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„My Poems are Psychosomatic”: Motive Impulse in the Poetry of Julian Przyboś.

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“For a long time now, for many years (perhaps even since *W głęb lasu* [Into The Depth Of The Forest])¹ my writing has been sustained by my living, in the carnal sense inasmuch as in the spiritual: my poems are psychosomatic” – Przyboś confessed to Brzękowski a few months before his death.² It was also something he never made a secret of. In *Zapiski bez daty* [Diary Without Date] he says:

The best among my poems...were not something pondered on or written while I was sitting at a desk. I do not sit through, I walk through the process of composition, and my poems swell with oxygen as my heart does in an open space, when I take a stroll, among the fields, or in a forest, or a park.

Composing my verse peripatetically, I check its rhythm and sound against the breath, movements of the body, pace of the steps, pauses and accelerations of gait. And, above all, against that which is so difficult to put in words but which most generally – and thus most imprecisely – can be described as accord with the outside world.³

Przyboś expresses his “accord with the outside world” through activities that psychology divides into perception and proprioception:

¹ Most of Przyboś’ poetry has not been translated to English; volume and poem titles will be thus presented to the reader in Polish, followed by a working translation. (AW)

² A letter to J. Brzękowski from 21 May 1970, *Korespondencja J. Brzękowskiego* [Brzękowski’s Letters Collection] A. Mickiewicz Muzeum Literatim, inv. 2192, vol. 13, 138 *recto*.

³ Przyboś, *Zapiski bez daty* [Diary Without Date], Warszawa: 1970. 177-178.

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Today, as ever, we talk of only five senses: vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. This despite the fact that possibly the most crucial of all our senses, position and movement sense or proprioception, was first described nearly 200 years ago. It is so deep within us and so integral to our independence and movement through the world that it has for the most part remained hidden from our personal and collective consciousness.⁴

Unlike the sense of sight, the richest of our senses in terms of provided information, and, as such, an object of inquiry since the ancient times. It was also the sense of sight was that has served as the base for cognitive models and standards of rationality in the Western culture (which in the last few decades drew critical commentaries from philosophers, history of ideas theorists, and writers). It is, therefore, not surprising in the least that the questions of perception in Przyboś, especially of visual perception, have long been the focus of critical attention. The critics were, however, far less interested in the aspect of proprioception, despite the fact that already in 1927 an anonymous reviewer observed that

Wierzyński and Przyboś sing of muscle and the inspiration it provides. The former looks into the world of Olympic athletes, the latter, the world of machine operators...Two years ago Przyboś did not know man. His poetry echoed the chatter and racket of machines. He was scaring us. He thought he could extract poetry from pavements, rooftops and machines, the same kind of poetry that his predecessors drew from nature...Przyboś realized that that hand operating the machine is far more interesting and he felt its pulse, which is the heart rate of life...He left mechanics to the engineers.⁵

2.

I am not aware of any classification of poets that would be based upon the posture of their speakers, but if such a taxonomy was to be introduced to 20th century Polish literature, one would need to place Julian Przyboś and Miron Białoszewski apart as polar opposites. Przyboś usually stands upright, even erect, in his poems. It is for him more than a natural way of being in the world, it is almost a manifestation, a sign of pride in the victory over the inertia of matter, an overcoming of the force of gravity. It is a victory that must be felt physically – hence his ambivalent attitude toward space travel. On the one hand, it is tempting: “I envy the astronauts who ‘orbited,’ freed from gravity, immersed in heavenly abyss. Some of them felt so good in this truly liberated space (liberated from its own weight) that they ignored calls from the ground, prolonging the state of orbiting.” On the other hand, space flights cause doubts: “how is one to experience with one’s body, with its dimensions, those altitudes and velocities imperceptible for the physical sense of movement and for the heart beat?”⁶

⁴ Cole, J. Paillard, J. “Living without Touch and Peripheral Information about Body Position and Movement: Studies with Deafferented Subjects.” Bermudez, L. et. al. (eds) *The Body And The Self*. Cambridge, MA: 1998. 245.

⁵ Anon. “Z nowych poezji.” [On Latest Poetry] *Mysł Narodowa*. 1927 Vol. 2. 56.

