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## The Autistic Chirping of Memory: Butler, Tustin, Mokry

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2023, NR 1, S. 33–47

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*for my brave son, the Sparrow Wing*

### 1. The Regimes of Polish Grievability

“I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow.”<sup>1</sup> The “I” in this sentence is an individual I. However, the scope of what it treats as grievable and what it excludes from this realm is informed by its immersion in, and colonization by, collective patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, while there is no such thing as collective subjectivity, each member of a social group at least partly follows the group’s patterns of grievability, even if always, hopefully, with a difference. Thus, with all the necessary caution and all due attention given to the possible differentiations and heterogeneities, we are allowed to use Judith Butler’s formula on a collective level and state that a community is as much constituted by those it grieves for as by those whose

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1 Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York–London: Verso, 2004), 46.

deaths it disavows. Looking at the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that are at work in this respect is certainly one of the best ways of knowing who we are.

Polish society – a rather large and internally differentiated bundle of communities, shot through by powerful homogenizing forces of internal colonization – is a case in point. Think of the double refugee crisis on the eastern border of Poland. Here, Polish sensitivity to the fate of the Ukrainian refugees contrasts sharply with the almost utter non-grievability of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees on the border with Belarus – a contrast which so painfully reminded us of the racist limitations of Polish hospitality and of the deeply rooted xenophobia that defines us as a society. Think of the repeated description of the Russian invasion on Ukraine as the first European war after 1945, a slogan which so swiftly excludes from our view the wars in former Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup> It reminds us not only of the extent to which Polish society is still defined by Catholic identification (with Bosnian Muslim population being less grievable) and possibly of a racist prejudice against the Balkans as the Europe’s “barbarian South,” but also – and more interestingly – of the extent to which the mania of the end of the Cold War and the fall of the communist regime in Poland made us incapable of taking in the cruelty of the Yugoslavian disaster. Think of the recent crisis around the figure of John Paul II. What is worth noting in the present context is the striking contrast between the grievability of the victims of pedophilia, which might have become the driving force behind the ultimate fall of the most important Polish idol, and the utter non-grievability of the African victims of AIDS who fell prey to that very idol’s mindless pro-death policy directed against safe sex. What comes to the fore in this contrast is, surely, racism again, but also – and more interestingly – the cult of the baby as such, which plays the key role in both cases, a cult which is still a defining aspect of Polish culture: we support John Paul II’s anti-abortion policy because we love kids and we are troubled by John Paul II’s policy concerning pedophilia because we love kids. A new national holiday proposed by the ruling party – one that would commemorate children who fell victim of Nazi or Soviet state violence – was certainly designed to hush down the shock of the revelations

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2 Konstanty Gebert, *Ostateczne rozwiązania. Ludobójcy i ich dzieło* [Final solutions: The genocide perpetrators and their work] (Warszawa: Agora, 2022), 542.

concerning John Paul II, but it feeds on the same cult of the child which made the shock possible in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

Much additional work is needed if Butler's useful formula were to manifest its full analytic potential. Among other complex issues, it is to be remembered that what defines us are not only the objects of grieving and the nature of the harm done to them, but also the ways and practices of how we remember them. In particular, it is rather doubtful if the aggressively monumentalist gestures of public commemoration that Polish rightwing is fond of can be really identified as part of a work of mourning. You do not mourn your lost ones as lost if you are trying to immortalize them in the national thanatic pantheon. Think of the famously infamous contrast between the Warsaw Umschlagplatz monument, an admirable attempt to mourn for the Jews sent by trains to Treblinka from that very spot, and the shockingly ugly train car full of crosses (and one matzeva) which stands nearby and commemorates deportations of Polish citizens to the East.<sup>4</sup> This is not only a vivid case of an attempt to make one class of victims less grievable than the other, but also an example of two radically different ways of remembering in the public space. The moving, quiet, white space of absence (designed by Hanna Szmalenberg and Władysław Klamerus) is juxtaposed here with the aggressive black monstrosity (designed by Maksymilian Biskupski), with crosses looking more like harpoons directed against all the enemies of our community rather than like signs that mark a loss. This is an extreme example, but many cases of public commemorations of the lost ones of any national community are, inevitably, marred by the element of the bombastic which viciously replaces the work of mourning. There are many ways to avoid mourning, a pompous or simply all-too smooth and ritualized commemoration being one of the most obvious and most commonly used instruments, one that lies in our collective toolbox just next to the straightforward oblivion. It is simply not an easy job to keep on facing the lostness of the lost ones and the enigmatic questions they keep on asking us, to re-open ourselves to these questions again and

