

# Poetics in use

c r i t i c s :

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Jerzy Madejski, *Poetyka ekstremalna oraz inne noty o krytyce i lirycie współczesnej* [Extreme poetics and other notes on lyrics and contemporary critique], Wydawnictwo Pasaże, Kraków 2021

*Poetyka ekstremalna* [Extreme poetics] is a comprehensive collection of short critical texts published by Jerzy Madejski in various Polish cultural magazines – mostly “Nowe Książki” and “Kwartalnik Artystyczny”, with some reviews reprinted from “Odra” and a magazine from Szczecin, “Pogranicza”. The decision to publish texts written over almost two decades in one volume makes *Poetyka ekstremalna* an intellectual diary of one of the most renowned and influential commentators of contemporary literary life in Poland. Jerzy Madejski is a lecturer at the University of Szczecin who specializes in modern Polish poetry and prose, and autobiography. In recent years he has published two books: *Poetologie poststrukturalne. Szkice krytyczne* [Poststructural poetologies. Critical essays] (Szczecin 2018) and *Praktykowanie autobiografii. Przyczynki do literatury dokumentu osobistego i biografistyki* [Practicing autobiography. On the literature of personal document and biography] (Szczecin 2017). For years he has been an editor in a semi-annual from Szczecin, “Autobiografia”.

The book is divided in two parts. The first, entitled *O lirycie* [On lyric], contains forty-four reviews of poetic books (not just “new” volumes, but also various re-editions, selected editions, and anthologies). The second, entitled *O krytyce* [On critique] – in which the word “critique” is understood very broadly – consists of eighteen texts, including reviews of specialized literary studies books, collections of essays, as well as three extensive interviews.

The concise introduction briefly discusses the contents of the volume, and reveals some technical aspects of the writing process behind subsequent reviews – most were commissioned by magazines rather than chosen by the critic. This is interesting, because – as Madejski observes – the reviews collected in the volume constitute a coherent whole, even though this observation is not accompanied by any methodological declaration or theoretical comment. Madejski only suggests that “perhaps the titular essay reflects the spirit of the whole volume, which is an attempt at understanding Andrzej Sosnowski’s book, but also some aspects of all works by that poet, critic, and translator”<sup>1</sup>. Madejski thus does not decide to directly explain

<sup>1</sup> Jerzy Madejski, *Poetyka ekstremalna oraz inne noty o lirycie i krytyce współczesnej* [Extreme poetics and other notes on lyrics and contemporary critique] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Pasaże, 2021), 9.

the program of the titular “extreme poetics”, forcing the reader to undertake the effort of reconstructing the “method” of dealing with poetry applied in that book. The author outlines possible ways of using the volume, which he would like to see as “a reviewer’s (or maybe even beginner poet’s) guidebook”<sup>2</sup>.

Despite Madejski’s declaration that his choice was limited (due to the fact that the reviews were commissioned), *Poetyka ekstremalna* is not chaotic. Based on characteristics shared by the reviewed works, it is possible to recreate his research interests and identify those features of authors and their works which attract Madejski’s attention the most.

In the introduction, the author admits his interest in the figure of “an educated poet”, which apparently realizes itself in the case of poets who are simultaneously scholars. Many of the works reviewed by Madejski were written by distinguished scholars, well-known in the Polish literary studies environment. Apart from historians of literature from Wrocław listed by Madejski in the introduction, there is also Józef Franciszek Fert (review of the 2019 *Dagerotypy* [Daguerreotypes])<sup>3</sup>, Leszek Szaruga (discussion of the 2015 *Fluktuacja kwantowa* [Quantum fluctuation])<sup>4</sup> and Anna Nasiłowska (the 2018 *Ciemne przejścia* [Dark transitions])<sup>5</sup>. However, the authors discussed in *Poetyka ekstremalna* who do not work in academia are mostly characterized by their erudition and theoretical awareness, which is showcased by their poems.

It would seem that writing convincing poetry thematizing autobiography and *mise en abyme* – two areas of interest to Madejski – require a broad literary studies toolset: what he believes to be basic functions of poetry is realized in personal lyric, in the fullest meaning of the word.

I understand poetry (in line with what is stressed by contemporary literary theories) also as a record of personal experiences of individuals and communities. Here my attention is occupied by ways of objectifying human experience (love, breakup, loneliness, suffering, despair, pain...). I am especially interested in how a poem sometimes becomes an elementary part of autobiography. [...] It is known that today autobiography knows no limits, and traditionally, lyric has been a textual area for presenting and revealing various personal contents<sup>6</sup>.

Questions regarding which devices allow one to objectify the intimate, and whether and how poetry can be a way of dealing with difficult experiences occur repeatedly in reviews comprising the first part of the volume. However, the most typical characteristic of Madejski’s reviews, which clearly reveals his method of reading poetic texts, is the way he used traditional tools of poetics in its structuralist-formalist variant. A detailed analysis – including that of verse – of the structure of investigated poems, and situating an identified formal solution in a specific historical-literary context is the starting point of most of the reviews included in the volume. Next, Madejski moves on to the semantic layer of a poem, distinguishing key

<sup>2</sup> Madejski, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Madejski, 81–84.

<sup>4</sup> Madejski, 93–95.

<sup>5</sup> Madejski, 125–128.

<sup>6</sup> Madejski, 10.

motifs and topics, and shows what kind of transformations they undergo in the discussed works. Only then does he offer his own interpretation of such described elements of a poetic text. This aspect of Madejski's book is important especially due to the fact that by consistently applying this method he proves that traditional reading of philological literature is useful in reading contemporary poetry. Perhaps this "return to sources" hides the answer to the question what the titular extremity of poetics is about.

