

“The best spoken book”. Aleksander Wat, the avant-garde, and “testimonies” of Central and Eastern Europe

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Wat's “voice from the past”

In *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (2012), a conversation between Timothy Snyder and Tony Judt covering a number of topics, Snyder stated that “perhaps the best spoken book is *My Century*, the magnificent autobiography of the Polish-Jewish poet Aleksander Wat”. I would like to investigate possible reasons behind such an interpretation of Wat's memoir. I also want to understand the phenomenon of *My Century* as an account which (I believe) only seems to have little in common with the avant-garde experiments from the poet's youth, as it is in fact a product of what Daniel Bell defines as the radical, angry sixties, and which refer to various avant-garde movements, propagating – just like them – apology of individual experience¹. Analyzing a spoken memoir as something more than just an account by an engaged witness of events taking place in Central and Eastern Europe, I would like to reveal the experimental potential of *My Century* as a book based on (according to Czesław Miłosz's and many readers' intentions) assumptions closely resembling avant-garde aesthetics and the related spoken turn in historiography of the second half of the 20th century, processed in various ways in social memory practices.

¹ See Daniel Bell, *Kulturowe sprzeczności kapitalizmu* [Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism], especially the part “Sensibility of the sixties”, translated into Polish by Stefan Amsterdamski (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2014), 161–187. English version: Pennsylvania: Basic Books, 1978), 144.

Obviously Wat's autobiography has a recorded, written and edited form, and formally it has little in common with the avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century. During his recorded conversations with Miłosz, Wat dissociated himself from aesthetic and political experiences from his youth. Contrary to Anatol Stern, he did not want to make the literary experiments from his youth seem more artistic than they were. He spoke rather fondly of futurism, although with no nostalgia². At the beginning of *Dziennik bez samogłosek* [A diary without vowels] Wat also dissociated himself from the avant-garde poetics of experiment and formal-intellectual innovations:

This is what I need, I, once an adventurous ex-avant-garde representative: to know, touch, feel that what is now has already been, that what I am experiencing at this moment has already been experienced and lived through, that it is within human power, within my power to experience it. [...] I am not a copyist or antiquary – I am not looking for the latest and newest, I am constantly seeking validation of new orders of objects, words, rhythms of the past, experienced time and time again³.

Another reason why *My Century* is a spoken and (seemingly) non-experimental book is that in the sixties Wat suffered from physical pain which became worse after he came to the USA. Invited by the University of California, Berkeley, he was unable to write his own memoir, let alone give it a literary form. However, according to Miłosz, this was not the only reason Wat did not feel good in the USA: he was "completely blocked", he would forget about his pain and cheer up only when he "told stories"⁴. Additionally, the post-war period – a time when biographies dealt with two totalitarianisms – was also the time of return to the poetics of personal testimony as one that allows to adequately conceptualize historical experience. Miłosz constructed this testimony rhetoric around *My Century*, which demanded means other than literary. He dubbed this book "a moving panoramic picture"⁵, stressing that in the editing process he was mostly concerned with "future historians' interest"⁶, "holding the tape recording in reverence", and attention to "preserving the language spoken by Warsaw's intellectual environment". He explained that this was the source of the numerous repetitions of words, sentences, situations (the same event was presented slightly differently, i.e. each time with a new shade of judgment". Miłosz had no doubt that *My Century* was first and foremost a testimony. His conviction affected later historiography, as evidenced by Marci Shore's *Caviar and Ashes. A Warsaw's Generation of Life and Death in Marxism* based on (among others) Wat's accounts. It was also present in Polish literary studies, e.g. in Małgorzata Czermińska's *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie* [Autobiographical triangle. Testimony, confession, challenge]. Czermińska writes:

Wat treated his work on a spoken memoir as both a testimony about a century which he witnessed, and an auto-interpretation of a personal story of a man who experienced evil and suffering. Both the testimo-

² See Marci Shore, *Kawior i popiół. Życie i śmierć pokolenia oczarowanych i rozczarowanych marksizmem* [Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw's Generation of Life and Death in Marxism], translated into Polish by Marcin Szuster (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2019), 385.

³ Aleksander Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek* [A journal without vowels], transcribed and edited by Michalina Kmieciak (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018), 19.

⁴ Aleksander Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1990), 14.

⁵ Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, vol. 1, 18.

⁶ Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, vol. 1, 17.

nies about twentieth-century history and auto-analysis are inseparable and intertwined in Wat's narrative. It is difficult to talk about proportions, however, the testimony seems to dominate in *My Century*⁷.

