

Teksty Drugie 2012, 1, s. 172-187
Special Issue – English Edition



“That which is slipping away”: On Exposing the Idiom in Stanisław Barańczak's “Surgical Precision”.

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Stanisław Barańczak’s readers are accustomed to the fact that each new collection of his poems surprises with poetic variety and introduction of previously unknown registers. Without going back into too distant past, we recall that *Atlantis* (1986) brought a series of image-poems with distinct frames and highly saturated with color, presenting a specific hyperrealistic record of time, freed from axiology and polemics with the language. *A Postcard from the Other World* (1988) continued this new epic style of poetic narration, but here, even more clearly than in individual poems from *Atlantis*, the poet delved beneath the surface of the phenomena, searching in *this* world for the secret codes and rhythms of *that* hypothetical world. This he did more intensely the more transitory and indelibly sensual seemed reality and everyday life.

 miałem potępieńszą pracę
rozbierając to wszystko
 I had a wretched job
dismantling it all*

says the narrator in the poem *Pan Elliot Tischler* [“Mr. Elliot Tischler”], which is an attempt to break through the tangible matter (bits of other people’s privacy in the newly purchased home) to the transcendent, to the question about the fate of the owner of the house after his death. Dismantling Mr. Tischler’s wooden structure – a ramp to the garden for his disabled wife – can be seen as a metaphor for seeking different, alternative dimension. The principle of a hidden code governed every poem in *A Postcard from the Other World*, dictating a sophisticated, multi-level organiza-

* Unless otherwise note all quoted passages translated by Paweł Pyrka

tion of rhyme and meter, but also the composition of the whole set, in which the metaphor of the hero's single day, and of single human life, is inscribed along with the metaphor of conversation with a hypothetical Creator, identifiable in a mirror arrangement of poems which represent the lack of conclusion in that dialogue.

And finally *Journey in Winter* (1994) – a fascinating poetic dream, unfolding in monochromatic tones of winter. Here Barańczak seems to leave behind that poetic joy of color and image. A bleak, wintry landscape – inspired by the songs of Franz Schubert, and more distantly, motifs from the poems of Wilhelm Müller – provides a scenery free of illusions of domesticity, where a spatial-conceptual philosophical discourse develops, on the place of man in the universe and the absence of necessity for human happiness. A discourse, we should add, which appears to be a modern paraphrase of confessions of a disappointed romantic lover who has been denied the right to happiness and rejected by indifferent world.

Released in 1998, "Surgical Precision" includes a number of poems written in the style known from *Atlantis* and *A Postcard from the Other World*, in which Barańczak's poetic road reaches its fullness. I am thinking here among others of *Altana* ["A Gazebo"] and *Płynąc na Sutton Island* ["Going to Sutton Island"], probably some of the most beautiful Polish poems of the twentieth century. Barańczak's latest volume, however, is also, and perhaps most of all, an opening of new spaces and paths of poetry, the existence of which was, admittedly, difficult to predict, reading his poems from the eighties.

The most remarkable poetic innovation in this volume seems to be the unusual, almost expansive presence of *idiom*. By that I mean both the concept of idiolect in its literal, encyclopedic sense (as a "set of individual properties characterizing speech of an individual, related to their origin, education, profession, environmental habits, stylistic preferences, etc." – Dictionary of Literary Terms, ed. J. Sławiński), and a deep poetic immersion in all other, not exclusively linguistic idioms of the world – the idiom of private biography, of human body, of a section of matter, space, a memorized sound, a melody line. Idiom appears as a design principle, indeed as a center where most of the poems are crystallized, while the essential poetic drama of "Surgical Precision" involves the uncovering of what is hidden in the accident of idiom: the fundamental mysteries of existence, marks of genius, traces of the sacred, finished beauty, superhuman principles and logic of the world, all encoded in the disposable and the mundane, concealed beneath the trivial coating of events. The reader, being a witness to these operations of poetry, may initially stand helpless in the face of individual poems. With an extraordinary passion, Barańczak poetically appropriates the most peculiar, and in a sense the most extraneous areas of reality, fragments of space, objects, texts of culture, individual words extracted from the corners of language. They become an object of affirmation; their one-off quality, their uniqueness and placement outside the order become dramatically enhanced, perhaps refined in the act of poetry.