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3 TVN 24 Biznes (TV station), accessed June 19, 2023, <https://tvn24.pl/biznes/z-kraju/nowe-swieto-panstwowe-10-wrzesnia-grupa-poslow-pis-wniosla-projekt-do-sejmu-narodowy-dzien-wspomnienia-gehenny-polskich-dzieci-wojny-6854357>. The motion has been passed and the holiday is now official.

4 Elżbieta Janicka, *Festung Warschau* [The stronghold Warsaw] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2011).

again – and to permanently question and redefine ourselves as a result of that opening.<sup>5</sup>

Now, as the example of the impressive Umschlagplatz monument clearly shows, it is often the imaginative artists who can do the job that is needed in such cases. At least sometimes they manage to break the silence of oblivion or silence the noisy drums of public commemorations that make the voice of loss inaudible or cut through the all-too smooth surface of rituals that pretend to remember the loss but in fact make it all-too present through representation. In what follows I would like to take a look at one particular and very peculiar example of such an artistic attempt at renewing and reopening Polish memory. What I have in mind is a strikingly original and beautiful book of poetry by Marcin Mokry titled *Świergot* [Chirping]. However, in order to prepare us for the reading, I would like to show my own toolbox which will be provided by the psychoanalyst Frances Tustin.

## 2. The Autistic Object and the Refusal of Mourning

Tustin's notion of the autistic object which is of special interest for me in the present context should be viewed against the background of two rival theories of individuation, proposed, respectively, by Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein. Famously, Winnicott suggested that the process of separation between the mother and the child, the process thanks to which the child becomes a relatively independent entity, is necessarily mediated by what he called the transitional object.<sup>6</sup> The object, a soft and comforting piece of materiality, appears within the so-called potential space which grows between the two bodies, with the mother slowly distancing herself from the child. If the withdrawal of the mother is not too sudden and is not troubled by other distorting circumstances, the object can play the role of the token of both union and separation, without forcing the child into the traumatizing feeling of loss which would have to be mourned. The transitional object which is not just an object of contemplation, but is actively manipulated by the child – it is played with – is the first not-me object for the emerging subject, without being

5 Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, ed. John Fletcher (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 234–259.

6 Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 1–34.

something fully external. By re-presenting the mother, it allows the child to cope with the maternal absence.

Equally famously, Melanie Klein believed that the process of separation is inevitably accompanied by the dramatic feeling of loss.<sup>7</sup> The loss forces the child to move from the original paranoid-schizoid position in which it denies its separation and numerical difference from the so-called “good breast” into the more mature, but painful depressive position in which, initially, the child perceives the mother as a lost whole, while also feeling guilty of the “destruction” of the maternal object. Only gradually, through the process of reparation which is also the first instance of the work of mourning, does the child recover its trust in the existence of the maternal object. It also develops its own representations of the object, which, however, do take into account the separation and loss. On this theory, symbolization – including the development of language – is governed by the mechanisms of the act of mourning, with the symbols “knowing” they are not what they represent.<sup>8</sup>

Now, Frances Tustin seems to be using a theoretical framework which is a combination of Winnicottian and Kleinian perspectives. According to this model (which Tustin does not formulate explicitly), the objects of play do work as transitional objects, but the play is at the same time a work of mourning which aims at relative recovery from the feeling of loss caused by separation. This implicit model is, however, only the positive background of a relatively successful development against which Tustin analyzes what she is really interested in: the bleak world of the child with autism.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of autism the process of separation and individuation is radically distorted. The reasons for these distortions are partly inborn and partly to be looked for in the early relation between the mother and the child, even though Tustin is very careful not to blame the maternal carer for the situation. Whatever the reasons, however, the child with autism experiences the external world as the source an unbearable, nameless terror, as an abyss into which the child fears it will fall. It is unable to play with objects that would open for it a path to relatively successful separation from the mother. Thus, it confronts the black hole of the

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7 Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude* (London: Vintage, 1997), 61–93.