⁶ Przyboś, *Zapiski bez daty*. 172 and 198.

Białoszewski, on the other hand, praises lying down. "Lying down" is a title of a poem, and at the same time, as if a project for a new literary genre, resulting from the position of his body, programmatic for Białoszewski.⁷ Przyboś focuses completely on submitting the world to his energy, one so irresistible that one gesture, one glance suffices to transform the surroundings. The temptation to conquer nature, typical of our civilization, the "breathtaking anthropocentrism"⁸ is something that Białoszewski tries to overcome: he does not want to control reality, he wants to yield to it.

In Przyboś, the erect body is an indicator of high mobility: "I existed only to the degree that I ran!"⁹ But it is an impeded run, or rather, an eagerness to run, an impatient pace. For Przyboś, the world is a place where one walks and while walking, crosses the horizon.¹⁰

Any vigorous action seems suspicious to the one lying down: Białoszewski speaks of the fear of a being that is too energetic.¹¹ Meanwhile, the one that walks looks down on the one lying down. Przyboś dismisses the poems included in Białoszewski's *Było i było* wondering if they were, perhaps, "a result of boredom or artistic abulia?"¹²

And when he wants to test the truthfulness of his great predecessors, Przyboś looks at their poetic gait. "One does not find the experience of a tourist or a hiker in Słowacki's "W Szwajcarii" [In Switzerland] – a walk that involves climbing, panting and sweating in the mountains is transformed in his poem into a swan-like glide, an angelic flight to the summit." Przyboś contrasts "W Szwajcarii" with Mickiewicz's "Na Alpach w Splügen" [In Splügen Alps] that does justice to the "sense of height and the climber's effort."¹³ The work of English Romantics is impressive in that regard, especially the physical effort that preceded and accompanied creative activity. Wordsworth created not at his desk but while he wandered, peripatetically, traversing up to 30 miles of flat terrain per day: De Quincey estimates that in his life, he must have walked the distance of 175-180 thousand miles, a stimulant that replaced alcohol and other physiological stimuli, resulting in a life of uninterrupted happiness and the best part of his work.¹⁴

One must regrettably admit that Polish Romantic poets were no match for the English wanderers. They did have their share of brilliant exploits (for instance, in 1818

⁷ See also: Stawiński, J. "Miron Białoszewski: epigramaty na leżąco." *Przypadki poezji*. Kraków: 2001. (*Prace wybrane*, Vol. 5) 251-262.

⁸ I am recalling this particular expression to bring back a forgotten story, both charming and instructive, by an American historian of ideas, C. J. Glacken. *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century*. Berkeley, CA: 1973. 494.

⁹ Przyboś, J. "Znowu na rodzinnych polach." *Pisma zebrane* [Collected works] Vol. 1. Skątek, R. (ed.) Kraków: 1984. 203.

¹⁰ Przyboś, J. "Ziemią gwiezdnie pojętą." *Pisma*... 221.

¹¹ Białoszewski, H.M. *Rozkurz*, Warszawa. 1980. 117.

¹² Przyboś, J. "Z powodu *Było i było* Mirona Białoszewskiego." *Poezja*. 1996, Vol. 2. 98.

¹³ Przyboś, J. "W błękitu krainie" *Linia i gwar*. Vol. 1. Kraków: 1959, 294.

¹⁴ Shattuck, R. "This Must Be The Place: From Wordsworth to Proust." *Romanticism*. Thornburn, D. and Hartman, G. (eds.) Ithaca, NY: 1973. 180.

in the Mount Blanc massif Antoni Malczewski reached the summit of Aiguille du Midi – 3,843m.), but they lacked perseverance. It took Przyboś to make up for this neglect.

The poet took his first decisive steps the third volume, *Sponad* [From Above] (1930) and from that moment on, he never ceased to walk, until the last verse. He thought, perhaps, that he would be able to, just as the “bare-footed geese shepherd” in one of his poems,¹⁵ conjure a brook (or anything else) with running; he could certainly conjure a poem with walking. Should we search for a perfect form for Przyboś’ wanderer, we would find it, perhaps, in the following description.

