachura used for one of his personas, which he often signed on personal correspondence. Buchowski describes a protracted and heated debate over who could and could not say *Sted* (some claimed that one personal contact with the poet gave them the right to be familiar), which in itself says volumes about Stachura’s peculiar myth. (302-4).

<sup>285</sup> Marek Gałązka’s official website: <http://www.galazka.pl/podrodze.html>.

performer), sometimes appearing with his sons. As a performer, he has gained a devoted audience over the years and many consider his adaptations the finest and “most true” to the spirit of Stachura (Jerzy Stachura, the poet’s nephew and addressee of the song “*Piosenka dla juniora i jego gitary*,” approved of Gałązka’s interpretations). An anonymous reviewer of Gałązka’s 1981 performance with the band *Po drodze* wrote that “Stachura’s poems in particular identify the concerns of today’s man and fit his current situation. Marek Gałązka, who composed and performed them, for the most part aptly interpreted their character. The band *Po Drodze* stands out with its high musical culture and gentle sound.”<sup>286</sup>

#### 4. THE LAND OF GENTLENESS

<i>Na mile wokół roznosiłem kolana</i>	For miles I carried around my knees
<i>wiedząc że podróż tylko obmywa dusze</i>	for I know that only a journey cleanses souls
<i>i że trubadur w klasztorze to rana</i>	and a troubadour inside a cloister is a wound. <sup>287</sup>

The initial affective jolt, the shiver of shock and identification that Gałązka first reported are strangely absent from the description of his performance. The “gentleness” noted and praised in the review becomes not only his trademark quality, but also labels a movement, or subgenre of sung poetry called “the Land of Gentleness” (*Kraina łagodności*). The label originated from a television program series aired between 1995 and 1996, accompanied by a number of records issued with the songs the program featured, while the phrase itself comes from Wojciech Bellon’s 1972 song titled “*Pieśń Łagodnych*” [The song of the gentle ones]:

*Niech zakwita, niech oczyszcza, niech kształt nada  
Tam, co w nas tkwi gdzieś na dnie samym  
Niech się wznosi, niech się wznosi*

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<sup>286</sup> The blurb quoted on Gałązka’s website, <http://www.galazka.pl/podrodze.html>.

<sup>287</sup> From the poem “*Dużo ognia*.”

*Aż zabłyśnie tęczę  
Do krainy łagodności bramą.  
[May it bloom, may it cleanse, may it give shape  
Over there, to what sits inside us at the very bottom  
May it rise, may it rise  
Until it will shine through a rainbow,  
The gate to the land of gentleness].*

One look at these lyrics shows how starkly different Bellon's bucolic vision is from Kaczmarek's ironic and often violent imagery, and suggests what kind of audience the movement courts and attracts. While stress is placed on personal growth, changes occur within the whole community, whose members presumably enter "the land of gentleness" together once they complete the cleansing process. No historic time mars this process, which resembles organic forms and cycles of nature. Togetherness constitutes its chief value, as the dust jacket of Wojtek Bellon's record *Bukowina I* professes: "*chodzi o to, żeby razem śpiewać, żeby być ze sobą przy tym śpiewaniu bo ono jest funkcją wspólnego bytowania*" [what matters is that we sing **together**, that we're with each other during singing because that's the function of communal being].<sup>288</sup>

Bellon clearly prioritizes benefits of this mutually enriching experience over whatever verbal 'message' his lyrics could convey. Anna Barańczak's analysis of song lyrics also concludes with the claim that

the word in "post-Gutenbergian culture," the "culture of iconosphere" and electronic media [...] is gradually losing its role as a carrier of meaning and its significance becomes reduced to its phatic function [...]. In cultural systems in which authentic knowledge of reality and exchange of opinions are often being replaced by presentations of general phrases and slogans [...] personal contact and sense of community are more important than the need for precise self-definition and demonstration of individuality. (102)

Barańczak speaks here of mass culture and of the word in popular music. Without necessarily sharing the critic's slightly elitist point of view, Bellon seems to agree with

