

MARTA KORONKIEWICZ

Translated by: PAWEŁ KACZMARSKI

## Materiality as Resistance and Protection: The Case of Andrzej Sosnowski

This article elaborates on a conception of poetic form derived from the work of the contemporary Polish poet Andrzej Sosnowski, in order to further our understanding of form as something material and dynamic rather than static and purely “textual”. Sosnowski often comments on the materiality of poetry as a useful metaphor that allows us to grasp its peculiar semi-autonomous condition; hence his eagerness to employ the metaphors of poetry as choreography, bodily gesture or action.

By putting Sosnowski’s comments in the context of contemporary debates on form and matter in literature—from historical materialism and its traditionally complicated relationship to formalism to a more traditional philological approach to the so-called “new materialisms”—I attempt to point out a possibility of transcending the usual tensions and divisions organising these debates. Here, I find particularly useful the notion of “affordances,” as used by Caroline Levine, as well as the techno-poetic approach of Nathan Brown, and certain conceptual tools offered by the “new formalist” movement. Finally, I reference the work of Adam Ważyk, Sosnowski’s predecessor and one of his main inspirations, in order to show the poetic form as a way of protecting/preserving certain forms of life. Ważyk’s idea of form as a means of resisting entropy provides a unique insight into the more practical aspects of the politics of poetic form.

Keywords: Andrzej Sosnowski, Adam Ważyk, poetic form, new formalism, politics of poetry, materiality of poetry

There's a particular voice in contemporary Polish poetry that stands out as a starting point for a whole range of comments, essays and conversations on the materiality of language. It belongs to Andrzej Sosnowski—a crucially influential poet and an equally influential translator, known for his insightful commentary on Ezra Pound, Elizabeth Bishop and others. The critical reception of his early poems, published in the early 90s, proved—first and foremost—that there was an urgent need for new ways of discussing poetry. Poetry criticism in Poland was in dire need of modes of thinking and writing that would differ radically from the moralistically-oriented language of the 80s, ones that would keep close track of the philosophical and theoretical developments in which Sosnowski was explicitly interested and which would eventually prove immensely influential within the Polish humanities in general. Today, we would associate these developments with a particular strand of so-called *French Theory*, one that's tied in particular to the names of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man—Sosnowski was an Americanist by trade, and through his residency in Canada he could witness these developments first hand.

But this shift towards a certain version of *French Theory* (and deconstruction in particular) had a very clear downside; some of the critics used it as a thinly veiled proxy for a more general obsession with textuality. Numerous reviews of Sosnowski's early books, especially those written outside of the framework of professional criticism, seemed to focus on the near-legendary „difficulty” and „illegibility” of his poems—suggesting that Sosnowski's readers should focus their attention on the “language as such,” detached from such traditional categories as meaning (see Maliszewski 1995; Jankowicz 2002; Gutorow 2003a). An entry on Sosnowski in *Polska Poezja Współczesna. Przewodnik Encyklopedyczny* (The Encyclopedic Guide to Contemporary Polish Poetry) summed this up neatly by stating that, according to critics, his poetry “invested in the materiality and transitivity of language” (Kałuża n.d.).

Critical essays on the early Sosnowski were full of similar observations: “Sosnowski's poetry constitutes a battle between [authorial] intention and the living element of speech or writing”; it “shows the word in its material shape rather than its meaning.” These observations led inevitably to a certain theoretical position:

The most important aspect of Andrzej Sosnowski's poetry is the language itself. The way in which the poet employs language—his “drift towards the unknown”—makes invalid the game in which the reader has so far participated, and which has been based on unveiling meanings, revealing intentions and guessing the reasons or consequences of certain events. (Turczyńska 2010)

Thus, the word, seen in its “materiality,” becomes synonymous with the word that doesn’t yet have any meaning, that appears only as a sound or an image. Or, to rephrase that in more practical terms, if the “material” word had any meaning, it would be rooted firmly and solely in the word itself, independent now of the author’s will and/or intention. And to “read” such a word, at least according to these critics, meant submitting to it, affirming the incomprehensible and focusing on experience rather than understanding.

