

Dorota Walczak-Delanois

Barbaric Poetry? The Challenges of Contemporary Civilization : A Comparative Polish-Belgian Study

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Dorota Walczak-Delanois

Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)

Barbaric Poetry? The Challenges of Contemporary Civilization (A Comparative Polish-Belgian Study)

*nasza epopeja jest epoką z ekranu
równie zagadkową jak kryształ w meblościance*

“our epic poem is a screen epoch as mystifying
as a crystal trinket on a shelf of the wall-unit”
(Kopyt, 2011: 12)

When civilization accelerates

Looking at the fluctuating fortunes of civilizations, we can easily notice that there are moments in the histories of various countries, or even continents, when the axes of different cultures intersect one another and epicentres of individual literatures seem to pulsate with a common, strongly accelerated rhythm. In this way in the early 20th century the technological innovations which changed the way of estimating distance, generated first the admiration for machines and cities, and, consequently, new modes of expression. These changes were followed by a deep reflection on how it became necessary for people to find themselves again and redefine their place in the quickly changing and growing world. Naturally it meant also looking for a new poetic formula adequate for these changes. This subject was discussed, among others, by Tadeusz Peiper in his collection of essays *Tędy (This Way)*:

Jeśli poezja żywi się człowiekiem, to jakżeż może pozostać z dala od spraw, które stanowią większość dnia większości ludzi. Byłoby to śpiączką wrażliwości, tępotą oka lub niemocą.¹ (Peiper 87)

These words turn out to be particularly relevant in the context of the growing tension between modernity and tradition in Polish culture and literature (Jedlicki 66). It seems that today, at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, we feel a similar need to re-define ourselves. It is related to the shifting boundaries of what is possible in life and literature, the growing influence of computers in everyday life, the economic and institutional crisis, problems in the job market, but also with the achievements in the fields of medicine, astrophysics and biogenetics, to quote just a few areas of changes which the contemporary people have to confront. Poetry has been a great touchstone for these changes; the issues of high culture and the development of individual self-expression, mass culture and utilitarianism, in view of the increasingly interchangeable positive and negative values, and the widespread belief in both the decline and the fall of the contemporary world into barbarity, seem more legitimate now than ever before. Just like Tadeusz Peiper, Aleksander Wat, Bruno Jasiński, Tytus Czyżewski, Jan Brzękowski, who were in the centre of European futurism and the first international avant-garde, also contemporary poets try to diagnose society, often in an irreverent way, or at least to try a new approach. The awareness of changes and the need to keep the formula up-to-date seems to be as pressing as they were at the turn of the 20th century, with one important difference—the discourse created in the 19th and 20th century around the idea and canon of “beauty,” is not valid anymore. The 21st century probably replaces the relevance and meaning of the category of “beauty” in poetry with the media popularity, technical brilliance and variously defined functionality. Umberto Eco may have been right when he wrote in *On Beauty*:

... the gap between the art of provocation and the art of consumption grew narrower. What is more, while it seems that there is still a gap between “cultivated” and “popular” art, in the climate of the so-called post-modern period cultivated art offers new experimental work that goes beyond visual art and revivals of

¹ “If poetry feeds on man, how can it stay away from things which occupy the better part of any day in the lives of most of people? It would be a coma of sensitivity, insensitivity of the eye or impotence.”

visual art at one and the same time, as the tradition is continually reassessed. For their part, the mass media no longer present any unified model, any single idea of Beauty. (Eco 426)

The earlier parameters used by the poets (the social standing, the way of publishing and the contact with the readers) changed drastically. Today international publishing market, the ability to upload one's own realization and presentation to YouTube, the developed and heterogeneous system of poetry awards, "niche" and "celebrity" poets transform the definition of the center and the peripheries influence the the character of being a poet. In order to demonstrate that, let us start, then, with the poets.

Poets facing their bodies here and now

As Michał Paweł Markowski stated when writing about Baudelaire, Kant and the modern readings of Kant:

Dla Baudelaire'a ciało jest ciałem, przede wszystkim postrzeganym. To zaś jest ciałem znaczącym i odwrotnie: znaczenie ciała nadaje postrzeganie, a mówiąc ściślej przedstawianie. Oznacza to, mówiąc najkrócej, że ciało niezobaczone, nieprzedstawione nic nie znaczy, nie posiada żadnego sensu, z czego można wysnuć następujący wniosek: *sztuka jest nadawaniem sensu ciału*, które poza sztuką jest ciałem pozbawionym sensu.² (Markowski 77)

It seems that the contemporary existence of the poet has to be defined clearly in the new formula through the body. It gives evidence to his/her existence, the biological being often in the opposition to no longer the machine, but to the illusion, an image created virtually through the media on the screen. This existence is not always appealing. Regardless of the geographical latitude, the present has created a template for the self-realization of the poetical body.

