

# Unstructured, unprocessed, unused. Witold Wirpsza's journals

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We can treat the opening lines of a poem by Witold Wirpsza – the protagonist of the present paper – as the research question:

How to make use of a literary-broken  
Biography, which arts should be used, to  
Make it work, which moments should be scraped off  
With a rhythmic scraper, so that the fragments  
Fit together, and are  
Useful for the future reader?<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Witold Wirpsza, "Spożytkować pisarsko" [Make use in literary ways], in: Witold Wirpsza, Przesady [Superstitions] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2011), 11.

The subsequent verses elaborate on this topic, and its transformations are characterized by an accumulation of lexemes from the same semantic field as the initial “breaking” – the “evening squeezes / into the morning”, youth “blows old age apart”, and a melody seems “creased”, “crushed”, “plundered”:

A biography, where an evening squeezes  
 Into the morning, where cardinal  
 Directions are mixed up, where youth  
 Blows old age and its moral coherence apart?  
 Where melodies are creased, and tempo  
 Is crushed, and rhythms are bulging, and pauses  
 Are plundered from their hollows? How, I ask,  
 To make useful use of  
 A biography rich in  
 punctuation marks, and lacking in grammatically closed  
 periods?

Not to do it. Wait for  
 Disappearance; there is a chance that all that  
 (And some more) will be organized according to  
 A horrifying order and that someone will make use of it<sup>2</sup>.

The final, suggestive, graphically separated answer can be read as a confession of a lack of faith in the ideal of life writing, understood broadly in terms of spontaneously recording oneself, organizing one’s life via writing, an autobiographical re-creation. This ideal is rejected in two ways, on two levels of the text. The first one is obvious: no, the biography should not be utilized, it should disappear, or be utilized by somebody else. This “somebody” (biographer, researcher, God?) will have to deal with the richness of “punctuation marks” tearing the existential *continuum* into heterogenous parts – too many to see “grammatically closed periods” in them. The fact that life can be “punctuated” is a blessing; as long as a person is alive, they can only be “horrified” by organizing it. The second level is deeper; it concerns Wirpsza’s creative concept; the phrase “make use of” provides an insight into it. Making use of something means ‘to use something that is available’; this utilitarian aspect is highlighted by the somewhat tautological phrase “make useful use of” and introducing the category of “usefulness” to the poem. Thus Wirpsza considers his biography as potential material for a literary work, however, in creative work it can only be used on condition that it is artistically processed. He expresses this idea directly in the foreword to his 1964 novel *Pomarańcze na drutach* [Knitted oranges]: “When I got down to writing prose in the 1940s, soon after liberation, I was not actually aware what artistic shape this prose would ultimately take”<sup>3</sup>. It was not enough to write down his Oflag experience; it required “an artistically efficient linguistic net” made of deforming “ways of combining words and meanings”, which later underwent “syntactic and

<sup>2</sup> Wirpsza, “Spożytkować pisarsko”, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Witold Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, edited by Dariusz Pawelec (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski 2021), 25.

compositional transformations based on the variation technique"<sup>4</sup>. As a result, instead of an Oflag autobiography, collection of memories, memoir or account, after fourteen years he completed an "experimental novel", considered as "the most peculiar prose published in Poland as of late"<sup>5</sup> (Rafał Marszałek), and "an utterly pioneering, European-class novel"<sup>6</sup> (Edward Balcerzan). The conclusion seems obvious: life writing should be done without any artistic aspirations, using traditional autobiographical genres. And if they are to be "made use of" in literary ways, in an "artistically effective" manner, then this should be achieved through experimenting and pioneering, rejecting traditional autobiographical forms – even if it takes significantly more time. The avant-garde ways are not autobiographer's ways. Experimenting excludes intimacy.

The poem *Spożytkować pisarsko* [Make use in literary ways] was published in 1966 in the book of poems *Przesady* [Superstitions], i.e. in the "experimental" and "linguistic" phases of Wirpsza's work (1960-1971) according to Dariusz Pawelec's classification<sup>7</sup>. At that time Wirpsza became famous for being "heroically consequential in his experiments, even risking misunderstanding" (Jan Witan), a poet tirelessly "testing possibilities offered by the avant-garde" at the same time "heralding postmodernist games"<sup>8</sup> (Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik). Wirpsza was also accused of formalism, scientism, *mise en abyme*, antisemitism, hermeticism, mannerism, "stylistic calculation"<sup>9</sup>, and "schoolboy conceptismo"<sup>10</sup>. In that period he clearly shunned autobiographical genres, which makes his neo-avant-garde works seem detached from personal, everyday experience, and deprived of any attempts at reflecting its directness in writing – contrary to what can be observed in works by Miron Białoszewski, Krystyna Miłobędzka, or Leopold Buczkowski. As we learn from *Przerób* [Process], which can be considered an ingenious attempt at an autobiography of poetic work (as proposed by Philippe Lejeune<sup>11</sup>) using cybernetics language, – an experience can end in a text only once it is transformed into "a structure, i.e. something shaped and having a shape", thanks to which "impulses" of some experience cease to be "noise" and become "an informative surplus"<sup>12</sup>. This conviction does not necessarily mean questioning the whole idea of life writing. However, for Wirpsza – who proposes to treat theory of literary art as "a game of meanings", and who is attracted to the formal rather

