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Does This Poem Work (for You)?
Irony, Possibility and Work
in Adrienne Rich's and Franco Berardi's
Critical Thought

The starting point of the paper is the social function of poetry, as understood by Adrienne Rich in her later essays. According to Rich, the single most important function or “capacity” delivered by poetry today is to continuously remind us of the things that we might want (as individuals as well as a society), our forgotten or buried desires. In her manifesto “Poetry and Commitment” Rich asks about the ways in which poetry intervenes in one's life – how, with all its formal aspects and aesthetic mechanisms it enables us to imagine an everyday life different from the one we already have. In the paper the authoress compares Rich's point of view to that of Franco “Bifo” Berardi in his last book “Uprising. Poetry and Finance”. Using Polish poetry of the last ten years or so as an example, the paper reflects on the actual work of (and the inside of) the poem.

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Poetry and Finance, Poetry and Commitment

Last year, Franco “Bifo” Berardi – an Italian philosopher, activist and once a member of the *operaismo* movement – published a book called *The Uprising. On Poetry and Finance*. The book is a part of a larger project which has been run by Berardi for a few years now; another part of the project is the freshly-created SCEPSI – School of Social Imagination in San Marino. Poetry and finance, school and imagination, the “No-Future” generation and a possibility of a global social change – such combinations, as unobvious and ambivalent as they may seem at first, define the path of Berardi’s critical thought. What one may find particularly interesting is that this path has been running recently somehow parallel to the line of thought and work of Adrienne Rich, a famous Marxist/feminist poet and essayist who passed away in 2012. Thus for a literary critic, especially one who finds exceptional joy in reading poetry, many of Bifo’s theoretical propositions will seem neither new nor original – but it is more than interesting to find those ideas re-emerged within another tradition, especially one that has never had much in common with literary theory or criticism. Berardi claims that he offers a “surprising solution” to today’s social problems; and although many of the conclusions he eventually reaches have been articulated before within the Marxist tradition of literary criticism, it is thanks to Berardi that those ideas may find their way to another group of readers – namely a group of scholars in social sciences and humanities who, due to the contemporary conditions of intellectual labour, no longer have time (or indeed a sense of obligation) to read literature, not to mention poetry. In this context “The Uprising” becomes an opportunity to both revisit Adrienne Rich’s critical thought and to compare those two – close-yet-distant – understandings of the complex and unobvious relationship between poetry, work/labour and society. This comparison may in turn allow for a revision of what we came to describe as “Polish poetry after 1989”, with its subtle shifts and undertows.

In her famous manifesto “Poetry and Commitment” from 2006, Rich repeats time and again one single question: “does this poem work?”. She quotes a number of different poems, translated from a number of different languages; and what she wants (or needs) to know is whether they perform a certain *work*. At first, Rich’s words sound like a ritual question asked by some posh art critic during an opening night at a gallery. But what is so important is that Rich omits the phrase “for you”; thus, she actually uses the word “work” in a way which may suggest that poem performs some kind of work on its own, *producing*

something unique – not as a tool or an instrument, but in fact almost as a living worker. It seems particularly interesting that Rich rarely even mentions the work of the reader, focusing instead on the work performed by the poem itself.

The understanding of the socio-political dimension of poetry – which is present both when a poet writes and when a reader reads – developed within Rich's critical thought for a long time, beginning with such canonical essays as "Blood, Bread and Poetry", through her notes and short comments collected in "What Is Found There", up to her later essays and interviews published in two collections: "Arts of the possible" and "A Human Eye". At the very beginning, her career as a poet was defined and determined by her will to "bridge a gap between being a poet and a woman" (Rich 1986, 175); she attempted, both through her poems and through her active participation in the feminist movement, to convey a strong message about the political nature of the private space, and she was one of the first feminist poets to do so (this side of her political activity is underlined, for instance, in Alison Bechdel's second graphic novel, "Are you my mother?" [Bechdel 2012]).