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<sup>288</sup> Emphases in the original.



her assessment of contemporary culture. *Kraina łagodności* fills a niche in Poland that corresponds to what Bulat Okudzhava is credited with naming “the folklore of the Soviet urban intelligentsia.”<sup>289</sup> We should not let the simplicity of the “rainbow” language mislead us—Bellon’s compositions achieve high levels of verbal and musical complexity, and are remarkable for their graceful lyricism. Instead of being confrontational or riveting, the music creates, for the most part, a soothing, introspective mood and atmosphere. This quality prompts certain people to deride the entire genre of sung poetry as diluted hippie saccharin, especially of the *piosenka turystyczna* [tourist song] variety, an offshoot of vagabond culture into which Bellon sometimes tapped.

In terms of technique, the guitar reigns supreme in all kinds of sung poetry. Affectionately nicknamed *wiosło*, “the oar,” it symbolizes freedom of movement, portability, and usefulness in many situations. It was, without doubt, the instrument of choice for the 1980s bard. Its power could be muted or unleashed according to the needs of the player by soft strumming, vicious pounding on the strings (or even the box), and empowering or enriching the sound through inclusion of multiple players. For the most part, the compositions are kept simple and the sound low, to give words a chance to be heard. The instrumental accompaniment should not be considered expendable or secondary—even if the words carry most of the semantic weight, music not only creates the right mood for their reception, but also adds a layer of meaning on its own. In addition, the sounds of the guitar signal the beginning of a performance, bringing the audience to attention.

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<sup>289</sup> See Rachel Platonov, 87.

To illustrate how these practices typically functioned in “real life,” I would like to present a personal case of the group “*Do poduchy*” [Pillow talk], comprised of students of Polish Literature and Philology at the University of Wrocław. Its members included:

Bogusław Białecki—guitar, vocals (the composer of the majority of the band’s songs; big fan of Leonard Cohen);  
Janusz Kula—various guitars (arranged most of the band’s compositions, an accomplished guitar player);  
Romuald Mendelak—bass (“polytechnic input, and during most difficult times, also mobile in the form of the car Łada”);<sup>290</sup>  
Jacek Wilczko—percussion, harmonica;  
Mariusz Milczarek—guitars, flute (“wasted talent, who played Frank Zappa better than Zappa”);  
Dariusz Franckiewicz—guitar, vocals, harmonica (also composed a few songs for the band; big fan of Stachura and Kaczmarski).

*Pillow Talk* performed informally for groups of friends (for about ten years of their extended college careers, roughly between 1979-1989). They sang songs by Stachura (to Marek Gałązka’s music), Leonard Cohen (in Maciej Zembaty’s translation), Wolna Grupa Bukowina, Nasza Basia Kochana, Pod Budą, Jacek Woźniak, and sometimes their own original texts and compositions. For them, as well as many others around them at the time, “Stachura was God”—they reached highest levels of pathos with his poems, read all of his texts.

The world of song and poetry was for them an intellectual and creative refuge from hopeless, harsh reality. It channeled “yearning for a better, more beautiful world” into art. It helped to cultivate personal relationships: friendship and love. While they held Kaczmarski in high regard and considered him unimitable, they saw themselves and their performances as a reaction against “*kaczmarkowszczyzna*,” a sub-culture of the “solemn and too serious bunch, singing misty-eyed doing nothing, but thinking they were fighting

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<sup>290</sup> All quotes for this section come from a personal interview I conducted with the band’s members on Dec. 28, 2007.

socialism.” They also reacted against rock music, as too loud, channeling aggression under the guise of protest. Their choice of songs reflected their life philosophy: they wanted to assert that simple pleasures of life can be poetic, no matter what the political system was. “Today it’s called inner immigration, but for us it simply meant normal life away from the chaos of politics.”