Poetics of testimony was highly popular in Central and Eastern Europe. However, spoken memoirs by intellectualists who emigrated to places where they constituted a cultural and social minority becomes understandable when we place it in a broader, geopolitical context. A methodological revolution was taking place when *My Century* was recorded: growing popularity of oral history and lively archival work for collecting, recording, and studying the voice of witnesses of history, put in specific cultural and social policies of western liberal democracies. Such voices, according to the principles of oral history (formulated by Paul Thompson somewhat later, in 1978), were supposed to reveal the historical truth of minorities' experience. Their representation in academic discourses was to be emancipatory in terms of contents, as well as the spoken form. In *Voice of the Past* Thompson writes that "oral history certainly can be a means of transforming both the content and the purpose of history", because – as he stresses – "it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place"⁸.

Inspired by Marxism, Thompson perceived oral history as something close to the revolutionary postulates of the avant-garde, although this category does not explicitly appear in his book. This is because Thompson – in contrast to Marx, who believed that an utterance alone is unable to establish or subvert social order⁹ – assumed that speech is emancipatory, a view he shared with representatives of the avant-garde. Speech – as a means of spontaneity, grassroots movement, energy and folklore – was supposed to be a tool for liberation, democratize experience, and disturb poetics and media of talking about historicity in an egalitarian way, in order to give significance to everyday experiences of common people. Thompson perceived emancipation in terms of universalism; it was subject to a teleologically understood progress – the pro-democratic change for the better, in favor of freedom of individuals, groups, and communities.

Miłosz perceived his conversations with Wat in similar terms, although (contrary to the British historian) he was no longer fascinated with Marx. According to Miłosz, Wat's account was supposed to reveal the universal significance of totalitarianism supported by a biographic story, and indirectly legitimize western ideas of liberal democracy and personal freedom. Wat clearly did not appreciate the formula of dissident testimony which Miłosz in part imposed on him, such an account could be met with understanding in America at the time of the Cold War. Eugenia Ginzburg's shocking memoir was published in the USA already in 1967, Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* – in 1970, the same year as the first volume of Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir was published, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn received the Nobel Prize in literature.

⁷ Małgorzata Czerwińska, *Trójkąt autobiograficzny, Świadeństwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie* [Autobiographical triangle. Testament, confession, challenge] (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 40.

⁸ Paul Thompson, Joanna Bornat, *Głos przeszłości. Wprowadzenie do historii mówionej* [The Voice of the Past. Oral History], translated into Polish by Paweł Tomanek (Warszawa: Centrum Archiwistyki Społecznej, 2021), 283. English version: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 3.

⁹ See Sebastian Michalik, *Przemoc i mowa w nowoczesnej myśli społecznej. Przyczynek do pojęcia negatywności politycznej* [Violence and speech in modern social thought. A contribution to the notion of political negativity] (Warszawa: PWN, 2014), 213.

However, in Europe the revealing function of *My Century* was not so clear. Due to recession and failed expectations of the sixties, which produced the 1968 counter-culture, the following decade was a time of unrest in Europe. Attitudes to communism were far from unambiguous, which Wat criticized: "westerners do not have the code to break the devious semantics of any communist statement"¹⁰. Many European projects of revision and concealing history of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes – especially ostentatious silence of some representatives of the French left in the face of Stalinism's crimes – could be met with criticism by intellectualists behind the iron curtain. Meanwhile, many European intellectualists saw anti-capitalism rather than anti-communism as the right direction for a cultural revision post 1968.

Many critical observers of the seventies defined that decade as depressingly aware that it followed great expectations and ambitious ideas, not offering anything beyond empty and unconvincing repetition of past ideas¹¹. According to Tony Judt, contrary to the sixties, the seventies proved to be individualistic rather than communal. Perhaps a turn in the form of oral history – which he believed to be not only a methodological revolt, but also a grassroots, non-academic movement with an influence on cultural and social policies – was a reaction to that individualism. On the one hand, it was supposed to appreciate the unique voice of individuals as material for constructing a historical narrative, and on the other – it was based on a conviction that this appreciation should emancipate not only individuals, but also communities.

Wat and Miłosz's joint venture is an original, clearly central-eastern-European version of thinking about oral history. Although Wat was far more reflective in thinking about his own narrative, which was somewhat in defiance of the intentions Miłosz imputed to him. For Wat, a diary – "spiritual autobiography", as Czerwińska put it – was a deeply personal expiation for his short-lived fascination with communism, for which he could not forgive himself, and which he interpreted in terms of personal guilt, metaphysical rather than historical.