But it's Rich's later work that introduced a certain set of questions and categories which seem particularly interesting today. Among those is the already-mentioned problem of the work performed by a poem. Rich claims that the poem "reminds us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future" (Rich 2007, 36). The poetry would be thus able to restore for the subject what he or she had already known or felt; what was lost and is now neither known nor unknown; it is through poetry that the subject would be able to regain what he or she had to forget or give up as incompatible with the conditions of his or her everyday life.

Further on, Rich writes: "The imagination's road open before us, giving the lie to that slammed and bolted door, that razor-wired fence, that brute dictum: »there is no alternative«" (ibid., 21). Of course, the claim that poetry is able to invoke images of "new" or "other" realities has been around for centuries. Nonetheless both Rich and Berardi – and here those two thinkers find a solid common ground – point out that such poetry has a "perfect enemy" of sorts in today's dominant economic discourse. This understanding of poetry, usually intuitive and abstract, is suddenly put in an opposition to a specific oppressive language based precisely on the principle of limiting the imagination.

Although Rich talks a lot about the "task" of poetry – its "work" – she never treats the poem as a tool or an instrument. She writes, not without irony: "Poetry is not a healing lotion, (...), a kind of linguistic

aromatherapy. Neither it is a blueprint, nor an instruction manual” (ibid., 25). Repeating James Scully, she differentiates the protest poetry” – which is shallow, reactive and predictable in means – from “dissident poetry”, a poetry that does not respect boundaries between the private and the public, a poetry that “talks back” and “acts as a part of the world” (ibid., 13–14). What we should grasp here is what exactly Rich means when she writes about the poem as if it acted by itself, on its own. In “What if”, a short essay published in “What Is Found There”, Rich talks about a revolutionary poem and how it should work:

A revolutionary poem will not tell you who or when to kill, what and when to burn, or even how to theorize. It reminds you (for you have known, somehow, all along, maybe lost track) when and where and how you are living and might live – it is a wick of desire. (...) And truly revolutionary art is an alchemy through which waste, greed, brutality, frozen indifference, “blind sorrow”, and anger are transmuted into some drenching recognition of the What if? – the possible (Rich 1993, 241).

“What if”, “the possible” – it’s the simplest name for what the poem actually *creates* or *produces*. It exists objectively, or at least not entirely subjectively, as it may become a part of the collective imagination or even a social practice. It cannot emerge, of course, without the participation of a reader; but the reader – and here we find the key to understanding Rich’s subtle concept – does not perceive “the possible” as something he produced *through* the poem, i.e. as a result of his own work in which the poem was merely a tool. Instead, he sees “the possible” as a result of a work that was performed *within* and *by* the poem itself, by unpredictable, although visible and orderly behaviour of its various parts and elements. There is, perhaps a very short moment when the reader almost sees the poem as a conscious living being – and although it is obviously not the case, from now on the poem gains a particular status: partly a complex and a wonderful machine, partly a self-conscious, independent being.

There is an interesting, perhaps somewhat overlooked book by a Polish literary theorist and critic, Kacper Bartczak – I think it may prove helpful in grasping the peculiar work-like activity of the poem. Although referring to slightly different theoretical sources, Bartczak develops an interesting idea of poems that “behave” in a certain way. By assuming that the human behaviour – our way of exploring the environment – is basically a series of figures (analogies, comparisons, juxtapositions, etc.), Bartczak is able to examine how a poem – being in itself a series of formal decisions – tries to survive in a certain textual environment,

it develops itself and “manages on its own” (Bartczak 2009, 170–207). This quasi-organic perspective sort of suspends the poems ontological status between living and non-living; between a mechanism which has been programmed in such a way as to act in a definable, repeatable manner, and something that remains active, dynamic and unpredictable. In other words, it’s an image of the poem as something between a living organism (a living worker perhaps) and a machine. And this goes along really well with Adrienne Rich’s vision.

