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Miron Bia?oszewski

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Brief orientation

Born and raised in the independent Poland of the interwar period, Miron Bia?oszewski (1922-83) came of age during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw (1939-45), lived through the city's utter destruction in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and experienced both post-war poverty and the restrictions of the Communist system, whose fall he did not live to witness. During the Stalinist years, he was forced out of his job as a journalist, possibly because of his homosexuality. Additionally, it was difficult for him to publish under the Stalinist regime because his aesthetics contradicted the tenets of socialist realism. After the Thaw in 1956, he belatedly debuted with a poetry collection, *Obroty rzeczy* (*The Revolution of Things*). Even though he was older, Bia?oszewski was considered part of the Generation of 1956, an influential group of writers emerging in the post-Thaw environment. Bia?oszewski spent his whole life in Warsaw but in later years did some traveling, visiting several Mediterranean countries on a boat cruise; he also visited the US to receive the Jurzykowski Literary Award in 1982.

Throughout his career, Bia?oszewski relied on linguistic techniques developed by the Polish interwar avant-garde, particularly the Futurists, but also the so-called Cracow Avant-garde with the influential poetics of Tadeusz Peiper, Jan Brz?kowski, and Julian Przybo?. What makes Bia?oszewski stand at the forefront of Polish literature, though, is not the techniques he used in his individual works but the radical scope of his project, which was unprecedented in Polish literature in its consistent attention to the everyday and ordinary, the re-enactment of orality, genre-bending, and the fusion of writing and life. For Ryszard Nycz, Bia?oszewski's lifetime loyalty to his project makes him par excellence a neo-avant-garde artist:

“Bia?oszewski shares with the neo-avant-garde the artistic imperative of ‘doing his own thing’ (...); “his attitude is a model of tenacity, consistency, and a specific mission of the artist of the final phase of the neo-avant-garde (...). Seen from this perspective, Miron Bia?oszewski is certainly one of the last genuine avant-gardists in Polish literature.” (Nycz 2001: 224-225)

In his poetry, prose, and theatrical plays, Bia?oszewski blurred genre divides. He often invented poetico-prosaic genres, whose playful names suggested their emergence from specific situations, such as “mini-trances” (“transiki”), “hums” (“szumy”), and “walking diaries” (“spacerowniki”). Most of his works are written in language that re-enacts colloquial speech, the most recognizable feature of his aesthetics. He was interested in orality from the time of his acclaimed debut, and he continued to explore the colloquial through his subsequent poetry volumes, *Rachunek zachciankowy* (1959; *Calculus of Whims*), *Mylne*

wzruszenia (1961; *Misdirected Sentiments*) up until his most radical *By?o and by?o* (1965; *There Was and There Was*), a volume in which the traditional determinants of poetic diction are replaced with the mimicry of everyday speech. From the mid-1950s (and especially when he lost his job) to the early 1960s, in addition to poetry, he wrote, co-wrote, staged, and acted in avant-garde plays, published in 1971 as *Teatr Osobny: 1955–1963* (*The Separate Theater: 1955–1963*). The volume's title is misleading as it contains plays from the period of the Theater on Tarczy?ska (Teatr na Tarczy?skiej, 1955-1958) as well as Separate Theater (Teatr Osobny, 1958-1963). Although only Bia?oszewski features on the book cover, he publicly acknowledged that several of his plays for Teatr Osobny were co-authored with his longtime collaborator and mentor, Ludwik Hering.

The publication of *Pami?tnik z powstania warszawskiego* (1970; *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*), whose language re-enacts oral testimony of the harrowing civilian experience of the Uprising, brought him much critical recognition and a wider readership. After the *Memoir* until his death, Bia?oszewski published so-called life-writing, a series of works in which he represents a narrator bearing his name and surrounding himself with characters bearing the names of his friends and family members. His writing evolves from capturing snippets of reality in the initial volumes, *Donosy rzeczywisto?ci* (1973; *Reporting Reality*) and *Szumy, zlepy, ci?gi* (Hums, Lumps, Threads, 1976) to more extensive diary-like entries in *Zawa?* (Heart Attack, 1977) and novel-like style of posthumously published *Chamowo* (2009; *Chamowo*). Bia?oszewski's trips to the Mediterranean and the States are recounted in the two diaries, also posthumously published: *Obmapywanie Europy: Dziennik okr?towy* and *AAAmeryka* (1988; *Mapping Europe: A Ship's Log and AAmeryka*). As Bia?oszewski returned to poetry at the end of the 1970s, some volumes of the small narrations contain poetic cycles, including his "cabaret" cycle, *Kabaret Kici-Koci* (*The Cabaret of Kicia-Kocia*).