In his attempts at describing and interpreting totalitarianism Wat relies on his own, direct experience, and on theoretical generalizations provided by his versatile erudition. However, at some point psychological, sociological, and historical explanations prove insufficient, and Wat resorts to metaphysics in order to answer the question: why evil¹²?

In other words, the spoken diary was a personal, expiatory performance – a form of agency via words, which was an important (if not fundamental) aspect of life-writing¹³. Its significance may have escaped western audiences towards whom Miłosz was oriented. For Miłosz, Wat's diary was obviously a unique document. However, it belonged to the recognizable genre of testaments by central-eastern-European intellectuals scarred by totalitarianism. This was a vision Wat could not ultimately accept.

¹⁰Michalik, 278–279.

¹¹Tony Judt, *Powojnie. Historia Europy od roku 1945* [Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945], translated into Polish by Robert Bartołd (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 2008), 560.

¹²Czerwińska, 100.

¹³Paweł Rodak, *Między zapisem a literaturą. Dziennik polskiego pisarza w XX wieku* [Between record and literature. A diary of a Polish twentieth-century writer] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011). See also Paweł Rodak, „Nie istnieje tu nic, zanim nie zostanie wypowiedziane». Rozmowa z Philippem Lejeune'em" [Things only exist once they are spoken. An interview with Philippe Lejeune], *Teksty Drugie* 2-3 (2003).

Perhaps this is why he dissociated himself from being a politician or historian in the foreword. He stressed that contrary to them, he is not a person who “makes history” or “describes historical acts” – instead, he has “a certain specific way of experiencing all experience”¹⁴. But at the same time, he did not resist being considered one of many witnesses of history – in fact, he stressed it in numerous documents referring to his biography, aware that this was the only interpretation that would be understandable for western institutions. Hence in one of his grant applications for his post-war works he described his political orientation: “My 1942 article in the London government’s magazine in Kujbyszewo, where I write: «we are eyewitnesses... of apocalyptic shattering of cultures and civilizations, which would like to be governed only by the rules of human reason»”¹⁵. This quote subtly highlights the significance of his own expiation, and at the same time avoiding any political self-definitions which require categories which – according to Wat – are no longer useful.

Not a politician, not a historian

Narratives of oral history were supposed to demystify dominating discourses based on criticizing social and political hierarchies – both in Paul Thompson’s and Czesław Miłosz’s works, and only partially in Aleksander Wat’s project. This is the reason why – similarly to the avant-garde – they fetishized everyday life, voice as a medium of unmediated, authentic communication, and the ultimately ambiguous figure of “a commoner” as the main subject of historical events. According to Thompson and French historians associated with “Annales”, everyday life constituted a potentially emancipatory category, allowing an insight into things which escaped literary or scientific regimes. The fight for unofficial, local, personal testaments, ignored by the machinery of power structures¹⁶, which shaped the past in their image, resembled many of the postulates of the inter-war avant-garde. Thompson’s postulates were later radicalized by Alessandro Portelli, who worked with oral histories from the seventies, collecting testaments from residence of Rome’s slums, and studying (among others) Italian workers. After many years he tried to present his research in the form of sound essays, almost completely eliminating text as a tool of privileged experts.

Wat’s ideas regarding his own accounts of “history happening” was often close to that, which is why he stressed his attitude – lay, open, non-professional – in terms of disdain to “politicians’ language” and a sense of alienation inspired by strange, precise, and concise academic language¹⁷. Miłosz seems to have been even closer to this way of thinking. He stressed that apart from Wat’s unprecedented biographical and literary experience, *My Century* owes its unique character to “a certain current, difficult to name, that flowed between when we talked”¹⁸. That current – a specific coexistence in a conversation – was what Portelli later defined via a “conversation is a dance” metaphor:

¹⁴Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 1, s. 19. English version: *My Century. The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*. Translated into English by Richard Lourie. (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), xxv-xxvi.

¹⁵Ryszard Zajączkowski, “W archiwum Wata” [In Wat’s archive], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1 (2007): 154.

¹⁶Thompson, *Bornat*, 284.

¹⁷Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 1, 20.

¹⁸Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 1, 16. English version: XXIII.

Your moves and your partner's moves impact each other – in a sense, it is about partnership. And in oral history, it is about co-authorship; cooperation in creating something¹⁹.