One of Parisian squares hosts the most beautiful monument of our poet. At the top of a high column, Mickiewicz, presented as a pilgrim, is on his way, fierce and inspired, raising his hand in a clairvoyant gesture of hope and motioning to follow him towards a destination his eyes are focused on.¹⁶

3

The poet walks and at the same time performs a gesture. The latter motif is not exceedingly common in Przyboś’ work but it is always very meaningful. Even more so, gesture has been inscribed in the grammatical structure of his poetry due to the dominant role of its deictic elements which are nothing else than “gestures indicating with the help of sound” and “belong to the oldest stratum of language.”¹⁷ Przyboś devoted attention to the relationship of words and gestures in his essays and prose as well. In his laudatory speech for the writer Tadeusz Breza, awarded for his literary achievement by the “Odrodzenie” weekly, Przyboś observes: “Reading Breza’s prose, I often feel as if his speech returned to the source of the word, to the gestic genesis of human language: to gestures, facial expression, expressing with one’s whole self that which these days is expressed only through language.”¹⁸

Przyboś points to those features of Breza’s prose which can be analyzed today with the help of rich, if somewhat chaotic, knowledge resulting from the research of para-verbal and non-verbal communication. Interestingly, the poet overlooks the most striking aspect of Breza’s writing, emphasizing something secondary instead. It is truly challenging to trace in Breza the return to that which is primal – in human psyche, in behavior and language. He is open, first and foremost, to the signals exchanged in an environment where tradition is well established and rules of conduct clearly outlined, where each shade of gesture, expression or intonation carries information precisely because of its

¹⁵ Przyboś, J. “Lipiec” [July]. *Pisma zebrane*. Vol. 1. 114.

¹⁶ Przyboś, J. “Mickiewicz.” *Linia i gwar*. Vol. 1. Kraków: 1959: 269-270.

¹⁷ Kuryłowicz, J. Podstawowe kategorie morfologiczne. *Biuletyn Polskiego Towarzystwa Językoznawczego*. 1971 Vol. 28. 11. See also: Łapiński, Z. “Miejsce na ziemi i miejsce w wierszu. O składnikach deiktycznych w liryce Przybosia.” *Przestrzeń i literatura*. Głowiński, M. and Okopień-Sławińska, A. (eds.) Wrocław: 1978. 297-307.

¹⁸ Przyboś, J. *Odrodzenie*. 1946, Vol. 3. 2.

conventionality. Breza is immersed in the social context, investigates convention and wants to present sophisticated communicative processes. Przyboś, on the other hand, feels best among nature and seeks spontaneity. At the origin of his poetry, there lies the memory of the "gestic genesis of human language," in other words, universal, biological "source of the word."

He returns to the very same motif in his analysis of Mickiewicz's "Farys":

They say that primitive man expressed himself with gesture and movements of the entire body. Later, expression was economically reduced to movement of the tongue – and this is when human speech began, this is when the word – compared to the old, inarticulate cries accompanying gesture and movement – received its meaning and power. Primitive man cried and gestured a lot, consuming enormous amounts of physical energy in order to conjure the simplest image. Primitive language was directed entirely outside, destined for the eyes. Speech of the cultured man became economical, the word – a small movement of the tongue – gained weight, it does not point to the things outside but evokes them in the imagination, it is directed towards the inside of man. Cultured, strong man endows words with the power of evoking movements of internal feelings, images and ideas.¹⁹

However, in Przyboś's poetry, the "cultured man" does not repress the "primitive man." They simply divide their roles. The primitive man becomes the poem's hero, present in it in the flesh, whereas the cultured man is the poem's maker, a hidden creator of the entire work. "Inarticulate cries" turn into onomatopoeic dissonances. "In order to conjure the simplest image" the hero still uses "enormous amounts of energy," however, it is no longer physical, but mental energy. The language is still "entirely outside, destined for the eyes," although only "in the imagination."

To sum up, external mobility is replaced by internal mobility: in other words, physical actions give place to mental actions. But he transformed man does not break away from his ancestor, he does not give up the archaic strata of personality. His spirituality remembers its physiology, his psyche remembers the body, and the movement of thought remembers the movement of muscles.