² "For Baudelaire the body is first and foremost the perceived body. The perceived body, in turn, is a signifying body and the other way round: the significance is conferred upon the body by perception, or, to be more precise, depiction. It means, to put it succinctly, that the unseen and undepicted body does not mean anything, does not have any meaning, which leads us to the conclusion: *art is giving meaning to the body*, which outside of art is the body deprived of meaning."

The self-realization which is, generally speaking, one of the many components of the poetical world, which is a far cry from the Romantic idea of uniqueness and individuality. This is a quality imitating the surrounding universe, with which one has to communicate—the poets communicate with their own bodies since they are not an integral part of their own beings. The old dissociation between the body and soul, indispensable for metamorphosis, is replaced with the dissociation between the voice addressing the body and the poet's body. It is caused naturally by the growing pressure of immediacy. The acceleration and adjustment of the new form has already been observed in the world around us already by the poets who are still active yet considered classics: such as Ewa Lipska, Tadeusz Różewicz, Julia Hartwig or even much younger Tomasz Różycki. On the other hand, we have hypertext realizations, cyber poetry or “liberature”³ written by such authors as Judy Malloy, Johannes Auer, Tatiana Matveeva, Piotr Czernski or Zenon Fajfer. Their texts clearly declaring their intentions and functioning in particular reading circles, are not necessarily very innovative, but can boast of possessing well-defined communication codes and recognizable means of communication.

However, I would like to concentrate in my discussion of barbarity and its opposite on the young poet and musician Szczepan Kopyt who was shortlisted in 2011 for the prize “Paszport Polityki” awarded by a major Polish weekly *Polityka* for his pioneering new genre of “record-volume.” Originally entitled *BUCH*, the genre in question constitutes a combination of a volume of poetry and a musical album thus comprising a multimedia experiment. The penchant for combining various art genres is already apparent in his previous book, which is double-sided and contains two volumes of poetry in one: *możesz czuć się bezpiecznie [you can feel safe]* is in a way the reverse of the accompanying *Yass*. Kopyt is a young poet but he has already attracted critical notice, for instance as the laureate of the 10th Jacek Bierozin National Poetry Contest (2004) and one of the nominees for the Gdynia Literary Award. He is the author of the poetical volumes *Yass* (2005), *Yass/możesz czuć się bezpiecznie (Yass/you can feel safe)* (2006), *Sale sale sale* (2009). My choice of him as analysis material is dic-

³ *The idea of total literature* where “the text and the book as a physical object form the organic whole,” proposed by Zenon Fajfer in 1999—cf. Katarzyna Bazarnik “What is Liberature?” in *Bartkowiaks Forum Book Art 2005/2006*, p. 465.

tated by the particular sensitivity of this young author to the problems of the contemporary world and the surprising poetical forms he employs. The author I would like to compare Kopyt's "barbarity" with is a French-speaking Belgian poet Vincent Tholomé, Kopyt's contemporary, also when it comes to the dates of publishing his books, although Tholomé is slightly older. The texts of both of these poets show a pleasantly surprising coherence, employing both the form as well as content in the poetical discourse on the contemporary (the barbaric and the civilized) world as well as literature (high and low). It seems that their volumes meet in the middle of their mirror dialogue and while both poets-observers are deeply engaged, the formulas they use in facing the contemporary civilization are completely opposite. Contrary to Kopyt, for Vincent Tholomé, one of the dimensions and sizes of the experiment is not an abbreviation but an elongation of the word, sentence, or the whole poetical text. Both poets also experiment with the printed word, by avoiding the traditional linear order of the print, pages and table of contents. The qualities that the new formulas have in common are their modifiability and potentiality, expressed also in the constantly changing *locus poeticus*. This is not surprising, since the mobility of "here" destroying "there" causes the contemporary poets to be constantly on the move, in the state antithetical to contemplation, constantly requiring to define themselves in relation to something. The distance and mobility can be expressed through the use of the stylistic means derived from the street culture of hip-hop and rap:

szczepan wyluzowany tej ziom
pije bro pali faję ziom, cytuje wińską:
„mam pięć chujów w mieszkaniu
wczoraj byłam w katedrze i się
śmiałam, o boże” słońce, słońce, słońce
dymek fioletowy, zaraz spada na tramwaj
przewietrzony, biciki zapuszczone don
guralesco – liryczny mesydz kuzynie
loczki się kręcą w lirycznej maszynie
na kaponierze kontempluje kłacza
miasto poznań, jedzie na wykład z logiki
nie znając definicji i aksjomatyki tej
razi go słońce i ma polew bo w kuchni
pani maria postawiła na podłodze gipsowego budę

śmieszny taki z brzuszkiem i małymi stópkami
nie nudzi mu się, nawet jeśli – to go szczerze wali
brejka rule, jedzie oldskooolem, potem
instytut las – morasko, gdzie gra yass na próbie
taki z niego luzer, ziom sprawdź to, yo.⁴
(Kopyt, 2006b: 8)