Performances took place in small, intimate groups, in dorm rooms or sometimes in the acoustically perfect stairwells, with the sound-carrying potential “approximating gothic cathedrals.” The protocol required that the listeners stop talking when the guitars began to play. What the band considered important was the mood—light, with a touch of humor, but also serious and introspective whenever serious songs were performed. Entertainment was thus combined with reflection. If someone was disruptive, they were asked to leave and were not invited again. Song was one of the “immanent ingredients” of parties (usually paired with alcohol consumption), and often included singing along, since the lyrics were universally recognized and beloved by members of the audience. *Pillow Talk* was not a unique phenomenon in student life—“the sounds of the guitar and singing resounded from behind many a dorm room’s door.” With time, the performances began to include elements of self-parody or playfulness, to avoid boredom of singing the same repertoire always the same way.

A band which arose in very similar conditions of student life, *Stare Dobre Małżeństwo* (“Old Married Couple,” or SDM), successfully continues the style professionally until this day. With a core of four men, two of whom had held on like “an old married couple” already in 1983 when the band was formed at the University of Poznań, the band “has been linked to Stachura, that man-legend, from the very

beginning.”<sup>291</sup> *SDM* portrays itself in a half-serious, half-joking way, both on the website and during live shows. Performances are interspersed with personal anecdotes of student life (even though the band’s members have reached middle age), usually reported by the band’s front man, Krzysztof Myszkowski:

*Jesień 1985. Egzamin z filozofii, w głowie szum, a za ścianą studentki psychologii już po egzaminach, co robić, co czynić—uczyć się czy szukać żony? W pokoju obok, z piątego roku depilująca nogi zdobytą żyletką Iridium, nucila pod wąsem: “kim tyś jest, madame?”*

[Fall 1985. Philosophy exam, static in my head, behind the wall the female psychology majors already done with their exams, what to do, how to act—to study or to find a wife? In the room next door, a female student shaving her legs with an Iridium razor, humming under her mustache: “who are you, madame?”]<sup>292</sup>

Whenever the band feels that the audience is not sufficiently involved, they do something integrational. For example, in their Chicago concert on January 15, 2000, Myszkowski asked everybody in the audience to stand up, lock hands, and sway together as he led the melody of an uplifting song. (Corny as it sounds, it did relax the audience and transform the mood.) Stachura remains their main attraction. In 2005, *SDM* released a new, fuller version of their previous *Missa Pagana* album, which now includes a complete set of poems that comprise it (as Myszkowski reported in the concert, two pieces used to resist their attempts to set them to music, until they were finally able to “crack” them).

As these descriptions demonstrate, the audiences who gathered around performers of the Land of Gentleness strain opted for a quieter, more intimate contact with the “living word,” treating it less as a form of opposition than a form of self-preservation. This does not imply that they were unconcerned or uninvolved in political life. As Dariusz Franckiewicz says, “our attitude towards communism [*komuna*] united

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<sup>291</sup> From the band’s official website at: <http://www.sdm.art.pl/>. Apr. 14, 2008.

<sup>292</sup> From *SDM*’s concert in Wrocław, November 15, 2005.

professors and students more than mutual interest in literature or culture in general. Each of us had the same dreary future ahead of us.” But unlike the angry, rebellious young people who listened to rock music or challenged riot police, this group yearned for a balanced, “normal” life without constant intrusions of History of Politics. When Jan Woźniak reflected on what attracted young people to Stachura’s writing, he noted that the strongest pull was its connection with “Franciscan thought. That these events’ participants understood those ideas showed in their behavior: in their openness, mutual respect, in their attempts to find mutual understanding in order to experience something wonderful.”<sup>293</sup>

I did not intend to create a bifurcation between politicized and non-involved groups. What I delineated above presents two extreme ends of one continuum, between which many other kinds of responses were possible. It is remarkable how similar, and how noble the values of all these young people were—freedom, individual responsibility, compassion for human suffering, self-knowledge. Certainly, once *poezja śpiewana* has become established as *mode du jour*, its potential for new discoveries weakened. By the early 1990s, it has become its own self-referential institution, with festivals (like the yearly “Stachuriada”), larger concerts, recordings, and occasional waves of nostalgic feeling for the lost charms of dorm life.<sup>294</sup> On one hand, political involvement can—and did—create dogmatism and undesirable heightening of nationalist extremism. On the other, the sweetly righteous approach of the “gentle ones” also turned in some instances into caricatures of Stachuriad “rites.” Whenever one Truth exclusively steers people’s

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<sup>293</sup> Originally published in *Słowo Powszechne* on January 19, 1984, quoted in Buchowski (311).