In practice, however, this type of submission and affirmation seemed to produce a very particular type of a critical commentary. Though the 90s gave us a few original and now-canonical readings of Sosnowski’s work (see Orska 2006, Gutorow 2003b), a typical essay focused on the “materiality of language” in his poems had certain common features. It started with the critic confessing that they did not understand the text; this condition was then affirmed and backed up by the assumption that the poem actually *wanted* to remain incomprehensible—a suggestion of intention acting against itself, or meaning working against the possibility of meaning. What usually followed, though, was a reading of a number of specific poems, a reconstruction of various lyrical scenarios and communicative situations, in search of an answer to the very traditional question of “what these poems are about”—the answer being, at least in some of the worst cases, that the poems were simply and solely interested in themselves: in the issues of meaning, language, communication etc. Thus the materiality of language was quickly equated with a kind of self-referentiality—and at the same time betrayed the inefficiency of this mode of criticism, its ultimate inability to either provide “traditional” interpretations or to go beyond the need for such interpretations.

Meanwhile, Sosnowski himself seems eager to comment explicitly on the materiality of poetic language, but his comments stem from a very different approach. The question he poses as central concerns the metaphor. “Metaphors—can one somehow justify their use?”, asks Sosnowski somewhat paradoxically, only to answer with the example of materiality-as-a-metaphor, the “materiality of language” as a metaphorical way of grasping certain function or ambitions that one finds in a poem:

Let us consider, for instance, the power of a certain text. Let’s consider the oft-used phrase “powerful stuff,” and so on. In such common phrases one finds a reference to the hidden physicality of poetic influences. Dark stuff, right? I’ve come up with a humble theory that suggests that every incisive action performed within language is a gesture of a disappointed body. Disappointed meaning—because this “theory,” or more like an intuition, has little to do with the body’s

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resentment and its desire to compensate or whatever—and so „disappointing” in the sense of the body acting, ambitiously but ultimately in vain, far beyond its own reach, beyond its „jurisdiction”, in a void. What we see here is the melancholy of an extended line, one that runs straight into infinity. Instead of a dance - or “instead of flowers” (*zamiast kwiatów*), as in Bruno Jasiński’s famous dedication in “Pieśń o Głodzie.” In other words, the language of a certain heightened intensity, the language that has a specific temperature, density and solidity— and I’m still thinking of poetry here—is a language that understands its bodily beginnings and wants to take them as far as it can, thus creating something like a spectre of a near-articulate physicality. Well, I guess I’m a hopeless materialist, because even the breath of an empty word—or maybe better, the empty breath of the word—seems to me to have a material form. (Sosnowski 2010, 184)

(Sosnowski then repeats these intuitions in *Stare śpiewki*, a collection of lectures published in 2013.)

Let us point out the main differences between this approach and the one advocated and practiced by Sosnowski’s early readers. Firstly, Sosnowski intentionally and explicitly limits himself to talking about the materiality of poetic language, rather than language as such. Secondly, the materiality of poetic language stems here directly from its bodily beginnings, tied to the body of the speaker. Thirdly, the materiality of language is seen here as a metaphor; nothing is said about its (alleged) potential to fundamentally alter our understanding of the concepts of sense or meaning. Sosnowski employs the metaphor of linguistic materiality—which he also compares to the material nature of light—not to escape the boundaries set by such categories as meaning and understanding, but in order to express certain practical intuitions about poetry: that rather than being a mere account of experience, a poem is able to preserve in itself—and thus carry on, extend—a certain movement, or a certain gesture, something more than a static image. That’s why another “material” metaphor employed by Sosnowski is that of a choreography: “It’s always about a choreography, a multitude of steps and figures, a multitude of sounds and voices.” We can even think of the poem as a stage adaptation: a re-enactment of movement, in the absence of the original body. The spectral nature of the poem’s “near-articulate physicality” seems to stem precisely from this: from our repeated attempts to imagine the poem as resembling light (or dance, or movement) rather than from any actual, factual similarities between the two.