Movement, mobility and changeability are also proportionate to the information content, which in turn is in proportion to the modernity of technologies (Ballafard 60). Both poets use in their poetic formulas visible **excess**. It is mostly expressed through lists and repetitions. Kopyt is moving, passing various things, continually registering things passing in front of him; Tholomé, on the contrary, stops moving things. His whole volume *Chacun est quel'qun* (*Everybody is somebody*), is based on lists, but the titles read in succession are also important, since they become more and more ordinary, trivial and at the same time improbable. Here are a few examples:

1. tous ces gens qu'on croise chaque jour en rue ou sur une place et qu'on ne croisera plus
 2. gens à qui je pense souvent
 3. il y a des fois des gens qu'on connaît rien qu'à les voir une
 4. il y en a qui existe que dans le conflit
 9. certaines on les bouleversantes histoires de l'amour
 16. tous ceux qui sautent de coque à l'âne
 23. parmi ces gens il y a des sans-gêne qui viennent à la maison et s'y croient comme chez eux.
 24. gens que j'aurai pu ne pas rencontrer⁵
- (Tholomé, 2007: 5-27)

⁴ “szczepan chilled out here homie / drink brew smoke cigs homie quoting wińska / ‘i’ve got five dicks at my place / yesterday I went to the cathedral and I / laughed, o god’ sun sun sun / purple smoke, soon falls down on the / airy tram, beats are jamming, don / guralesko—lyrical message I mean / hair is curling in the lyrical machine / at the kaponiera he contemplates rhizome / city of poznań, he goes to the lecture in logic / without knowing its definitions and axioms / the sun is dazzling, lhao cause in the kitchen/ms maria put on the floor a plaster Buddha / so funny with his tummy and small feet/he’s not bored, and if he is, he doesn’t give a shit, / breakarule, play oldschool then / forrest institute—morasko where yass rehearse/he’s so chilled-out, homie check it out, yo.”

⁵ “1. all the people we pass everyday on the street or in a square and whom we will never meet again 2. people I often think about 3. there are some people I know just by briefly

Also, the conscious prosaism of poetry, and their careful rhythmization are aspects important for both poets. The noticeable features of their poetry are the particular attention paid to the visual aspect of the poems and experimentation. Obviously, these formal aspects do not make the poems non-poetic and do not make either the authors or the texts created by them “barbaric.” However, when we follow this train of thought to its logical conclusion, the following unavoidable question arises:

What, then, barbarity is?

How can we qualify barbarity? If we look at the original *barbare* in the histories of national literatures in the countries of both poets, we can see that in the 21st century this descriptive epithet is sometimes replaced with two interchangeable other: *exotic* and *peripheral*. If the geographical location in relation to the centre does not play its former role, it is still important when it comes to reaching the readers. A more sensible solution is an attempt to define the degree of “barbarity” in the context of the previously accepted and generally accepted values indicated by the poetical text through its formal adaptation to the new, loosely defined modernity. It could of course turn out that the poet—“*Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie*” (*Barbarian in the Garden*, Herbert, 1962)—only poses as a barbarian, since s/he is actually classical. The barbarity of the contemporary poet is only a barbarity as long as it rebels in a way against the norm of the poetical civitas. It is very difficult to define its boundaries with reference to the last two decades. Nevertheless, a constant feature of transgressing the classical canon as a rebellious act is the peculiar use of hyperbole and litotes which show and explain the disordered world in its excess or drastic deprivation, through the reduction of meaning, tautological with regard to the expressed point, or the multiplication of meaning which makes us doubt its very existence. The poetical barbarity of the formula reflects the barbarity

looking at them 4. some people exist only in the conflict 9. some have experienced appalling love stories 16. all those who switch the subject 23. among them there are those who come to the house and unceremoniously make themselves at home 24. people that I could not have met”

of the modern world. I understand here “barbarity of the formula” as a kind of a clearly noticeable transgression of a poetical contemporary form. Such a poem can be a quite original and rebellious text. And often it is.

On the other hand, the “barbarian” poem returns to the systems, sounds and images which have already been established in literary tradition. The barbarian constantly flirts with the civilized and the primitive. This is, in fact, one of the characteristics of a “barbarian” formula: the possibility of being several forms at the same time and to explore the depth of dissonance. Such a poem (a barbarian one) becomes a patchwork model and shows the disintegration of the modern world, the world which wants to be civilized, yet is unable to do so. It also means that “barbarian” is not in an obvious way a negative thing. On the contrary—it happens that such a poem has a very positive background.

Last but not least, I propose to read the word “formula” as a matrix for not only one but for many poems. Let us see some more specificities of this kind of poetic formulas in the poetry of Szczepan Kopyt and Vincent Tholomé.

