

Autothematic Description in Poetry by Women: The Case of Joanna Pollakówna

Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik

ORCID: 0000-0001-9770-6234

I.

Poetic meta-reflection¹ is an important, though underestimated, aspect of poetry written by women. Most poets thematize (their) manner of writing, reflect on the role and purpose of poetry, and sometimes, in the process of developing their own poetic projects, theorize on the subject. Metapoetry defines the poetry of some female authors and autothematic reflection is always present in their poems, growing and evolving over the years. I refer to the original and significant—in terms of quality and sometimes also in terms of quantity (one's entire poetical *oeuvre*)—metapoetic projects of Wisława Szymborska, Julia Hartwig, Krystyna Miłobędzka, Urszula Koziół, Bogusława Latawiec, and Ewa Lipska, as well as numerous self-reflective texts by Anna Kamieńska, Halina Poświatowska and Joanna Pollakówna. Among younger poets, we should mention Joanna Mueller, Marzanna Bogumiła Kielar and Julia Fiedorczuk. This list of examples is not complete, but it is not accidental either.

¹ In this text, I use the terms autothematic poetry, metapoetry, and meta-reflection interchangeably. I am aware of the differences in the origin and meaning of these terms and of the problems related to their definitions, meanings and use. I am also aware that the interpretation of a given phenomenon depends on the literature and language employed in its description, which are constantly changing and evolving. For example, meta-reflection is a category developed by the structural-semiotic paradigm in the context of postmodernity and new methodologies. Autothematic writing as a complex category was discussed at the conference *Nowy autotematyzm? Meta-refleksja we współczesnej humanistyce* [New autothematicism? Meta-reflection in modern humanities], which took place on November 28 and 29, 2019 at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (a monograph with the same title will be published in 2021).

In literary studies, the dominant assumption is that metapoetry, as a special form of thinking about poetry in poetry, is the domain of male authors. Or, to put it differently, in poetry studies, metapoetry is examined almost exclusively in works created by men.² However, if we were to look at the writing practice itself, it would be difficult to find noticeable differences in the popularity or intensity of meta-reflection in poetry by women³ and by men. However, we could find certain differences in the process of close reading, in poetic idiolects and in the thematic saturation of their metapoems. I will not focus on these potential, though clearly noticeable, differences. Instead, I will concentrate on a different and more interesting problem.⁴

I will focus on metapoetry, which employs description (metapoetry in description): it is one of the basic forms of poetic expression, which both employs and thematizes how the subject expresses/ constitutes herself. I will discuss the meta features of this poetic technique, asking questions about the role of the medium of language in constructing and deconstructing the represented world. In other words, poetry which employs autothematic description may be considered an interesting form of self-reflective writing. Naturally, it is not only present in works written by women; it should be remembered, however, that as a rule, metapoetry written by men is more often examined in literary studies and works by women are largely unexplored. Therefore, although I will focus on poetry by women, my analytical insights and observations may apply to poetry in general. The analytical focus on poetry by women may, on the one hand, lead to a reevaluation and reexamination of metapoetry, and, on the other hand, it may allow us to see the texts of poets in a different light, outside of “literary sanctuaries:”⁵ not solely as “poetry by women” (i.e. a subcategory of “real” poetry that is not subjected to gender classification), but as poetry which is not limited to certain themes and styles. Meta-reflection, as well

² This is the case, for example, in Andrzej Niewiadomski’s monograph on metapoetic reflection in modern Polish poetry, where only Anna Świrszczyńska was mentioned: Andrzej Niewiadomski, *Światy z jawnych słów i kwiatów ukrytych. O refleksji metapoetyckiej w nowoczesnej poezji polskiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2010).

³ When I write about poetry by women, I mean literature that is not necessarily women’s literature, or does not want to be associated with this category, including both literature in which the female experience is described and the “I” identifies as female and poets who do not reveal their gender, creating a “universal” subject or ignoring the feminine aspect of the described experience. It is therefore a concept that is broader than “women’s poetry,” which, moreover, is difficult to define and has been widely discussed in literary studies. See, for example, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska in: “Literatura kobieca a literatura kobiet,” in *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, ed. Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, Kraków 2020), 21–33.

⁴ For example, Joanna Mueller proposes a distinction between “gender” specific types of autothematic writing, interpreting meta-reflection in poetry by women as a kind of self-defense against labeling it as “women’s poetry.” “The latter probably just like to write about writing – and poets thus want their readers to focus on the text in itself, and not just on the props and themes;” Maria Cyranowicz, Joanna Mueller, Justyna Radczyńska, “Solistki bez chóru. Pożyteczne refleksje,” in *Solistki. Antologia poezji kobiet (1989–2009)*, ed. Maria Cyranowicz, Joanna Mueller, Justyna Radczyńska, drawings by Pela Dwurnik, Marta Ignerska (Warszawa: Staromiejski Dom Kultury, 2009), 227.

I discuss metapoetry and linguistic poetry by women in opposition to its stereotypical presentation in literary studies in more detail in: Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, “Inna teoria poezji? *Ubi leones*, czyli o autotematyzmie w wierszach kobiet,” in *Stulecie poetek polskich*, 369–406.