<sup>4</sup> Wirpsza, *Pomarańcze na drutach*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Rafał Marszałek, "Eksperyment Wirpszy" [Wirpsza's experiment], *Nowe Książki* 9 (1965): 402.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Balcerzan, "Człowiek Witolda Wirpszy" [Witold Wirpsza's man], *Nurt* 2 (1965): 48–49. Balcerzan was correct – there have been two German editions of the novel, under the title *Orangen im Stacheldraht* (1967, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> See Dariusz Pawelec, *Wirpsza wielokrotnie* [Wirpsza repeatedly] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2013), 48–69.

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, *Poezja jako teoria poezji* [Poetry as theory of poetry] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2001), 201.

<sup>9</sup> Marta Wyka, "Poeta – filozof" [Poet-philosopher], *Życie Literackie* 34 (1967): 10.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Józef Lipski, "Autotematyzm, ekspresja i koncept" [Mise en abyme, expression, and concept], *Twórczość* 12 (1967): 114.

<sup>11</sup> See Philippe Lejeune, "Autobiografia i poezja (fragmenty)" [Autobiography and poetry (fragments)], translated into Polish by Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, in: *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii* [Variations about a certain pact. On autobiography], edited by Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 299–301.

<sup>12</sup> Witold Wirpsza, "Przerób" [Processing], in *Wirpsza: Gra znaczeń. Przerób* [Game of meanings. Processing] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2008), 213, 223.

than existential-experiential pole of the experiment<sup>13</sup> – life writing is not engaging. Processing life writing artistically is an interesting possibility, which must be pioneering in Wirpsza's case (e.g. *Pomarańcze na drutach*). Out of the two types of experiment distinguished by Julia Novak in the introduction to *Experiments in Life-Writing*, Wirpsza is definitely closer to “negating” than “expanding” the possibilities of an auto/biography; he does not try to present readers with a more complete and faithful representation of his life – he explores its artistic possibilities and limitations, which brings his works closer to “ironic and self-aware games” with assumptions about the genre characteristic for postmodernist “antibiographies”<sup>14</sup>.

### Literature as autobiography (about resistance)

Considering Witold Wirpsza an author who rejects biography in favor of experiments may be controversial. One might even say that in the socialist realist period he was a model example of an autobiographical author, often resorting to first-person prose based on confessional lyrics. This is especially evident in the 1953 *List do żony. Wiersze* [A letter to wife. Poems], which concludes with *9 III 1953*<sup>15</sup>, a poem about „joining the Party”, as well as in the 1956 *Z mojego życia* [From my life]. The latter book of poems opens with *Pamiętki rodzinne* [Family memorabilia], and it also contains *Grób rodziców* [My parents' grave], *Przyjacielowi młodości* [To my childhood friend], or *Dziewczynie, którą kochałem* [To a girl I loved], as well as *Szczęście* [Happiness], dedicated to his wife, Maria Kurecka, in which subsequent sections are entitled with years. At the time Wirpsza also wrote autobiographical prose, such as *Na granicy* [On the border] and *Stary tramwaj* [An old tramway], and he favorably referred to life writing genres, e.g. in the 1952 *Dziennik Kożedo* [Kożedo Journal], in which daily dates are highlighted in the titles of subsequent texts, such as *22 V 1952 Strzępy koszul* [Shreds of shirts], *26 V 1952 Łączność, strzały* [Communication, fire] or *4 VI 1952 Riots – Gun*. In his 1981 essay *Dzieje rymopisa czasu swego* [History of a versifier of his own time] published in “Kultura” [Culture] he openly criticized “emotionalism” and “kitsch” of his own poetic texts written “in a phase of common graphomania”, which he dubbed “monstrous poems”, “even worse than kitsch”: “Utter, unheard of, graphomaniac rubbish”<sup>16</sup>. However, when arguing with Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, he resisted the temptation of an autobiographical confession, and the argument he presented throws light also on his model anti-autobiographical works from the 1960s and

<sup>13</sup>This is also a conclusion from analyzing Wirpsza's score-poems, see Piotr Bogalecki, *Wiersze-partytury w poezji polskiej neoawangardy* [Score-poems in Polish neo-avant-garde]. Białoszewski – Czycz – Drahan – Grześcizak – Partum – Wirpsza (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2020), 147. We should add that distinguishing two “poles” of this experiment would be problematic for Wirpsza, because in his works there is no contradiction between stressing the form and cognitive and axiological function of literature; however, there is some distancing from life writing which forsakes the form.