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that happen when the language becomes a poem. This becomes much clearer when, later in the same interview, Grzegorz Jankowicz asks Sosnowski about the link between “materiality” and “incomprehensibility.” Sosnowski’s answer seems to subvert the expectations of many of his readers:

I think that the “materiality” of poetic language signifies mainly its untranslatability, which is not necessarily the same as its “hermetic” or “incomprehensible” nature. If the meaning “is shaken at its foundations,” then it has to do with paraphrasis, explanation, lesson, one’s articulation of the so-called message—a transmission of the poem’s meaning outside the poem. (...) It is now common to think of meaning as something that can be expressed in many different languages, as if there was a certain universal place, similar to a currency exchange, where one can swap meanings in peace and quiet, exchanging one hard currency for another—yes, a different one, but ultimately they’re all quite similar. It seems to me that a poem resists such a circulation, it does not give in to the attempts to liquefy it in such a manner, it can only joyfully lose its liquidity. “Understanding,” however—well, this is a whole other story. Why should I maintain that I don’t understand even something as extreme as Schwitters’ “Ursonate” or the rituals of Artaud? I believe I do understand—does it make sense to call them hermetic? One could also approach this from the point of view offered by Wallace Stevens: a poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully (...) So there is no return to this or that expression “from before” the poem, because the poem itself is not a mere translation of something that existed before it. (Sosnowski 2010, 185)

What the poet seems to defend here is the very traditional idea of understanding—the *possibility of* understanding, the *need for* understanding—as a foundation for reading even the most difficult and complex of texts (or works of art). But in order for the reader to understand this particular textual form that we have come to call poetry, they have to first recognise its specificity—its essential untranslatability. Before we develop these intuitions any further, we need to sketch out a somewhat broader context.

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At the risk of oversimplification, it seems that one could approach the issue of the materiality of poetic language from two distinct perspectives. Firstly, there’s the more traditional, philological approach that has as

a starting point such obvious examples of the poem's "physicality" as its rhythm, rhyme, sound, shape on the page etc. Secondly, there's a more socially oriented point of view that seems to have more to do with the materiality of language as such—the materiality of language as a social practice—rather than, specifically, poetry.

The former approach focuses, nominally, on the audial and the visual aspects of the poem (Attridge 1981, Arrata 2011); but, when transposed onto a theoretical level, it serves as a means of emphasising the tension between "form" and its "content," between materiality and meaning—laying foundations for the typically poststructuralist separation of the authorial intention and the now-independent language. That's precisely the conclusion of a well-known essay on the materiality and meaning in poetry, by Derek Attridge:

The organisation of the linguistic substance in poetry acknowledges—and enforces—the fact that literary language is not the language of daily discourse, and that the "meaning" of a literary text is not to be located in some authorially underwritten intention or critically validated interpretation, but in what the text itself does for its readers, or, more accurately, in what its readers are able to do with, and within, the linguistic structures by which it is constituted. (Attridge 1981, 245)

Today this semi-philological, semi-poststructuralist approach seems somewhat archaic—it must necessarily be reviewed in the context of the renewed interest in materialist thinking within the contemporary humanities. More often than not, the notion of the materiality of language will now invoke a broad social and political context, defined by the ongoing tension between the "old," Marxist materialism, and the so-called "new materialisms" (see Dolphijn & van de Tuin 2012, 91–110; Coole & Frost 2010, 30), seen by some as the postmodernist brand of materialism (Eagleton 2016, 13). The very idea of a materialist renewal is thus inherently problematic, if only for the lack of clarity on what "materialism" is actually supposed to mean, as it seems to be defined both in relation to materiality and matter itself (Beetz 2016, 1-7). Having said that, when it comes to language, both sides of the debate are, broadly speaking, focused on language as a social practice.

On the historical-materialist side, the most important theses on language were recently effectively summed up by Johannes Beetz:

There is, again, (1) the positive materiality of matter here consisting of sound waves, the bodies of gestures, and inscriptions on surfaces. These phonic, graphic, and gestural materials, however, become language only through practices of

signification and meaning production, as this is what differentiates them from other sonic, visual, and haptic materialities. Therefore, (2) language possesses a materiality of mutability that refers to the fundamentally processual and practical character of language. Speaking, writing, gesturing, reading, understanding, etc. are material practices outside which language does not exist. Language, then, to recall Marx's critique of Feuerbach, should not be understood as an object of passive contemplation that confronts individuals in its materiality, but as a practical human activity that materializes in practices. Signifying practices depend on codes or "regulated differences"—what Kristeva calls "objective laws"—in order to function. (3) The effectivity and facticity of those laws exerts a material (i.e. effective) force on individuals, who must follow them if they want to communicate and interact. (Beetz 2016, 87–88)