⁵ I discuss “sanctuaries” for poets in more detail in Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, “Polska poezja kobiet XX wieku. Próba porządkowania doświadczeń,” in *Stulecie poetek polskich*, 35–93. I refer in it to Janusz Sławiński’s text, in which he discusses Polish poetry from 1956 to 1980 in the context of political struggles: “Poetry was granted special rights as a sanctuary of language; it was excluded from restrictions imposed on other published texts. In order to enjoy its privileges, it had to accept its imposed status – that was it;” Janusz Sławiński, “Rzut oka na ewolucję poezji polskiej w latach 1956–1980,” in *Teksty i teksty* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1991), 108. For example, love poems could be found in “sanctuaries” for poetry by women, provided that they were not too erotic and did not break any taboos. Poetry by women could be considered high art if it was devoted to “feminine” themes. In other words, if poetry emphasized its “femininity,” it was considered uncomplicated, banal, and secondary.

as linguistic and avantgarde experiments, are definitely outside of such literary “sanctuaries” where poets have been appreciated and granted artistic freedom.

At this point, we have to mention that in literary studies, “poetry by women” (and “writing by women”) has been associated with a certain style of description. It dates back to 1928 and Irena Krzywicka’s article in *Wiadomości Literackie*, entitled *Jazgot niewieści, czyli przerost stylu* [Female gibberish, or the excess of style]⁶. According to Krzywicka, female writers, among other things, used descriptiveness, comparisons and epithets excessively, exaggerating trivial things. Their style was decorative, and form triumphed over content. Their texts were not considered intellectual. However, the stereotypical “meticulous” and extensive descriptions, artificial emotionality, and stylistic excess associated with poetry written by women is only one of many possibilities and does not necessarily lead to metapoetic reflection.

Therefore, I wish to distance myself from these historical and literary connotations, as well as from gender divisions, and instead focus on a particular form of description which is a separate, though not autonomous, metapoetic autothematic technique. Description itself, according to Janusz Sławiński, who analyzed it in terms of narration, is made of “sentences which are answers to the questions about things, places and characters.”⁷ Sławiński observes that description may take different forms, including introductory, dispersed, extended and integrated description. In her examination of poetry, Seweryna Wysłouch observes that description is “commenting on the properties of things, characters and phenomena” and at the same time “the most controversial literary technique; it has been criticized in literary studies by many, from Lessing to Przyboś.”⁸ Wysłouch classifies poetic description in terms of form, distinguishing “anarchic” description (after Sławiński), which is “uncontrollable listing,” description with a coherent framework, description with a semantic dominant, kinetic description and description which deforms space.⁹ For Wysłouch (similarly to Sławiński), form and syntax are the most important. For example, the use of lists and listing translates into a detailed, visual and vivid poetic image. For Wysłouch, the use of lists becomes a basic distinguishing feature of description and determines its classification, in accordance with the intensity and features of the compositional system. For example, “anarchic” description, full of extensive comparisons and metaphors, is tamed and “organized” by rhetorical devices (repetitions, frames, gradations, contrasts, etc.) With its focus on categorization and description of mechanisms which generate a given phenomenon, structuralism still accounts for the semantics of the analyzed forms, signaling “an epic attitude towards the world,”¹⁰ directing attention to a specific “technique of seeing,”¹¹ or the way of seeing the world, as exemplified

⁶ Irena Krzywicka, “Jazgot niewieści, czyli przerost stylu,” *Wiadomości Literackie*, no. 42 (1928). See also: Joanna Krajewska, „Jazgot niewieści” i „męskie kasztele”. *Z dziejów sporu o literaturę kobiecą w Dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* (Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 2010); Agata Zawiszewska, *Między Młodą Polską, Skamandrem i Awangardą. O kobietach piszących wiersze w latach 1918–1939* (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe US, 2015).

⁷ Janusz Sławiński, “O opisie,” in *Próby teoretycznoliterackie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1992), 194 (emphasis – JS).

⁸ Seweryna Wysłouch, “Od Lessinga do Przybosa. Teoria i kompozycja opisu,” in *Literatura a sztuki wizualne* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994), 24.

⁹ Wysłouch, 25.

¹⁰ Wysłouch, 25.

¹¹ Wysłouch, 38.

by the aforementioned Adam Mickiewicz and Julian Przyboś. In the end, however, we arrive at a methodological, universalized and autonomous “technical” description.

Nevertheless, neither Sławiński nor Wysłouch take into account the autothematic character of description. However, considering Sławiński’s discussion of Roland Barthes’s “effect of reality,”¹² we should point to the meta-reflective potential of description. Indeed, it has an intrinsically contradictory nature. In relation to Flaubert, Barthes diagnosed it as the interpenetration of the “aesthetic” and the “referential”: “in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity.”¹³

Autothematic description gives just such an illusion (or desire) of referentiality: it promises to signify “reality” and provides it with a linguistic alibi, by means of the “revenge of a mortal hand.” A model example is autothematic description in Wisława Szymborska’s *Radość pisania* [The joy of writing]: it both creates and destroys the world in which “this written doe” is running “through these written woods.”¹⁴ Such an autothematic and autonomous poetic image exemplifies how the described object and language come face to face in writing,¹⁵ revealing the time and place of this “meeting” and asking questions about its rules and purpose. The focus is not on “reality”, but on the very process of producing its effect. This process is not always as evident as in Szymborska’s poem: “They forget that what’s here isn’t life./ Other laws, black on white, obtain.” Eventually, doubts triumph over conclusions and the basic dilemma remains unresolved:

Jest więc taki świat,
nad którym los sprawuję niezależny?
Czas, który wiąże łańcuchami znaków?
Istnienie na mój rozkaz nieustanne?

Is there then a world
where I rule absolutely on fate?
A time I bind with chains of signs?
An existence become endless at my bidding?