<sup>14</sup>Julia Novak, “Experiments in Life-Writing: Introduction”, in: *Experiments in Life-Writing. Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, edited by Lucia Boldrini, Julia Novak (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 3.

<sup>15</sup>Biography plays an important role in the socialist realist poem: “I told my biography. And hands were raised: /It was a day which comes back. And which is back again. // Here, in the same room, the secretary gave me / The rectangle of my party card among heated congratulations”. Witold Wirpsza, *List do żony. Wiersze* (Warszawa: PIW, 1953), 38. The disdain for closing a “broken” existence in “grammatically closed periods”, articulated in *Spożytkować pisarsko*, can be therefore seen as self-criticism regarding earlier works.

<sup>16</sup>Witold Wirpsza, “Dzieje rymopisa czasu swego” [History of a versifier of his own time], in Wirpsza: *Gra znaczeń*, 257–258.

1970s: “Publishing the results of an introspection through first-person narratives is in fact a dangerous game; it is easy to get trapped in self-delusion, if not in something even worse, when self-control fails”<sup>17</sup>. Instead of a “psychological mess” he advised to stick to “tangible facts”, which – when it comes to literature – refer to “texts and nothing beyond them, [...] nothing beyond texts from the discussed period, and these texts need to be analyzed”<sup>18</sup>. For example, a linguistic analysis of “subsequent phases of linguistic moral decay in Borowski’s prose will tell us more about those times and author’s decisions than a mawkish story about his tragedy, even if he dictated it from beyond his grave”<sup>19</sup>. Wirpsza is consistent in his choice. As an old poet who leaves his socialist realist youth behind, and who is forced to emigrate for political reasons, he could write a wonderful, poignant “life story” in the poetics of a parable about a convert – and yet he forbids himself from doing it, because of “self-delusion” inscribed in autobiography.

Therefore, instead of the “self-delusion”, Wirpsza writes *Sama niewinność* [Pure innocence] – an experimental novel about the impossibility of writing a credible biography, which takes the form of notes written by a shorthand typist employed for this purpose by a fifty-year-old, nameless man, defined in the text as a “socialist millionaire”. She confesses: “Ultimately, my work was about crossing out, adding, putting together what was non-linear by its nature, about making the incomplete complete, [...] in short: my work was about falsifying peculiarly false material”<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, in such a “falsified” autobiography everything proves to be a lie: lies, i.e. a “dominating thread [...] of contact and conspiracy” (134) transpired from stories about the protagonist’s life from the very beginning; lies turned out to be “subtle” and “sophisticated” to such an extent that one can even “delight in them, as if they were a good dish, good love, good sleep” (101), whereas the biography can be easily “invented” (which the protagonist does on several occasions) depending on the overall situation and current needs, and thus “reinvent oneself from scratch” (77). This means that also the final effect will inevitably be “falsified”, which the protagonist senses from the beginning, admitting that “there was something like lying in that story about falsifying” (94). However, we should add: there is something like lying also in the fact that Wirpsza, who uses several autobiographical facts such as being imprisoned in an Oflag or his post-war involvement with communism and the resulting financial benefits in his story about lies in an autobiography. Dariusz Pawelec observes at some point “the biographies of the author and protagonist of *Sama niewinność* [...] start to run parallelly”, and so “the biographical context shapes the vision from the novel, although the autobiographical perspective is determined here mostly by the role of a witness, perhaps with the exception of the way of presenting an Oflag”<sup>21</sup>. Pawelec continues, adding that “descriptions of Oflag life in the novel clearly correspond with analogous descriptions from *Listy z oflagu*” [Letters from an Oflag]<sup>22</sup>. In a way, after all, Wirpsza incorporated his life in that text, although he did it perversely, entering a level of falsifying which we refer to as

<sup>17</sup>Wirpsza, 265–266

<sup>18</sup>Wirpsza, 266, 263.

<sup>19</sup>Wirpsza, 263.

<sup>20</sup>Witold Wirpsza, *Sama niewinność*, edited by Dariusz Pawelec (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2017), 25.

Quotes in that paragraph are referred to directly in the text via page numbers.

<sup>21</sup>Dariusz Pawelec, “Posłowie” [Afterword], in: Wirpsza, *Sama niewinność*, 198.