<sup>294</sup> As Svetlana Boym suggests, “nostalgia depends on materiality of place, sensual perceptions, smells, and sounds. [...] Locale is not merely a context but also remembered sensation and the material debris of past life” (*The Future of Nostalgia* 258).

thoughts, its potential for questioning diminishes. Adorno always warned about the “terror” of anything all-encompassing, homogenizing, or universalizing, on the suspicion that “the whole is the false” (Minima Moralia 50). Any large wave that sweeps along wide swaths of the beach carries in its fold pieces of rubbish and small pebbles. Neither end of the movement was able to avoid falling prey to its own invented mythologies. At its worst, it dissolved into generalities and feel-good nonsense. At its best, it fostered personal responsibility, creativity, and empathy.

The sphere of hopes and wishes must be viewed as formative and enabling, in that it creates a space where common experiences can be evaluated and shaped. A recurring theme in Maxine Greene’s book Releasing the Imagination, a chronicle of her expansive thinking on the role of the arts in education, is the idea of “opening” or “clearing” space for cognition. Imagining that which is not, that which was or which could be, opens the mind and activates new ways of seeing the world. “In contradicting the established, or the given,” Greene argues, “art reaches beyond what is established and leads those who are willing to risk transformations to the shaping of a social vision.”<sup>295</sup> With all the misunderstandings and oversimplifications of our imperfect world, yet also aided with the richness and variety of imaginative approaches, the 1980s Polish culture of song did provide a worthy testing ground for social change. It allowed young people to reconsider and re-figure their place in the world, not only as individuals but also as fibers in the fabric of society.

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<sup>295</sup> From the chapter titled “Imagination, Breakthroughs, and the Unexpected” (30).

## CONCLUSION: LOOKING BACKWARDS, FORWARD THINKING

In my new robe  
This morning—  
Someone else.<sup>296</sup>

At the end of Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, a beautiful and moving tale of an impossible love, disembodied Troilus wanders among the "erratik starres" of the ninth sphere. When he looks down on "this wrecched world" from above, he smiles, with a mixture of sadness and relief. Chaucer then switches points of view and directs our attention to the work he has just completed, to address the readers, who have just finished reading the story. He does so obliquely, by calling out to his text:

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,  
Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,  
So sende myght to make in som comedye!  
But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,  
But subgit be to alle poesye.<sup>297</sup>

As the poet sends his "little book" out into the world, he expresses both pride and trepidation. He asks the Almighty Maker for continued inspiration in the composition of tragic and comic works; he asks the reader to be understanding and to judge his poetry fairly. Chaucer's invocation is an exercise in literary convention, but it also allows the poet to speak about his hopes and fears, those of a writer and those of a mortal. The vantage point of the ending gives him a chance to see himself and his work from a

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<sup>296</sup> Poem nr. 1 (25). Basho. On Love and Barley—Haiku of Basho. Trans. Lucien Stryk. London: Penguin, 1985.

<sup>297</sup> The quote preserves the original, inconsistent Middle English spelling (V:1786-90). From: "Troilus and Criseyde. The Riverside Chaucer. Larry D. Benson, ed. 3rd ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 473-585.

distance—spatial, temporal, and metaphorical. He knows that one day he will join the ranks of other “dead white men” like Virgil, Ovid, and Homer, that his books will replace his person and will have to do all the speaking on his behalf. He imagines his text *as an* emissary on a journey from which it cannot return, or at least not return unchanged.