Thus, autothematic description would be a candid description, a meta-description. It is still subject to the formal distinctions listed above. Nevertheless, they do not matter at this point. The (seemingly) transparent descriptiveness of the poetic sentence seems to be the exact opposite of *Radość pisania*. It helps the reader “forget that what’s here isn’t life.” A discreet but effective “mortal hand” is trying to erase what it has done.

¹²Sławiński, “O opisie,” 191–194.

¹³Roland Barthes, “The reality effect,” translated by Richard Howard, *The rustle of language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 148.

¹⁴All quotations from the poem *Radość pisania* are from: Wisława Szymborska, *Wiersze wybrane*, selected and organized by the author, new revised edition (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2010), 116. The English version is from “No End of Fun,” 1967. Translated by S. Baranczak & C. Cavanagh.

¹⁵Barthes, “The reality effect,” 125.

At this point, Julia Hartwig's poetry, so ideologically and linguistically different from Wisława Szymborska's works, is an interesting interpretative point of reference.¹⁶ Julia Hartwig is also expressing her metapoetic awareness, though she rarely openly reflects on the nature of language and writing techniques in her poems. Indeed, she rarely asks about the essence of poetry – the “clear unclear.”¹⁷ It does not mean that she is not concerned with recording and documenting reality. Hartwig often writes about the affirmative role of poetry, seeking a “vision of harmony” and trying to “keep up the rhythm” of life and language (*W pochodzie* [In procession]).¹⁸ She thematizes the problem of expressing the world in words both in poems (“Sudden touch of Monge Square / by one uttered word” (*Wymówione*) [Uttered]¹⁹) and authorial comments (“I want my poetry to be clear and simple, even when it expresses what may seem inexpressible”²⁰).

In her intellectualized and discursive poems, she indirectly formulates her poetic program in opposition or in dialogue with other, especially avant-garde, programs. Hartwig opposes “poetry made of crumbs, peels, debris, vague allusions, imprecise words, and unfinished thoughts. Allowed to not to be beautiful, excused from sloppiness.” She opposes poetry which gives up on tradition and culture, “timeless symbols” and “the common paths of human myths” (*Co mu ślina na język przyniesie* [Talking without thinking]).²¹ We learn about her understanding of poetry and its tasks as if in passing: from anecdotes and stories about events and people (often about other anonymous poets). Observing, experiencing and describing the world is conveyed and substantiated, both in terms of syntax and versification, by the sentence.²² This is seen in a poem in which the world represented by a “young poet” turned out to be “after all in his attempts real / if despite June heat / I believed in November rain and snow / that banished him to the bar after he lost his girl” (*Wahanie nad książką młodego poety* [Hesitation over a young poet's book]).²³ Using a descriptive sentence with subtle hints of meta-reflection, Hartwig does not lose confidence in language, taking the side of those artists for whom “the most appropriately chosen word is above all a carrier of poetic meaning, it expresses a certain reality, even if it is transformed by imagination.”²⁴ Her “credible sentence,” combined with the technique of description, seems to be the basic “poetic unit.” It defines her poetry at its core, as in these autothematic verses:

¹⁶It is closer to Czesław Miłosz, see Anna Legeżyńska, “Gdyby Czesław Miłosz był kobietą...,” in *Pochwała istnienia. Studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig*, ed. Barbara Kulesza-Gulczyńska, Elżbieta Winiecka (Poznań: Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2015).

¹⁷You do not count during writing / and yet everything is counted / you do not hide / and yet you are hidden / you do not show off / and yet they see you and they recognize you / Admit / that this is somewhat vague – Julia Hartwig writes in the poem *Jasne niejasne*; Julia Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane” (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2010), 442. Hartwig's poems discussed in this article were translated by M. Olsza.

¹⁸Hartwig, 375.

¹⁹Hartwig, 465.

²⁰Julia Hartwig, “Dawać do siebie dostęp zachwyтови. Wystąpienie z okazji nadania tytułu doktora *honoris causa* Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu,” in *Pochwała istnienia. Studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig*, 11.

²¹Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane,” 127.

²²“The need to communicate, to find a response to what we write, breaks through the darkness and seeks an understandable expression for itself,” the poet said, receiving an honorary doctorate in Poznań, “The choice of syntax is connected with the readability of poems. As for me, I build a poem in a sentence, almost never in a verse, which I would call scattered, typical for futurism, for example. A sentence as a logical unit, used in everyday language, is easier for the reader to understand;” Hartwig, “Dawać do siebie dostęp zachwyтови,” 8.

²³Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane,” 179.

²⁴Hartwig, “Dawać do siebie dostęp zachwyтови,” 8–9.

Wierzę w zdanie W przystanek który szuka formy
 składnej i skromnej jak codzienna mowa [...]
 cierpię łagodnie lecz trwale na ból niedookreślenia [...]
 Nie przeszkadza mi to podziwiać rozpiętych szeroko w oknie
 gałęzi lipy dosłyszeć skrzeku sroki
 uprzykrzonego i błogosławionego ponieważ jest [...]
 Ale zdanie zdanie wiarygodne
 sprawia że znowu czuję pod stopami ziemię
 (*Potrzeba*)²⁵

I believe in a sentence In a pause that seeks form
 as neat and humble as everyday speech [...]
 I suffer mildly but persistently from the pain of the indeterminate [...]
 It doesn't stop me from admiring in the window
 Linden branches hearing the screech of magpies
 annoying and blessed because it is [...]
 But a sentence a credible sentence
 makes me feel the ground under my feet again
 (*Need*)

In both poems, by Szyborska and Hartwig respectively, the purpose of the metapoetic descriptive sentence is not so much visualization as the problematization of the existence of the described object and of its poetic “credibility.” Its interpretive potential (those “linden branches” that are visible “in the window” and in-between lines) is determined by the tension between creation and invalidation, invalidation and creation – the game is played in poetry and through poetry, although poetry is not the ultimate goal. By displaying or merely suggesting the gesture of describing reality, the author demonstrates its inevitability and unnoticeability and at the same time the writerly consciousness of the subject, which also becomes a non-poetic (ethical, personal, metaphysical, and existential) commitment.