As he stresses in the introduction, Madejski often reviews particular poetic volumes through a detailed analysis of individual poems. I would like to illustrate this method by using the same practice on the example of the poetics of one text, characteristic for *Poetyka ekstremalna*. This is how Madejski opens his review of Mieszysław Machnicki's 2014 *jest tylko gradobicie i deszcz Perseidów* [there is only a hailstorm and a meteor shower]:

Mieczysław Machnicki improves in the art of the tenth, i.e. describing the world in the form of a ten-verse strophe. It is not common in Polish poetry; it can be found in Jan Kochanowski's poems, in odes by Kajetan Koźmian, and – sporadically – in other authors. What makes a contemporary poet resort to what would seem to be a used-up and unfunctional verse and aesthetic solution? Come to think of it, Machnicki fills his book of poems with five distiches, which together comprise a tenth<sup>7</sup>.

Later in the text, Madejski cites in full one of the poems, whose predominant semantic feature is the garden topos. When he moves on to analyzing the text, he points out how a description of a specific space becomes a metaphor of cosmic order. Next, he indicates poetry by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz and Leopold Staffs as possible inspirations. After this extensive discussion of a single poem, he makes some general comments on the whole book of poems:

[...] Is Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, as an author of octaves, Machnicki's patron? Here, too, poetry is a manifestation of formal virtuosity, and the most important aspects of art include: sound, rhythm, euphony. [...] Machnicki seems to try to merge different versions of aesthetics. We can find baroque conceptism in his works. One poem is based on parallelly constructed verses, which open with "if I regret anything..." (p. 26). There is also a poem, in which subsequent verses are connected with one conjunction (polysyndeton). [...] It is true that in this type of aesthetics the subject is blurred. As a result, we ask who is talking to us, and who writes poetry for us<sup>8</sup>.

The second part of the book comprises mostly (although not exclusively) reviews (eighteen in total) of critical publications on various poets presented in a monograph or quasi-monograph style, among others: Tadeusz Różewicz, Stanisław Barańczak, Zbigniew Herbert, Ryszard Krynicki and Ewa Lipska. In each text Madejski tries to familiarize readers with the discussed authors and their academic achievements. Na drugą część *Poetyki ekstremalnej* składają się głównie (choć nie wyłącznie) omówienia publikacji poświęconych konkretnym poetom przedstawianym w monograficznym lub quasi-monograficznym ujęciu. Do wyboru osiemnastu szkiców weszły recenzje książek poświęconych między innymi Tadeuszowi Różewiczowi,

<sup>7</sup> Madejski, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Madejski, 62–63.

Stanisławowi Barańczakowi, Zbigniewowi Herbertowi, Ryszardowi Krynickiemu czy Ewie Lipskiej. Należy docenić, że w każdym z tekstów Madejski stara się przybliżyć sylwetkę badacza lub badaczki stojących za publikacją i wskazać na ich wcześniejsze dokonania naukowe.

Most reviews from this part are kind towards the authors, although not without reservations and disputes. However, there is one exception: *Pomiędzy wieżą Babel a wieżą z kości słoniowej O poezji Tadeusza Różewicza* [Between the Babel tower and an ivory tower. On Tadeusz Różewicz's poetry]. (2008) by Jan Marx was mercilessly criticized – Madejski does not find a single argument in its favor. His criticism is elegant and within conventions of critical discourse, however, the fact that this is the only clearly negative review in the whole book is somewhat surprising.

*Poetyka ekstremalna* is without a doubt a good book. Madejski kept his promise from the introduction, and created a guidebook for literary critics presenting “on examples” how to write about poems and discursive texts on literature. The monograph is specialist, written by an erudite, and as such, it should be treated as a professional, critical-literary book. For this reason, I disagree with Paweł Próchniak, who states that Madejski's essays “seek resonance with the world beyond academia”, który we fragmencie recenzji naukowej przedrukowanej na okładce *Poetyki ekstremalnej* stwierdza, że zawarte w niej szkice „szukają rezonansu ze światem poza akademią” as it is difficult to imagine how this book could be of use to readers who are not skilled in professional humanities. Nonetheless, for all professional literary critics and scholars, *Poetyka ekstremalna* is a collection of model “critical miniatures” (a term aptly used by Madejski to describe his own texts) which can be of use in honing their skills.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

## References

Madejski, Jerzy. *Poetyka ekstremalna oraz inne noty o liryce i krytyce współczesnej*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Pasaze, 2021.

# KEYWORDS

Jerzy Madejski

review

LITERARY CRITICISM

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper reviews Jerzy Madejski's collection of critical essays *Poetyka ekstremalna oraz inne noty o liryce i krytyce współczesnej*, an anthology comprising forty-four reviews of poetic books, and eighteen reviews of literary studies books previously published by Madejski in various literary magazines, such as "Nowe Książki", "Kwartalnik Artystyczny" and "Odra". Madejski reads the analyzed texts carefully, philologically, and then puts forward his own hypotheses and proposes his interpretations. As a result, *Poetyka ekstremalna* is a *vademecum* which can be used by reviewers as a guidebook for writing critical-literary texts.

*philological reading*

## CRITICAL MINIATURE

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Gerard Ronge – born in 1994, literary scholar, PhD in humanities, assistant professor at AMU Department of Polish and Classical Philology. Graduate of AMU Interdisciplinary Individual Studies in Humanities and Society. Author of papers published, among others, in “Forum of Poetics”, “Literatura i Kultura Popularna”, “Studia Norwidiana”. Awarded with several scholarships from the Minister of Science and Higher Education, and the “Diamond grant” program. |