The poems in "Surgical Precision" which display fascination with idiom are those formed around a single personal word, expression or an artifact of memory;

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poems which enter the secret areas of intimate subconsciousness, of linguistic and pictorial prehistory: *Poręcz* ["Handrail"], *Za szkłem* ["Behind Glass"], *Od Knasta* ["From Knast"], *Problem nadawcy* ["The Sender's Problem"]. Each of these works, these poetic revelations, is anchored in a word. A word which carries the entire personal era ("Knast," a name of a confectioner from Poznań in "From Knast," or "fresh pickled cucumbers" remembered from distant youth in "Behind Glass"), which opens the senses to the microcosm of matter and its relationship to human existence, limited by time (the idiolectic "tubajfor" in "Handrail"), which brings to light the seemingly untranslatable idiom of traditional Polish culture (in "The Sender's Problem" which paraphrases Fredro's *The Revenge*). The word, the idiolect, is a medium, a key opening a time, an idea, but, as a carrier of those dimensions, it remains at the same time a separate entity in a poem. The surprise at the universe of the word continues, a single, unique set of sounds and syllables, which could hold, inscribed within, all the great objectivized world. The fascinating arbitrariness of the word "Cześniak," in which someone (?) once (?) inscribed an entire universe, now completely illegible, yet existing behind the veil of time, beyond the obstacle of the sounds-letters code:

nikt już nie wie, co znaczy archaiczny przydomek czy tytuł:
... zniekształcony derywat słów "cześć"? "czas"? "nieszczęśnik"? "uczestnik"?

nobody knows what this archaic nickname or title means:
... distorted derivative of the word "hello"? "Time"? "Unfortunate"? "Participant"?]
(*"The Sender's Problem"*)

The word "powiat" (district), which is an episode in the poem *Powiedz, że wkrótce* ["Say, it won't be long"]:

W... no, to słowo, też na wpół martwe... w "powiecie"?
W powiecie skóry wszyscy znają się nawzajem.

In the ... well, this word also half-dead ... in the "district"?
In the district of skin they all know each other.

The word "szczwany" (wily) in the poem *Debiutant w procederze* ["Rookie in the Business"], which carries an extinct grammatical category and a whole tradition and cultural idiom is now lost in social memory (although the poet does not ask about this prehistory in the text, something tells him make use of this particular word repeatedly). Finally, there are the deep connotations of the title word "poręcz" in "Handrail," bearing the refrain, "Kto spamięta? I kto się odwdzięczy?"

In all these examples, the poetic amazement comes from singularity and accidentality as faces of the infinity, from the discovery that there is no territory of language, that each idiom is able to contain the universe, and finally that someone? something? inscribes, encodes the universe, the absolute, the perfection, into colloquial words, familiar and "indigenous" expressions, dwelling in the dialects of the language, in sanctuaries and provinces of time, space, culture, and that it does

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so, moreover, against the human hierarchy of the "center" and the "periphery" of the world.

The poems "Handrail" and "Behind Glass" present perhaps the most radical attempt to reveal the universe in singularity and uniqueness. They start from idiolect, from a private word, which not only carries its individual meaning, its designation, but what is more, it carries the mark of its single use or production. It is a word that "happened" in a particular situation, which makes it even more accidental, more apart from the rest. And that word becomes an idea, revealing its unpredictable potency; it activates times and spaces.

"Handrail," an extremely mysterious poem, is "happening" somewhere on the borderlines of language, inorganic matter of wooden railing and someone's human life, which is heading into collapse, into non-existence. Two words – "poręcz" (rail) and "tubajfor" (polonized "two by four" – dimensions of timber used to build the railing) – radiate in the poem from their material, wooden core. They become carriers of the pre-idea of – there is no other way to express it – woodenness, combining in that incantation of "tubajfor" with with the pre-idea of carpentry as a wisdom of shaping matter, in which human existence can find support:

Milkliwie oschła dobroć kanciastej poręczy
z – jakby spolszczył imigrant-cieśla – tubajfora
(*two-by-four*): kto spamięta? I kto się odwdzięczy

za jej sosnowe wsparcie, za rytm, w jakim jęczy
w porze przyplywu zawias pomostu, raz po raz,
żeliwnie? Postna szczodrość.

Taciturn dry kindness of angular railing
made from (by immigrant-carpenter) – a "tubajfor"
(*two-by-four*) who will remember? And who will repay it?

for its pine support for the rhythm in which
at high tide the hinge moans on the pier, again and again,
like cast-iron? Fasting generosity.

Once heard, the idiom "tubajfor" is repeatedly echoed, transformed, but still reminiscent of the original on the level of sound and rhythm. It is inserted into a sophisticated rhyming pattern of the *villanelle*, which also provides framework for the whole poem: : "*two-by-four ... Tu? Błąd. Wróć. ... Stój. Bądź. Trwaj. ... To? Byt. Twój*" [two-by-four ... Here? Error. Back. ... Stop. Be. Exist. ... This? Your. Life"]. This series of warnings, pleas and judgments seems to be, hidden in the idiom, a voice of a Guide? A Person who Knows the Way? A Guardian? It is one of many mysteries of this poem. The word "poręcz" (rail) undergoes multiple alliterations but returns with its core unchanged thirteen times in rhyming position, in accordance with rules of *villanelle*. It seems entwine the poem, to wrap around the ends of lines, protecting the text from dissolution, holding together that which is impermanent. It seems to reenact in its verse-making role the idea of caring matter, repeatedly expressed