8 Hanna Segal, *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (London–New York: Routledge, 2015).

9 Frances Tustin, *Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients* (London: Karnac Books, 2003).

universe without any mediation. In order to defend itself against this horror, it resorts to contradictory but complementary strategies centered upon, respectively, autistic shapes and autistic objects.

The autistic shapes are relatively stable compositions of sense impressions, mostly of tactile nature.<sup>10</sup> They are perfectly private and absolutely “soft” in the sense that the encounter with them is not characterized by any resistance. They are not things or objects, but rather the impressions of the very surfaces of things, freed from the things themselves. With a set of stereotypical, self-stimulating moves and gestures, the child with autism resorts to the shapes in order to surround itself with their familiar softness which protects it from the horror of the void.

The use of the autistic object is also a form of self-stimulation, but works very differently.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the absolutely soft autistic shape, but also unlike the relatively soft transitional object, the autistic object is absolutely hard. It can be a matchbox car, a stone with rough edges, a piece of hard plastic. It is not a toy and it is not a symbol. In fact, it is not an object perceived as truly separate from the child's body. It is defined by its function which is to shield the child from the void into which the child should but is unable to step, as it lacks the capability to build the bridge composed of transitional objects of mourning. The autistic object bars the way out: it is a plug which screens off the void of separation, but so does it block the path to the work of mourning. It is a non-transitional, intransitive object which does not lead anywhere. It is a mock-exteriority: by stimulating itself on and on by the hard autistic object the child both confirms its own existence, pretends to be in contact with something exterior and bars its own way to the true exteriority, while remaining within the screened off, protected sphere guarded by the hardness of the object. The object blocks the way to the sphere where intersubjective linguistic representations could develop, but – at least for the time being – it is simply safer for the child to stay with it, for what awaits it on the other side of the autistic object is not the bridge of representations, but the void of nothingness. Until the therapeutic process has not reached any relative success it is cruel, dangerous and unwise to rob the child of its protection. And so it remains within the dual world of soft autistic shapes and hard autistic objects which seem

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–169.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 102–118.

to be two aspects that only when dialectically combined can form the hard-and-soft objects of our external world. Incapable of this dialectical combination, the child with autism moves constantly between the two contradictory poles of softness and hardness.

When introducing his idea of transitionality, Donald Winnicott emphasized the fact that one should take into account both transitional objects and transitional phenomena. Among the latter, he mentions also vocal phenomena and sounds which can easily play this role. As we have seen, autistic objects are precisely not transitional. However, according to Frances Tustin, vocal phenomena, including actual words can also play the role quite well. Developing some of Tustin's ideas, Ewa Modzelewska-Kossowska has suggested that the linguistic phenomena that are to function as autistic objects are likely to contain sounds which are equivalents of tactile hardness, sounds such as "r," "g," "k" and so on.<sup>12</sup> Modzelewska-Kossowska focuses on the case of a patient with autism, who produced a curious, extremely suggestive neologism which she identifies as the patient's autistic object. The neologism, "krzykda," is a portmanteau word composed of two Polish words, "krzywda" (harm) and "krzyk" (scream). With the second "k" inserted in the middle, this striking word is a real scream of the hurt unconscious, a lament and protest at the same time, a meaningful-meaningless element which inhibits the all-too smooth passage of linguistic work of mourning and forces it to move in the deadly, repetitive circle from "k" to "k." And since it can be read as "krzyk da" (literally "it will give a scream"), this screaming word of refusal and protest literally and repetitively keeps on keeping the promise of "giving" a scream.