Miłosz stresses that the spoken form of *My Century* renders it “more active and energetic”, addressed directly at listeners: full of repetitions, free flow of thoughts, circularity of contents returning in different variants, which Miłosz considers to be the diary's great value. To some extent, it also suited Wat's ideas, who insisted in *Dziennik bez samogłosek* that he “DOES NOT LIKE WRITING ABOUT HIS LIFE”: “Think about it, imagine my situation: once again recalling, faithfully reviving experiences which almost seem forgotten, almost or seemingly healed”²⁰. Obviously “energy, movement, freedom and action” – a whole selection of values imputed by Miłosz to Wat's diary – closely resembled historical avant-garde's way of thinking. This was similar to Thompson's works, who elaborated on the question of various consequences of oral histories (not always valuable), only in later editions of *The Voice of the Past*. Later research revealed that oral histories do not always “liberate”, nor do they provide therapeutic consolation. To the contrary: they can traumatize, and by providing a way of expression, they allow a safe channel for anger or resistance, and thus hinder constructive social changes.

Contrary to oral history's attempts at regaining the voices of those who are poorly represented, Miłosz and Wat's project involved outstanding authors, who influenced twentieth-century discourses, and who – as dissident intellectuals from Central and Eastern Europe – were against any totalitarian or authoritarian regimes. However, Wat's influence – contrary to Miłosz's – was never major. Even Miłosz considered Wat's literary career as somewhat failed, although through no fault of his own. Moreover, *My Century* was written by a man who represented an unprecedented cultural formation, i.e. Polonized Jewish intelligentsia from Central and Eastern Europe, extremely scarred by the 20th century. Contrary to many intellectuals from Western Europe, that formation was never privileged, and its identity dilemmas were marked by unique tragedy, as evidenced by Wat's archive. There is a file with biographic entries he collected, which includes a note about not only Wat and his wife, but also unknown fate of their Jewish families.

They lost a 5-bedroom apartment in 1939 (and for the second time now) with antiques, library, paintings. His wife lost real estate she inherited from her father, Abram (Adam) Lew: tenant houses in Warsaw at Nowostalowa 6a and a villa in Otwock (“Meran”). His wife's parents, Abram and Sara (Salomea), as well as her sister, Rita Grinstein, died in Treblinka. Wat also lost his two brothers with their families: Arnold (Aron) Chwat – in Treblinka, and Dawid Chwat – probably in Oświęcim²¹.

The unique status of the Polonized Jewish intelligentsia in Central and Eastern Europe made it even more unprivileged than most representatives of the intelligentsia from the same region. It also rendered its experiences incomprehensible for western audiences at the time when Pierre Bourdieu announced that “academic discourse” is only an expression of “the dominating frac-

¹⁹Alessandro Portelli, “Oczekuj nieoczekiwanego” [Expect the unexpected], in: *Opowiedziane. Historia mówiona w praktykach humanistycznych* [Told. Spoken history in humanities], edited by Agnieszka Karpowicz, Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdżel, Marta Rakoczy (Warszawa: Instytut Kultury Polskiej, 2019), 9. Translation into English mine, PZ.

²⁰Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 285.

²¹Zajączkowski, 153.

tion of the dominating class²². Wat recognized that historical specificity of western intellectuals. He considered a completely different discursive-social foundation of Western intellectual circles, which he saw as subjected to “the dictatorship of France’s elders”²³, “doomed to the chair of apathy”²⁴. “Thus the French youth have to rebel”, because “by the time they get a university degree or a specialist position, they will have been trained, molded into routine”²⁵.

Moreover, the unique “grassroots” character, and at the same time “commonness” of Wat’s experience also concerned the fact that his dealing with communism, followed by his “private war with it” resulted from the experience of a laborer sharing prison camp life with people from the bottom of the social ladder, rather than that of an intellectual:

There is ample literature on soviet labor camps [...]. What makes Wat’s experience peculiar is the fact that apart from 11 prisons in which he dealt with soviet people of all ranks, professions and formations [...] he also experienced the common life of unprivileged working classes for three years, on the lowest levels of existence. This allowed him to watch and experience first-hand the mechanisms, course, and shape of soviet reality²⁶.