<sup>22</sup>Pawelec, 198–199.

fiction; not lying directly, but telling the truth via lying – and at the same time confessing to lying. Likewise, in some perverse way he “made use in a literary way” the falsification of his biography in the poem cited at the beginning of this paper – an in many other works. There is no other way, and in each of his texts (and by any other author, for that matter) one can search for biographical elements, some form of life writing. The question is: is it worth it<sup>23</sup>? Wirpsza’s – a representative of the neo-avant-garde – answer is simple: no, it is not. There are more interesting and important things to do in life, and definitely in literature and art, than the “self-delusion” of autobiographical “graphomania”, such as questioning by deconstructing autobiographical conventions, which Wirpsza does also in many of his poetic works, such as *Dziennik pokładowy* [Logbook] from *Przesady* [Supersitions], *Monolog Amadeusza Mozarta (1756–1791)* [Amadeus Mozart’s monologue] from *Spis ludności* [Census] or in the poems *In verrem* and *Odchodzącemu* [To the person leaving] from the final, unfinished *Przypomnienie Hioba* [Reminding about Job]. *Odchodzącemu* is based on a perverse call for action: “Sit down and write memoirs [...]. Write whatever you like. You can embellish / make things up; use a graph-ruled notebook, / So that you write evenly”. Comparing writing a memoir to a confession, he adds ironically that confessionals are “penetrated by sins confessed honestly, / Or left unsaid, lied, which is not important / In the end”<sup>24</sup>. The supposed honesty of autobiographical writing, in which organizing the story eventually proves to be more significant, is equally unimportant. We have not wandered far from “grammatically closed periods” from a poem written at least fifteen years earlier...

One seemingly irrelevant fact should attract attention when comparing those texts from the perspective of *life writing*: contrary to *Spożytkować pisarsko*, *Odchodzącemu* is annotated “Berlin, 18.9.1982”. This is the case with the whole *Przypomnienie Hioba*, whose structure – even more significantly – is based on dating: the poems are arranged chronologically, from the earliest *Przypomnienie Hioba* [Reminding about Job] (Berlin, 19.06.1982) to *Rozmyślenia (luźne)* [(Random) considerations] (“Berlin, May 1985), written four months before Wirpsza’s death. Wirpsza used this device – absent from books published and written in Poland, as well as in early emigration days – for the first time in *Apoteoza tańca* [Dance apotheosis], a book of poems written from “the spring of 1973” to the fall of 1975; the final poem, *Prognoza (Prognozy), czyli historia naturalna smoków* [Prognosis (prognoses), i.e. a natural history of dragons] was annotated: “Berlin, 12 November 1975 (on my name day)”. Wirpsza became increasingly more consistent with adding dates to his poems: in *Apoteoza* most poems are undated, whereas in the following *Spis ludności* there are only three undated poems, and in the final *Przypomnienie Hioba* each poem is dated. Dates connect poetry to biography, each time forcing us to think – like Derrida reading Celan – not just about the “date *itself*”, but about “the poetic experience of the date, that which a date, *this one*, ordains in our relation

<sup>23</sup>On a different level this doubt also refers to the functionality of the notion of life writing in research into Wirpsza’s (and similar authors’) work, and, more generally, its functionality in literary studies. Novak admits that it functions as a “loose umbrella term” which refers to genres absent from autobiographical studies (Novak, “Experiments in Life-Writing”, 2). Zachary Leader’s popular definition of life writing includes letters, court records, scientific and historical texts, poetry, etc. See Zachary Leader, “Introduction”, in: *On Life-Writing*, edited by Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>24</sup>Witold Wirpsza, *Utwory ostatnie* [Final works] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2007), 51.

to it”<sup>25</sup>. And since in Wirpsza’s later works almost every poem is dated, we could perceive them even as journal entries (following Philippe Lejeune’s simplified definition of a journal as a “series of dated traces”<sup>26</sup>), even though Wirpsza clearly keeps off such simplified, direct record of experiences<sup>27</sup>. It is also significant that the most direct references to actual events from Wirpsza’s life can be found in the dated annotations to poems written in cursive (three such examples in *Spis ludności*). The annotation to the already mentioned *Monolog Amadeusza Mozarta* contains information about hospitalization: “Berlin, started in February 1980 in hospital, finished in April of the same year at my own desk”<sup>28</sup>. The reason for hospitalization is revealed in the annotation to the next poem, *Zabijanie* [Killing]: “Berlin. Started in November 1979, finished in April 1980. A break lasting three months and a half following a car accident, in which I wasn’t killed”<sup>29</sup>. The last hospital gloss can be found following *Monolog w samym środku centrum* [A monologue at the very center of the center]: “Excogitated in hospital in July 1981, finished at home on 18 August, when I already had titanium in my bone. / Berlin, 1981 (Symmetry: 18.8.81)”<sup>30</sup>. There is no doubt this information can impact interpretation; for example, the annotation to the last one can explain why the text was about molybdenum – a transition element used e.g. in the production of medical implants. However, does the status of annotations accompanying indexes of reality – date and place – make them a privileged space for autobiographical expression? Even if not, they have a special place in Wirpsza’s works, who generally clearly distanced himself from autobiographicalism; they can be read as an experiment in life writing which induces Derridean reflections regarding the institutionalism of personal confession literature, the date phenomenon, the role of a supplement and limits of text.