Indeed, autothematic themes and techniques in poems by women are rarely selfless, autonomous, and focused on poetry itself and its affairs, similar to language poetry. Using descriptive techniques (but not only), they are often placed in biological or natural contexts and focused on the experience of everyday life. They also (re)present a given subject in terms of identity, psychology, looks and biography, using the form of a self-portrait. On the one hand, description is strongly referential, naturalistic, and somatic, and, on the other hand, the very act of describing is emphasized, and the creative frame seems to bring the constructed image to the fore. This is clearly seen, for example, in the poetry of Bogusława Latawiec, which (especially in her later works) “is set” in nature, meadows and gardens, which the poet knew in life. The combination of description and landscape in Latawiec’s poetry is framed autothematically. It becomes a plane of communication and correspondence of beings, as exemplified by the metapoetic lively landscape in *Ptaki Warty* (The Birds of the Warta River), in which the rules for describing the Warta river refer to the general

²⁵Hartwig, “Wiersze wybrane,” 184.

laws that govern the world.²⁶ This poem is also a metaerotic poem that may be read in an autobiographical context. According to Wojciech Ligęza, in Latawiec's poetry, "the boundary between autothematic and descriptive writing" disappears, "the act of perception is the act of writing," and "fragments of landscape intertwine with words and letters."²⁷ Interesting examples of poetry devoted to nature and "set in" a landscape, which authenticates the world in description and at the same time metapoetically questions it, may be found in the works of Marzanna Bogumiła Kielar and Julia Fiedorczuk. It grows in successive volumes, transforming into original metapoetic and eco-poetic projects which explore the possibilities of a descriptive sentence.

Autothematic procedures seem to reinforce non-autonomous linguistic goals and individual epistemological projects in poetry by women. Not only language or linguistic dilemmas, but also (self-) conscious description of experience is emphasized. Sometimes, it transforms into an "autobiography" of a subject who is aware of the self-creation power of the word. The poetry of Halina Poświatowska is a good example. According to Grażyna Borkowska, in the autothematic text *** (*Lubię pisać wiersze...*) [*** (I like to write poems ...)], Poświatowska does not employ the convention of a manifesto but uses the convention of a self-portrait instead, "which makes 'technical' terms seem existential. Words and even metalinguistic formulas are translated into objective, phenomenal or visual specifics."²⁸ Poświatowska is thus the author of not only "sanctuary" love poems, but also, which is less obvious, metapoems, in which the word strengthens the presence of the "I" in reality, offering an original version of a vital meta-description. Such complexities may be found in the works of other poets as well.²⁹

According to the most common definition of autothematic poetry, which usually concerns poetry by men, meta-reflection focuses on text, language, and the poem and the most important thing is to problematize the poetic medium. Such a definition is not always useful in interpreting poetry by women. The poetic self-awareness in poetry by women is usually subordinated to the understanding of the subject and the questions of identity. Metapoetry by women exposes experiences that are difficult to express in words. It demonstrates that by bringing to the fore the medium of language, self-reflection also helps express and thematize non-linguistic issues connected with identity, the subject's psychosomatic condition, and physical and psychological problems. This variant of meta-reflection that is "contaminated" with life is prominent today because reading practices are rooted in the cultural contexts of interpretation, which make the reader more sensitive to the autobiographical rather than the autonomous aspect of autothematic writing. Thus, meta-description does not so much trigger the "the reality effect" as expose its individualized perception and understanding. It inspires formal explorations and tests the medium of language. At the same time, the form of the poem is explored. I would like to discuss this latter question in reference to a poem by Joanna Pollakówna.

²⁶See the interpretation of this poem: Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, "...zobaczone, dotknięte, pomyslane". Bogusława Latawiec i Julian Przyboś," in *Przemiarki do istnienia. Wątki i tematy poezji kobiet XX i XXI wieku* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016), 162–179.

²⁷Wojciech Ligęza, "Rytm środkowy," *Twórczość* no. 1 (1983): 119.

²⁸Grażyna Borkowska, *Nierozważna i nieromantyczna. O Halinie Poświatowskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001), 179.

²⁹As, for example, in the pre-war works of Beata Obertyńska, for whom nature was an active component of meta-poetic metaphors; see: Anna Wal, "Liryka autotematyczna," in *Zakłęte przestrzenie. O twórczości Beaty Obertyńskiej*, ed. Zbigniew Andres, Zenon Ożóg (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2005). On vital autothematism in Poświatowska's poetry see: Grądział-Wójcik, "Inna teoria poezji? Ubi leones, czyli o autotematyzmie w wierszach kobiet," 379–384.

||.