Frances Tustin pointed out that the horror of the void that people troubled by autism feel throughout their lives is sometimes given a particularly accurate expression in various works of the Romantic and Modernist poetry. This is only understandable: the poetry in question also reacts to a drastic disillusion and disenchantment of the world. Thus, Tustin supports her argument with the words of poets who both express the terrible feeling and offer some comfort by the very act of skilful expression. And yet the striking example of "krzykda," the powerful

12 Ewa Modzelewska-Kossowska, *Czy zniknie Warszawa, tak jawa jak sen? Katastrofa koronowirusa i przeklęty świat* [Will Warsaw vanish, both reality and dream? The coronavirus catastrophe and the cursed world] (unpublished). I am most grateful to the Author for giving me access to this important paper as well as for introducing me to the work of Frances Tustin in the first place.

autistic neologism with immense poetic potential, shows that the connection between poetry and the world of autism may be even stronger than Tustin suggests. Formally extreme, “krzykda” does not describe or express a feeling, but rather enacts, performs the dramatic experience in its very structure and vocal anatomy. By blocking the flow of language, by questioning the very mechanisms of transitionality and the work of mourning which should make it possible to cope with the catastrophe, the suffering poetry of *krzykda* refuses to gloss over loss. Paradoxically, in its repetitiveness and impotent perseverance, it preserves the truth of, the very lost-ness of the loss, which our everyday language and our everyday ways of practicing the famous art of losing work through all-too quickly. Thus, while unable to move on, it keeps on re-membering by dis-membering. And it is precisely this path that I want to follow now in reading some aspects of the great poem by Marcin Mokry.

### 3. The Chirping of the Inhuman

Published in 2019, *Świergot* [Chirping] is Mokry's second book of poetry.<sup>13</sup> His first book, titled *czytanie. Pisma* [reading. Scripture], published two years earlier, anticipated some of the gestures of the later volume in an interesting way, but it is only with *Świergot* that Mokry reached the level of radicalism and coherence that are marks of a true brilliance.<sup>14</sup> It is a complex, intellectually and emotionally demanding book on, as one of the reviewers suggested accurately, how the waves of universal history assault and possibly even drown our private stories.<sup>15</sup>

Considered as a book, *Świergot* is a very carefully and beautifully designed material object full of textual and visual effects. First 24 pages of the book follow rather strictly one particular pattern. On the left-hand page we see a title, a date and a short poem. On the bottom of the page we see fragments of entries from a dictionary, captions of illustrations from a botanical textbook or a geographical atlas, as well as fragments

<sup>13</sup> Marcin Mokry, *Świergot* [Chirping] (Wrocław: Fundacja na rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019). Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are translated by the author of this article.

<sup>14</sup> Marcin Mokry, *czytanie. Pisma* [reading. Scripture] (Łódź: Dom Literatury w Łodzi, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Rafał Wawrzyńczyk “Jaskółka retroawangardy” [The swallow of the retroavanguardia], *Dwutygodnik* 3 (2020), accessed June 19, 2023, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artuku-1/8798-jaskolka-retroawangardy.html>.



of advertisements and newspaper announcements. On the right-hand page we see a fragment of an alphabetically ordered list of villages, towns or cities, together with page number and a letter-number code of a given square on a map: evidently a fragment of an index from a world atlas. The list begins *in medias res* with Spanish “Oviedo” and moves on through places whose names start with O and then those whose names begin with P. Both pages are covered with a dense grid composed of tiny dots.

The poems seem to present glimpses from a life of a family composed of Marcin the father (who speaks here in first person) and his children, Antoni and Maria. Marcin seems to be a loving and caring, but troubled and sometimes distracted dad who – in one of the poems – when going away, does promise his son to reappear, but is not sure if he will be really able to keep the promise. The mother is absent, a fact which is difficult not to link to an oncologic illness suggested by some of the textual bits appearing at the bottom of the left-hand page, as well as to passages such as “with her who died” or “You do know well where you are, in the ground.”