Katolicy w barach mlecznych śmierdzą niemiłosiernie
bóg dał im wątróbkę i smażone buraczki
zginął za ich grzechy
za bony obiadowe kazał im kupić święty kisiel wiśniowy
oglądajcie seks w telewizjach! katolicy oglądają
seks w złym wydaniu powodujący niemiłosierne mdłości
a potem traci na tym cały kościół, młode córki jadą na saksy
panie z radia maryja mało nie zaczną roznosić
strażnicy, gorliwość, predestynacja, obierki od ziemniaków
hej panie jezu zatańcz ze mną, gruby ksiądz z gitarą
ma cukrzycę i lubi młodzież⁶
(Kopyt, 2006b: 9)

A characteristic feature is the lack of consistency in using the categories of “deprivation” and “excess.” There is little choice between them; both of these

⁶ “Catholics in canteens stink dreadfully / god gave them fried liver and beetroots / died for their sins/told them to buy holy cherry kissel for their meal tickets / watch sex on TV! catholics watch / bad sex causing severe nausea / and then the whole church loses, their young daughters go to work abroad / radio maryja ladies nearly start distributing / the watchtower, zeal, predestination, potato peels / hey dear lord jesus dance with me a fat priest with the guitar/he is diabetic and likes young people”

categories are mixed and present the total lack of any control. Here in the most recent poetry we can find the symptoms of barbarity, not only through the experienced multiplicity and variety, but also through negatively marked “all-inclusiveness.” The accumulation of the effects, props, views and old histories have to be domesticated in order to acquire significance again; the repetitions separated by commas or slashes are a sign of the barbarity of contemporary civilization. One can observe the process in the poem “chwaliszewo”—the title is the name of one of the districts of Poznań. In its depiction the formal part of the poem consistently supports building the content of the poem:

chaos/równość + cośtam buzujące w winie
w żyłach/w starożeczach/gdzie upadają knajpy
gdzie się gnieźdzą pogrzebowe zakłady/na zakrętach
po zmroku solaryczne dresiarzy/zapachy kebab
+ sos czosnkowy ścieka im po udach/te mury
pamiętają karnawał/wielkie szalone łapanki
tu krzyżowały się szlaki/tu mówiono językami
tu łądowali obcy gdy ziemia była im obła
.....
dzielnica pełna ruin/czarne cegły
bezdomni/bezbarwni/beznodzy/na wózkach
na dyktach/czekający na skucie lodem +
w rzece + kominy + księżyc + noc⁷
(Kopyt, 2006b: 44)

When we apply the theory of Tadeusz Sławek to Kopyt’s poem, it turns out that the graphic signs in place of punctuation signs eliminate the discrepancy, introducing the new meanings between the text and the blank, apparently empty space: “the conjunction ‘and,’ not present in the material sense, delays the appearance of one or the other meaning, announces them, forecasts them” (Sławek 18). The elimination of the conjunction shows most vividly the inco-

⁷ “chaos/equality + something buzzing in wine / in the veins/old river beds/where eateries go bankrupt / where the funeral parlours nestle/at the corners / after dark sunbed chavettes/smells kebab / + garlic sauce dribbling down their thighs/these walls / remember the carnival/big crazy round-ups / here trails intersected/here one spoke in tongues / here the strangers landed when the earth was rotund for them / . . . the district full of ruins/black brick / homeless/colourless/legless/on wheelchairs / on plywood/waiting to be icebound + / in the river + chimneys + moon + night”

herence of the world, the duplicity of its phenomena and the accumulation of the categories of the meaning.

The poem under the significant title “all the young punks (new boots and contracts)” dedicated to two cities Wrocław and Poznań (not capitalized) defines barbarity anew as an invasion, all the greater since it is confronted with the psalm formula. The re-adaptation of the old, time-hallowed poetical formula not only emphasizes the invasion of China-made products, but also takes away the character of *sacrum* and *nobilis* from the old poetical formula:

niech będzie błogosławiony rozum i telefon nokia
(made in china) i sto poranków jednego ranka

za zimna śmietanka, papieros i przewód pokarmowy
kobieta współłokatorka, co czyściła kuchnię i

robi na raz: śniadanie i obiad; miałem takie plany
żeby się zabrać za siebie, chodzi przecież o władzę

jak rozdrabniamy się w tych brudnych knajpach
i o kobiety chodzi, które wstają jeszcze gorzej

niż ja; niech będą błogosławione nowe trampki
(made in china), kupieckie miasto, studia pozbawione

sensu i znaczenia, początek wieku i bezkształcie

.....
wiersze piszą coraz młodszy & dla ciebie ta wieczność
potrwa jeszcze lat kilka – nie oglądasz telewizji?