Miłosz also believed Wat’s biography to be special. In the introduction, he highlights that Wat’s story, whose awareness (including that of social hierarchies) is the main protagonist, serves as a tribute to “illiterate Ukrainian peasants, Polish workers from the Polish Socialist party, Jewish shoemakers from little Galician towns, and even Russian bandits.”²⁷

Interestingly, Wat’s account could resemble a “witness narrative”, i.e. the basic genre of oral history, which John Beverley later defined as an account of a “direct narrator”, “affirmation of the authority of personal experience”, and that contrary to someone who writes their autobiography, such a narrator cannot affirm their own identity as separate from the subordinate situation of a group or class whose story they narrate²⁸. Although Beverley stressed that a “witness account” belongs to those who are either “functionally illiterate”, or are not “professional writers”²⁹, his insistence that a witness is outside “privatized, modern identity” and “forms of western literary and academic writing”³⁰, allowed to see a relationship between Miłosz and Wat’s project (Wat genuinely suffered because of his cultural alienation among Berkeley intellectuals), oral history, and witness narratives as “the art and strategy of subordinate memory”³¹. However, contrary to Miłosz, Wat did not like being a victim of oppression: a subordinate, oppressed subject demanding support and empathy. This is why he highlighted the agency of people who made auton-

²²Cited after Judt, 562.

²³Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 273.

²⁴Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 273.

²⁵Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 273.

²⁶Zajączkowski, 153–154.

²⁷Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 1, 17. English version: xxiv.

²⁸John Beverley, *Narracja świadka, podrzędność i autorytet narracyjny* [Testimonio, subalternity and Narrative Authority], in: *Metody badań jakościowych* [Methods in qualitative research], edited by Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln (Warszawa: PWN, 2009), 763.

²⁹Beverley, 762.

³⁰Beverley, 763.

³¹Beverley, 769.

mous moral decisions, independent of historical circumstances throughout his story – perhaps in opposition to Miłosz’s biographical revision from *The Captive Mind*.

Wat was aware that his testimony was commonly incorporated in broader discourses (also, to some extent, by Miłosz) which affected the interpretation of his autobiographical experience, making it more like dissident testimonies protecting him from the status of an “idle beggar”³² in the USA. In *Dziennik bez samogłosek* he complained about the poetics of “automiserabilism” which he felt was imposed on him also because of his migrant status. “Those myths about me, «poor, beaten by communism, oppressed» because it «matches the image», when it was in no way obvious or apparent that it was actually me who picked that fight”³³. This is how Wat saw his entrance into American environment: “What a relief: to be able to show myself in a world without those myths always surrounding us like a curtain which becomes thicker and darker and more impenetrable with time”³⁴. However, he was disillusioned as to his own situation: „And what if you are constantly watched, touched, probed: should we accept him as one of us? Or spit him out?”³⁵. He concluded: „How was one to expect that after thirty years they will still play the role of a comical newlywed, secretly photographed for fun and entertainment”³⁶.

Regardless of their differences, it seems that Wat and Miłosz managed to create a peculiar policy of evoking historical experience sooner than academics did, which is why Wat refused to consider it an autobiography or diary interpretable in terms of genre categories suggesting either literary, or historical-memoir interpretation. He stressed that it is neither an autobiography, nor a confession, nor a literary-political treaty; he meant it as a “recapitulation of personal experiences of more than twenty-five years of coexisting with communism”³⁷. “Recapitulation” signaled that he did not think of his memoir in terms of genres and formal issues – he was more concerned with its functions. Recapitulation suggested practice; the process of summarizing and organizing memory. Within its frames, “politics” was not a separate, rational subject domain – it was “fate”³⁸. It was almost like destiny deprived of any providential connotations; however, it should be stressed that in this case politics was far from the avant-garde perception of it as a personal domain, or collective creation. One could also say that Wat’s way of thinking about spoken narratives, contrary to Miłosz’s, resembles what has evolved in Polish humanities only recently.

Piotr Filipkowski’s project, critical of Thompson’s tradition, is one of its variants. According to Filipkowski, oral history as “hermeneutics of fate” is not about historical truth or its emancipatory potential, but about reclaiming individual “sense that people give to their past experiences – always in the context of present-day experiences – and to their life as some completed closed unit which they reflect upon. And about communicating that sense”³⁹. Wat consciously

³²Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 288.

³³Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 289

³⁴Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 291.

³⁵Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 292.

³⁶Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*.

³⁷Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 1, 20.

³⁸Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 1, 19.