As my dissertation comes to a close, I would also like to take stock of its aims and limitations. Through detailed textual analyses of poems, songs, literary criticism and other forms of public expression, I have argued that the genre of *poezja śpiewana* was part of a complex web of social practices that shaped and changed a generation. On the one hand, by sketching out common patterns in behaviors and responses I delineated trends indicative of a collective cultural consciousness. On the other, by stressing individual differences between artists and their distinct prescriptions for improving quality of life in Poland I intended to complicate the collective model with the inevitable personal exceptions. In my focus on “textual experience,” I asserted the primacy of texts because their centrality to the activities connected with live performances cannot be denied. Texts and various readings of them formed the underlying foundation on which both performers and listeners based their mutual understanding and where they met in communal interpretive efforts. Music added affective depth to the experience of words and as such must be considered as indispensable and inseparable from any verbal content. Jacek Kleyff, the creative legend of the *Salon Niezależnych* [Salon of the Independent Ones] cabaret, summarizes this symbiotic relationship between words and music in his 1981 song “*Co słowo zawiera...*” [What Word contains...]:

<i>Co Słowo zabiera—</i>	[What Word takes away—
<i>Muzyka otwiera,</i>	Music opens up,
<i>co Słowo zamyka—</i>	what Word closes off—
<i>oddaje Muzyka.</i>	Music carries on.



[. . . . .]	
<i>Co Słowo głosi—</i>	What Word proclaims—
<i>Muzyka podnosi,</i>	Music raises,
<i>co Słowo poleca—</i>	what Word suggests—
<i>Muzyka rozświeca.</i>	Music illuminates.
[. . . . .]	
<i>bo, co Słowo wie,</i>	because what Word knows,
<i>to Muzyka chce,</i>	is what Music wants,
<i>co w Muzyce tkwi,</i>	what is lodged in Music,
<i>to w Słowach jak drzwi.</i>	finds a door in Words.] <sup>298</sup>

In addition, I also proposed that the third factor, the artistic personality of the bard, needs to be appended to the dual hermeneutical model, since it contributed to how *poezja śpiewana* was received and understood.

Scholarship that examines intersections of words and music in performance is quite scant; sung poetry in particular has only now begun to attract serious critical attention. My dissertation enters into that gap, although it could only signal a number of issues without exploring them at length. With the exception of Anna Barańczak and Edward Balcerzan, nobody has looked at songs as examples of a dual-coded system in which music and words work in concert. Incidentally, studies of Provençal troubadours have been also afflicted with this problem, compounded by the scarcity of medieval source materials devoted to the musical dimensions of performances. This is where the study of contemporary Polish songs can enrich parallel analyses of medieval cases, no matter how tenuous the connection between modern and pre-modern troubadours really is. For a literary scholar, writing about the sphere of music and affect in this context poses significant challenges, not only because of the lack of sufficient musical training but also because the feelings associated with such a multi-layered experience are difficult—if not impossible—to recreate on paper. Martin Jay gives this quandary another

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<sup>298</sup> Kleyff, 93.

twist when he comments on it in the following way: “Indeed, it is perhaps because experience can sometimes become an end in itself that it escapes the exchange principle. Who, after all, would want to trade one’s own experience of sex for an account of another’s?” (6). Nonetheless, accounts that describe experiences of *poezja śpiewana* was all we could examine.

In this and many other ways, *poezja śpiewana* provides experience of the liminal. Its power feeds off the tensions of in-between: the ineffable and the commonly expressed, “mine” and “theirs,” distant and immediate, authentic and contrived. Most available criticism does not venture out beyond the literary aspects of the genre, neglecting the larger context of socio-cultural realities and political movements against which the enthusiasts of sung poetry often defined themselves. The question why the music explosion happened in the 1980s in the way it did can be fully explained only through these multiple contexts—developments in literature and other arts which led to greater audience participation; social changes involving wider access to education and higher consumption of goods and culture; political events which galvanized public opinion and mobilized the nation in the struggle to change how the country was run.