Joanna Pollakówna used autothematic techniques in her poetry rarely yet consistently and intriguingly over the years.³⁰ According to Mateusz Antoniuk, Pollakówna's metapoetry is a coherent though diverse whole, endowed with "theoretical and literary consciousness, in which words turn out to be unreliable and ambivalent carriers of meaning."³¹ Antoniuk further observes that this doubtful tone may find its justification in the deconstructive concepts of Derrida and Barthes, as evidenced by, among others, a rhizome metaphor.³² The rhizome metaphor may be found, for example, in *Poezja* [Poetry] from the collection *Szpitalne lato* [Hospital Summer] (1972), where "wild vegetation [which] feeds on us" "grows into a foreign shape" and "our ideas which we know from the stalks / strangely divide into an alien orchid."³³ Nature does not only give rise to Pollakówna's autothematic metaphors, which are in principle dense, difficult, and somatically and synesthetically disturbing, as if taking over or demonstrating the inertia and the autonomous power of language that the subject is trying to control. The poet repeatedly returns in her poetry to the question of language as a mode of expression in an almost post-modern manner, sensing and dismissing with anxiety the crisis of linguistic communication.

The naturalization of autothematic reflection plays a significant role in Pollakówna's works. Self-referentiality may be found in the descriptions of landscape: it "creates" and questions the represented object at the same time. This is what happens in *Pracownia* [The study], a short yet intriguing poem included in *Szpitalne lato* immediately after *Poezja*, where affirmation seems to give way to skepticism.

Pracownia

Jaki świat się wykluwa w ślad za słowem moim?
 Wątlę, przedwcześnie wzeszły,
 wypłonionym
 krajowidokiem tańczy w chłodniejszym powietrzu?
 Jakieś fragmenty nie domalowane
 – bezbarwne plamy
 Jakieś fragmenty zbyt cyzelowane
 – struktury piany
 Jakieś gorzkie ułamki rzeźb prawie udanych
 wśród szkicowych perspektyw
 wśród farb rozbełtanych.

*Październik 72*³⁴

³⁰"The meta-linguistic and metapoetic reflection is focused on the senses: there are a lot of autothematic themes in these poems," Adam Dziadek observed, emphasizing somaticity and sensitivity of Pollakówna's poetry; Adam Dziadek, „Efekt brzmienia – o wierszach Joanny Pollakówny,” in *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*, ed. Anna Kozłowska, Jan Zieliński (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UKSW, 2017), 113.

³¹Mateusz Antoniuk, „Dukt pisma się zasupła niepewnym gryzmołę...». Joanny Pollakówny wiersze o wierszach,” in *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*, 101.

³²"The vision of 'the betrayal of the text,' which does not accept the original intention of the author may be associated with the visions of Roland Barthes. Barthes exposes the complexity of language, presenting the text as a place where subjectivity is blurred and the author is absent etc.," Antoniuk writes; Antoniuk, 104.

³³Joanna Pollakówna, *Wiersze zebrane*, selected, edited and prefaced by Jan Zieliński (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2012), 228. Pollakówna's poems discussed in this article were translated by M. Olsza.

³⁴Pollakówna, 229.

The study

What world is hatching out of my word?

Frail, prematurely risen,

etiolated

landscape dancing in colder air?

Some fragments are left unpainted

- colorless fields

Some fragments are too perfect

- foam structures

Some bitter fractions of almost successful sculptures

among sketchy perspectives

among mixed colors.

October 1972

The first sentence, which is also the first verse, is “divided” into two interconnected semantic themes, the source of which is the creationist metaphor of the world “hatching out of my word:” a biological theme (the creation of life) and a metapoetic theme (the creative gesture of a “mortal hand”). The metaphor develops into a description of reality, which, however, remains quite general and enigmatic. It does not evoke a holistic and vivid image. The “form,” the material, the multimodality of art, and technical issues are exposed (“some fragments are left unpainted,” “foam structures,” “fractions of sculptures,” “sketchy perspectives,” and “mixed colors”). The poem takes the reader inside a studio, an intimate and secluded space, offering instead of the promised “landscape” an image of the world that is a “byproduct” of the creative process. The “I” withdraws, hiding behind description, which develops in subsequent verses. The repetition of questions and unfinished answers endows it with a specific rhythm. The poem tries to answer the question asked in the first verse, which is fundamental to the description: “What world is hatching out of my word?” The answer is not satisfactory; there are many adjectives and participles in the poem (frail, risen, etiolated, unpainted, colorless, perfect, bitter, almost successful, sketchy, mixed), and it is rhetorically based on listing (the catalogue) and provocative pronouns but the world presented in the poem turns out to be indefinite, unfinished, and contaminated with fragmentation, sketchiness, and inattentiveness. The poem is an inadequate description – it is an imperfect description. It (re)presents the world only in fragments and fractions, sketches and unpainted spaces. The “creator/author” seems to focus on what is not important, losing energy on mentioning the shortcomings and hardships of creation. However, this is also a meta description, a self-referential poem that talks about a creative process that was “almost successful.” The subject is vividly present in it as well. We do not know exactly what the “landscape” (re)presents: it is only an index of the world which is created “out of my word.” We know, however, that the word and the world belong to someone: they belong to the “I” that has been inversely emphasized in the first line. The “I” is explicitly referenced only in the beginning of the text, but it is a crucial moment in terms of versification: the “I” is as if watching over the entire text. The question from Szymborska’s poem returns but this time it is formulated in a different poetic diction: “Is there then a world / where I rule absolutely on fate?” Indeed, the “I” in *Pracownia* does not describe a doe and the hunters who are chasing it, but removes itself from the poem: it withdraws from the announced description. Thus, it is not the act of creation but its result that is questioned. In this “almost successful,” bitter, and “mixed” description, the key role is played by the word “almost.” Problematic relations between the “world” and the word make us think of Barthes’s “effect of reality.”