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in the poem, most clearly in the chorus of “And who will repay it?” The existence of inanimate matter is in the ”Handrail” opposed to the vision of dissolution, the end of human life, in the evocative image of human fear of passing:

... Kto pamięta? podnosi wzrok, wdzięczny,

znad niewywoływalnych negatywów tęczy:
zimnych głębin? A “zimnych” to nie metafora:
igliwia skostnień mrowią w nas, nas tępo dręczy

próchno, któremu trzeba okuć, plomb, pajęczyn
filtrujących owadzi mrok, podpór i porad:

Stój. Bądź. Trwaj. ...

... Who remembers? looks up, grateful,

from undevelopable negatives of rainbow:
cold depths? And “cold” is not a metaphor:
needles of stiffness tingling inside us, torments us dull

rot, which needs bindings, seals, spider webs
to filter the insect darkness, support and advice:

Stop. Be. Exist. ...

The idiom of the “rail” is a response to these fears. A reaction to the vision of an inverted rainbow, of “cold depths,” “stiffness” and “rot,” which can be associated with luminescent layers of a cemetery, of underground space, unreachable by human voice (the ambiguity of the phrase “undevelopable negatives of rainbow”). The proximity of the world of things, of inorganic material, more durable than the human body is seen as a stabilizing context for human life saturated with the fear of passing and end:

Postna szczodrość, najciaśniej podręczny

pień nauk zheblowany w przyziemny, bezdźwięczny
głos, w linię prostą, prostą jak próg czy zaporą:

Tu? Błąd. Wróć.

Fasting generosity, the tightest handy

trunk of sciences planed into mundane soundless
voice, into straight line, straight as threshold or barrier:

Here? Error. Back.

The relationship between man and things of inanimate matter is an area of, so to speak, heightened sensitivity in the poetry of Stanisław Barańczak. In another poem from the collection, *Plakała w nocy, ale nie jej płacz go zbudził* [“She cried in the night, but it wasn’t what woke him”], there is the “creak of wood, rattling against

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the chimney/ branch, wind, trembling glass," which are said to be "alien to affairs of people" – more in the sense of a soothing recognition that there is an autonomous sphere of inanimate entities which makes us, humans, realize that the logic of this world is not directed at mankind. This theme emerged clearly already in Barańczak's *Journey in Winter*. This "impartiality," ontological separateness and individuality of inanimate matter would be, if I read *She cried in the night, but it wasn't what woke him*, a source of tranquility. In "Handrail" the substantiality, the texture of wood, its grain, which we touch and deeply experience, give a chance to delay the existential drama, the pain of passing. The longevity, the actual materiality of the railing confirms (poręcza), the continuity of the world, in light of which one's own death is less painful.

Another line of associations and an area of experience are opened by the idiom "fresh pickled cucumbers" in the poem "Behind Glass." The poem has features of poetic epiphany. The starting point is the image: kitchen, noon, cucumbers in a jar, a moment in time, in space – perhaps in distant past. Similarly, at the end of the text the poetic narrative is released from the "solution" of idiolect, in which it was previously stuck and which at the end radiates a different picture, a streak of memory released from the element of language, a scene in a movie theater:

ten wrodzony wasz opór i upór
jak dwie bruzdy na twarzy – takiej, jaką miał Gary Cooper
w słynnym kadrze, też za szkłem zresztą, za strzaskaną w promienne drzazgi
szybą. Twarz z brodawkami i wszystkim, strużką potu, fałdami skóry;
ale tak jasno wtedy, ze trzydzieści lat temu, w salce
kina "Muza," na ścianach, na ich tynku i boazerii
jej ekranowy odbłask wypisywał: wolno-ć, niewierny
Tomku, w samo południe, czyli w każdej chwili, wolno ci sprawdzić
tę mgielkę na szkle słoja, krwotok tej szyby, puls gwiazdy,
sprawdzać życie, własne, na przegubach świata kładąc półślepe palce.

this innate resistance of yours and stubbornness
like two lines in the face – like that of Gary Cooper's
in the famous shot, also behind glass, a pane shattered into radiant
splinters. Face with warts and all, a trickle of sweat, folds of skin;
but so clearly then, some thirty years ago, in the auditorium of
"Muza" theater, on the walls, the plaster and the paneling
its screen reflection spelled out: you can, doubting
Tom, at high noon, so any time now, you can check for
the mist on the glass jar, the bleeding of the pane, the pulsing of the star
check for life, your own, placing half-blinded fingers on the world's wrists.

The ending of the poem, therefore, opens itself to universals and presents a moving description of existential experience: youthful initiation into freedom, loneliness, maturity, into feelings of the world's ungraspability, its mystery, beauty and suffering. Thus we could read the final lines of the poem.