to stąd ta filozofia, buta i chore spojrzenie, check it out
trzeba wyemigrować do czech, być jak havel i blant

i żadnych roszczeń w sprawie dostępu do morza i kultury
niech będą błogosławione przedustawne struktury

kanapowa lewica, tańsza prasa i nowa wrażliwość
brak właściwego wykształcenia, dorobku i mieszkania

przetłuszczające się włosy i nowe pryszcze z rana
i żadnych porównań; chciałbym dokończyć te książki

zakończyć poezję – wiesz dobrze kiedy nie piszę
dla nisz, i dzięki temu jest zwrot podatku i żalność

i noc, którą by mogła osądzić nas na szalkach, cokolwiek
o czym mówi nam dziennik, to prawda i jeszcze

niech sądzi nas monika olejnik z czarną szarfą na ustach
jestem jak spot, co przerywa taką sygnitywną ciszę

ach! piękny jesteś wierszu, o mediach, akumulacji i spermie
trzeba kupić karabin, koniecznie, i jeszcze zapuścimy brody

wszyscy⁸

(Kopyt, 2006b: 50)

The modernity as a symptom of barbarity is depicted by Tholomé in a completely different way. It seems that in his case we have to deal with the re-adaptation of primary barbarity. An example of such an action is the volume *KIRKJUBAEJRKLAUSTUR* saga published in the series whose name is worth quoting “Le clou dans le fer expérience poétiques,” (“A nail in the fetters of poetical experience”). This book develops a story which actually becomes poetical prose, alluding through its construction, rhythm and poetical articulation of sentences to the primeval sounds of human language. But similarly to the poems

⁸ “blessed be reason and Nokia phone / (made in china) and one hundred dawns of one morning / cream too cold, a cigarette and oesophagus / the female flatmate who has cleaned the kitchen and / makes breakfast and lunch at a one go; I had plans / to do something about myself, it is about power / how we get sidetracked in these dirty bars and it’s about women who get up even worse / than I do; blessed be the new trainers / (made in china), merchant city, university studies / deprived of sense and meaning, the start of the century and shapelessness / . . . poets get younger and younger & for you this eternity/is going to last a few years more—don’t you watch TV? / hence the philosophy, arrogance and sick look, check it out / one should emigrate to the czech republic, be like havel and joint / and no claims for the access to sea and culture / blessed be the pre-well-laid-out structures / the armchair left, cheaper press and new sensitivity/lack of proper education, achievements and apartment / greasy hair and new zits in the morning / and no comparisons; i would like to finish these books / finish poetry—you know well when i am not writing / for the niche audience, and thanks to that there’s tax return and grief / and the night which could judge us on its scales, whatever / you hear about in the news, its true and let / monika olejnik judge us with a black ribbon across her mouth / I am like a spot interrupting such a signitive silence / oh! you’re beautiful, my poem on the media, accumulation and sperm / I have to buy a rifle, absolutely, and let us grow beards / all of us”

quoted above, an important figure in the poem is the accumulation, multiplicity of words and beings, as well as the repetition—as if the poetical logorrhea to which the rumbling title alludes was a magical spell, an anti-rational formula. The broken poetical narrative is signified formally in Kopyt's poetry often by the use of "/" (slash). Tholomé uses instead a logorrhoea discourse. For instance, the monologue of the speaker is interrupted by the conversation about the results of football games, club names, and the character of the play of individual footballers, all of which are not congruous with the previous narration. The poem ends with a reflection on patterns, matrices and stereotypes appearing in human existence, expressed through the repetitive structure of the poem, on purpose constructed like a primitive and monotonous message:

la matrice
nous restons à la matrice
nous restons attachés à la matrice
il y a pour toujours un reste de nous
comme un bouton est boutonné
nous sommes comme un bouton boutonné
nous sommes le bouton de la matrice
la matrice nous boutonne le bout
le petit bout de nous fixe à la matrice
nous restons nous
les animaux à quatre pattes
avec un bout noué
à la matrice
nous ne nous détachons pas
nous ne cherchons même pas à nous en détacher
la matrice nous tient
nous demeurons tenus moulus
et boutonnés par le bouton
du petit bout à une boutonnière
c'est la matrice
Les boutonnières nous tiennent les nerfs⁹
(Tholomé, 2007: 70-71)

⁹ "matrix / we remain in the matrix / we are attached to the matrix / there's always some remnant of us / like a button is buttoned / we are like the button all buttoned-up / we are the matrix's button / a bit of us affixed to the matrix / we remain ourselves / four-legged animals / with the end tied up / to the matrix / we do not detach / we do not even try to

The monotony, repetitiveness and re-adaptation of the old form are important since they point to the problem of the reception of culture (poetry included) of modern people and modern society, through their consciously caricatured and distorted use. This is what Vincent Tholomé writes about, taking into account the education of modern Europeans.