³⁹Piotr Filipkowski, “Historia mówiona jako hermeneutyka losu. Doświadczenie przedtekstowe” [Spoken history as hermeneutics of fate. Pre-textual experiencing], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2018): 47.

put a similar idea of an existential hermeneutic circle into practice a long time before that. Provoked by Miłosz's questions, he avoided answers by resorting to anecdotes, or snapshots of his own biography, consistently returning to certain issues or discussing them from different angles. The episodes he remembered would be meaningful in the context of the whole recapitulation (which did not set off the work of sense), but for minor, random memories. Similarly to Filipkowski's conceptualization: "like in a hermeneutic circle – remembered and evoked episodes gain a deeper meaning in the context of the whole biography. And that complete biography, equipped with some surplus of existential meaning, is but a constellation of those meaningful elements, episodes, memories, images, and experiences"⁴⁰. Thus one could see a meaningful, mature, narrative and political experiment in Wat and Miłosz's project. Its significance will be extracted by discourses developed in the west only in the 1980s and they are implemented in European humanities until today.

Testimonials and confessions

Reasons governing the form of *My Century* is thus complicated. In order to understand it, it is necessary to confront Wat's stories with contemporary historical discourses, as well as avant-garde (although going as far back as Rousseau) ideologies of the spoken word. Such a broad perspective combining different discourse fields allows an insight into life writing questions of oral and written practices of twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe. The rhetoric of testimony constructed around oral history and spoken autobiographies of intellectuals from that region requires a critical consideration. Although it has a lot in common with at least some of the avant-garde's foundations, it dates significantly further back – specifically to *The Confessions* by Rousseau, which caused an aesthetic and moral earthquake, and inaugurated modern voice ideology, which later resonated in the imagination of the twentieth-century artistic avant-garde on the one hand, and on the other – in social policies of oral history and testimony concepts realized by Miłosz⁴¹. The rhetoric of oral testimonies and the accompanying voice ideology – foundations of Miłosz's concept – thus have a long tradition. They were also developed locally by Polish Romanticists, as evidenced clearly by Mickiewicz's literary silence. In his Parisian lectures, Mickiewicz dreamed about the living word as an embodied, collective act. He claimed that "in folk language, to vouch with your word is to vouch with yourself"⁴², "word is man", and "in Slavic languages, the words «man» and «word» share etymology"⁴³.

According to Michalina Kmieciak, a similar mythology of speech and (more broadly) word can be found in Wat's early work from 1930s. Kmieciak juxtaposes young Wat's speech philosophies with that of old Mickiewicz, defining them as "rigorists of acting". It was in the 1930s when Wat became fascinated with communism, and at the same time – disillusioned with literature and its fictionality; he dreamed about a democratic, emancipatory gesture of "leav-

⁴⁰Filipkowski, 47.

⁴¹Mary Chamberlain, Paul Thompson, "Introduction. Genre and Narrative in Life-Stories", in: *Narrative and genre*, edited by Mary Chamberlain, Paul Thompson (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), 15.

⁴²Adam Mickiewicz, "Literatura słowiańska. Kurs IV" [Slavic literature. Course IV], in *Dzieła* [Collected works], vol. XI (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1998), 77.

⁴³Mickiewicz, 149.

ing the narrow guild of professional writers"⁴⁴. At that time, he was highly skeptical of book culture and its social background. When editing "Miesięcznik Literacki" [Literary monthly] – a magazine with communist inclinations – he valued "reportage", based on "observation and conversation", "without embellishments and a formal suit", for its apparent direct character which refers to orality and testimonies. Just as later representatives of oral history, Wat wants to reach "genuine testimony of specific experiences"⁴⁵ of the proletariat. Even in 1964 he defined his own writing as "chained speech"; he also mentioned people who stimulated him intellectually as the form of "logorrhea" which – contrary to internal monologues mirrored in writing – is less "banal, sloppy, shapeless"⁴⁶. Conceptualized in a broader cultural field, an autobiographical story, available via the voice of the reader or teller, proves to be a subversive genre, far from written and literary autobiographies. Similar interpretations can be seen in contemporary realizations of autobiographical stories. For example, in the context of the 1970s in Poland, Przemysław Czapliński observed that when they take the form of an extended interview, they can be treated as "an opening to social integration and incorporating knowledge [of Stalinism] into social strategies of producing dialogue culture"⁴⁷. What is more, a spoken autobiography is a strictly political project demanding "dialogue as a cultural rule", and "more reflexivity and equality in social communication"⁴⁸. Another example showing that spoken autobiography – consistently read through the lens of confession and testimony – is still treated as a strictly political act, comes from Timothy Snyder, cited at the beginning of this paper. In a 2012 interview with Tony Judt, Snyder mentions Wat's memoir. Snyder not only claims that spoken diaries have a glorious tradition in Central and Western Europe; he thinks that as spoken testimonies of an era and simultaneously individual histories, they belong to grassroots movements for democracy and communal engagement. Snyder associates them with the socially- and politically-engaged intelligentsia from the former Eastern Bloc, as well as with collective and individual emancipation⁴⁹.