Before this opening, however, we observe in "Behind Glass" a certain exegesis and sacralization of idiolect, an investigation into the nature, the substance of the

cucumber and its “freshness.” “Fresh pickled cucumber” as an idiom is permanently inscribed in a certain era, a certain domain and community; it is a condensate of some old-fashionedness and steadfastness, of quiet domestic resistance to oppression, to winds of history, to “the era of simplification” – once? Or now? All of its features – the thickness of the skin, the greenness (synthesis of the blue blood of noble ancestors and the yellow bile of unfulfilled present), the “garlic vigor,” the “upright” position, with dignity, packed tight in a collective jar, and finally the “freshness” (*malosolność*), synonymous with lack of fulfillment – somehow produce double meaning; they are qualities of cucumber matter, and at the same time trace a map of that formation, a social genotype of “mustachio / vilniuses and subcarpathians before the First War” lost in the modernity of the twentieth century. Along with this formation, its idiolect enters the poem through echoes of antiquated proverbs and sayings, here diluted and incomplete (like the “fresh” pickled cucumbers), and also in distress, because intertwined and undermined by some shreds of newspeak, newspaper language of television advertising lingo.

The whole text in general seems to recreate a form of cucumber jar. The narration becomes saturated with this paremiological, conservative and preservative ingredient like pickles in a jar with salt. Also, the formal shape of “Behind Glass” – its “tightness” of “packed” verses, which through their length seek to use every bit of room available with no respect for caesuras or syntax, and the absence of white space in the text resulting from the lack of division into stanzas – all those seem to have been adopted from the prototype form of cucumber jar.

As mentioned, the path of associations, which runs from prototypical “fresh pickled cucumber” leads to the opening of the poem onto an existential perspective. The initial image of kitchen at noon, of cucumbers and glass jars, will be repeated, though not literally, in the epiphanic final image, a frame from a movie watched “some thirty years ago, in the auditorium of / Muza theater”: *High Noon*, in which the face of Gary Cooper is also behind glass and its texture with “warts and all, a trickle of sweat, folds of skin” somehow resembles the unwavering aspect of cucumber in distress. At this point, in this epiphany of remembering, the narrative subject becomes in a sense finally personalized; it becomes someone’s memory, biography, someone’s life story. Everything previously described in the poem can be found in this biography, which cannot be separated from the pre-history it holds within, and from which it emerged into independent existence, capable of checking, of rebellion, confidence and freedom. And the key to this biography will always be the jars in the kitchen and the mysterious words: “fresh pickled cucumber.”

“Behind Glass” is a beautiful, poetically daring text, something radical and, like “Handrail,” maximalist in reaching out to the essence of time, history, biography, and language. A poem that is a praise of idiom, and is within the realm of Barańczak’s individual poetics particularly revolting. It is like a return to linguistic poetics, which seemed to have subsided in American experience, withdrawn before the accumulation of images of the New World, and probably translational experiences (Bishop, Larkin, Merrill, Hardy, Frost, Auden). This time, however, the idiolect

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word, which is in the center of the poem, hides beneath the surface of its singleness a whole universe, an infinity; it is the prototype, the mother-word, unlike before, when word had to be reminded of its referents and meanings, shown the way into the world.

The fascination with idiolect, and more broadly, the fascination with the amazing journey of "common places" (*loci communes*) within idiolects, across languages, times and cultures, the fascination with their existence how it is concealed in exotic subcodes appeared already in Barańczak's earlier works, such as in the poem *Wrzesień* ["September"] for the volume *Atlantis*:

W pokoju z biurkiem, tablicą i nie dającym się otworzyć oknem
(klimatyzacja) wyjaśnia znaczenie zdania
"goniąc za żywiołkami drobniejszego płazu"
grupie złożonej z Mulata, Japonki, dwojga Anglosasów,
nowojorskiego Żyda i kalifornijskiej Irlandki.
... Za oknem wieżyczka Lowell House
złoci się w słońcu, jak co roku świeżo odmalowana.
... W promieniu
co najmniej mili (1609,31 m)
jeszcze przez dobre pięć minut oprócz niego nie będzie nikogo,
kto by wiedział, co znaczą słowa "spólny łańcuch" oraz "ziemskie kolisko."

In a room with a desk, blackboard and a window that won't open
(air conditioning) explains the meaning of the sentence
"pursuing smaller molluscs for the sport alone"
to a group consisting of a Mulatto, a Japanese woman, two Anglo-Saxons,
New York Jew and an Irishwoman from California.
... Outside the window the tower of Lowell House
golden in the sun, as every year, freshly repainted.
... Within
at least a mile (1609.31 m)
for a good five minutes there won't be anyone apart from him
who would know what is it means to "encircle the vast world" with "chains
of harmony."