Beetz is looking to materialism for a possible reconstitution of a subject that has previously been decentralised and "dispersed" into language by poststructuralist thought. In order to achieve this, he recalls and reviews the traditional Marxist understanding of language (although he is aware that, as Raymond Williams famously noted, "Marxism has contributed very little to thinking about language itself" [Williams 1977, 21]). Here, language is seen as a "practical consciousness" (Engels) or an activity (Marx) and, taken together, these two concepts result in a vision of language as "a distinctive material process" (Williams 1977, 38). Beetz shares this general outlook with Shalini Shankar and Jillian R. Cavanaugh, editors of the anthology *Language and Materiality*:

we see the language of everyday life as material practice: embedded within structures of history and power, including class relations and markets, but also having physical presence. The language of everyday life is what people do with and through language as they work and play, making meaning and creating value in the process. (Shankar & Cavanaugh 2017, 1)

Thus the *materialism* of language refers here mainly to its social aspect (Eagleton offers a similar perspective). Although, like I said, this renewed interest in materialism can be seen on some level as a way of nuancing our understanding of poetic language, this kind of commentary necessarily remains quite vague and theoretical in nature. It serves to embed the language in the fabric of social life, preventing it from being separated from its author; but it pays little attention to the specificity of particular textual, rhetorical and literary forms. Those with a more practical approach, like Sosnowski, will eagerly recognise the social roots of the poem's materiality; but, their interests are ultimately in something quite different—in the specific material production associated with poetry.

There is, however, yet another starting point, and a discourse that seems to run somewhat parallel to the main contemporary debate on materialism in the humanities. It is associated with a general turn towards a more practical, or practice-oriented, understanding of the humanities (see Domańska 2010; Rewers 2012; Nycz 2017). Its foundation is the notion of *poiesis*, understood now as a practice or an activity; and a renewed interest in *poetics* as a particular way of defining the object of one's research (see Nycz 2012). In other words, the focus is on the act of making itself, rather than any particular conception of materiality.

It is within this general framework that Nathan Brown has developed his own understanding of a new materialist poetics. In *The Limits of Fabrication* (Brown 2017), he takes as his starting point the equation of poetry and making—again, the notion of *poiesis* is crucial—understood here quite literally, as a work of material construction. Brown's book is a comparative study of sorts, where one side of the comparison has to do with technological innovation, and the other with innovation in poetry (seen now as a “branch of material research and fabrication,” Brown 2017, 12). Deriving his idea of materiality from matter in its most empirical, intuitive sense, he remains primarily interested in the process of poetic invention, understood as a production of new arrangements within the poem: “experiments with the invention of new poetic forms through an engagement with the fundamental materials of poetic language (mark, space, grapheme, phoneme, breath, sound, signifier” (Brown 2017, 13); this production resembles closely the invention of new physical materials, e.g. in nanotechnology. But this almost-perfect translatability of the poetic into the technological—and vice-versa—becomes a source of bother for the otherwise enthusiastic reviewer of Brown's book:

If one of the characteristics that different forms of matter, in all of their variant forms, may be said to share is a certain resistance, a capacity to elude attempts at their refabrication or repurposing, it may be this most common aspect of materiality that is unwittingly minimized in Brown's account. To fully foreground this would be to ponder just how that resistance is overcome; how it is that the very different forms of matter in question resonate upon one another or, just as likely, how they are ultimately fated not to do so. (Eyers 2017)

This idea of resistance seems strikingly similar to that offered by Sosnowski: the poem's materiality is fulfilled in its ability to resist translation, to resist having its meanings expressed through another medium.

Brown and Sosnowski share quite a few intuitions; broadly speaking,



they may be seen as representing the same wing or faction within the broad church of poetic materialism. They eagerly acknowledge the social and political dimension(s) of the poem's materiality, its nature as an essentially social practice, but ultimately they put focus on what the poem *does* with its specific matter, on poetry as a process of material production. Their approach is practical, rooted in poetics rather than philosophy. They may even be seen as belonging to roughly the same literary tradition, with Brown tracing his own lineage back to Ezra Pound. But there is an important difference as well. Whereas Brown seems to think that the poem's material nature is revealed in—or indeed guaranteed by—its ability to be translated into another medium, another language (e.g. that of technology), for Sosnowski it is precisely the poem's *inability* to be translated into anything else, its *resistance* to paraphrase, that confirms its material specificity. In other words, poetry reveals its material character not through a dialogue with another medium, but through its *form*. There is no materialism in poetry, Sosnowski seems to say, but that of form.