There is also an unmarked cycle of nine poems from *Granice wytrzymałości* [Limits of endurance] (which did not contain any dated poems) written in the late 1960s and early 1970s (published posthumously as *Częstkowa próba o człowieku i inne wiersze* [Fragmentary notes about man and other poems]). There are two distinguishing criteria which allow one to classify those poems – from *Rok rozpoczęty* [A year begun] dated “January 1969” to *Spiętrzenie; koniec roku 1972* [Accumulation; end of the year 1972] – as one poetic cycle: yearly dates in their titles and a similar tone, resembling a chronicle or report. These poems are an example

<sup>25</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Szibboleth dla Paula Celana*, translated into Polish by Adam Dziadek (Bytom: FA-art, 2000), 9. English version: *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan*, in: *Sovereignties in question: the poetics of Paul Celan*, edited by Thomas Dutois and Outi Pasanen (Fordham University Press, 2005), 1-64, 6.

<sup>26</sup>Philippe Lejeune, “Koronka: dziennik jako seria datowanych śladów” [Diary as a series of dated traces], translated into Polish by Magda and Paweł Rodak, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2006): 21. However, it should be noted that in his earlier texts Lejeune stressed the difference between using a clearly biographic “I”, guaranteed by the author’s own name, and using a traditional, lyrical “I”, observing that in “pure poetry”, for various reasons, the “autobiographical pact” loses its credibility” (Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact”, translated into Polish by Stanisław Jaworski, in: *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu* [Variations about a certain pact], 195, 192).

<sup>27</sup>In his later works, Wirpsza writes down his memories (e.g. in *W jednej chwili* [At one moment], *Palisander i skóra* [Rosewood and leather], or *Trudności* [Difficulties]) and dreams (*Ostatnio pojawiające się motywy w snach* [Recent themes of my dreams], *Cztery talerze* [Four plates], *Ciemność* [Darkness]) far more often than before. A more detailed analysis of Wirpsza’s dreams deserves a separate paper, especially that some of his final works, which do not contain direct oneritic references (e.g. *W świątyni* [In a temple] and *Efekt Dopplera* [Doppler effect]) can be interpreted in the same vein.

<sup>28</sup>Witold Wirpsza, *Spis ludności* (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2005), 38.

<sup>29</sup>Wirpsza, *Spis ludności*, 51.

<sup>30</sup>Wirpsza, *Spis ludności*, 62.

of a perverse, intertextual game with two types of non-fiction literature: historiography and autobiography. Although the former, responsible for the general theme and stylistic orientation of the whole cycle, dominates, autobiographical and metapoetic fragments related to them (referring to e.g. the topos of a chronicler-poet) also play a significant role in the cycle. Contrasted with historical and historiographical considerations, next to reflections regarding the essence of politics and significance of Apollo 11 mission, they are at most “punctuation marks” known from the 1966 poem *Spożytkować pisarsko* and returning now in *Rok rozpoczęty* in order to inaugurate the cycle – I believe this is not a coincidence.

It is common knowledge that punctuation marks are small and seemingly insignificant, but locally they can change sense, set off a game of meanings. And so if Wirpsza ends *Lato 1970* [The summer of 1970], which is about “an epidemic of cholera / on the Black Sea”, the Danube flooding, and the situation of “small countries / sentenced to snow: / Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia” with a distich separated from other verses: “That steamy summer and as if you put on a pot on your head: / Dark, stuffy, sleepy”<sup>31</sup> – he almost provocatively highlights the separation of the course of an individual life from general history, individual experience from facts, memory from history. Contrary to history, individuality of existence (in subsequent poems of the cycle gradually, but ineffectively organized) is impossible to nuance, gain symbolic meaning, be organized. Wirpsza writes about this suggestively in *Początki roku* (1970):

In the long run everything is  
Unbearable; I am unable to organize  
My life. And moreover this is out of tune with  
Everything, it is not a symbol or metaphor of  
Psychological, political, etc. events  
This year starts with emptiness, confusion and  
Is climatically obscure. I’m curious, what will  
Come out of it, if the principle of entailment exists at all.  
Doctors say that climate harms people<sup>32</sup>.

### A diarist poet (second resistance)

The portrayal of Witold Wirpsza as an author rejecting biography in favor of experimenting may be resisted for another reason, which allows us to study his works from the perspective of life writing studies. If creation is “processing”, and the creative process “processes” experiences, then instead of focusing on the effect of that processing, perhaps we should seek what is being processed, i.e. personal material prepared by the author for artistic processing – existing *in crudo*, and so far “artistically ineffective”. Such an opportunity is offered by archives, which allow us the most direct insight into Wirpsza’s biography. *Listy z oflagu* published by Pawelec in 2015, are letters sent by Wirpsza to his future wife; also Wirpsza’s correspondence

<sup>31</sup>Witold Wirpsza, *Cząstkowa próba o człowieku i inne wiersze* (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2005), 130.