The poems are composed of broken fragments, with grammatical and semantic cuts, gaps and shifts within and between the lines. We receive only bits of stories and narratives, scraps of dialogues and soliloquies. Often we may think we are just about to grasp a more coherent whole and arrive a slightly bigger picture, but then we stumble upon one more cut and we lose again the track of understanding. The chopped, distracted nature of the discourse seems to be directly addressed by one the poems which closes with “The end / of language [or: tongue – A. L.]” Not much later we encounter the title of the whole book embedded within a powerful declaration: “nothing else but a chirping / drawn out of remnants.”

And it is right after this declaration that the pattern that the book has followed so far begins to change. First, a single word “tracks” appears as a surprising addition to the list of city names. Then, the next poem confronts us with bleak images (“burnt out, cold, lifeless”) and its dating moves us back in time by five years (the initial dates oscillating between 2017 and 2018). Then “tracks” again, this time twice. The next poem, titled “Maria sees a rose,” is dated 05.04.94 and presents a fragmentary discourse which clearly refers to one of the massacres on the main bazaar in Sarajevo during the war in Bosnia. “The child’s hand / was taken away by a dog,” we read in a sudden moment of semantic coherence. On the top of the next page the word “Pokój” (peace) appears as one of the city

names and the name “Sarajevo” is reproduced on the right-hand side. Apart from two more geographical names appearing at the bottom, the rest of the page is occupied by an odd design which, indeed, looks a bit like a rose. Its middle is marked by the word “duša” („soul” in Bosnian and Serbian) which is surrounded by a circle composed of the repeated word „krv” („blood”). This circle, in turn, is surrounded by a shapeless shape composed of the onomatopoeic, senseless „śriiii,” a chirping repeated numerous times.

From this moment on, the pattern breaks for good and the complexity of the composition becomes rather mind-blowing, so that a detailed reconstruction would be beside the point. Let us focus on the most important elements and aspects of this brilliant and deeply moving composition. Two pages after the “rose” the geographical list gets finally stuck on name which this time is dated: it is “Potočari 13 July 1995,” the place and time of one of the massacres of the civilians from Srebrenica. For the next few pages the book is stamped with textual traces referring to that act of genocide. Mokry makes extensive and imaginative use of documentary evidence by quoting transcripts of dialogs from the so-called Petrović footage, a unique recording of the massacre and its aftermath, as well as a report on exhumations at Kozluk (another site of killings) by a forensic anthropologist Richard Wright.<sup>16</sup> However, a new motive, overlapping with the references to Srebrenica disaster, is soon introduced. With a poem titled “Maria has fever” dated 15.02.46, we move even deeper back in time and soon we find ourselves confronted with the catastrophe of the Shoah in general and with bits and pieces of textual evidence from ghetto of Łódź in particular.

The most general mechanism of this maddening progress is rather clear. Together with Marcin, Maria and Antoni we travel back in time and face outbursts of violence exerted upon not-our-own, upon people of low level of grievability in Polish collective memory. The intimate narrative of the family life gets entangled and confused with historical reports on the violence done to others. As this highly disturbing journey continues, another process escalates, that of the fragmentation of language, of chopping and reshuffling of narratives, poems and documents. What is crucial, however, is that the growing decomposition of language

<sup>16</sup> Richard Wright, “Report on Excavations and Exhumations at Kozluk in 1999: with Appendix on Visits to Konjevici and Potocari,” February 2, 2000, accessed June 19, 2023, <https://srebrenica.sense-agency.com/assets/exhumations/sg-2-06-kozluk-eng.pdf>.

cannot be adequately captured by the idea of fragmentation. Step by step, the chopped, scattered messages turn into, or are replaced by, textual bits whose sensuous nature, their physical placement on the page and their vocal qualities when read aloud increasingly dominate over their semantic dimension. The ultimate result is not so much a fragmented language, but a play of strange elements of post-linguistic, vocal nature.