. . . en négligeant la pratique des arts, en la réduisant à la portion congrue, le système éducatif de Belgique, Europe, fait de nous des spectateurs. Pas des acteurs. Des consommateurs de biens culturels. Pas des individus conscients de ce que peuvent l'art et la culture. Pas des individus participatifs et créatifs.¹⁰ (Tholomé, 2009: 52)

The centre of poetical reflection: material and form

Employing the existing poetical matrices and schemes of social communication in their transformed and caricatured form shows how sensitive both poets are to the question of form. The point is not only in finding the most appropriate expression for the thought, but also in comprehending the whole communication process and its atrophy. To quote Tholomé again:

Ainsi, en Belgique, en Europe, le système éducatif m'aura permis de maîtriser vaillamment quelques aspects techniques de la langue. Par chance, grâce à une maîtrise suffisante de la lecture, de l'orthographe et de la grammaire, j'arrive maintenant à écrire de façon convenable des lettres de motivation et des curriculum vitae. Je reste poli dans mes lettres de réclamation. J'ai parfois quelque peine à écrire des lettres d'amour mais, à notre époque électronique et téléphonique, cela n'a peut-être plus tellement importance.¹¹ (Tholomé, 2009: 49)

detach ourselves / the matrix holds us / we remain bound formed / and buttoned up in the little / piece of the button-hole / it is the matrix / the button-holes hold our nerves"

¹⁰ “. . . by neglecting the practical aspect of art, and reducing art to doled-out portions, the education system in Belgium and Europe turns us into observers. Not actors. Consumers of culture. Not the individuals, conscious of what art and culture can do. Not the committed and creative individuals.”

¹¹ “So in Belgium, in Europe, the education system helped me to learn somehow the technical aspects of language. Thanks to reading, spelling and grammar I can now write correct cover letters and CVs. My letters of complaint are always polite, although sometimes I find

For that reason, according to the above argument and the assessment of one's ability to write and read, one of the favourite forms for the poetical diagnosis of the condition of contemporary civilization is the miniature and all kinds of abbreviated, broken, cut messages, reflecting communication difficulties. A miniature message can complete a longer poetical narrative, as in the case of *Kirkjubaejarklaustur*:

On est assis sur caillou blanc. On se raconte une fois de plus ce qui se passe. Ici.
Tonnes de choses qui arrivent. Un jour. Une fois.
A Kirkjubaejarklaustur

Puis c'est fini. Fini. Fini.
Fini fini?
Oui. Fini fini.
Ah bon.
Oui¹²
(Tholomé, 2009: 147)

The poem can be a one-sentence statement, more of a slogan than an aphorism, or a text message as in Kopyt's poems "a poem for gail," in "komitety" ("committees") or a "sms od mamy" ("sms from mum"):

I am for the naked society
(Kopyt, 2009: 24)

nie twórzcie komitetów
palcie własne¹³
(Kopyt, 2009: 31)

babcia tak płacze aż nie
może jeść 2 dania bo
zmarła taylor i jest jej
pogrzeb w 3701

it difficult to write love letters, but in our era of electronic and phone communication it does not matter that much anymore."

¹² "We are sitting on a white stone. We tell again each other one more time what is happening. Here. Tons of things / happen. One day. Once. / In Kirkjubaejarklaustur / Then it's finished. Finished. Finished. / Finished finished? / Yes. Finished finished. / All right. / Yes"

¹³ don't set up committees / burn down your own"

odcinku mody na
sukces¹⁴
(Kopyt, 2009: 32)

The awareness of the described fall and the return to non-standard solutions does not mean releasing oneself from the signs of culture. Szczepan Kopyt, alluding to Dostoyevsky, uses the intertextual literary crime not in order to remind the readers that new crimes are constantly committed, but treats it rather flippantly, describing it in a humorous way and depriving it of all seriousness. In the poem below words are also miniaturized since “sli/spr/hun” attract more attention and reflect the means of expression of social niches than “slice/spread/hungry.”

m.c. raskolnikov
nie odślonię rolety choć ciemno
nie założę skarpetek chodź piździ
nie odszukam rogalu choć jest gdzieś
nie pokro' nie posma' go dżemem

choć głodny to przez to syty
choć nieświadom to jednak świadomy
gdziez ty jesteś rogalu ukryty
jestem gło' jestem gło' jestem głodny¹⁵
(Kopyt, 2006b: 10)

Below we can read a very interesting poem “dzieci postmoderny” (“the children of postmodernism”), which tackles the evolution and stagnation of civilization and culture in a different way. Telling readers what they can see, or, in other words, the visual aspect of the poem becomes omnipresent, through the analogy to children’s cartoons, the graphic shape of the stanzas, square and rounded brackets, numbering, spaces, and comments on the appearance of the protagonist of the poem. However, one should not be misled by this peculiar attack on poetry, since it is grounded in extensive reading in literature and philosophy

¹⁴ “grandma cries so much she / can't eat the main course cause / taylor died and her funeral is / in episode 3701 of / the bold and the beautiful”

¹⁵ “won't pull up the blind though it's dark / won't put on the socks though it's fucking cold / won't find the bread roll though it's somewhere here / won't sli' won't spr' it with jam / though hungry it makes me sated though unconscious i'm yet conscious / where are you the hidden roll / i'm hun' i'm hun' i'm hungry”

as well as the knowledge of social mechanisms. In other words, the barbarity of the formula never equals the barbarity of the author.