<sup>32</sup>Wirpsza, *Cząstkowa próba o człowieku i inne wiersze*, 122.



with Heinrich Kunstmann was published in the same year, which made Dorota Cygan and Marek Zybura publish a several pages long memoir, a dialogue with a journal, *Ein Pole in Westberlin*, which they believe was written in 1971. Although that interesting document – found in the Berlin section of Wirpsza’s archive, deposited in Akademie der Künste in Berlin – is subtitled *pages from a journal*, it is clearly a memoir. Starting with a brief account of his “first trips to West Berlin” from the 1950s, Wirpsza describes the circumstances surrounding his year-long stay in the city due to the DAAD scholarship he received in 1967, adding: “If I had followed Witold Gombrowicz’s suit and written a journal, it would probably contain notes like these”<sup>33</sup>. This is followed by a chronological list of memories from that period, dated using names of the months. The memories are about different events significant for Wirpsza’s later biography, such as being awarded by the Darmstadt Academy, his attitude to student protests following Benno Ohnesorg’s death, participation in the interrupted concert conducted by Pierre Boulez, or a long conversation with Paul Celan by “a bottle of Polish vodka”<sup>34</sup>.

It was therefore likely that since it is more extensive, the Szczecin department of Wirpsza’s archive deposited in Książnica Pomorska<sup>35</sup>, would hold numerous documents full of life writing content, beyond correspondence – which has its own rights and is beyond the scope of this paper (apart from the observation that it was probably not a coincidence that the poem *Listy* [Letters] opens with “A lie”<sup>36</sup>). And indeed, apart from notebooks with literary works, the Szczecin archive holds many notes written on individual pages, margins of manuscripts and typescripts, random, loose pages<sup>37</sup>, as well as in numerous notebooks: apart from thirteen address books and calendars (signature No 1480)<sup>38</sup>, there are also fourteen A5 notebooks: six under signature No 1481, and eight from file No 1823. The number of notebooks, privileged in journaling due to their “promise of continuity”<sup>39</sup> could indicate potential major autobiographical discoveries. Unfortunately, the notebooks mostly contain drafts of poems, excerpts from books and magazines, random dated notes, conspectuses, reference lists, among which personal reflections and memories are far and between.

<sup>33</sup> Witold Wirpsza, “Ein Pole in Westberlin (kartki z dziennika) [pages from a journal]”, in Witold Wirpsza, Heinrich Kunstmann, “Salut Henri! Don Witoldo!”. Witold Wirpsza – Heinrich Kunstmann. *Listy* [Letters] 1960–1983, translated and edited by Dorota Cygan, Marek Zybura (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 309, 310.

<sup>34</sup> Wirpsza, “Ein Pole in Westberlin (kartki z dziennika)”, 315.

<sup>35</sup> All subsequent materials discussed here are from that archive. Many thanks to Leszek Szaruga, Wirpsza’s son, for kindly allowing me to work in the archive and cite Wirpsza’s journal here. I would also like to express my gratitude to Jolanta Liskowacka and other staff members of Książnica Pomorska for their assistance.

<sup>36</sup> Witold Wirpsza, *Drugi opór* [Second resistance] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2020), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Although they contain quite a number of interesting biographical materials, I would like to mention only one type, whose form is interesting from the perspective of life writing. Whenever Wirpsza left home, he would leave jocular, sometimes illustrated notes with information for his family; one of them, written in green ink (which suggests 1980s) on a piece of paper torn out from an A5 notebook, says: “13.30. / Disgusting, repulsive, atrocious, / ghastly, revolting, monstrous, / dreadful and horrifying / enormous, multicellular / and multiatomic // Sleepyheads: // I am leaving. When I’m back, I would like: 1) the hay to disappear / 2) conifer needles to disappear. / We will serve Zagajewscy / tea and treats”.

<sup>38</sup> From today’s perspective, Wirpsza’s annotations referring to illustrated advertisements in Orbis calendars attract attention; in one case he added “as far as he does NOT demand anything from us” to the slogan “the customer is king”, and to “We invite you” – “but not to stay, we are full!”.

<sup>39</sup> Lejeune, “Koronka”, 18. Lejeune adds that a notebook is supposed to guarantee that everything will come together; a notebook – sewn or glued together, in a cover or on a spiral binder, often with the author’s name on it – is a promise of at least minimum unity, what Paul Ricoeur refers to as «the narrative identity».