The list of authors to whom Rich feels a particular kinship is long but coherent. We’ll find here June Jordan, Muriel Rukeyser, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, authors from Israel and Iraq, poets from prisons and various activist groups. Many of those authors may be seen as a part of the so-called “New World poetry” – a term borrowed by Rich from June Jordan, used to describe a certain literary tradition deriving from Walt Whitman. What Rich is trying to prove, as far as the tradition is concerned, is that a single poem may be seen as actively producing a tradition. Tradition is no longer seen as merely a function of a social phenomenon called “literature”; it becomes a very particular and specific declaration on behalf of a specific poem; a poem that encourages the reader to go beyond the boundaries of a single work of art. Contrary to a popular belief, discovering a new literary tradition is not only a voluntary activity on behalf of the reader, motivated by his will to develop certain skills or gain certain knowledge; it is also a result of a very purposeful strategy employed by a poem. Reading another poem is a result of a work performed by the original poem; reproduction of the act of reading is another kind of work, a sort of a reproductive literary labour. Performing this work allows for the “proper” work of the poem to be repeated in different historical circumstances.

Our buried desires

It’s surprising that in order to give a precise analysis of the poem’s work – Rich refers to a popular, canonical poem by Wallace Stevens, the one beginning with the words “The house was quiet...”¹ The very

1 The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

first question that she poses with regards to this poem is: “But what is a poem like this doing in a world where even the semblance of calm is a privilege few can afford?” (Rich 1993, 11). Steven’s suggestive image of an absolutely calm and peaceful environment – a silent night, an empty house, everything in total harmony – seems like a reference to a luxury that is inaccessible and even incomprehensible to many people. But as Rich claims and shows, it is the music of the poem that actually evokes the state that the poem is talking about; the poem works not by depicting a reader’s own world, but by letting him or her remind him- or herself of a once forgotten need for such an environment, a desire for such conditions of life. The way in which Rich reads this poem brings to mind some of the concepts developed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, namely the idea of the reading of the moods. Gumbrecht sees the mood as something that may be invoked by a slightest touch imposed on the body by its material environment – this may be a musical tone, weather or anything of a similarly elusive nature (Gumbrecht 2012). According to Rich, it’s the music of the poem – especially in Steven’s own plain, mantra-like reading on the radio – that, along with everything we tend to associate with a summer night, has an ability to awake a reader, to awaken his forgotten desires and senses.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi is neither a poet nor a literary theorist, so it may prove particularly interesting to examine how the poetry became an object of his interest in the first place. According to Berardi’s

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
The access of perfection to the page.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

(Stevens 1997, 311–312).

own commentary, his project is, in a way, a continuation of the line of thought of such philosophers as Paolo Virno or Maurizio Lazzarato, who explored the relationship between language and economy, appealing to the “subsumption and subjugation of the biopolitical sphere of affection and language to financial capitalism” (Berardi 2012, 13). Following Virno and Lazzarato, Berardi compares the linguistic process of dereferentialisation and the process of breaking the bond between the monetary signifier and the physical goods. Berardi writes: “The production of meaning and of value takes the form of parthenogenesis: signs produce signs without any longer passing through the flesh” (ibid., 20). Created in the course of different poetic experiments – Rimbaud’s, symbolists’, and so on – the possibility of postreferential language has preceded and indeed forecast what happened to the economy when it was transformed into a semio-economy because of its incorporation of linguistic mechanisms. Included in the result of both those processes was also the automatization of language, which itself received a certain market value – the visible symptoms are of course things like Google’s indexing of phrases and the idea of media “content”, etc. Berardi suggests that because poetry predicted those things in the first place, today it’s the poetry that may help us to reverse those processes. At the same time Bifo refers to Giorgio Agamben’s idea of the voice as a conjunction between meaning and flesh. For Berardi, poetry may be seen as a voice of language, its corporal dimension. “Poetic language – says Berardi – is the insolvency in the field of enunciation: it refuses the exaction of a semiotic debt. Deixis acts against the reduction of language to indexicalisation and abstract individuation, and the voice acts against the recombinant desensualisation of language” (ibid., 22).