[strofa_01]
jej kwiat nazywa się kroton (stoi na stojaku
na płyty winylowe), jej pies to matylda
a drugi to popak (teraz jest bardzo ciemno)

[strofa_02]
teraz ona rozmawia z błażejem (błażej robi
filmy, ma kręcone włosy, ja też takie posiadam
a raczej miałem), mój kwiat nie ma nazwy

[strofa_03]
(nie zapytałem) co zrobimy z lustrem od mamy?
co z markiem rothko? (mark rotko też jest martwy)
święci z ikony (w planie amerykańskim) [cięcie]¹⁶
(Kopyt, 2006b: 17)

Kopyt and Tholomé are similar also in their use of the formula which I would call infantile/primitive. It is expressed through such texts as the one by Kopyt:

wobec piękna
test pieroga:

oto pieróg – zobacz
został sam na talerzu
kawałek cebulki masło

hm

hm hm hm
ha!

¹⁶ “[stanza_01] / her potted plant is called croton (it stands on / the vinyl records rack), her dog is matylda / and the other is popak (now it’s very dark) / [stanza_02] / now she’s talking with błażej (błażej makes / movies, he’s got curly hair, just like I do / or rather i did), my plant is nameless / [stanza_03] / (i didn’t ask) what are we going to do with the mirror from my mother? / what with mark rothko? (mark rothko is dead, too) / the icon saints (American shot) [cut]”

e-ę pieróg nie czuje
nie mów że prosi jak piesek
że jak język cichutko
robi: yf yf yf yf
na co się decydujesz?¹⁷
(Kopyt, 2006a: 36)

And Tholomé's text "Un totem (poésie) inuit n° 5"

mia
miapa
tumia
miorapa
tunpoura
mia
miavoir
tuma
tumapa
pamila
outupansa
gesupia
outupansa
at
at
atan
atan
atan
atrapé
atrapé
gesuime
ankola
gesuime
palapa
dantédoi
gesuipa
dantébra
gesuipa

¹⁷ "in the presence of beauty / dumpling test: / 36 / here's a dumpling—see / it's left alone
on the plate / a piece of onion butter / hm/hm hm hm / ha! /e-e the dumpling can't feel
/don't say it's begging like a puppy / that like a little hedgehog it makes / the soft sound: yf
yf yf yf / what's your decision?"

outucroi
gemémi
miapar
gemémi
miapar
tumboufa
lalala
tubboufa
lalala
tumboupfa
(Tholomé, 2012: 20)

However, the point of the poem is not “words in freedom,” John Cage’s “imaginary landscapes” or William Burroughs’s cut-up technique. In the article “Powrót do zakłóceń. Sondowanie progu tolerancji” (“A Return to Interference. Determining the Threshold of Tolerance”) Roman Bromboszcz trying to combine the research on literature, visual arts and music, writes¹⁸:

W literaturze znajdziemy takie egzempli jak poezja fonetyczna, pozbawiona znaczeń i umuzyczniona. Poeta mówi, krzyczy, gra mimiką, emocjami, ale nie wiemy do końca, co nadaje. Z kolei pewien wycinek poezji wizualnej nastawiony jest na grę asocjacji, w miejsce jasności. Istnieje także cały nurt eksperymentalny, w którym fabuła jest zdestruowana.¹⁹ (Bromboszcz 103)

However, both Tholomé and Kopyt in their most mature poetical works create poetry in which they are aware of the gesture and posture in which it is delivered; by putting the visible and audible poetic nature of the posture in the brackets, they maintain their detachment and deprive such a message constructed message of the seriousness of primitivism. In order to rebuild the primitivism of the genre and the awareness of the barbarity of the poetic “I,” one requires a credibly primeval message. Paradoxically, in order to construct the message,

¹⁸ For a more extensive discussion of the subject, see Roman Bromboszcz, *Estetyka zakłóceń*. Poznań: WSNHiD. 2010.

¹⁹ “In literature we can find such examples as phonetic poetry, musical and deprived of meaning. The poets speak, shout, act through mimic and emotions, but we do not quite realize what their message is. On the other hand, a certain branch of visual poetry uses a game of associations instead of clarity. There is also a whole experimental trend in which the plot is destroyed.”

we need to give voice, sounds and phonemes to the category different than human beings, since a great, primarily extra-poetical change of roles has taken place: **the personification of objects and the reification of the human being.** In order to return to the glorious past of civilization, we need to start from scratch, from square one. It means re-awakening of the sensitivity reduced by consumerism and taking up the game with what is ugly, primitive, untamed, low—as for instance Anatol Stern used to do.