Three rather different, but intertwined sequences of such elements run through the second half of the book. The first one is composed of various occurrences of the word that we have already encountered, the first really disturbing element in the whole book, namely the repeated word “tracks.” The tracks run through much of the later part of the book, disappearing and reappearing again and again. At some point they are joined by the words “tram” and “whirl.”<sup>17</sup>

The second sequence seems to be an antithesis to this mechanical line of deadly, noisy transport. It is composed of various names of common plants and flowers (namely: evening primrose, knapweed, pea, yarrow, fleabane) scattered here and there on some of the pages. The apparently innocent and idyllic nature of this sequence is of course rather misleading: according to Wright’s report these are the very plants that used to grow on the site of the execution. More precisely, living plants of this kind were found growing around the bodies, while dead plants were found under them. By scattering their names over the pages of his book, Mokry turns the names into objects they were to represent, while turning the very pages into the killing fields of Bosnia. Moreover, consistently trying to confront the intimate story of his three protagonists with the historical violence done to the less or non-grievable, he lets his plants grow literally and literarily over his own family. In what is perhaps the most radical and most shocking juxtaposition of the whole book, Mokry puts “an example of a filled out body sheet,” with the details of the state one of the bodies at Kozluk was found in, side by side with the report of the ultrasound scan of his pregnant wife, with the details of the body of the fetus in perfect shape and health (incidentally, this is also the only time when the mother and her name, Agnieszka, is mentioned explicitly in the book). Both reports are shot through with the names of the plants

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17 In an insightful reading of Mokry’s poem, Antoni Zajac suggests an association between Świergot and Steve Reich’s “Different Trains.” Antoni Zajac, “Z resztek wydobyty” [Extracted from remnants], *Kontakt*, December 15, 2019, accessed June 19, 2023, <https://magazynkontakt.pl/z-resztek-wydobyty-swiergot-marcina-mokrego/>.

growing here and there among the technical data – and so the horrifying perspective that Maria and Antoni will be also lying with the plants over and under their bodies becomes painfully tangible.

It is not only that the scattered names of the plants grow over the two juxtaposed reports. The “tracks” and “tram” of the first sequence also run through these sheets.<sup>18</sup> However, the third and most disturbing sequence is also present on these two pages. It is simply the sequence composed of chirping, of the weird “śriii” which made its first appearance when Maria saw the terrible “rose.” In a way, the chirping line may be seen as an ambiguous synthesis of the other two: the technical whirr of tracks and trams going through the ghetto of Łódź and the organic silence of the plants growing on the site of killing of the civilians from Srebrenica meet and are transcended by the avian, organic, but strangely metallic, radically inhuman chirping of the “śriii.”

Most consistently, it is this terrible sound that we hear at the very end, multiplied. Back from the time travel, we encounter what seems to be one more title of a poem: “Maria hears the chirping,” marked with the most recent date in the whole book, 02.06.19. There is no poem here, though, only three “śriii”s here and there and a dictionary entry (“pożar [= fire] (*m*) Feuer (*n*)”) plus a cosmic caption from an atlas (“Układ Słoneczny [= Solar System]”) at the bottom of the page. On the next page we get a minute fragment of an avian narrative (“they eat, copulate and / sleep while flying”) and three now-familiar names of the uncanny plants reappearing for the very last time. The last two pages of the book or, rather, one final broad page composed of two sheets facing each other, is occupied solely by numerous “śriii”s scattered over the blank paper from which even the precise grid of minute dots that accompanied us through the book has disappeared. The network of coordinates is gone for good. We do not look at the ground anymore. With no ground under our feet, we are falling forward through the air filled with the terrible chirping.

Commenting on this impressive finale and punning on Thomas Stearns Eliot’s classical formula, one of the reviewers suggested that in

<sup>18</sup> The combination of deadly tracks and the plants growing over the killing fields and then literally transplanted into the poem enables us to identify one of the main sources of Mokry’s poem in Paul Celan’s famous *Engführung* where a similar combination is to be found, together with an imaginative use of documentary evidence concerning war violence. Paul Celan, *Die Gedichte*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2020), 117–122.

Mokry's poem the world ends not "with a bang, but with chirping," with the inhuman voice of the metallic birds that may be identified as the military aircrafts of a coming war.<sup>19</sup> It may also be the case that the chirping birds should be seen (or rather heard) as the inhabitants of a world to come, beings that do not care about the humans that massacred each other and were superseded by some new natural/post-natural forces. However, more needs to be said about this brilliant ending. And this is precisely where we need to return to the idea of the very autistic object.