Such thinking about speech as a reference to the truth, coupled with the conviction that the ultimate civilizational crisis happened because of the alienation of the spoken word (which could mean anything in totalitarian regimes, according to the government's decision) is also apparent in his autobiographical story. When talking about his time in a soviet prison, Wat said: "*Jenseit der Wahrheit und der Lüge*: this is what I said to myself, paraphrasing Nietzsche. And, as is typical of moments of illumination – actual or imagined – the walls of my tight cell disappeared, and I **saw** that every human utterance since the dawn of speech had been either true, or false, either honest, or a lie. It could be beauty-poetry, and a prayer, but also then the human mind was like a shepherd separating one flock from another"⁵⁰. Wat discovered

⁴⁴Aleksander Wat, "Jeszcze o reportażu" [More on reportage], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 10 (1930): 425.

⁴⁵Michalina Kmieciak, "Paradoksy awangardowego zaangażowania. Milczenie artysty i rewolucja. Przypadek Aleksandra Wata" [Paradoxes of avant-garde engagement. Artist's silence and revolution. The case of Aleksander Wat], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 2 (2019): 76.

⁴⁶Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 270.

⁴⁷Przemysław Czapliński, "Rozmowa przeciw ekstazie. O kłopotach z autobiografią (nie tylko) komunistyczną" [Conversation against extasy. On issues with (not just) communist autobiography], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2018): 26.

⁴⁸Czapliński, 26.

⁴⁹Tony Judt, Timothy Snyder, *Thinking the twentieth century*, translated into Polish by Paweł Marczewski (Poznań: Rebis, 20219).

⁵⁰Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 2, 40.

the essence of totalitarianism via the alienation of “the human speech”. Its distortion and detachment from any truth criteria unrelated to the oppression of the regime seemed to him the most horrendous thing to ever happen to civilization⁵¹.

The spoken idiom of the works by the intelligentsia from Central and Eastern Europe – an unprecedented formation in terms of the continent – was also suggested by Miłosz. In the introduction to *My Century* he wrote about Wat’s adoration for intellectual disputes, that “what he wrote always seemed like a fraction of what he would say”, and that “paradoxically, and contrary to his intention, his longest book was not written – it was a collection of tape recordings”⁵². That spoken character of Wat’s works – transcending text towards apparently authentic experience – was also suggested by his later interpreters. In the excellent *Aleksander Wat: forma życia. Studium o pisaniu, doświadczeniu, obecności* [Aleksander Wat: A form of life. A study in writing, experiencing, and presence], Paweł Paszek stresses that “an encounter with Wat’s poetry is an encounter with a text and texts, with literature and a literary universe, and first and foremost, it is an encounter with life which calls towards stories, just like stories call towards life”⁵³. For Paszek, Wat’s memoir was a story understood as a form transgressing literature. This opinion was shared by Przemysław Rojek, who considered Wat’s post-war writing “a bio/bibliography, i.e. writing about self, and simultaneously a constant attempt at finding a better way of storytelling”⁵⁴. Krystyna Pietrych highlighted the “continuous writing process, characterized by directionless potentiality and constantly postponed finality”: “in a phase of permanent birth”⁵⁵. This process resembled living speech more than a closed text. Wat declared: „I am unable to finish, perhaps I do not believe in the logics of finishing, I keep starting and abandoning my projects”⁵⁶.

The orality ideology always associates orality with a testimony of truths or senses (both individual and collective) which are closest to actual experiences. This curious characteristic meant that even if someone’s speech was mass-reproduced (as a recording or book), it was treated as a record of time; by definition a moment of a living, authentic encounter with that person. Autobiographical pact in the case of audiobiography (Philippe Lejeune) looked different than in its written versions. If writing an autobiography was treated as obliging readers to treat it as the truth⁵⁷, then a spoken autobiography was interpreted as an emanation of truth. Voice seemed to abolish all literary and paraliterary conventions in the form of pacts innate to the genre.

⁵¹Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 2, 41.

⁵²Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony*, t. 2, 9. English version: xvii.

⁵³Paweł Paszek, *Aleksander Wat: forma życia. Studium o pisaniu, doświadczeniu, obecności* [Aleksander Wat: A form of life. A study in writing, experiencing, and presence] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2021), 25.