The subject that creates reality with words is at the same time attentive and reservedly sensitive in her description. The “I” watches over the weak, defenseless world (“frail, prematurely risen,” “etiolated,” and “dancing in colder air”). Metaphors refer directly to physiological processes, pointing to the naturalness and difficulty of creating life/art. Etiolation is a process during which plants which grow in hostile conditions, i.e. places with insufficient light, do not produce chlorophyll and develop elongated stems. Yellowish, fragile, undeveloped leaves and shoots dance, searching for light; the plant is fighting for survival. It is worth remembering this motif.

“Etiolated landscape” combines biological and painterly connotations, evoking a faded old painting or an old-fashioned reproduction. Thus, it points to the (significant) role of visual arts and painting in Pollakówna’s poems, emphasizing the descriptive abilities of poetry and the motif of “the sister arts” and *ut pictura poesis*. This is how Anna Legeżyńska interprets *Pracownia*, noticing in the poem a reference to “the technique of abstract painting that departs from mimetic representation.”³⁵ This poem may also be read as a potential or imperfect ekphrasis³⁶ or hypotyposis of a work of art in general. Thus, the text is a statement about the process of (re)presenting the world, demonstrating how the author approaches the subject of her description. Such a self-reflective moment is inscribed in the poetics of *ékphrasis*, which as a form of “paying attention to,” “explaining,” and “speaking about the image” points to the problem of representation in literary works. As a verbal representation of graphic or visual representation, ekphrasis becomes, as Adam Dziadek observes, a contemplative theoretical act, emphasizing the self-reflectivity of the text.³⁷ It is possible thanks to description, which exposes meta-linguistic signals. Indeed, description is not important in itself: it propels a subjective interpretation of a work of art, focusing on the problem of representation.

The “etiolated landscape” is the only painted trace of a “real” landscape in the poem, visualized in a metaphorical juxtaposition. It fights for survival in art (not only in literature). Antoniuk wrote about Pollakówna’s postmodern metapoetic awareness, about her “metalinguistic intuitions,” which point to the “anarchic power of writing” and the “unreliability and deceitfulness of language,” which “merely pretends to be successful.”³⁸ As an intellectual, Pollakówna must have been aware of these great problems of the humanities of the second half of the 20th century. However, the game played in *Pracownia* seems to be particularly complicated.

Let us return to the “etiolated” metaphor of the poem. Just as a plant’s shoots wither due to a lack of light as it intuitively strives for the sun, so the world cannot be constituted in a fractional, fragmentary description with no metaphysical foundation. According to Anna Legeżyńska, “[t]here is no [...] principle according to which the fragments of the colorful composition could create a whole; it lacks meaning and order. In this case, both reality (the world cannot be described in words) and transcendence (the fragmentary sketch does not represent the metaworld) are inexpressible.”³⁹

³⁵Anna Legeżyńska, “«Metaświat» w wierszach Joanny Pollakówny,” in *Od kochanki do psalmistki... Sylwetki, tematy i konwencje liryki kobiecej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2009), 274.

³⁶On the scarcity of ekphrasis in Pollakówna’s poetry see Ewa Górecka, “Między znakami: słowo i obraz w poezji Joanny Pollakówny,” *Świat i Słowo* 15, no. 2 (2010): 19–20;

³⁷See Adam Dziadek, *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004), 76–83.

³⁸Antoniuk, “«Dukt pisma się zasupła niepewnym gryzmołem...»,” Joanny Pollakówny wiersze o wierszach,” 101, 104.

³⁹Legeżyńska, “«Metaświat» w wierszach Joanny Pollakówny,” 275

In turn, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska emphasizes that "Pollakówna seems to move from the level of experience [...] to the level of transcendence with great ease" and "both worlds cannot be represented in the language of mimetic description."⁴⁰ Therefore, description is deconstructed in the poem: it becomes (intentionally) an inadequate description that does not authenticate the described reality, but seeks Light, traces of transcendence in its allegorical ruins, bitter fractions and mixed colors. Moreover, the subject does not even intend to describe the world created "out of a word," whose existence outside the poem is assumed. The "I" does not persuade the reader to believe in the power of the word and forget "that what's here isn't life." Instead, the "I" draws attention to what is happening in the studio, seeking answers to the most important questions.

Indeed, let us look inside the poem and examine its "divided" rhythm. The poem is syllabic (though irregular), playing with traditional formats of the Polish alexandrine and the hendecasyllable:

```

----- / ----- 13 (7+6)
-----
-----
-----
----- / ----- 13 (7+6)
----- / ----- 11 (5+6)
-----
----- / ----- 11 (5+6)
-----
----- / ----- 13 (7+6)
-----
-----
-----

```

The first sentence syntactically follows the verse, imposing on it the recognizable rhythm of the Polish alexandrine, with a caesura after the seventh syllable. The Polish alexandrine is used twice more in its complete form (in the fourth and the ninth verse) and in the very last verse, where it will break into pre- and post-caesura parts, strengthening the fragmentation of the described world. The Polish alexandrine is interwoven with the hendecasyllable in its classic form (5 + 6) but it also appears in other variants: 7 + 4 (the second and the third verse) and in the form of pre-caesura hemistichs ("colorless fields," "foam structures"), which are not completed in the post-caesura part: as if the description could not develop into a comprehensive image, as if it suddenly stopped, even giving up on punctuation (only in these two verses there are no stops). Despite these deviations and small rebellious attempts, the poem is a typical irregular syllabic poem,⁴¹ in which irregularities are part of the system: they are planned and controlled. Indeed, irregularities are possible only because there are rules that can be broken, though always within certain limits. The verses fall apart in predictable places. Contrary to how it may appear, the poem does not transform into free verse (although the layout could suggest it). The second sentence is the least predictable in terms of versification. Also, the governing metaphor of the poem is expressed in the second sentence. The sentence is long, and its syntax is somewhat confusing. Vocabulary is difficult as well. Nevertheless, stress (on the penultimate syllable) and rhyme structures are typical of the syllabic poem. The rhyme scheme is elabo-

⁴⁰Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska, "Małomówność J. Pollakówny. Sygetyzm jako metoda twórcza i apofatyzm w dyskursie o chorobie i transcendencji," in *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, 791-792.