Berardi’s project is rooted, at least partly in the experience of the protest movements of the last few years. In them, the Italian philosopher sees a possibility of reactivating the body of general intellect, the cognitarians, the intellectual laborers from all over the North-Western World. As he puts it, “In the street demonstrations (...) bodily sensibility, blurred and stressed by precarity and competition, is finding new modes of expression, so that – let me underline this – the desires begin flowing again” (ibid., 143). For Berardi (and here he resembles Rich) it’s the awakening of desires that may “awaken” the individual from his or her automatisms; liberate him from the “there-is-no-alternative” mode. For both thinkers the awakening of desire is a fundamental task of the poem performing its work; and by “awaking the desire” they seem to mean a very specific idea of reestablishing the collective literary imagination.

For Berardi (and here he resembles Rich) it’s the awakening of desires that may “awaken” the individual from his or her automatisms; liberate him from the “there-is-no-alternative” mode. For both thinkers the awakening of desire is a fundamental task of the poem performing its work; and by “awaking the desire” they seem to mean a very specific idea of reestablishing the collective literary imagination.

In the longer run, the poem's task is to enable us to think up other forms of social life. According to Berardi, in today's world it is up to poetry to produce a level of complexity higher than the one being managed by financial capitalism (*ibid.*, 157–158). This way poetry is capable of liberating the general intellect from the power of incomprehensible, value-multiplying processes which are presented as natural, logical and unavoidable. In other words, by surpassing the linguistic complexity of contemporary economy, poetry is capable of offering us a higher value bet.

Both Rich and Berardi reflect upon the specific literary “tools”, that is, ways in which the poem is doing its job; its natural activity. Rich hints of her intuitions by asking a curious question:

What's pushing the grammar and syntax, the sounds, the images – is it the constriction of literalism, fundamentalism, professionalism – a stunted language? Or is it the great muscle of metaphor, drawing strength from resemblance in difference? The great muscle of the unconstricted throat? (Rich 2007, 32–33)

She pays particular attention to the formal side of the poem, its “construction”, which – based on both stable points and certain dynamic tensions – in a way, again, “works” on its own. James Scully, whom Rich quotes extensively, wrote about it as well:

The simplest decisions about the line breaks will ramify, affecting not only the structural economy of a poem but its social practice, the way it works as a poem. For instance, we know that a line break will influence the way a word or syllable is attacked (in the sense that a musician attacks a note). (...) When line breaks are shifted, posture and attitude change, along with assumptions about meaning, focus and expectations. The poem “plays” differently (Rich 2009, 94).

The age of panirony

“The Uprising” is a short book, consisting for the most part of loose sketches and undeveloped ideas – it's hard to say anything about Berardi's coherent theoretical proposition. His intuitions tend to be presented in a very inspired and over-elaborate sort of way. Berardi does not examine any particular poem closely, his knowledge about poetics is pretty outdated (with Shklovsky's estrangement being one of his favorite theoretical concepts), and he refers only to major modernist authors: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Eliot, Yeats. Thus, in his approach to the problem

of “the work of the poem” there are a lot of performative gestures, wishes and requests. His wishful thinking is particularly apparent when it comes to the questions of rhythm and irony. Berardi sees them not as particular *features* of a poem, something residing *inside* the literary text, but rather as its *products*. Irony and rhythm are shaped and created *within* the poem, but as soon as they are “ready”, they are sort of cast *outside* and planted into a very specific social context. But that is not where Berardi’s wishful thinking is at its strongest.

As for the rhythm, Berardi’s approach may be loosely associated with that of Henri Lefebvre – namely, the idea of the social rhythm, the everyday life rhythm. In Berardi’s vision the rhythm allows for solidarity, as it “tunes into a shared vibration”. Berardi often substitutes “rhythm” for “refrain”, and poetry – he writes – is the language of the movement as it tries to deploy a new refrain (Berardi 2012, 153). Although his thought is unclear, one could suppose that, according to Berardi, rhythm and refrain serve as means of transmitting the unspeakable and non-verbal. They awaken the reader’s sensibility, which Berardi sees as an ability to understand that which cannot be verbalised (ibid., 143). Here, the main problem with Berardi’s approach is of course that rhythm does not necessarily have to be associated with any kind of repetition whatsoever; in fact some of the most important XX-century theories of rhythm tend to separate those two categories, Henri Meschonnic’s work being probably one of the best examples.