This perfectly contemplative text, devoid of a clear thesis or message is the early record an intuition which in "Surgical Precision" will be developed in a series of poems. Note that *September* becomes crystallized through the astonishment at the distance between two idioms, that it arose at the point of intersection of the language idiom – a few words of a Slavic poet of the first half of the nineteenth century, and the spatial idiom – the image of a sunny day in an American college. The poem *Window*, also from *Atlantis* offers a similar record of interaction between two idioms: a picture of suburban landscape outside a closed window – the poet writes directly about the "idiom of afternoon" – meets imposed upon him a "soundtrack" – a greet-

¹ Mickiewicz, Adam. "Ode to Youth" *Adam Mickiewicz, 1798-1855: In Commemoration of the Centenary of His Death*. Paris: Unesco, 1955. 177-180. Print. (translated by George Rapall Noyes and Marjorie Beatrice Peacock)

ing addressed to a neighbor, spoken in a foreign language, “in which (next door) neighbor and (biblical) neighbor are one and the same / word.”

Thus, *September* and *Window* show a clash between the idiom of language and that of space. Here we are actually at the starting point a poetic concept, a certain idea which will be fully realized in “Surgical Precision.” That is because the area that is complementary to language idiom is in Barańczak’s latest volume precisely the idiom of space. Such spatial counterpoint to ”Handrail” and ”Behind Glass” can be found in much more extensive poems *Implozja* [“Implosion”] and the eponymous *Chirurgiczna precyzja* [“Surgical Precision”].

On the surface, the two texts could not be more different from the hermetic “Handrail” or ”Behind Glass,” poems completely immersed in the element of language. However, I would like to suggest that “Implosion” and “Surgical Precision” are poems born of the same idea: to discover in the ordinary and peripheral quality of idiom and accident, a certain joke (an idea, a plan) of the Creator. Or, if you will, a mysterious principle of nature which states that perfection, genius, time, space and its absence, all these universal categories cannot exist outside form, substance, common matter, sensory and transitory concreteness.

Idioms and accidents are often subject to pitiful human depreciations; they can be ignored by physiognomists who establish the canon of male beauty (which is what the poem “Tenors” is about, indirectly), become the despised and shunned storyline of one’s own life, much less alluring and clear than the life of a hero in a romance film (“Tears in the Cinema”), or be considered a professional failure, like the glass clinking on the recording of Bill Evans’s concert (in “Hi-Fi”). However, it is the poet’s job not be deceived by the apparent insignificance and dimensionlessness of the idiom, to possess the necessary intuition and to sense at least the existence of the code in the accident, even though decoding its signs, this “letter to the world” (“The Sender’s Problem”) is virtually impossible.

Thus, “Implosion” and “Surgical Precision.” Both poems appear to be quite loose and open poetic narratives. They seem to appear and vanish with their narrator, like quotes, a verbal event, a “soundtrack,” contaminated by the non-poetic extravagance of speech, the lack of poetic drama or a clear punchline.

“Implosion” is a record of the demolition of a high-rise belonging to an insurance company, a narration firmly anchored in a section of time and space, half journalistic, with a touch style of a local afternoon paper or radio station. What is striking here is the eagerness to record details, a slightly offhand visual perspective and a careful look at the transformation of space with a touch of personality of the narrator – a somewhat ironic, momentarily distanced commentator; a poet-witness? a reporter? a friendly neighbor?:

Od wczesnego rana
tłum gromadził się wokół placyku – bariera
i wozy policyjne, a więc nie napierał,
raczej gęstniał i wierzył, że zapowiadana

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transmisja TV przegra w konkurencji z samym
życiem (co wcale nie jest regułą). ...

... Szesnastopiętrowy
wystawiony na słońce (jak ktoś nieświadomy,
że opalenie się to krok do melanomy),
smukły wieżowiec firmy ubezpieczeniowej

przeżył swój biały beton i zielone szyby,
stabilny, choć tak silnie party naszym wzrokiem.

From early morning
the crowd gathered around the square – the barrier
and police cars, so it didn't push,
rather thickened and believed that the announced

TV broadcast would lose in competition with actual
life (which is not the rule)...

Sixteen stories
exposed to the sun (as someone unaware
that sunbathing leads to melanoma),
a slender tower block of insurance company

flexed its white concrete and green windowpanes,
stable, though so strongly pressured by our looks.

The personified narrative super-consciousness that has been introduced to this event does not shut the space of the poem; it is also just an event, a parallel one, with its jokes, ironies and *bons mots* which move parallel to the collapsing walls of the building and undulating emotions of the street audience. The reader will not experience complete identification with the persona; it will not be the authoritative "off-screen" voice from outside the poem which could explain the meaning of all this presentation, its poetic intention, which would reveal another level and the final message of the text.