However, there are some exceptions – the analysis of the collected material reveals that Wirpsza started writing a journal four times, but each time he did it irregularly, ultimately giving up. The first diary<sup>40</sup> opens proudly: “Journal / begun 13.VI.50”, and covers one year over... seven pages. Wirpsza’s notes are irregular, sometimes very short, mostly about everyday affairs (“I am waiting for a letter from Różewicz”, 6). From today’s perspective, those notes look like a record of a writer’s block and atrophy of personal reflection at the height of socialist realism. For example, on 17<sup>th</sup> August Wirpsza wrote: “After two months I am returning to the problem from 13.6.50” (3), but after a few days he abruptly stops his notes. On 20<sup>th</sup> February 1951 he wrote: “It’s been six months. I have only written one poem over that time – *Hymn narodowy* [A national anthem]. Numerous started projects (*Poemat polemiczny* [A polemic poem], *Towarzyszom niemieckim* [To my German comrades], *Do syna* [To my son], *Dzieci* [Children]) – everything got stuck halfway through. Plenty of ideas which cannot be utilized – because I am not good enough” (5). In the following paragraph, he only wrote: “An idea for a play”, repeated after a few months: “23. IV. 51: 1) An idea for a play:” – again, without writing anything... Probably the first journal failed because of socialist realism, and a few years later the same situation happened again. His second journal (signature No 1823, A5, brown cover) bears a more humble title: “Notebook I”. There are six pages of notes dated from 7<sup>th</sup> April to 5<sup>th</sup> June 1955; there are also several poems. Most notes are excerpts from the press, often humorous, mostly from “Trybuna Ludu” [People’s Tribune], whereas all personal notes are short. For example, on 24<sup>th</sup> April he wrote: “A trip with L.: Białego valley, path over Regle, Patyki pass, Kalatówki, Kuźnice”. In the next attempt (signature No 1481, A5, navy blue cover signed “W. Wirpsza”) there are only four dated entries without any general title: the first one was written on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1957, followed by three more written six months later (22<sup>nd</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup> February 1958); additionally, similarly to the other notebooks, that one also contains random, undated notes.

If the archive is to be trusted, after those three unsuccessful attempts, Wirpsza gave up until 1980s, when he started writing what would later become his most extensive, proper diary<sup>41</sup>, from 31<sup>st</sup> August 1981 to 29<sup>th</sup> July 1982. At first it was kept quite regularly. The whole journal is only twelve pages long, but written extremely densely, in tiny handwriting. The title suggests some distancing from the diary genre: “Dated notes, not in an order” – nonetheless, the entries are disciplined, polished (there are surprisingly few erasures) and genuinely engaging; they could be published. Occasionally Wirpsza starts a new topic under a working title and returns to it after a few days; the most extensive notes are: *Kant i Peiper* [Kant and Peiper], *Gombrowicz i Miłosz* [Gombrowicz and Miłosz], *Determinizm* [Determinism], *Religia* [Religion] and *Etos Beethovena* [Beethoven’s ethos]. There are also shorter notes, some with titles, such as *Racjonalizm* [Rationalism], *Hegel*, *Manicheizm* [Manicheism] – or the worrying *Apokryf* [Apocrypha] from 1<sup>st</sup> September 1981, an important intext of *Liturgia* [Liturgy], a poem Wirpsza started writing in the same year:

<sup>40</sup>Signature 1823. This document survives in the form of seven pages torn out from an A5 notebook. The pages are hand-numbered; I refer to that pagination in the main text.

<sup>41</sup>Signature 1823, a 16-page A5 notebook with a turquoise cover and yellow back, on the first page a handwritten title: “Dated notes, not in an order”, numbers (corrected) written in top right corners of each page. All subsequent quotes are from this source.

Let's say: a text of some previously unknown Gospel has been found, which implies that Christ was crucified not at the age of 33, but much later. Meaning: he had lost his mother, the political situation of the Holy Land had changed (Pontius Pilate no longer ruled), different people were responsible for his Passion, older apostles had died (so Peter, Paul and St. Andrew would not become the Church Fathers). Nonetheless, Christ's sacrifice would be essentially the same, theologically nothing would be different, Sermon on the Mount would be the same Sermon on the Mount. What would be different then? History? – External crust of history (4).

When it comes to untitled notes, there are some considerations regarding the last *Lament* by Jan Kochanowski, criticism of modern pedagogy, polemics with Marx's *dictum*: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it", as well as a curious aphorism from 1<sup>st</sup> November 1981: "Only God, some women, and no man are grown-ups" (10). And what about intimate, personal notes that would give insight into the life of the avant-garde author, who could write in a eulogy-confessional style? Only two notes from September 1981, i.e. the first phase of writing the journal, can be considered personal. On 6<sup>th</sup> September Wirpsza wrote:

Something that has been neglected, forsaken, forgotten to do. Here memory fails, it is unclear what it is (was). What if it was (the most) important? What will the consequences be? Maybe it was something that cannot be a reason, nor have consequences; whose significance lies only in existing.

Is there still a tree that was supposed to be touched? If it still exists, then if it is touched too late, will it matter? – Etc. (6).