4

We usually put muscles in motion when we want to do something. But muscular agitation, linked to the semi-conscious pattern of future activities, can also result from the closely watched external events that we are inclined to identify with. Psychology uses here the notion of "empathy," in other words, identification. Empathy involves co-experiencing the states experienced by others and even, by further analogy, the states and processes of nature.

Empathy triumphed in the Romantic era. It made a comeback in the period of Young Poland, and later in the expressionist movement, and the importance that Przyboś assigned to the muscular motives was his personal contribution to the tradition. His poems

¹⁹ Przyboś, J. "Słaby i mocny wiersz." [Strong and weak poem] *Czytając Mickiewicza*. Warszawa: 1950. 179-180.

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include identification with the environment, conviction of isomorphism of the subject and object, and a sense of interchangeability of motor sensations, a certain sense that my internal actions find parallels outside of me, and that someone else can experience something for me. As in the following passage:

a burdened charcoal burner, throwing off the sack for me
bent forward
straightened up
breathed out.²⁰

The quoted passage comes from a verse about poetic composition where the effort of the charcoal burner is a muscular equivalent of the poetic effort, as well as an event that liberates one from that effort. Thus, emphatic images not only are a recurrent experience of the poems' speaker but also retain direct connection to the creative act in itself.

5

Przyboś's artistic effort aimed mainly to capture the contents of what is located on the very edge of consciousness, contents that in the world of the poem result from the internal biography of the lyrical hero inasmuch as the current situation around him. The reader is assigned the role of a mute spectator of psychosomatic events. But, the poet exhibited high sensitivity to the future fate of his works and their further literary life. Przyboś believed that a poem does not find its full realization until it is recited, and he lamented the contemporary practice of pushing spoken poetry outside the spotlight. He was a juror of several popular recitation competitions, participated in public readings, and recorded the reading of his own poems for the radio.

One of the critics who participated in those events noted that Przyboś' voice "lacked inherent vigor, muscularity." "He rebelled against physiological imperfections and limitations. Reciting his poems, he challenged his voice to a fight." Failing grotesquely at times, Przyboś was nonetheless able to impart his own truth of poetry on the listeners. "The listeners discovered that the human body is always the matrix of the poem."²¹

Thus, in Przyboś, bodily sensations, tied to the motion and creative effort of the organism, find their expression also – or, perhaps, first and foremost – in the sounds of the poem, born not only in the eye and the heart, but also in the throat. A printed poem is a solidified product of the actions of the articulatory system – that is, of lungs, vocal cords and the tongue.

In one of the poems he speaks of "infant-verse."²² A work that is being composed is for the poet a physical extension of his substance. Its "organic" character, a distant and already worn out metaphor, takes on concrete shape here and is almost literal. In his essays, Przyboś returned to what he called a "motor-auditory ovary," describing it as:

²⁰ Przyboś, J. "Ciężar poematu." [The weight of the poem] *Pisma...* 253.

²¹ Gronczewski, A. "Podwieczorek z torturami." *Miesięcznik Literacki*. 1988 No. 23, 69-71.

²² Przyboś, J. "Jaskółka" [Swallow] *Pisma zebrane*. Vol. 1. 224.

“a directional tension of the gift of speech towards two senses of expression: towards the sense of hearing and the muscular-motive sense, taking place when the poet attempts to capture an unexpressed phenomenon.”²³

6

From the “motive” perspective, Przyboś’s work discloses a connection between seemingly separate elements. The theme of a wanderer is a personalization of the idea that man – and his most perfect incarnation: an artist – is a creature that is motive by nature. The motif of gesture points to the motor origins of the language, and Przyboś’s idea of the principle of empathy allows for a motive symbiosis between the subject and its surroundings. Finally, the poet’s persistent concern for the possibly fullest realization of his works, his readings of them (despite discouraging results), reveals a belief that a certain quantum of verbal energy needs to be transmitted physically from the author to the receiver.