⁴¹Maria Dłuska calls it an irregular poem. In her opinion, it is a syllabic poem bordering on free verse that is "more unpredictable," Maria Dłuska, *Próba teorii wiersza polskiego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980), 227.

rate and deliberate, although imperfect and dispersed. In the original Polish version, the lines are (inter)connected by imperfect rhymes: *moim – wypłonionym, wzeszły – powietrzu, domalowane – cyzelowane, plamy – piany, udanych – rozbełtanych*, also in keeping with the internal consonance of *szkicowych – perspektyw*. The rhyme scheme only appears to be “left unpainted.” In fact, it is “perfect” in its imperfection, drawing on assonances and consonances. Viewed from the inside, the text is rhetorically ordered by repetitions, alliterations and parallelisms. Nothing is accidental, sketchy, or unstructured. All irregularities and imperfections are controlled. The poem finally finds its rhythm, trying for a moment to transform into an amphibrach. The transformation is “almost” successful: it is fragmental and thus perfect. The reader must pause to accentuate the words that follow one after another (“**rzeźb / prawie**”) and to read prosodic words (“**rzeźb prawie**”).

The syllabic poem is thus “almost successful:” some verses and rhymes are “left unpainted,” inaccurate and unfinished, but there are no semantic “colorless fields” in the text. Despite its apparent sketchiness, the poem, through its form, rooted in a recognizable versification tradition which engages in a dialogue with the epic descriptiveness of the classical Polish syllabic poem, questions the modernist belief in the communicative crisis of language. Pollakówna, similarly to Hartwig, seems to “suffer mildly but persistently from the pain of the indeterminate” and repeat through the form of the poem: “I believe in a sentence In a pause that seeks form.” Even if a mimetic description of the world is not possible, a mimetic description of its creation is possible by repeating the creative gesture, by the very pursuit of versification that is “almost successful,” which is a testimony to the search for Meaning. It is worth paying attention to this stylistic, architectural, and therefore also metapoetic potential of versification-in-description, because it is also thanks to poetics that imperfection collides in this poetry with perfection, endowing it with interpretive anxiety.⁴² It is no accident that the author opens the studio door, allowing the reader to take a sneak peek at the technicalities of writing poetry.

Pollakówna’s *Pracownia* shows us an etiolated, fragile, and distorted world, which “is dancing in colder air.” Against all odds, it fights for life, inevitably heading towards death, often associated in this poetry with cold air and coldness.⁴³ Instead of reality, it metonymically focuses on its representation in language, using the meta-poetic potential of description. The desire for Meaning is also coded in the form of the poem. Pollakówna’s “taciturn”⁴⁴ and “short, sketchy, fragmentary”⁴⁵ poems do not develop into large-scale images, but they can, thanks to brief description, give the reader a metaphysical thrill of a different, indescribable world.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁴²In his discussion of *Małomówność* [Taciturnity], Piotr Śliwiński explained what worries him in Pollakówna’s poetry: “Her rhythm and orderliness seem inappropriate for traumatic themes, strongly penetrated by pain and marked by disorder. [...] Lyrical ‘perfection’ in this case does not close or restrain, which makes it impossible to predict the shape of subsequent works. Because perfection is open to imperfection, through which the drama of transience and eternity enters the poem; it is so important that it somehow renders the issues of poetics secondary. The poem is a credible sign of this drama. It is enough;” Piotr Śliwiński, “Zmysły i sensory (Joanna Pollakówna),” w *Przygody z wolnością. Uwagi o poezji współczesnej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002), 89.

⁴³Pollakówna’s final collection of poems published posthumously is entitled *Ogarnąłeś mnie chłodem* [You embraced me with cold] (2003).

⁴⁴*Małomówność* [Taciturnity] is the title of the collection of poems written and selected by Pollakówna from 1959 to 1994.

⁴⁵Jerzy Kwiatkowski, “Felieton poetycki,” *Twórczość* no. 12 (1975): 125.