Bia?oszewski's previously unpublished works are regularly released. The publication of his "secret diary" (*Tajny dziennik*, 2012), the revised and uncensored version of the *Memoir* (2014), and the three volumes of uncollected writings (2015-2017) became significant literary events.

Developments

Bia?oszewski's oeuvre can be divided into three stages: from his first four volumes of poetry and theatrical works (1950s-1960s); through the so-called small narrations and hybrid prose of the 1970s and early 1980s; to his return to poetry in the late 1970s. An exceptional place in this periodisation is granted to Bia?oszewski's masterpiece, *Memoir* (1970), mainly due to its historical subject.

In his early poetry, especially the first volume, Bia?oszewski was invested in showing how the ordinary can be transformed into a sphere of elated artistic explorations, an approach influenced by the Cracow avant-garde. *The Revolution of Things* circles around the speaker's intimate relations with inanimate objects, which, bereft of their functionality, reveal their aesthetic qualities. The speaker defamiliarises, sacralises, and transubstantiates his quotidian existence, as in the paraphrases of the Catholic liturgy. The volume powerfully fuses the high and low and features exalted dialogues with floors, quilts, and drains. For Bia?oszewski's speaker empirical losses become linguistic gains, as in the exuberant poem "Ach, *gdyby, gdyby nawet piec zabrali . . .* ' *Moja niewyczerpana oda do rado?ci* " ("Oh! Oh! Should They Take Away My Stove . . . ' My Inexhaustible Ode to Joy"). In this privatisation of the high genre of the ode, the speaker substitutes the "gray gaping hole" ("szara naga jama") formerly occupied by the stove with rapid repetitions of the phrase transforming it into a Japanese-sounding "sza-ra-na-ga-ja-ma."

Already in his second and third volumes, *Calculus of Whims* and *Misdirected Sentiments*, Bia?oszewski engages with neo-semantisation that can be traced to the futurist tradition, a practice which comes radically to the fore in *There Was and There Was* (S?awi?ski 1965). His experiments with word formation, articulation, and the laying bare of language devices, at times resemble the non-referentiality of "zaum" and

“écriture automatique” (Poprawa 2019: 202). For this inventiveness he has been labelled a “linguistic poet.”

In *Misdirected Sentiments*, Bia?oszewski also begins to fuse poetry and autobiography. From the earlier “priest of the everyday” (as critics would have it), his speaker now becomes “Bia?oszewskawy” (literally, “Bia?oszewskish” or “Bia?oszewskian”), a hero of his own linguistic inabilities (“s?ów niepotraf”). In *There Was and There Was*, Bia?oszewski’s poetry shifts to notes-on-the-go, which privileges situationism and builds a sense of eventfulness from banal occurrences. The poems become poetico-prosaic hybrids with the language shunning “literariness” (literacko??) and re-enacting the colloquial. Bia?oszewski creates a social heteroglossia by penning works that stage a multiplicity of voices belonging to various social groups.

Most critics did not appreciate the radicality of *There Was and There Was*. Julian Przybo?, a poet and theorist of the Cracow Avant-garde (initially enthusiastic about Bia?oszewski’s idiosyncratic voice), famously shunned *There Was and There Was* as unworthy of the category “literature.” Not only had traditional determinants of poetry – a strong sense of a poetic “I” and a distinctly “poetic” language – disappeared, but Bia?oszewski’s colloquial language and its hybrid forms, neither poetic nor prosaic, precluded in Przybo?’ eyes the internal coherence of poetry, which he considered the central principle of the high avant-garde mode.

Because he was unable to publish until 1956, Bia?oszewski wrote his early poetry “for the drawer.” During this period he simultaneously experimented with different modes of theatrical production and performance, which influenced his subsequent propensity to theatricalise the representation of ordinary events and everyday speech. In 1955 after Stalin’s death, together with Lech Emfazy Stefa?ski and other friends, Bia?oszewski formed the experimental Theater on Tarczy?ska Street housed in Stefa?ski’s apartment. In 1958, together with Ludwik Hering and Ludmi?a Murawska – each interchangeably taking on the roles of director, actor, and stage designer – he established Teatr Osobny (the Separate Theater), this time in Bia?oszewski’s small apartment in D?browski Square. Supported by audience donations, the Separate Theater had as its stage the nook containing Bia?oszewski’s bed. This alternative theatre, post-Thaw but still amidst the grayness of the late Communist 1950s and early 1960s, attracted local and foreign theatregoers (foreign guests supposedly included Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir).