Language urged, facilitated, and registered transformations of Polish life. In addition to shifts in poetics, I examined the peculiar relationship between the rhetoric of communist propaganda and both literary and “everyday” language used in opposition to the dominant public discourse. As a prime site where identities are declared, disavowed, and manipulated, language marks firm division lines between self-defined groups of users, but also shows, less directly, how fluid such verbally-asserted differences can be. Oppositional writers frequently exploited the rift between registers (“official” and

private) and used the language of propaganda to imbue it with ironic or otherwise unintended meaning. Close reading skills often associated with metaphoric language of poetry were thus employed in subversive ways, reminiscent of methods formerly used against various foreign occupying forces. The strong connection of the Polish tongue with the national cause certainly merits more exhaustive analysis than I had room for in this limited format. The special function of intellectuals called upon by the needs of the victimized nation to inspire patriotic feeling and to mobilize it for decisive action placed an inordinate amount of stress on all intellectual activity, in particular on literature, historiography, and philology. Throughout the nineteenth century up to the regaining of independence, Polish writers reached for Poland's unique history for a variety of ends, but each had to negotiate its middle position as *antemurale Christianitatis*, a protective wall buffering the West's vulnerable edges from the incursions of the rapacious East, its vincular or peripheral status alternately understood in terms of a natural virtue or a thoroughly undeserved curse.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> The idea expressed by Mickiewicz, although clothed in a new conceptual garb, was not a real novelty. Like the Romans searching for illustrious myths of origin to compete with the Greeks they conquered with military action but still strove to match as a culture, or the Britons reaching back to Troy for ancestry to establish a more ancient provenance for their race of settlers, so did the Poles embellish their relatively late start in European history with fantastic genealogies. In the periods of glory, these genealogies would explain Poland's 'natural' leadership, while in the moments of crisis, they would be used to strengthen the weakened spirit by bolstering national pride and self-confidence. Thus X. Wojciech Dębołęcki, a Franciscan theologian writing in 1633, goes on to prove that "the oldest in Europe Polish or Scythian Kingdom is the only successor of Jadam, Seth, and Japhet in the world; established by God in Paradise as the ruler of the world; and it is for this reason that Poles are called Sarmatians" (qtd. in Bystron, 18-9). Dębołęcki wants to see the wings of the emblematic Polish white eagle spread over the entire world, "when some Polish or Aquilean king, having conquered the Turks, will transfer the Majesty of the world from Poland to Syria and establish it on the Lebanese mountain, from where our ancestor Polach had originated and from there he brought it over for us" (19). The reasoning based on historical 'data' was supported by linguistic arguments as well. The very same Dębołęcki maintains not only that "the Slavic language is primordial in the world," that "the primary Syrian language spoken by Jadam, Noah, Sem, and Japhet was no other than Slavic," but also that "Greek, Latin, and other languages have developed out of it" (20). And if this type of argument can be explained (if indeed not laughed away) by a naiveté attributable to the age which produced it, one would find oneself hard pressed to replicate the same line of defense for the work published in 1895 in Vilnius, bearing the revealing title: "The Harmony of Tongues, or Their Merging into One, that Is Polish, through the Mediation of Phoenician, Returned to the Family of Slavic Tongues." See

The “middle” geopolitical position of Poland allowed it to draw currency from two equally full cultural coffers—the pan-Slavic heritage that included lively oral traditions, and the treasure trove of Western European culture. These two sometimes complemented each other, and sometimes indicated split allegiances.<sup>300</sup> The father of Polish folklore studies, Oskar Kolberg, for example, believed that the folk songs he gathered reflected a unique Polish identity detectable at the level of sound: “Melody is the soul of song, in which you will recognize thought and heart as if in a mirror, for it characterizes the spirit of each generation.”<sup>301</sup> In reaching for the myths of medieval Europe, therefore, contemporary Polish poets wished to reconnect two somewhat discontinuous traditions. What connected them was a yearning for a more natural, potently universal art that stirred the heart as much as it stimulated the mind. When we look back on the troubadour tradition itself, however, we will notice that a tinge of nostalgia colored it from the beginning.