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*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* suggests that the form is something that is “not translatable, paraphrasable, or reducible to information” (Wolfson 2012). This only confirms both Sosnowski's and Eyers' intuitions. But what is the purpose of the form's resistance? Why is it something worth appreciating from a practical—and materialist—point of view?

In order to find an answer to this question, we may need to introduce Adam Wążyk—an avant-garde Polish poet and translator, expert on the historical theories of poetry, who preceded Sosnowski by several generations and greatly influenced his work. Although Sosnowski is often read through the lens of his English and American inspirations, he belongs first and foremost to a tradition of the Polish avant-garde poetry that goes back to the 1920s and stems from a series of debates on the technical possibilities of linking together poetry and modernity in its most current, immediate aspects. These arguments first took place in journals such as *Zwrotnica* and *Nowa Sztuka* (see Wójtowicz 2014) and were later taken up, in the 50s and 60s, as a part of a larger debate on the relationship between literature and the state, only to be eventually largely forgotten due to the influence of the moralistically-oriented, explicitly anticommunist criticism of the 70s and the 80s. Adam Wążyk, as a cen-

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tral figure of many of these debates and one of the leading “official” authors of the 50s, was for a long time condemned to the same fate (Kaczmarek 2017; Skurtys 2015; Orska 2013; Shore 1997). Sosnowski is currently one of Ważyk’s most influential advocates, and arguably the person most responsible for reintroducing him and his work to contemporary readers.

Ważyk’s essays on *wersologia*—versology, a branch of poetics now largely forgotten in the contemporary humanities—were, and to a certain extent still are, strikingly innovative and original, not only in the Polish context, but the European one as well. They focus largely on the issue of the poem’s *organisation* and its goal, i.e. why the poem always seems to need to be organised in a certain manner, why it leans towards order even in its more anarchic forms. Ważyk, quite unexpectedly, links this issue to the issue of entropy (Ważyk 1964, 20).

This reference to a term usually associated with “hard” science is nothing new to Ważyk, who studied mathematics at university, during the interwar period. It is also not that surprising in the historical context—obsession with science/technology was, after all, one of the running themes within the avant-garde movement. But whereas such borrowing of scientific terms is usually quite symbolic, and produces only the loosest of analogies, Ważyk is surprisingly serious about how crucial the idea of entropy is to poetry and poetics:

The principle, according to which the temperature within an isolated system will always reach equilibrium, unless new energy is added from the outside, reveals for us the irreversible, one-way nature of the time flow—it’s the law that was later defined as concerning the transition from the less probable states to the more probable ones. Order is less probable than disorder. Modern cybernetics has turned this into a general law of increasing entropy, which is the measure of disorder in the macroreality. (Ważyk 1964, 20)

In the context of language and communication, he sees entropy as closely tied to the issue of information:

Information tends to diminish, to dissipate. The recipient can receive less information than the amount that was sent, but he cannot receive more. The loss of information is the equivalent of an increase in entropy. The organisation of the poem, constituted as a way of slowing down this process, is itself subject to it. (Ważyk 1964, 20)

In order to “delay this process,” Ważyk explains in the next few paragraphs, what is “constituted” (*powołana*) is the “organisation” (*orga-*

*nizacja*) of the poem. That is the shortest definition of form provided by Ważyk:

The poem's organisation represents a cycle: the same (or similar) configurations of phonemes and accents return, the number of syllables or accents repeats itself, the similarities between various intonations are emphasised. Even the same sentences may be repeated, but these repetitions are carefully dosed out and not all authors use this particular tool. (Ważyk 1964, 27)

The organisational surplus within the poem—its repetitions, redundancies etc.—is what opposes or resists entropy, as it serves to preserve and convey the information (see e.g. Koronkiewicz 2017, Kaczmarek 2017, Skurtys 2015):

We are too firmly intertwined with the irreversible stream of events. We can only oppose this through the repetition of certain signals. This is exactly what we do when we use the poetic form. We refer back to a contradiction that occurs between the forward movement of the poetic vision (which is compatible with the direct human experience) and the cyclic movement of the poem. (Ważyk 1964, 27)

The form resists and opposes the flow of time, it establishes the hierarchy of information and, to a certain extent, reifies something that may no longer be there. Imagined like this, it acts now in the service of fruitful communication—against the forces of distortion and transformation. Here we go back to the issue of translatability: resisting entropy means insisting that the meaning is not “hard currency,” that the poem cannot be paraphrased without loss, summarised or refabricated. Thus the form may be seen as being a *protective* force. But what exactly is it supposed to protect?