By far Bia?oszewski’s most recognised work is his *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* (1970). The *Memoir* recounts the sixty-three days of the uprising using linguistic devices developed by Bia?oszewski earlier in his poetry and theatre – misapplication of idioms; change and exchange of suffixes and prefixes; replacement of syntactic units with isolated phonemes; fragmentation of sentences; onomatopoeic expressions; and ellipses. All these devices emphasise the performative aspect of the *Memoir*, which re-enacts an oral testimony (“talking memoir”) in a multi-angled, syntactically incoherent, fast-paced, first-person narrative. Some critics treated the *Memoir* as separate from Bia?oszewski’s other works mainly because of its historical subject, but this “separateness” should be problematised. The *Memoir* is central to Bia?oszewski’s artistic development and psychobiography. As a survivor, he gives testimony to a personal and collective experience. As a writer, he harnesses his earlier experimental strategies to “perform” a canonic historical event and represent the temporal paradoxes of traumatic memory. The aesthetic strategies developed in the *Memoir* affect Bia?oszewski’s later writing. Hence, both artistically and biographically/psychologically, the *Memoir* is always already at the core of Bia?oszewski’s writing.

The post-*Memoir* prose written from the 1970s to early 1980s, takes ordinary events as its subject with “Bia?oszewski” and his friends as main characters. With Warsaw as the setting this work solidified Bia?oszewski as a writer of the everyday. Some of the volumes also contain poetic cycles, combining poetry and prose and eschewing definite genre categorisation.

Avant-garde strategies

Critics used the category of the “avant-garde” in relationship to Białoszewski to serve different purposes. For popular critics the term served as a means of labelling his writing as incomprehensible for a general audience. For some high-brow critics, it served to demonstrate his betrayal of avant-garde aesthetic principles. For others, it encouraged explorations of more flexible approaches to the avant-garde (Sobolczyk 2009: 83-84).

When we think of Białoszewski’s writing from the perspective of his artistic attitudes (Nycz’s tenacity, consistency, and a sense of mission), his entire oeuvre appears to embody different modes of experimentation with life-writing as a “project of existence” (“projekt egzystencji”) continually at its core. Hence, even the periodisation of Białoszewski’s works seems more heuristic than analytic. A productive approach to Białoszewski’s writing benefits from being “as broad as possible, consistent with the concepts of the neo-avant-garde, that is assuming not only fluid boundaries between prose and poetry, artistic works and personal records of life, but also opening the author’s literary works to other arts, thus emphasizing its intermedial and processual character” (Orska 2021: 147).

Close to the elemental force of spoken language, Białoszewski’s writing seems constituted of jotted-down, here-and-now, notes-on-the-go (“zapiski”), meant to be received as unfinished, rough, and outside genre norms. Their open-endedness often shows itself in the page layout and Białoszewski’s use of blank spaces, hyphens, indentations, ellipses. No other writer in post-war Polish literature equals Białoszewski in his consistent vision of literature as *energeia* – an open-ended process of creation – rather than *ergon*, a self-contained work.

The open-endedness emphasises Białoszewski’s horizontal attention to “everything” and his juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated events and contexts, which when analysed show a great deal of artistic coherence. Białoszewski “makes” literature from the “ready-mades” of reality: overheard snippets of conversations, noises in the apartment building, the rustling sound of leaves. His attention to the sonic is a persistent feature throughout his career.

Białoszewski’s trademark lies in his shunning of the high register of literary language and his re-enactment of colloquial speech. Especially in his poetry, he is particularly interested in speech that exhibits its own inability to be articulated and that, like the mumblings of a drunkard, displays the dynamics of speech production. He focuses on the materiality of language and the performative aspects of the spoken through fragmented sentences, exchanged suffixes and prefixes, the displacement and rearrangement of phonemes, the creation of an effect of arbitrary signification. Białoszewski does not mimetically represent speech but hyperbolically re-enacts its lack of precision and intelligibility.

This avant-garde strategy to liberate words from their syntactic and grammatical confines relies not only on the semantic but also on the sonic qualities of language. Białoszewski’s “(phono)stylistic devices” (?niecikowska 2021: 293) create “the kind of leaven for fictional events [zdarzenia fabularne]” through the arbitrary juxtaposition of words with phonetic similarity (Hellich 2021: 81). “In the transformation of words, in breaking grammar, I see the unfolding drama,” claimed Białoszewski (Białoszewski 2015: 381). This unfolding drama inherent in language is central to the theatricality of Białoszewski’s poetics (Kopciński 1997). He emphasised the dramaturgical aspects of his works when he applied his acting skills to read them in private and public settings and for recordings. Spontaneously “playing theater” was also an ongoing source of inspiration for him. During gatherings with friends, Białoszewski often arranged spontaneous theatrical productions and experimented with film recording (“filmikowanie”). This childlike and ludic “group art” features as a subject of his life-writing.