By moving deeper and deeper in time and passing through the waves of less-(or non-)grievable losses, by exposing his own family life to these waves, by textually amalgamating one with the other, by shifting from techniques of fragmentation and textual dispersion increasingly into what could be clumsily named "autisticization" of the text, Mokry – more and more maddeningly, but also more and more effectively – stubbornly refuses both to be silent about violence and loss and to cover it with stable representations that would offer a seeming closure of the work of mourning. What seems to be crucial in this respect is the dialectical temporality of the chirping, the vocal autistic object that both ends the book and prevents it from ending and closing in any conclusive way. On the one hand, the chirping, as the third sequence after the ghetto tram whirring over its tracks and the dispersed uncanny plants of Kozluk, is an anticipation of the final disaster and the ultimate loss. On the other hand, precisely as future-oriented, it effectively destabilizes each past-oriented narrative that would like to smoothen things up. The terrible "śriii" acts both as a sign of what is coming and as a refusal to let the lost go, as an autistic inhibition of a "normal" act of mourning and representation – and so, paradoxically, it embodies (rather than represents) the lost within the text. The sensual, tactile embodiment of the missing bodies precisely as missing and thus non-representable, turns the text into a permanent performance of mourning which is effective precisely in its inability to mourn.

The radical nature of the autistic chirping which closes or rather keeps on re-opening the book can be seen if we compare it with the powerful "krzykda" evoked above. "Krzykda" is a seemingly senseless, but perfectly meaningful and immediately understandable, screaming expression of

<sup>19</sup> Jakub Skurtys, "że nie porozdzielani. Szliśmy" [That undivided. We went], *Magazyn Wizje*, November 17, 2019, accessed June 19, 2023, <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/skurtys-mokry/>.

harm, produced by a subject who, even if terrified and on the border of losing their humanity, still defends their stance within the human word and world. The chirping goes dangerously beyond the human and is unable to re-enter it. It autistically “knows” that where we walk the bridges of stable words that claim to refer to stable objects there is only the black hole and the abyss of loss. The chirping subject stands on the other side of the linguistic and keeps on producing his terrified and terrifying sounds that both protect him from falling with their hard consonants and keep expressing his terror of the abyss and the ultimate disaster. It may well be that the terrified Marcin, the protagonist of the “story” perceived as distinct from the author, has withdrawn from language into the autistic world of chirping and so he is ultimately unable to protect his children from falling. It may well be that, not unlike the little Árpád described by Sándor Ferenczi, who imitated the screams of the rooster he was terrified by, Marcin ultimately identifies with, and gives voice to, the inhuman, metallic chirping of the coming birds of destruction.<sup>20</sup> It may well be that it is her father’s own chirping that Maria hears at the very end. And yet, by never-really-ending his brilliant and terrifying book with the autistic chirping, Marcin Mokry the poet does what only the most radical masters of language are capable of doing: he keeps re-opening Polish memory onto the losses that we can never properly grieve and, by doing so, he keeps on formulating the necessary, if ultimately impossible, conditions of what it would mean to protect our children from the disasters to come.

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<sup>20</sup> Sándor Ferenczi, *First Contributions to Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Ernest Jones (London and New York: Karnac, 2002), 240–52.

## Abstract

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*The Autistic Chirping of Memory: Butler, Tustin, Mokry*

In the first section of the paper the author offers a quick view on the shape of Polish collective memory seen through the lens of Judith Butler notion of grievability. He argues that it is often the job of the artists to reopen closed and falsified forms of remembering and mourning. Then he introduces the idea of the autistic object borrowed from the work of the psychoanalyst Frances Tustin. This category becomes the key to the reading of Marcin Mokry's book *Świergot*, which forms the main part of the paper and which presents this brilliant work as a radical reopening of Polish memory. Paradoxically, the poetic means that are instrumental in this act reopening can be identified as having much in common with the world of autism as described by Tustin.

## Keywords

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Judith Butler, Frances Tustin, Marcin Mokry, grievability, mourning, autism, violence