As for the irony, in the last chapter of the book Berardi attempts to contrast it with cynicism – suggesting that it is irony, not passion, that truly opposes cynicism. For Berardi, irony is the ethical form of the power of language, which should be used by any social movement as “semiotic insolvency, as a mechanism of disentangling language, behaviour and action from the limits of the symbolic debt”. From his point of view cynicism is a consequence of losing faith, while irony comes from not having faith from the very beginning. The ironist – says Berardi – rejects the whole game, he “creates a linguistic space” where the law has no effect. Cynicism contests the social solidarity, while the act of understanding the irony allows for a thoughtful communion (ibid., 159–169).

The hope that Berardi places in irony is understandable, although risky. The most popular, or simply the most spectacular definition of irony – “the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes” (de Man 1996, 179) – reminds us of its destabilising, and eventually alienating character, which for long has marked various humanistic disciplines.

Although the process of dereferentialisation may be perceived – as is the case with Berardi – as a poetic experiment, it was scholars in humanities who moved it out from the field of arts and into theoretical discourse. And, as Rich notices “In a country where native-born fascistic tendencies, allied to the practices of the »free« market have been eviscerating language of meaning, academic postmodern has to shoulder its own responsibility for mistrust of the word and attendant paralysis of the will” (Rich 2001, 117–118).

This seems particularly important in the Polish context, where the crash course of poststructuralism has accompanied the fundamental political transformation, and where in the fields of literature emerged the so-called poetry after 1989 – poems replying to the new sociopolitical situation with a peculiar sense of freedom from certain traditional obligations. Polish literary theorist and critic, Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, has recently defined the last decade of the XX century in Poland as “an age of panirony”. New poets occupied – in opposition to the typical positions of the 80s – the positions of ironists who believed in nothing but their own privacy and who would much rather stick to those beliefs than embrace the public space for its idea-creating potential. I quote a poem written together by Marcin Świetlicki, Marcin Sendcecki and Marcin Baran:

We would write poems
full of pretty neat ideas
or just any ideas.
But, our dear Julian,
no ideas stand outside the window.
Yep, not a fucking trace.²

At the same time the literary criticism has been possessed by a daemon of textuality, nothing-beside-the-text, the unending celebration of autonomy. And there would be nothing wrong with that if only the reader was not so eager to believe that the poetry really has nothing to do with life as such. Although the poets of the 90s created a poetic language

2 Marcin Baran, Marcin Świetlicki, Marcin Sendcecki, *Za oknem*:
Napisalibyśmy wiersze
pełne niezłych idei
lub jakichkolwiek.
Ale, drogi Julianie,
żadna nie stoi za oknem.
Tak, za oknem ni chuja idei

which Piotr Śliwiński called “the biographism of everyday life” – with such big names as Marcin Świetlicki, Marcin Sendeki, Marcin Baran, Jacek Podsiadło – in this case the “everyday life” was not seen as a common ground – something more general than the private space of each individual – but quite the contrary, as a part of one’s privacy, as something more particular than the private space. There was nothing left in the everyday life that would not be classified as intimate; and the poets’ relation to the state became increasingly that of a small, self-proclaimed libertarian businessman.

Of course, this image is a gross simplification; but it is necessary to see the shift that has been happening in Polish poetry for a few years now. First of all, it turned out that at least one of Berardi’s predictions was right: the poet who experimented most with the dereferentialisation of poetic language was the one to lead the literary criticism out of the non-referential paradigm. I mean Andrzej Sosnowski – who was also one of the Polish translators of Paul de Man’s and John Ashbery’s works. For a long time many readers of his poems had focused entirely on things like autonomy of language and radical subjectivity, etc. (see Jankowicz 2003; Gutorow 2007). And although Sosnowski’s work did not experience a sudden turning point, there was a moment when the critics started paying more attention to the problem of the poet’s voice, which allowed for a new discussion about the bodily aspects of his poetry (see Śliwiński 2011).