In the 1970s, voice performance entered Białoszewski’s creative process. He would often read his works into a recording device and listen to himself before revising texts for publication or would first record himself and then write from the recording. The *Memoir*, for instance, “all passed through the ear” because it was first written down in longhand, and then recorded, and finally typed, adding “talking diary” (“pamiętnik gadany”) to its “genre” description. The wave of explorations of Białoszewski’s recordings opened new

directions in Bia?oszewski criticism, focusing on the performativity of his process and representation, and the intersection of different media. The sonic qualities of his writing make some critics treat his texts as scores (“partytura”) to be actualised in a performance rather than as integral textual entities (Bogalecki). This, in turn, opens up a new dimension of Bia?oszewski’s project. The circulation between writing and reading, reading and writing gives Bia?oszewski’s works a hybrid and intermedia character, which, together with their attention to the ordinary, resemble the international neo-avant-garde movement of “Fluxus” (Orska 2021: 157).

Contents

Bia?oszewski’s withdrawal from mainstream literary culture and creation of an alternative literary niche became the operative principle of his reception. His distancing from public life has been expressed in terms of autonomy, authenticity, singularity, and separateness. The concept of withdrawal (S?awi?ski, 1976) was used to account for Bia?oszewski’s seeming indifference to the norms of the Polish literary scene and to the cultural pattern of writers serving as public intellectuals. Seeing Bia?oszewski’s “kingdom of insignificance” (S?awi?ski, 1976) as a free artistic and existential territory should, however, be problematised and historicised, as it presupposes Bia?oszewski’s full agency over his bodily-textual existence and limits our understanding of his life and project. Bia?oszewski’s withdrawal and the creation of an alternative “life-and/as-writing” is simultaneously a courageous gesture of sovereignty as well as of self-limitation. Bia?oszewski was aware that his uncloseted homosexuality narrowed down his public options – for instance, he could never be a public intellectual – so he carved out for himself the kind of freedom that he could be afforded to him.

Bia?oszewski’s entire life unfurled under communism, limiting his options, yet he seemingly writes as if existing outside political confines. History and politics cross the threshold of the private and domestic in life-writing, but they do so surreptitiously and lightly, so that only careful readers can trace their presence. Although his representation of the ordinary is never merely a backdrop for the political (as in the literature of moral dissent), it nevertheless encodes the political as, for instance, in his portrayal of the domestic space which on the one hand is safe and on the other is always threatened by outside sources, whether the police or homophobic neighbours. Even in times of great upheaval for Polish society (e.g., the Solidarity period), Bia?oszewski avoided participating in the political life of his community and sharing in its collective affect. He claimed that “[he] can’t sway with everybody else” (“nie mog? ko?ysa? si? razem ze wszystkim”), but he never specified what exactly stood behind this refusal.

Bia?oszewski’s strategies encourage his readers to treat his writing as autobiography and “intimate cryptodiary” (G?owi?ski 1973). Yet, his “Miron Bia?oszewski” – his narratorial self – is imbued with a sense of distance and irony about its own textual status. This self needs to be understood simultaneously as fictional and real (i.e., identified with author), textual and empirical. This construction of sylleptic subjectivity presupposes that the narrative “I” is both mimetic and semiotic (Winiecka 2006). Bia?oszewski’s writing and life are mutually and dynamically interdependent. Each feeds and “performs for” the other.

Bia?oszewski kept a private profile. He neither participated in public debates on Polish literature and culture nor commented on other writers and artists. Most of his own programmatic remarks are performed rather than stated; that is, even if Bia?oszewski talks about his writing outside of his works (e.g., in press interviews), his idiosyncratic diction remains the same. Bia?oszewski was a critics’ writer. His experiments and idiosyncrasies were admired and promoted by the luminaries of Polish criticism. In the 1960s and 1970s, his writing was particularly significant for critics influenced by structural linguistics; their interpretations of Bia?oszewski’s poetry allow us to “trace the debates of Warsaw and Pozna? structuralists (...) regarding the very status of poetic language” (Komendant in Hellich 2021: 66).

Bia?oszewski's performative poetics with its countless events of everyday life re-enacted in the cadences and tones of oral delivery stood – and still stands – apart from Polish literature's national tradition preoccupied with history, politics, and national identity. He disengaged from that national tradition by constructing his writing as focused on the particular, the insignificant, the banal and what in high diction would be considered a taboo (e.g., his narrator's struggles with dentures). The elusive revelatory nature of Bia?oszewski's small narrations have been traced to the modernist epiphanic tradition, in which, as in James Joyce's writing, the inexpressible manifests itself in the banality (Nycz 1993). In their departure from universality, small narrations could be compared to what Lyotard called "micronarratives," countering grand narratives (Hellich 2021: 86).