Is this a personal confession, or a general reflection? Is this an account of an experience, or a concept in which considerations regarding the mystery of causality play a role? Does metaphor not win with a memory here? Another fragment, written on 1st September under the title *Rodzinne* [Family] is less universal, although no less literary:

If M. is a Cancer, and L is a Capricorn [this refers to Wirpsza's wife, Maria, and daughter, Lidia – P.B.], then I should situate myself in the middle, as the equator. Can a Sagittarius be an equator between two tropics? I think that he could play like this. And what about Pisces (A) [Wirpsza's son, Aleksander, i.e. Leszek Szaruga – P.B.], a double sign? One fish splashing between the equator and Cancer, the other one – between the equator and Capricorn. All that a mixture of water and fire. Not quite a family! Couples in a weird dance, changing their partners based on similarity, and then – oppositions. Is it cosmic or comic? Anyway, no chaos: an intertropical order (4).

Is it personal or peculiar? Autobiographical or autothematic? In any case, "no chaos" is an interdiscursive order. "Intertropical" too: Wirpsza uses his biography not in an autobiographical convention, but in forms "splashing" between the tropic of life and the tropic of creative work, between the turn to biography and linguistic turn – key to his writing and distrustful of any form of direct expression. Therefore all things biographical need to be aesthetically utilized, metaphorized, artistically encoded, made poetic, in short – processed into a structure.

According to Wirpsza's note on Beethoven from 18.11.81<sup>42</sup>, a structured note is better than a spontaneous one due to the presence of internal "tensions" which can "express internal joys, and not just aesthetic ones" (11). Wirpsza compares them to "directional tensions in Witkacy's works", making a reservation that "these are not limited to painting", and adding: "Directional tensions can arise on a surface, generally in space, and in time. So let's say that directional tensions in a poetic or musical space-time as a result of execution (?) (11). In the next entry, from 25<sup>th</sup> December, he analyzes *Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli*, adding that although "the area of activity and tension is not [...] closed like in Witkacy; it is open, tension is directed in the sense of «approaching infinity». This is Beethoven's ethos – a passionate, even religious ethos. There is also humbleness: subordinating to the form despite everything" (11). I believe that Witold Wirpsza had a similar ethos, and the postulate to subordinate to form, understood as a manifestation of humbleness towards the world and faithfulness to "internal values" meant that even his diary is governed by form – which would mean that his notes are not prisoners of dates, they "approach infinity".

Inevitably, Wirpsza transformed some of the diary entries analyzed here into articles. For example, the consideration about Beethoven, Kant and Peiper ended up in an article entitled *In dubio pro arte* from "Tygodnik Powszechny" (1982, No 37), whereas the notes about Gombrowicz – in an essay *Święte krowy* [Holy cows] from "Archipelago" (1984, No 3). *Zapiski bez porządku* were thus organized, they found their place in the superordinate construction of a coherent discussion, they were discoursed, and – as theoretical considerations – they gained new titles and audiences. It could not be any other way, given that in the only meta-journal entry, from 11<sup>th</sup> March 1982, under considerations following reading Aristotle and Wittgenstein, Wirpsza wrote: "Writing a journal. Some do it to consolidate psychological states, others – to consolidate considerations. Those two purposes are not mutually exclusive, but I prefer the latter. Analyzing my own soul? – neither do I need it, nor does anyone else" (12). It is also symptomatic that the moment Wirpsza stopped writing his *Zapiski datowane* coincides with the beginning of his work on *Przypomnienie Hioba*. Dating made its way into poetry for good. But in all truth – was there ever any other place for it? In the end, for Wirpsza a personal archive cannot be creative. It therefore seems that we can approach the truth about his biography (the truth about biography in general? the truth of biography?) through tracing the direction of tensions in his literary texts, and the mechanisms and strategies of "processing" the original lexical material, then through hope in what is allegedly unused, unprocessed, unfeigned and innocent, unfalsified and unhidden, indisputable and unquestionable, and ultimately inevitably... untrue.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>42</sup>Wirpsza comments on the symmetrical date ("Again, symmetry in the date. Funny", 11), just as he did in *Monolog w samym centrum*.

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# KEYWORDS

## journals

### WITOLD WIRPSZA

*Zapiski datowane, bez porządku*

### Witolda Wirpsza's archive

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper explores the question of autobiographism of the neo-avant-garde literary works by Witold Wirpsza, trying to determine the significance of journal as a genre to it. Wirpsza's meta-literary comments present him as an author who rejected biographism in favor of experimenting. It is simultaneously shown that some of his poems (especially from *Granica wytrzymałości* and *Przypomnienie Hioba*) and novels (*Pomarańcze na drutach*, *Sama niewinność*) can be read as results of experimenting with life writing. The analysis of Wirpsza's unpublished journals, especially the notebook entitled *Zapiski datowane, bez porządku* confirms the poet's disdain for intimate writing and consolidating psychological states.

## eksperyment

# NEO-AVANTE-GARDE

## *life writing*

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