But a further shift seems necessary – as the poets of the 90s inspired the philosophical choices of a whole generation of literary critics, the poets of the new century – Szczepan Kopyt, Konrad Góra, Tomasz Pułka, Tomasz Bąk, Kira Pietrek – should become a source of inspiration for the younger ones.

It is not only about the ideas being in fact right there behind the window; it is not just about re-introducing into a poem a set of emotional and fundamental topics like hunger, fear and rage – and proving that they have both a literary and a political potential, it is more about subtle shifts and changes in the mood and the voice of contemporary Polish poetry.

Of course, the youngest generation of Polish poets has not all of a sudden lost all their sense of humour. But they move from a position of irony and distance towards the more problematic, sarcastic position. Sarcasm – which may be, by the way, a missing part of Berardi’s analysis – as a kind of an acute irony driven by passion does not require any kind of an escapist behaviour. It allows for a voice of responsibility, although it does not give up on the idea of a thoughtful, understanding society

envisioned by Berardi. One of the most talented poets of the youngest generation – Konrad Góra – once reminded his readers about the original meaning of the word sarcasm: that is, dividing the meat from a bone. It is about looking for clarity, not obscurity.

If the poets of the 90s created at some point an ironic image of the poet as a barbarian and an outsider, Góra uses it in a subversively didactic manner: “I am hungered for as a flipside” (Góra 2011, 12) of the society in stagnation, says the poet who sees himself as a kind of a stubborn reminder, an error in the system. “As we have all decided to turn mute / I’ve been sent to you to make this evident” (Góra 2008, 7).

Another important “young” poet, Szczepan Kopyt, has distanced himself from the ironic position by using certain literary forms and inspirations barely present in the history of Polish literature; by referring to the American traditions of spoken word poetry and the New World poetry, with their unique mix of *flow*, *pathos* and everyday speech, Kopyt is able to say something about the kind of desire that probably both Berardi and Rich had in mind. Of course, some readers – brought up on the ironic poems of the 90s – will accuse him of being naïve and sentimental. But it is exactly where he seems to be naïve that Kopyt is in fact very close to writing the poetry envisioned by Adrienne Rich: “in the technocratic society that hates multiformity, hates the natural world, hates the body, hates darkness and women, hates disobedience, the revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees inseparably from art, and is not ashamed of any of these loves” (Rich 1993, 250).

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Marta Koronkiewicz (ur. 1987) – doktorantka w Instytucie Filologii Polskiej Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, krytyczka literacka, zajmuje się najnowszą polską poezją, społecznymi i politycznymi kontekstami wiersza, antropologią literatury i badaniami nad codziennością.

Abstrakt: Punktem wyjścia szkicu jest proponowane przez Adrienne Rich rozumienie społecznej funkcji poezji. Zdaniem Rich najważniejszym zadaniem poezji jest dzisiaj nieustanne przypomnianie o rzeczach, których moglibyśmy pragnąć (jako jednostki i jako społeczeństwo), o pragnieniach zapomnianych lub pogrzebanych. W swoim manifestie *Poetry and Commitment* Rich pyta o sposoby, w jakie poezja wchodzi w interakcję z życiem, jak za pomocą wszystkich swoich formalnych i estetycznych mechanizmów, umożliwia nam wyobrażanie sobie innej codzienności. Autorka szkicu rekonstruuje punkt widzenia Rich i porównuje go z koncepcjami Franco „Bifo” Berardi, z książki *Uprising. On poetry and finance*. Powołując się na przykłady z polskiej poezji ostatniej dekady, stara się udzielić odpowiedzi na pytanie o pracę, która odbywa się w wierszu.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja, Rich, Berardi, społeczna funkcja poezji, polska poezja najnowsza