The same characteristics of a verbal event, "captured" as if at a random section of time and space, can be observed in "Surgical Precision," a four-part poem, much longer than "Implosion." The chatty narrator's monologue is a slightly pretentious display of social eloquence in the form of reminiscing and commenting on the so-called current issues: politics, medicine, social behaviors, particularly regarding the surgical profession, with an addition of some personal anecdotes, gossip and hearsay about surgeons, a dose of pettifoggery, *political correctness* and encyclopedic erudition, full of rhetorical vigor and including a few witty comments in foreign languages. I think it would be a misunderstanding to read this poem with exaggerated attention to this discursive-anecdotal layer, to read it without the quotation marks, without realizing that in fact we are dealing with another type of *narrative idiom* present in Barańczak's collection. "Surgical Precision" is actually a narrative flow, captured in

a fairly random moment of someone's life and their linguistic activity, a record of existence. Existence in the idiom of time, space, language. Perhaps, as when reading "Implosion," the reader of "Surgical Precision" experiences something akin to a crisis of confidence, a lack of a stable foothold in the text, since the narrative subject immersed in this polyphony of its own plurality of expression, is unacceptable as an authority that would explain the overall meanings of the poem, and is not, we felt, the one holding the key to understanding the poem.

Can we then say that out of those four poems that particularly interest us here, "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision," these "reports from the world," it would seem semantically simple, filled with space, imagery and narration and devoid of ambiguity and poetic condensation, are actually more understandable, unambiguous, "lighter" than "Handrail" and "Behind Glass," both saturated with dark surprising linguistic associations and developing vague "substantial" exegeses, entering the microcosm of words and matter? Here is how we come to the key paradox: in poems where the figure of the narrator and the idiom of space were specifically emphasized, i.e. "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision," the lyrical subject is in fact equally internalized and the sense of those poems is situated as much outside the referential function of words and sentences, as it is in the case of "hermetic" poems, those focused on idiolect and the mother-word from which they derive their narration and poetic potential.

One could go further; the perceived difficulty of reading somehow connects the two pairs of texts and in a way opens the chance of a complete reading and discovery of the problem of idiom. The reading trauma experienced in contact with, on the one hand, "Handrail" and "Behind Glass" which eliminate the commentator and seem extremely hermetic, arbitrarily enclosing their space in a single word or object, and on the other hand "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision," which are disturbing because the imposing presence of the commentator and equally arbitrary opening of space, should provoke us to transfer the reading of these texts and of the whole volume to a higher level, to seek a common principle, the principle of idiom. It is difficult to say whether what we observe here is a poetic strategy intended by the author. But the fact is that the four interpreted poems constitute the center for the problem of idiom in Barańczak's collection and testify to the author's poetic and philosophical fascination with the topic; they appear to be "watching" each other and by identifying tensions, antinomies and symmetries which exist between them it is possible to understand the crucial theme in the whole of "Surgical Precision."

With that in mind, let us go back to the poems "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision" and try to answer the question: what meanings, hidden in the idiom of space and narration, are to be found in these works?

"Implosion" in some respects resembles Barańczak's "Birdwatchers" [*Obserwatorzy ptaków*] from the volume *A Postcard from the Other World*. The latter transcends the limits of genre scene, or a collection of trip impressions, which it seems to be at first. From a certain point the bird watchers are themselves being watched by some "inner eye" of the poem. From this perspective their communal perfectionism and

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hobby celebrations appear to be as much an entry into the world of ornithology, as an escape from the world of no classification, from realizing their painful existential singularity. This idea is reflected at the end of the poem:

Więc świat może jest po to, by przeszył, otworzył
nas czasem znak, jak strzałka: "JESTEŚ TUTAJ:
wśród ludzi, obcych, ale jesteście – zaufaj –
po jednej stronie, współobserwatorzy
ptaków, pogody, innych rzeczy."

So the world might be in order to pierce and open
us sometimes with a sign like arrow: "YOU ARE HERE:
among men, strangers, but you are – trust –
on one side, co-watchers
of birds, weather, other things. "

However, it seems that "Implosion," unlike *Birdwatchers*, is immersed in the idiom of time and space incomparably deeper and, perhaps, completely. Just like "Surgical Precision" is totally immersed in the idiom of speech and idiom of narration. In both these poems the absence of commentary is in some sense a commentary itself. These poems in particular, through their lack of thematic message, their radical entanglement with the sensuality of space ("Implosion"), with the flesh of language, narrative vigor and plurality of expression ("Surgical Precision"), point with unusual intensity at an *alternative reality* that was not described, or expressed in them. They point to the *non-being or non-existence* ("Implosion") and *silence and mystery* ("Surgical Precision"), categories not subject to human description and verbalization, and in fact, belonging to the transcendent space. And it is these that are actually the poetic theme, the "great absentee" in "Implosion" and "Surgical Precision." The main theme of "Implosion" – a poem so intensely preoccupied with matter and existence, is its opposite – non-existence. The main theme of "Surgical Precision" – so intensely "spoken" – is eventually that which was not said – silence. Each of these poems indicates its opposite in that it arbitrarily singles out a random part of space, a random part of someone's monologue, and in the way that these fragments continue in their lack of justification, since the lyrical narrator in both texts belongs entirely to the realm of idiom, the sphere of the expressible, opposite of which remains the Inexpressible. Such is the character of poetic operation in these texts. Both of these poems, so strongly rooted in the idiom of everyday life, turn out to be in the deepest sense philosophical, touching with the whole of their surface and thus reflecting that which cannot be named, described, or presented in any way.