By borrowing from the language of science and technology, Ważyk abandons the traditional formalist framework. This is only reinforced by his belief that the form does not exist in and of itself, it cannot be considered as a context sufficient to determine the poem's true meaning and importance—the poem “becomes interesting only as a certain organisation controlled by the human being” (Ważyk 1964, 6). These remarks seem to be closely linked to Sosnowski's idea of “the spectre of a near-articulate physicality,” which preserves or, even better, choreographs, projects out and extends a certain bodily gesture, a gesture that may originate in all kinds of human activity. But these metaphors are still all very unclear—and it seems that, in order to pin them down, make them more technical or more precise, we need to go beyond the traditional, “old-school” notion of poetic form.

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Thus it seems that we can no longer avoid the crucial question: how do we define poetic form? *Słownik Języka Polskiego*—one of the most popular dictionaries of the Polish language—offers 15 definitions; the *Oxford English Dictionary*—another 22. These numbers may not seem very encouraging; but, they are quite telling. *Słownik Terminów Literackich* (a Polish dictionary of literary terms) emphasises the fact that form “is usually defined by its opposition to either material or matter [content]. In the case of the former, “form” is used to denote a developing of the material, its formation; while the latter refers to what is immediately accessible in the perceived work of art, on the vehicle of its matter [content].” Similarly, the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* focuses on the tensions and contradictions that have historically defined our understanding of form:

Poetic form used to be binary: what was not content or context; the shape rather than the substance; any element or event of lang.[uage] not translatable, paraphrasable, or reducible to information. The binary entails a distinction between preexisting origin and material result, between determination and effect, between idea or feeling and its realization. Yet lang. theory from the 18th c. on (and poetic practice well before) has been challenging these binaries, most forcefully with the notion of constitutive form—form as active producer, not just passive register, of meaning. (Wolfson 2012, 497)

In the context of poetry, form can thus be seen as a kind of “shape” the poem takes when appearing before us, a shape that as much organises and preserves its source, as it refers us back to it. Form, as Angela Leighton rightly points out, remains—paradoxically—both an antinomy of matter and its only way of manifesting itself:

Somehow this platonic problem of form which is both ‘essential’, yet becomes visible or “manifest” in “material things,” transfers to the world itself. It is an abstraction from matter, removed and immaterial; but it is also subtly inflected towards matter. As a word it holds off from objects, being nothing but form, pure and singular; at the same time, its whole bent is towards materialization, towards being the shape or body of something. (Leighton 2007, 1)

Leighton is the author of an impressive review of the historical conceptions of form, aptly called *Form’s Matter*. Crucial to her study are the ideas of form that focus on its active aspects, perceiving it as a type of action or a force—such as offered in the work of Susan Wolfson and

Dennis Donoghue (Wolfson 1997; Donoghue 2003). In her search for a perspective that would go beyond the default notion of form as something static and stable, Leighton refers eventually to comments by Michael Wood, who suggested that every writer “need[s] at some stage to ask what literary forms know or know of” (Wood 2005, 135-36, quoted in Leighton 2007, 27). Leighton elaborates:

[Wood] proposes that form is neither just a property of writing nor a characteristic of the individual artwork, but knowledge itself—a tasty, secret kind of knowledge, and one not easily grasped. (...) This, in a sense, is the intuition of all those artists and writers who have ransacked the word “form” to find out, not so much what it might be or mean, once and for all, but rather, more uncertainly, what it might continue to ‘know or know of.’ (Leighton 2007, 28)