Nowhere is this departure more striking than in the "scandalous" *Memoir*, in which Bia?oszewski subverts the canon of heroic and martyrological representations of the Uprising. His "civilian prose" shuns the so-called Romantic paradigm with its economy of sacrifice, martyrology, and teleology of military "deeds" for the open-endedness and shapelessness of civilian experience. Bia?oszewski's avant-garde linguistic sensibility (his experiments in neo-semantization and attention to the sonic qualities of languages) all serve in the *Memoir* to represent the violent reality of the historical event and the wrestling with its memory.

Bia?oszewski's life-writing subverts the culture's grand narratives and social norms, but its textual strategies naturalise this subversion for his readers, best exemplified by Bia?oszewski's representation of homosexuality. Bia?oszewski does not veil his homosexuality in the modernist fashion, he does not "wink" at his reader, nor does he write an emancipatory counternarrative. Instead, he constructs a non-normative male narrator who does not organise himself around a male/female binary. His most immediate social structures are alternative to the heteronormative, patriarchal family. As this male identifies with the world of women (the most fascinating array of postmenopausal female characters in Polish literature), both notions of domesticity and masculinity are reconfigured as well. The repetitive textual performance of the "Mironian" quotidian discourages a scrutinising reading experience; rather, Bia?oszewski's reader is invited to read horizontally (i.e., without looking for the text's supposed "deep meaning") and rewarded with the pleasure of his small narrations' cumulative effect. Bia?oszewski destabilises the normative by blending it with the non-normative, but this technique acclimatises readers to the text's inconsistencies and makes them overlook its subversive charge. The same narrator who shamelessly postulates that he will "write everything" ("spisz? wszystko") in fact subtly and carefully circumscribes his reader's field of vision. In this context, reading Bia?oszewski through the lenses of gender performance (*à la* Judith Butler) helps us to see how he negotiates his "Bia?oszewski" between the hegemony of cultural norms of heteronormativity and otherness.

Conclusion

Bia?oszewski has been enjoying a great posthumous career in post-communist Poland. His legacy is playing a vital role in the search for new languages and identities for the post-1989 generations of Polish writers and poets, and in the best of them we can detect an unmistakable "Bia?oszewskian" flair. We could think about the spectrum of 20th-century Polish literature as stretching between Czes?aw Mi?osz and Miron Bia?oszewski. Whereas Mi?osz brought Polish literature an international recognition and transnational appeal with his classical diction and historiosophic preoccupations, Bia?oszewski in his unique neo-avant-garde ways privatised the Polish language.

This language can be compared to the aesthetics of other European writers, for instance, to Kurt Schwitters's Dadaist poetics of sound (?niecikowska 2023), but it is not these qualities and affinities with the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde that make Bia?oszewski's project cutting-edge. Rather, it is the maximalist dimension of this all-embracing experiment in "life and/as writing," all the more radical because it took place in the limiting environment of communist Poland. This experiment stretched from Bia

oszewski's youth to, almost literally, the moment of his death. Thanks to Bia oszewski's oeuvre, we are in possession of a rare map to the still-underexplored realities of the vibrant artistic niches during the oppressive Stalinist 1950s and commonly perceived as grey 1960s and 1970s. In Bia oszewski's theatre, we encounter a small but daring community writing its own laws on how to celebrate the ephemeral process of creation. Whether we acknowledge Bia oszewski's homosexuality or not, through his poetry and prose, we gain access to the representation of alternative families, quite dissimilar from the patriarchal norms. "Miron Bia oszewski" and Miron Bia oszewski share with their readers the pleasures of partaking in the artistic potential of the everyday. Perhaps like Joyce for Dublin, he is the "bard of the Marszalkowska Street," as he called himself, referring to Warsaw's major street. It is always his native city that he leisurely explores during the daytime and covertly cruises at night. In this "auto-bio-geography" (Karpowicz), Warsaw does not cease to be a communist Warsaw – shabby and tired – yet it also becomes a space of "something more," a realm of linguistic possibilities and the domain for effervescent experiences. The writing of this Warsaw has almost haptic qualities, like the weeds gathered by "Miron" in the city's forgotten corners that no "universal" vegetation can replace. If Bia oszewski becomes better known abroad thanks to the recent release of translation rights, his works should play a major role in redefining the image of the writer and literature in the Eastern Bloc.

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