But my attempt at capturing and commenting on the function of motor experiences in Przyboś fails to give justice to how deeply his intuition reached into the basic features of the language. One should note, perhaps, that in the first three decades of the 20th century, linguists wrote a lot about the articulatory experiences as superior – in the process of speech reception – to acoustic data. Aestheticians diligently studied those writings, until the issue was overshadowed by structuralism. In 1927, before he devoted his attention to the “semantic gesture,” Jan Mukarovsky gave a lecture on *motorické dění v poezii*,²⁴ and Mihail Bakhtin poignantly observed:

The bare accoustical side of the word has a relatively minor significance in poetry. The movement that generates acoustical sound, and is most active in the articulatory organs, although it also takes hold of the whole organism – this movement, either actually realized during one’s own reading, or experienced only as a possible movement – is incommensurably more important than what is heard. What is heard is reduced almost to the auxiliary role of eliciting the generative movements corresponding to it, or to the even more external auxiliary role of being a token of meaning, or, finally, of serving the basis for intonation, which needs the acoustical extension of the word but is indifferent to its qualitative phonic makeup, and as the basis for rhythm, which has, of course, a motive character.²⁵

After a few decades, the abandoned element resurfaced in the laboratories of psycholinguistics. Several competing theories of “motor theory of speech perception” came to life – I wish to outline briefly just one of them, created by Alvin Libermann and his associates over the course of several years. In its 1985 formulation, it is explained as follows:

²³ Przyboś, J. “Nowość potrząsa kwiatem.” *Czytając Mickiewicza*. 27.

²⁴ See: Mukarowsky, J. “O motorické dění v poezii.” Prague: 1985.

²⁵ Bakhtin, M. “The Problem of Content: Material and Form in Verbal Creative Art.” *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Austin, TX: 1990. 313.

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The first claim of the motor theory... is that the objects of speech perception are the intended phonetic gestures of the speaker, represented in the brain as invariant motor commands that call for movements of the articulators through certain linguistically significant configurations. These gestural commands are the physical reality underlying the traditional phonetic notions—for example, “tongue backing,” “lip rounding,” and “jaw raising” – that provide the basis for phonetic categories. They are the elementary events of speech production and perception. Phonetic segments are simply groups of one or more of these elementary events; thus [b] consists of a labial stop gesture and [m] of that same gesture combined with a velum-lowering gesture. Phonologically, of course, the gestures themselves must be viewed as groups of features, such as “labial,” “stop,” “nasal,” but these features are attributes of the gestural events, not events as such. To perceive an utterance, then, is to perceive a specific pattern of intended gestures.²⁶

The following claim is of similar importance:

The second claim of the theory is a corollary of the first: if speech perception and speech production share the same set of invariants, they must be intimately linked. This link, we argue, is not a learned association, a result of the fact that what people hear when they listen to speech is what they do when they speak. Rather, the link is innately specified, requiring only epigenetic development to bring it into play. On this claim, perception of the gestures occurs in a specialized mode, different in important ways from the auditory mode, responsible also for the production of phonetic structures, and part of the larger specialization for language. The adaptive function of the perceptual side of this mode, the side with which the motor theory is directly concerned, is to make the conversion from acoustic signal to gesture automatically, and so to let listeners perceive phonetic structures without mediation by (or translation from) the auditory appearances that the sounds might, on purely psychoacoustic grounds, be expected to have.²⁷

I shall refrain from summarizing arguments in favor of the referenced theory, I will only note how concurrent it is with the direction Przyboś took intuitively. For instance, empathy, believed so far to be active only in the presented world, becomes a principle almost organically binding the sender and the receiver of the poem. In the new perspective, the insistence to read poetry aloud presents itself as a result of a characteristic (although erroneous) belief that a motor reception of poem requires acoustic sensations. One may only assume that as a result of the emergence of similar theories, it will be easier in the future to understand and describe everything that Przyboś captured in his programmatic metaphor:

transmitting the motions and labors of my body
onto the vocal cords and onto the drive
of signifying tongue²⁸

Translation: Anna Warso

²⁶ Libermann, A. M. and Mattingly, I. G. “The Motor Theory of Speech Perception Revised.” *Cognition* 21, 1985. 2-3.

²⁷ Przyboś, J. “Więcej o manifest.” *Pisma zebrane*. Vol. 2 Skręt, R. (ed.) Kraków: 1994. 171.

²⁸ Przyboś, J. “Więcej o manifest.” *Pisma zebrane*. Vol. 2 Skręt, R. (ed.) Kraków: 1994. 171.