All these provocative ideas—form as action, form as force, form as knowledge—serve as a foundation for a broader turn towards the so-called “new formalism” (or “formalism 2.0.”). Not to be mistaken for the similarly-named movement in the American poetry of the 80s, this relatively new development in contemporary literary studies seeks to renew our interest in literary form beyond the framework offered by the “old” formalism associated with New Criticism and structuralism. New formalists, as Fredric Bogel rightly points out, are not interested in a simple and somewhat naive renewal of the abstract formalism of the post-war period (Bogel 2013, see also Theile & Tredennick 2013). On the contrary, they demand a productive closure to the process of “textualisation” of reality, begun by French Theory and modern cultural studies. This closure can only be achieved by applying poetics—the knowledge of the formal organisation of the text—to the larger project of “reading the world.” This is the starting point for new formalism, as offered by Ellen Rooney: “The extinction of an entire range of modes of formal analysis has eroded our ability to read every genre of text—literary texts, nonliterary texts, aural and visual texts, and the social text itself” (Rooney 2006, 35). Rooney’s manifesto was answered in 2015 by Caroline Levine in her *Forms*. The American critic provides a general definition of form: “Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference. (...). It is the work of form to make order.” (Levine 2015, 3). For Levine, form may thus relate in equal measure to the organisation of the text—or a work of art—and to various social issues and dynamics. In order to justify this “universality” or “mobility” of form, Levine introduces the notion of “affordances” (borrowed from the contemporary

design theory). An affordance encompasses all the possible functions of a certain “thing,” including the ways it can be used, its potentialities and some of its features:

Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. Cotton affords fluffiness, but also breathable cloth when it is spun into yarn and thread. Specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own range of affordances. Specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own range of affordances. A fork affords stabbing and scooping. A doorknob affords not only hardness and durability, but also turning, pushing, and pulling. Designed things may also have unexpected affordances generated by imaginative users: we may hang signs or clothes on a doorknob, for example, or use a fork to pry open a lid, and so expand the intended affordances of an object. (Levine 2015, 6)

By introducing the notion of affordances, Levine is now able to analyse of the function of the poetic form in a manner that includes all the *potential* uses of various forms—the things that forms are *capable of*, so to speak:

Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, “a moment’s monument,” while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. (Levine 2015, 6)

The notion of affordance as a set or a collection of abstract features and potential functions allows Levine to explain the “mobility” of forms, their ability to appear in very different contexts and areas of life (e.g. how rhythm may organise both a poem and the movement of bodies working). When recognised, the mobility of forms allows us, in turn, to discover the “generalizable understanding of political power”: for instance, “a panoptic arrangement of space, wherever it takes shape, will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power; a hierarchy will always afford inequality” (Levine 2015, 7).

Levine’s borrowing from the language of design clearly suggests that she associates form with something material, an item or an object. However, form is seen here not in terms of a static “shape” (as was the case with the popular dictionary definitions), but a configuration of forces or a balance of powers; it is active rather than passive (similarly to the idea of form offered by Wolfson and Donoghue). Forms are ultimately mobile—which explains why poets like Sosnowski may instinctively

describe the poetic form in terms of another activity, especially one that remains both dynamic and highly organised, such as dance or choreography.

Due to their mobility, forms can appear or emerge in various contexts; but, what is even more important, they can move or transition between contexts. Or, to put it more metaphorically, they can “lend” themselves out. Let us return to Wązyk who, in his poem “Entropy” (again, a telling title) seems to capture precisely this aspect of the poetic form:

I saw the ruins of a house  
not dismantled like after the war  
burned out windows  
half naked bricks  
and a beam hanging with almost no support  
there was something bodily there  
that cannot be hid  
as if the ruin was in me  
not in front of me in  
the empty street

(translated by: Paweł Kaczmarski)

The external form—a ruin—seems to have originated within the body; it lends itself to the body, it becomes embodied—thus allowing Wązyk to develop themes that are particularly important to him, like the constant danger of disintegration (of both the subject and the world around them). What the poem preserves and protects from entropy is not just the information, but also its source, the body from which it originates. As Sosnowski said, in a lecture from 2015, “the life lends itself to the poem.” In the larger context of Sosnowski’s work, this seems to imply that the poem is itself a form that preserves something that is infinitely and constantly endangered, that exists only barely, all but erased or worn off: a possibility of unalienated life that, under late-stage capitalism, can only exist in this state of extreme precariousness (Koronkiewicz 2019).