Nothing certain is known about the exact circumstances of composition or performance of medieval songs, although a number of collections called *chansonniers*

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Jan Stanisław Bystron’s collection of papers titled National Megalomania (1935), in which he discusses the formation of popular beliefs and opinions about one’s own people and about foreigners, through the lens of Polish national pride. When the first chapter of his book appeared in 1924 as a feuilleton series in a Cracow periodical *Przegląd Współczesny*, it attracted a great deal of attention and initiated a wave of heated polemics. Bystron, Jan S. Megalomania narodowa. Warszawa: Rój, 1935.

<sup>300</sup> It was also a source of mutual prejudice and misunderstanding. Even as late as 1929, A Brief History of Slavic Literatures and Literary Languages, jointly written by Aleksander Brückner and Tadeusz Lehr-Splawiński, still recalled linguist Johann Gottfried Herder’s easy characterization of the Slavs:

The universal Slavic characteristics are found nowhere else but in the cult of earth-nature; neither in the folk song, nor in the love of the epic and tradition; not in the self-sacrifice for freedom. Deep sentimentality, nostalgic pondering, tender sensibility, stirring emotionality next to wild imagination, giddy happiness; the mood thus very changeable, from one extreme to the other, from a friendly attitude today to a hostile one tomorrow, unstable and treacherous, is what characterizes Slavic lyricism. (4)

<sup>301</sup> Quoted from: Millerowa, Elżbieta and Agata Skrukwa. “Oskar Kolberg (1814-1890).” The History of Polish Folklore Studies 1864-1918. Ed. Helena Kapeluś and Julian Krzyżanowski. Warszawa: PWN, 1982. 23-103. (26)

contain lyrics and occasional musical scores for some of them. Another source of knowledge about the lives and adventures of troubadours and trouvères are the *vidas* (mini-biographies) and *razos* (short anecdotal explications of poems that often provide ‘rationales’ behind the composition of songs they feature). These pieces provide less accurate historical data than conscious self-fashioning, as they were often composed for entertainment.<sup>302</sup> In his essay on early troubadours, Stephen G. Nichols persuasively argues that *chansonniers* “may be said to have created the troubadour corpus in the thirteenth century” (75), thus reminding us that the filter of nostalgic mediation had been already in place in the early Middle Ages, having irrevocably shaped not only our own indirect impression of whatever live troubadour performances could have been like but also the vehicle of literary transmission itself. According to Nichols, manuscript evidence suggests a shift in “performative presence” over the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries; with the disappearance of the performers’ living bodies, stylized images and literary descriptions took their place to remind us forever of their absence, since “the body of the work cannot quite stand for the body of the poet” (69). Moreover, the undue emphasis on lyrics dealing with *amor de lonh* (love from afar)—and the subsequent exclusion from the field of interest works with political or other undertones—accorded Provençal poetry by contemporary readers shows a bias that can be partially explained by the mode of transmission.

Because *poezja śpiewana* focused so much on embodiment, the effacement of distance between the past and present, and direct contact with ‘living texts,’ I would like

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<sup>302</sup> See Elizabeth Aubrey’s *The Music of the Troubadours* (6-7). A good example of a sensationalist celebrity was Jaufré Rudel, author of six extant compositions. His *vida* claims that he produced good sounding songs with poor lyrics (“*E fez de leis mains vers ab bons sons, ab paubres mots*”), and that he fell in love with the countess of Tripoli without ever seeing her. In pursuit of his overseas lover, Rudel traveled to Tripoli only to fall into her arms and die on the spot (de Riquer, *Vidas y retratos*, 8).