Conclusion

The challenge of the contemporary poets is abolishing the rigid canon, all-inclusiveness and chaos. That is why a category of chaos and fragmentation becomes the new norm. Once *szumy, zlepy, ciagi* (*hums, blends, strings*), to use the title of a book by Miron Białoszewski (1976), were a challenge, now they are common. In contrast to Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of communication (1963), the hum does not interfere with the poetical message but forms its integral part. The claim made by Roy Ascott in late 20th century seems to be still valid:

The revolution in art which prompts these questions lies in the radically new role of the artist. Instead of creating, expressing, or transmitting content, he is now involved in designing contexts within which the observer or viewer can construct experience and meaning. (qtd. in Schanken 11)

In the most extreme cases poets settle their accounts with society, which is not a new thing, but the way in which this message is delivered can be difficult and lead to drastic poetical expressions. In the poem titled “we śnie przychodził do mnie lenin” (“lenin came to me in my dreams”) the following words form a sharp counterpoint: “Byliśmy w obozie zagłady, będziemy w obozie zagłady, jesteśmy w obozie zagłady”²⁰ (Kopyt, 2006a: 7-8). At the same time the enduring programmatic and long-ranging barbarity of the form turns out to be finally impossible. Its brutalization, defamiliarization, experimentations can be meaningful only as long as they contain depth, intertextuality, wide range,

²⁰ “We were in a death camp, we will be in a death camp, we are in a death camp.”

ear for music, the knowledge of history, literature and the increasingly important in the modern world money and economy. It does not deduce from the originality of the message. Both Kopyt and Tholomé show civic engagement, acute sense of observation of contemporary literature and openness to dialogue. They sometimes also employ the figure of the poet who feels more and more acutely, and shares his observations and warnings with the reader. In order to understand their poetical message it is important to know even more than ever before their individual and generational message. Fiona Sampson seems to be correct when she observes:

The European notion of the writer-and-intellectual may be biased towards the cerebral, and fail to recognize other aspects of a poetic role, such as that of “troubadour” performer travelling from gig to gig. But it is at its most helpful idea about a thickened-up poetic practice, a professional collegiality in which reviewing, for example, is a serious act of engagement rather than a simple barter-system, and where poets both young and established display a genuine and continuing curiosity about our limitless genre and the world beyond it. Connective, discursive, public and written, such poetry culture isn’t founded solely on gossip and personality . . . Thinking and writing a poem is not an act committed against the other, rival poets . . . but an act towards them. (Sampson 281)

To sum up, one could say that truly barbaric poetry, as long as it is authentic, does not exist, in contrast with the depicted barbarity. Barbarity is civilized by poets in many ways, sometimes funny, at other times iconoclastic, and the poetical formula, even when it seems to be vulgar, pared down, anti-lyrical and apparently unsuitable for the serious message about emotions and thoughts, is ennobled—and this is very good news!

Trans. Monika Mazurek

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Summary

The Polish poet Szczepan Kopyt and the French-speaking Belgian poet Vincent Tholomé craftily take part in the poetical discourse on the contemporary world (the barbaric and the civilized) as well as literature (high and low). They experiment with the printed word and the new formulas of hip-hop and rap in their modifiability and potentiality, which is also expressed in the constantly changing *locus poeticus*. Yet the barbarity of the formula never equals the barbarity of the author. Finally, truly barbaric poetry, as long as it is authentic, does not exist, in contrast with the depicted barbarity. Thus barbarity is civilized by poets in many ways, sometimes funny, at other times iconoclastic, and the poetical formula, even when it seems to be vulgar, pared down, anti-lyrical and apparently unsuitable for the serious message about emotions and thoughts, is ennobled.

Key words: comparative literature, new Polish poetry, new Belgian poetry, Szczepan Kopyt, Vincent Tholomé

Poezja barbarzyńska? Wyzwania współczesnej cywilizacji (polsko-belgijska analiza komparatystyczna)

Streszczenie

Polski poeta Szczepan Kopyt i belgijski poeta francuskojęzyczny Vincent Tholomé zręcznie uczestniczą w poetyckim dyskursie o współczesnym świecie (barbarzyńskim i cywilizowanym) oraz literaturze (wysokiej i niskiej). Eksperymentują ze słowem drukowanym i nowymi formułami hip-hopu oraz rapu, wykorzystując ich modyfikowalność i potencjalność, które przejawiają się m.in. w nieustannie zmieniającym się *locus poeticus*. Ale barbarzyńskości formy nie należy utożsamiać z barbarzyńskością autora. Ostatecznie, barbarzyńska poezja nie jest prawdziwie barbarzyńska, w przeciwieństwie do przedstawianego barbarzyństwa. Barbarzyńskość jest przez poetów cywilizowana na wiele sposobów, czasami w sposób zabawny, czasem obrazoburczy, a poetycka formuła – nawet jeśli wydaje się wulgarna, antyliryczna i pozornie nieodpowiednia – jest w istocie nobilitowana.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, nowa poezja polska, nowa poezja belgijska, Szczepan Kopyt, Vincent Tholomé