In his *Materialism*, Terry Eagleton claims that a return of the body’s “plundered powers” is both an inherently materialist demand and one of the goals of socialism—and poetry is uniquely posed to help us achieve this goal. It “seeks to restore to language something of the sensuous fullness that abstraction and utility have stripped from it” (Eagleton 2016, 78). And it is the form, associated here with the aesthetic, that prevents dematerialisation:

New formalism emerges as a close ally to materialism—offering a type of reading that is focused on returning, recalling and re-enacting the forms of life that have been forgotten, lost, or that have so far seemed impossible.

To see something aesthetically is generally assumed to mean seeing it contemplatively; but for Marx the true opposition is not between the practical and the aesthetic, but between both of them on the one hand and the instrumental or utilitarian on the other. We respect the specific qualities of things, which is the province of the aesthetic, when we employ those things for the practical ends for which they were fashioned. It is this that Marx means by use-value. So the practical and the aesthetic are closely allied, which is not how we usually think of the matter. Exchange-value and instrumental reason, by contrast, use objects simply as means to an end, with scant regard for their sensuous specificity. In this sense, for all their practical orientation, they are dematerialising forces. (Eagleton 2016, 63)

Thus, the metaphor of a material, bodily language—closely linked to the metaphor of an active poem, which, in turn, is rooted in a complex definition of form—points to the protective function of the poem, specifically, its ability to use the general mobility of forms to preserve and carry into the future the ones that are particularly endangered or precarious. From this point of view, new formalism emerges as a close ally to materialism—offering a type of reading that is focused on returning, recalling and re-enacting the forms of life that have been forgotten, lost, or that have so far seemed impossible. In his recent books, Sosnowski seems to explicitly admit that this is precisely how he sees the political goal of poetry as well: its revolutionary potential lies not in its “least poetic” aspects, but quite the opposite—specifically in the things that make a poem a poem. This thought, and the tradition from which it stems, may serve as a focal point for a renewed interest in the relationship between formalism and historical materialism, as well as become a specifically Polish input into the new formalist movement.

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MARTA KORONKIEWICZ – literary critic and researcher in literary studies. Assistant professor in the Institute of Polish Philology, University of Wrocław. She co-edited the anthology of new political Polish poetry „Zebrało się śliny” (2016). Her book on Andrzej Sosnowski was published in 2019 („I jest moc odległego życia w tej elegii. Uwagi o wierszach Andrzeja Sosnowskiego”). Her research interests include modern and contemporary Polish poetry, particularly in its social and political aspects.

**Address:**

Instytut Filologii Polskiej UW

pl. Nankiera 15b

50-140 Wrocław

tel. 71 3752 575

**email:** marta.koronkiewicz-kaczmarska2@uwr.edu.pl

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**Autor:** Marta Koronkiewicz

**Tytuł:** Materialność jako opór i ochrona. Przypadek Andrzeja Sosnowskiego

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł przedstawia koncepcję formy poetyckiej zaczerpniętą z twórczości Andrzeja Sosnowskiego, mając na celu rozwinąć rozumienie formy jako czegoś materialnego i dynamicznego, nie zaś statycznego i czysto tekstualnego. Sosnowski często powołuje się na materialność poezji jako użyteczną metaforę pozwalającą uchwycić jej specyficzną semi-autonomiczną kondycję - pochodną tej myśli są chętnie stosowane przez niego porównania poezji do choreografii, gestu, akcji. Ustawiając uwagi Sosnowskiego w świetle współczesnych debat nad formą i materią w literaturze - od materializmu historycznego wraz z jego zwyczajowo skomplikowaną relacją do formalizmu, przez tradycyjne podejścia filologiczne, po tak zwane „nowe materializmy” - autorka artykułu stara się wskazać możliwości przekroczenia napięć i podziałów organizujących to pole. Szczególnie pomocny kontekst znajduje w pojęciu „afordancji” tak, jak rozumie je Caroline Levine, a także w techno-poetologicz-

nym podejściu Nathana Browna czy w poszczególnych narzędziach i koncepcjach oferowanych przez ruch nowoformalistyczny. Przywołuje również twórczość Adama Ważyka - poety, który pozostaje jedną z głównych inspiracji Sosnowskiego - by przedstawić formę poetycką jako metodę chronienia/przechowywania pewnych form życia. Ważyka koncepcja formy jako środka odpierania entropii zapewnia szczególny wgląd w bardziej praktyczne aspekty polityki form.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Andrzej Sosnowski, Adam Ważyk, forma poetycka, nowy formalizm, polityczność poezji, materialność poezji