to offer a few reflections on medieval ideas of textuality and on realities of manuscript culture particularly relevant here. Instead of demasking the contemporary artists' efforts as opposite of "authentic attachment to the past,"<sup>303</sup> I suggest a thoughtful re-validation of nostalgia and imaginative refraction. What manual reproduction of texts keenly demonstrated—and modern printing methods effectively obscure—was the "human drama enshrined in all artifacts."<sup>304</sup> Readers of pre-modern texts face this drama much more often, handling pages made of animal skins, with clearly visible marks of original scribal labor and subsequent readerly glosses on the margins.<sup>305</sup> The crucial characteristic of non-printed material that influences its reception is that "chirographs are, like oral utterances, somatic—they are not separated from the body in the moment of their production and they continue to show traces of the body that produced them."<sup>306</sup> The modern bard of *poezja śpiewana* performs and embodies this somatic aspect in the form of the song.

Perhaps what makes the troubadour such a compelling cultural fixture is the universal paradigm of distance and yearning inscribed in the idea of *amor de lonh*. Absence and otherness can be painful, but they also inspire us to build imaginary bridges across the distance that separates us from each other. This space fills with longing and

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<sup>303</sup> Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (10). Scribner views nostalgia as unproductive, unless it leads its sufferer through the expected stages of mourning all the way to "disavowal" of the inaccessible object of yearning.

<sup>304</sup> "What every artifact displays," textual critic G. Thomas Tanselle rather mournfully observes, "is the residue of an unequal contest: the effort of a human being to transcend the human, an effort constantly thwarted by physical realities" (64). G. Thomas Tanselle. *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989.

<sup>305</sup> A wonderful new book on the subject of marginalia in medieval books of hours is Eamon Duffy's *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers 1240-1570*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006.

<sup>306</sup> The quote comes from Doane's brilliant essay on editorial methods in Old English. Doane's primary concern revolves around the intersection of orality and textuality (literacy) in chirographic transmission, where the manuscripts function as "performative productions" (83). Doane, A. N. "Oral Texts, Intertexts, and Intratexts: Editing Old English." *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*. Ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991. 75-113.

dissatisfaction, misunderstanding and wishful thinking, yet it also lights up with momentary joys of connection and aesthetic pleasure. Marcel Proust indulges in this bittersweet pleasure over several volumes of his monumental work on memory, subjectivity, and the passage of time. For Proust, we cannot fully understand or experience beauty until it is processed from a distance, “by virtue of that inevitable law that dictates one can only imagine that which is absent.”<sup>307</sup> Art springs up from the fissures between experience and our recollection of it, it comes to life *because of* that otherwise lamentable distance. It seems, therefore, that a more dynamic model of literary experience is necessary, one that takes into account the nostalgic pull already scripted into the texts themselves. Just as the poet’s life and its representation on paper do not form a closed, static system where influence flows in one direction,<sup>308</sup> books likewise compel us to interact with them through a voice we imagine we can hear sounding from between the pages. *Tolle lege*, take up and read. We can be changed by texts as much as texts can be changed by our response to that call. Chaucer knew this well when he gingerly pushed his “little book” towards future readers, when it was time to let go.

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<sup>307</sup> From Le Temps retrouvé (178-9): “*Tant de fois, au cours de ma vie, la réalité m’avait déçu parce qu’au moment où je la percevais mon imagination, qui était mon seul organe pour jouir de la beauté, ne pouvait s’appliquer à elle, en vertu de la loi inévitable qui veut qu’on ne puisse imaginer que ce qui est absent.*” À la recherche du temps perdu VII. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.

<sup>308</sup> Svetlana Boym’s book Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet explores this issue of interaction between textual myths and “real” lives of poets at length, with the actual circumstances of Soviet writers never far from sight. Boym brings up Russian formalist critic Yury Tynyanov, who complicated accepted notions of authorship and textual persona by suggesting the idea of “‘literary evolution,’ a perpetual flux of discourses and boundaries of discourses, that shapes literary texts, literary personalities, and literary ideology. ‘Literary’ always comes first in his concerns, not as a defacement of the author but rather as his cultural refashioning” (23).

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