References

- Antoniuk, Mateusz. "«Dukt pisma się zasupła niepewnym gryzmołę...». Joanny Pollakówny wiersze o wierszach". In *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*. Edited by Anna Kozłowska and Jan Zieliński. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UKSW, 2017.
- Barthes, Roland "The reality effect." In *The rustle of language*, translated by Richard Howard, 141-148. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986.
- Borkowska, Grażyna. *Nierozważna i nieromantyczna. O Halinie Poświatowskiej*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001.
- Cyranowicz, Maria. Mueller, Joanna. Radczyńska, Justyna. "Solistki bez chóru. Pozyteczne refleksje". In *Solistki. Antologia poezji kobiet (1989–2009)*. Edited by Maria Cyranowicz, Joanna Mueller and Justyna Radczyńska, drawings by Pela Dwurnik and Marta Ignerska. Warszawa: Staromiejski Dom Kultury, 2009.
- Dłuska, Maria. *Próba teorii wiersza polskiego*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980.
- Dziadek, Adam. "Efekt brzmienia – o wierszach Joanny Pollakówny". In *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*. Edited by Anna Kozłowska and Jan Zieliński. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UKSW, 2017.
- . Dziadek, Adam. *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004.
- Grądziel-Wójcik, Joanna. "Inna teoria poezji? Ubi leones, czyli o autotematyzmie w wierszach kobiet". In *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*. Edited by Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska and Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska, 369–406. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2020.
- . "Polska poezja kobiet XX wieku. Próba porządkowania doświadczeń". In *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*. Edited by Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska and Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska, 35–93. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2020.
- . "...zobaczone, dotknięte, pomyslane». Bogusława Latawiec i Julian Przyboś". In *Przymiarki do istnienia. Wątki i tematy poezji kobiet XX i XXI wieku*, 149–179. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016.
- Górecka, Ewa. "Między znakami: słowo i obraz w poezji Joanny Pollakówny". *Świat i Słowo* 15, no. 2 (2010): 19–20.
- Hartwig, Julia. "Dawać do siebie dostęp zachwytowi. Wystąpienie z okazji nadania tytułu doktora *honoris causa* Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu". In *Pochwała istnienia. Studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig*, Edited by Barbara Kulesza-Gulczyńska and Elżbieta Winiecka, 7–12. Poznań: Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2015.
- . *Wiersze wybrane*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2010.
- Krajewska, Joanna. „Jazgot niewieści” i „męskie kasztele”. *Z dziejów sporu o literaturę kobiecą w Dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*. Poznań: Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, 2010.
- Krzywicka, Irena. "Jazgot niewieści, czyli przerost stylu". *Wiadomości Literackie*, no. 42 (1928).
- Kwiatkowski, Jerzy. "Felieton poetycki". *Twórczość* no. 12 (1975): 125.
- Legeżyńska, Anna. "Gdyby Czesław Miłosz był kobietą...". In *Pochwała istnienia. Studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig*, Edited by Barbara Kulesza-Gulczyńska and Elżbieta Winiecka, 19–31. Poznań: Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2015.
- . "«Metaświat» w wierszach Joanny Pollakówny". In *Od kochanki do psalmistki... Sylwetki, tematy i konwencje liryki kobiecej*, 270–286. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2009.
- Ligęza, Wojciech. „Rytm środkowy”. *Twórczość* no. 1 (1983): 119.
- Niewiadomski, Andrzej. *Światy z jawnych słów i kwiatów ukrytych. O refleksji metapoetyckiej w nowoczesnej poezji polskiej*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2010.
- Pollakówna, Joanna. *Wiersze zebrane*. Selected, edited and prefaced by Jan Zieliński. Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2012.
- Sławiński, Janusz. "O opisie". W *Próby teoretycznoliterackie*, 189–213. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1992.

- . "Rzut oka na ewolucje poezji polskiej w latach 1956–1980". In *Teksty i teksty*, 95–120. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1991.
- Sołtys-Lewandowska, Edyta. "Literatura kobieca a literatura kobiet". In *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, 783–795. Edited by Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska and Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska, 21–33. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2020.
- . "Małomówność J. Pollakówny. Sygetyzm jako metoda twórcza i apofatyzm w dyskursie o chorobie i transcendencji". In *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje*, 783–795. Edited by Joanna Grądział-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska and Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska, 35–93. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2020.
- Szyborska, Wisława. *Wiersze wybrane*. Selected and organized by the author, new revised edition. Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2010.
- Śliwiński, Piotr. "Zmysły i sensy (Joanna Pollakówna)". In *Przygody z wolnością. Uwagi o poezji współczesnej*, 85 – 89. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002.
- Wal, Anna. "Liryka autotematyczna". In *Zakłęte przestrzenie. O twórczości Beaty Obertyńskiej*. Edited by Zbigniew Andres i Zenon Ożóg. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2005.
- Wyśłouch, Seweryna. "Od Lessinga do Przybosa. Teoria i kompozycja opisu". In *Literatura a sztuki wizualne*, 15–38. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994.
- Zawiszewska, Agata. *Między Młodą Polską, Skamandrem i Awangardą. O kobietach piszących wiersze w latach 1918–1939*. Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe US, 2015.

KEYWORDS

autothematic writing

METAPOETRY

versification

structuralism

ABSTRACT:

The article discusses autothematic description as a technique of metapoetic reflection. On the one hand, it is analyzed in the context of the structuralist theory of description and on the other hand, in the context of poetry by women, where meta-reflection is an important but underresearched phenomenon. Many poets use autothematic writing not because they want to problematize the poetic medium, which is to create Barthes's "reality effect," but because they want to construct their individual epistemological projects and inform the speaking "I." I analyze poems by Wisława Szymborska, Julia Hartwig, Bogumiła Latawiec and Halina Poświatowska and interpret a poem by Joanna Pollakówna anew.

Julia Hartwig

Joanna Pollakówna

poetry by women

DESCRIPTION

Bogusława Latawiec

Wisława Szymborska

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Joanna Grądział-Wójcik – literary scholar at the Department of 20th Century Literature, Theory of Literature and Translation at the Institute of Polish Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her research interests include the history of literature and the art of interpretation, primarily Polish poetry of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially poetry by women. She is the author of *"Drugie oko" Tadeusza Peipera. Projekt poezji nowoczesnej* (Poznań 2010), *Zmysł formy. Sytuacje, przypadki, interpretacje polskiej poezji XX wieku* (Kraków 2016), *Przymiarki do istnienia. Wątki i tematy poezji kobiet XX i XXI wieku* (Poznań 2016) and the co-author of *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje – tematy – interpretacje* (Kraków 2020), where she presents the results of her grant research. |