⁵⁴Przemysław Rojek, “Historia zmacona autobiografią”. Zagadnienia tożsamości narracyjnej w odniesieniu do powojennej liryki Aleksandra Wata [History stirred by autobiography. Narrative identity issues in reference to Aleksander Wat’s post-war poetry]. Kraków: Universitas, 2009, 38.

⁵⁵Krystyna Pietrych, *Aleksander Wat – (re)lektury. Nowe konteksty, inne perspektywy* [Aleksander Wat – (re) reading. New contexts, different perspectives] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2022), 13.

⁵⁶Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek*, 219.

⁵⁷Rodak, “«Nie istnieje tu nic, zanim nie zostanie wypowiedziane». Rozmowa z Philippem Lejeune’em”, 221.

Obviously, equating spoken histories and spoken audiographies with a unique testimony (clearly done by Miłosz in the introduction) made it difficult to notice sophisticated practices of the art of word: living, variational improvisations of life writing, at a given moment constructing a story about life as an example of a unique, oral creation, using specific means (linguistic and extralinguistic). It also made it difficult to notice how the medium as a form of record, as well as instruments for playing, archiving, classifying, and documenting voice change ways in which a spoken, edited, and written autobiography is understood. Any autobiographical stories result from the time, situation, and place of telling the story, and the social field related to the unique experience of interlocutors, what their audience is used to in terms of genre, the infrastructure of research or literary projects and the accompanying ideology. Their variants and intentional choices behind them are subject to rules which are from Rousseau's "truth".

Therefore, Wat's spoken memoir is not a fictional creation, nor a living, unique, non-fictional "testimony". It was an oral genre⁵⁸ *sui generis*, demanding a deep consideration regarding its social positioning and significance, also for the contemporary memory policies and their institutional background. In the case of *My Century*, it was necessary to see events taking place between the interlocutors, and the story genres which they set off. Those events were full of ambivalence, tensions, and negotiations taking place in the field of speaking experiences, institutions initiating them, and their politically-, socially-, and culturally-rooted actors. They were also based on culturally- and socially-defined policies of obtaining, evoking, or passing over Wat's memories and genre choices, who – together with Miłosz – chose "dialogic discourse", "rich heteroglossia", and complexity inscribed in "sequences of verbal processes", and 'constructs generated by cultural and personal encounters'⁵⁹.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

⁵⁸Agnieszka Karpowicz, "Poławianie gatunków. Twórczość słowna w antropologicznej sieci" [Hunting for genres. Literature in the anthropological network], in: *Od aforyzmu do zinu. Gatunki twórczości słownej* [From aphorism to zin. Literary genres], edited by Grzegorz Godlewski, Agnieszka Karpowicz, Marta Rakoczy, Paweł Rodak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2014).

⁵⁹Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as genre", in: *Narrative and genre*, edited by Mary Chamberlain, Paul Thompson (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), 23. See also Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk, "Can the Children Speak. Voice, Children and an ADHD Diagnosis in an Ethnographic Research", *Revue de Science Sociale* 63 (2020): 47.

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CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

ABSTRACT:

Analyzing Alexander Wat's *My Century* as more than an account of an engaged participant in the events of Central and Eastern Europe, I would like to show its experimental potential, close to avant-garde aesthetics. This potential, in my opinion, was part of an extensive institutional-discursive field, as it was related to the oral turn in historiography of the second half of the 20th century processed in various ways in the social politics of memory. In my interpretation, Wat's oral memoir was neither a fictional creation nor a non-fictional "testimony". It was a genre of verbal creativity, which demanded in-depth reflection on its social location and meaning. In the case of *My Age*, it was necessary to perceive in the events happening between the actors negotiating the conversation with each other and the various story genres they activated. These events were full of ambivalence, tensions and negotiations that took place in the field of genres of uttering experience, the institutions that initiate them and their politically, socially and culturally empowered actors and discourses. They were also based on culturally and socially defined policies of retrieving, reclaiming, restoring, evoking or silencing memories, and the intentional and genre choices of Wat himself. Wat and Milosz opted for, as Alessandro Portelli characterized oral history in 1998, "dialogic shaping of discourse", "rich heteroglossia" and "sequences of verbal processes and [...] constructs generated by cultural and personal encounters". In this article I want to show that this heteroglossia provoked different memory policies. It also constructed different ideologies of the voice of Central and Eastern European intellectuals.

*Central and Eastern Europe**Aleksander Wat*

VOICE

VERBAL CREATIVITY

oral memoirs

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