The middle section of "Implosion" is the scene of collapse of the building and slow contemplation of the three dimensions of space. The rhythm of the poetic description for moment seems to coincide with the rhythm of the structure's dissolution, perfectly exhausting the dramatic potential of all phases of the process without a single unnecessary word. With this purely poetic slowing down of perception, the sequence holds for a moment the disintegration of matter, and leads the poem

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outside the limits of the immediate playful relation and into the space of geometric abstraction. (Incidentally, we could probably sense some metaphysical overtones in the fact that majestically collapsing building belongs to an insurance company):

najpierw szkło okien
bezglóśnie wzduło się i rozprysło, jak gdyby

pod jednoczesnym ciosem kilku setek pięści,
po sekundzie popartych wielokrotnym grzmotem;
wschodnia fasada, najpierw dziwnie wolno, potem
coraz nieodwracalniej, jakby coraz cięższy

był dla niej obowiązek zachowania twarzy,
osunęła się; za nią, po spirali, prędko,
eksplozje przemykały się z piętra na piętro;
nowe grzmoty; przekroje biur i korytarzy,

złapanych na zaledwie wystygłym uczynku
pustki wewnątrz; zapaści, pionowe i tępe,
ścian; harmonijkowate składanie się pięter;
jeszcze nie opadł na to wszystko dach budynku –

już ogromny kłęb pyłu rósł mu na spotkanie;
łóskot trwał jeszcze – już go pochłaniała wrzawa,
gwizdy, oklaski

first the glass windows
silently swelled and were shattered, as if

hit at one moment by a few hundred fists,
in a second supported by multiple thunder;
the eastern facade, oddly slow at first, then
more irreversibly, as if it was harder

and harder to maintain face,
sank down, and after, in a spiral, quickly,
explosions darted from floor to floor;
new thunders; sections of offices and hallways,

caught in the act barely getting cold
emptiness inside; collapses, vertical and dull,
of walls, floors folding up like a paper fan
the roof did not yet settle upon it all –

and already a huge cloud of dust rose up to meet it;
the noise still rang – yet already absorbed by clamor,
whistles, applause

Thus “Implosion,” so intensely “frozen” in existence, in the idiom of real space, simultaneously and silently suggests, or rather implies a complementary space – of Non-being. At the end of the poem the narrator and witness to the event records the

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cooling down of emotions of spectators after the successful collapse of the building, casually alluding to something that "is behind us and was left behind":

... So that's it? Yes, it is. It's past nine.
The crowd goes back to where cars are parked.

carried by the wind bits of pink fibers
used for sealing, clouds of brown dust
squeeze into the streets, chasing us. Something was
ceased to be: there is a vacuum, visible, slender.
But that is behind us and was left behind.

The narrator, being one of us, carelessly, recklessly abandons the accident, just when something begins to open up, when one should start to look carefully, because another story begins, here signaled by the ending and the subtle breach of the poems shape: an additional, "superfluous" line that starts something we, who are seduced by tangibility, who are slaves of the senses and incorrigible empiricists leaving the scene of the event, will not experience, nor sense.

How about "Surgical Precision"? Does this poem, like "Implosion," carry hidden signals indicating that its visible world, the order of the narrative, its human emotions, omniscient quivering, rhetorical *elephantiasis*, in fact the whole idiom of speech is actually there *instead*; instead of silence, instead of some transcendent code or message with which this monologue, a universal human monologue, will never meet, but which it will always miss? Such a signal can undoubtedly be found at the end of the poem. Similarly to "Implosion" the ending has a texture of a shimmering hologram, its own poetic ambiguity. The cartoon joke about surgeons it summarizes is yet another scene belonging to the genre of black humor, perfectly positioned in the whole sequence of similar anecdotes present in the monologue. At the same time, however, such ending of the poem actually revokes the significance of the monologue itself, placing it in quotation marks; everything that was said may only serve to designate a blank space left by a mystery that is ungraspable and extraverbal:

Rysunek: operacja w toku; pochylone
plecy chirurgów tworzą spoistą zasłonę,

ponad którą wystrzela jak z procy, wysoko,
śliski wewnętrzny organ (śledziona, na oko)

a główny chirurg wrzeszczy obecnym w tej scenie:
"Nie wyrzucać – to może mieć jakieś znaczenie!"

Nie demiurkiem – chirurgiem być, chociażby takim:
nie bardzo precyzyjnym, niepewnym, co znakiem

a co przypadkiem, ale, gdy czegoś dotyka,
świadomym, że jest ważne to, co się wymyka.

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Cartoon: operation in progress; the surgeons'
backs serve as kind of bodily curtain

over which shoots out high above the team
a slippery internal organ (seems to me, a spleen)

and the chief surgeon yells at those in the room:
“Do not throw away – we may need it soon!”

Not god, but a surgeon seems better career,
even one not precise and often unclear

what a symptom is and what simply a coincidence,
but one that when touching can get a clear sense

of things' weight and confidently be able to say
that important is that which is slipping away.

Perhaps the same thought about man's inevitable missing of what is significant, about the diverging paths of human experience and of the unknowable, is also inscribed into the structure of “Surgical Precision.” One could wonder about the arbitrarily changing form of stanzas in the poem, and, perhaps more importantly, about that form's incompatibility with the logical framework of narration. This meaningful lack of precision, the mid-sentence and mid-thought breaks in the flow of the monologue, caused by variation in the form of the stanza could suggest that the whole architecture of the poem, including its arbitrary division into four parts, is governed by some strange and mysterious logic, not identified with the intention of the monologist. The latter's “surgical” story, moving forward with a narrative vigor and a slightly narcissistic self-confidence of someone who never found words and language to resist the process of articulating the world, is confronted with the logic of a higher order. A different, competing rhythm, superimposed on the poetic monologue, seems to be encoded in the text, in its extraverbal space, in the form of a message: “we speak of, name and describe the world, but our discourse forever misses the world's true pulse; it is always speaking beside the world.”

An issue not to be missed in the consideration of “Surgical Precision” is the very clear autothematic, as well as autobiographical character of the poem. The monologuing narrator is an Everyman, but also Stanisław Barańczak the poet, author of the text. The poem is saturated in a humorous and self-ironic way with the idiom of the author's biography and works. It contains a biographical thread, recognizable by no small group of readers: the story of an operation the poet underwent after leaving the country:

wyrostek, przewieziony w brzuchu przez Atlantycką
(zapomniany appendix mojej kontrabandy),

odezwał się – a byłem dawno po czterdziestce –
i narobił kłopotów: nie dość, że pękł, jeszcze

wszystko wokół zakaził, jakby kamikaze
darł się we mnie: “Mam zginąć? Dobrze, ginmy razem!.”

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the appendix that I smuggled across the Atlantic
in my belly (forgotten) began crazy antics

I've been long in my forties and this was the first
time it caused trouble, then decided to burst,

and infect all around, as kamikaze fighter
it screamed: "If I die, you won't make it either."

At the same time the poem bears some characteristics of poetic self-paraphrase; by changing the outline of the stanza four times, it becomes a kind of a gallery of Stanisław Barańczak's poetic formats, a "final revision," a display of self-quoted capabilities of Barańczak-the poet.

By applying the idiom of his own biography and poetics, the author of "Surgical Precision" places himself and his work on the side of this universal monologue that will never be completed, will never reach the essence, the mystery, since those are on the side of Silence. I think it is worth noting that serene self-irony inscribed in the poem and in its concept, which is binding the "winded" monologue, transitory in its mental fads, in its anecdotal randomness and grandiloquence, in a complex, variable structural pattern of rhymes and stanzas. In "Surgical Precision" one can also encounter, albeit significantly changed, many a "figure" known from Barańczak's poetry. As in the first part of the poem when we read through a sentence of almost Proustian proportions, with unusually lengthy embedded elements, and with a sigh of relief after a stanza and a half we welcome its ending, along with the fact that in spite of numerous included digressions, it turned out to be perfectly "written out" in lines and rhymes, and fortunately saved its ultimately unquestionable logic.

According to the principle I have already described here, the more visible and powerful the autobiographical element in "Surgical Precision," the more it points in the direction of its opposite – the transience of life – present like a negative throughout the monologue, in its entanglement in the "now," in the accelerated respiration which is life's too ostentatious manifestation. Autothematism, on the other hand, communicates the inevitable moment when one's work misses the Mystery that escapes poetic expression, the result of which can be a humorous poetic "hyperactivity" of the author in this poem. And I think that this autothematic frame, bearing the message: "My poems are just uncertain indications of something that we should not "throw away" as "we may need it soon"" helps to understand why "Surgical Precision" gave its title to the entire collection and in some sense supports all of Stanisław Barańczak's work, so much inclined towards the Unknowable.

Translation: Paweł Pyrka