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Julian Przyboś and the Literary Genres

Abstract

This article reviews the various ways in which Julian Przyboś dealt with genre conventions in his poetry. He used old forms of prose poetry, reworked the convention of hymn, ode and sonnet, wrote lullabies and rhymes, and, as one of the first poetry writers, brought the non-literary genres into poetry (letter, menu, postcard, note). Przyboś is also a prolific author of articles published in periodicals, prefaces and afterwords in books by other authors, or texts included in joint publications, many of which were forgotten or scattered. Through recalling these mostly concise publications a fuller reconstruction of Przyboś's attitude to genre conventions is enabled and helps to track the generic evolution of the avant-garde poet. Also, a new perspective is provided by reviewing the poet's home archive, which has been kept by his wife thus far. The poet paid attention to form consciously constructed structure to his compositions, with precision and scrupulousness, forming complex, though apparently simple constructions. The hesitation accompanying the classification of some of the notes only confirms the innovative character of his poetry, putting forward new forms, which undertake the game with tradition and exploit the richness of modern Polish.

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At the time of Julian Przyboś's poetic debut, the principles governing new poetry had only just begun to be shaped and the categorization of literary genres remained unclear (Balcerzan 1972: 72–73). The bodies of particular poems — avant-garde, futurist or those characteristic of the Skamander group of poets — encompassed potential, as if yet undiscovered, structures of literary conventions, which only after being reinforced by repetition in further texts could establish new forms of poetic expression (Balcerzan 1972: 74). The genre categorization is difficult to determine, which, as Edward Balcerzan pinpoints, is fixed between the easily distinguishable sphere of thought and the equally palpable stylistic plane, in the newly founded and unidentified poetic system (Balcerzan 1972: 72–75). The lack of a series based on the actual recurrence of the construct scheme hinders what is distinguishing and describes the potentially repeatable set of genre criteria. Consequently this striving for originality, uniqueness and singleness of lyrical composition means that elements of genre conventions remain transparent and undiscovered (Kwiatkowska 2011).

To a large extent the avant-garde abolished the essentiality of genre in poetry, relying instead on poetic art's autonomy rather than on the uniqueness of language. The demand for a poem's originality did not coincide with the repetitiveness of genre models, which were the expression of already familiar, hence undesirable, communicative situations (Cudak 2000: 26). The avant-garde poem should not copy the already existing forms of expression, but forge its own model, an exclusive lyrical situation, a singular construct (Balcerzan 1972: 76). The changes that had begun in the interbellum period led to the assumed crisis of genre. As Stanisław Balbus observes, literature, which freed itself from the external taxonomic chains, bared the paralysis of the literary theory, unable to describe the only partially unearthed and unique manifestations of genre categorization (Balbus 2000: 21). Overcoming normative poetics has always been the prerequisite of literary progress which enabled the evolution of poetic forms. However, in the 20th century, this process did not head toward the creation of a new order, but rather dispersed to short-lived and singular classifications, existing within a particular lyrical composition. Therefore, attempts to perceive these innovations as subject to superior principles and taxonomy could not have succeeded (Zgorzelski 1975).

Julian Przyboś, as most avant-garde writers, in the pursuit of originality, transgresses the genre conventions as well. To him, to subject the work to fixed norms, even if they only concerned the literary genre, would be a token of repetitiveness and submission to the overbearing influence of the codified system. Nevertheless, conscious of the value of tradition,

the poet is not entirely detached from the genre rules, but plays an architextual game with them, perfectly explicit in his poems. The forms of ode, sonnet, and hymn reappear in his works, undergoing further transformations. By changing them, Przyboś triggers tradition and begins a dialogue with the past, alluding to various outstanding works, which represent specific genres. The famous *Oda do turpistów* [*Ode to Turpists*]¹ is a paraphrase of Mickiewicz's *Oda do młodości* [*Ode to Youth*], the poem *Zamiast sonetu* [*Instead of Sonnet*] alludes to *Crimean Sonnets*, while *Z rozłamu dwu mórz* [*From the Rupture of Two Seas*] clearly refers to Słowacki's *Hymn*. Many a similar example taken from Przyboś's other poem collections can be brought up.

The contemporary reception of Przyboś's works focuses first and foremost on his lyrical compositions (available in two issues with critical commentary, the collection chosen by Edward Balcerzan and Anna Legeżyńska, and the full edition arranged by Rościsław Skręt), essays and critical texts (collected in the volumes *Sens poetycki* [*Poetic sense*] and *Linia i gwar* [*The line and the hubbub*], as well as a compilation of short sketches (published as *Diary Without Date*)². Yet Przyboś is also a prolific author of articles published in periodicals, prefaces and afterwords in books by other authors, or texts included in joint publications, many of which were forgotten or scattered. Recalling these mostly concise publications enables a fuller reconstruction of Przyboś's attitude to genre conventions and to tracking the generic evolution of the avant-garde poet. Also reviewing the poet's home archive, which has been kept by his wife thus far, provides a new perspective. The handwritings of poems, examined mostly by Rościsław Skręt, were included in the Jagiellonian Library collection a long time ago. Several dozen of folders filled with the poet's notes, shorthand notations, poetic ideas, unfinished typescripts, author's revisions, and newspaper clips, complemented by handwritten commentaries or drawings, still remain in Danuta Kula's apartment. Thanks to the analysis of this material, not only can the stages of Julian Przyboś's creative process be better understood, but also the path from an innovative metaphor (for example with a note dropped in a margin of a theatre program) to the final version of a poem, published in one of the volumes, can be tracked. A snippet, a fragment, or an unfinished form, all allow for a reanalysis of the poet's approach to language, stylistic and generic conventions, and the abundance of literary devices.

The majority of texts that have been kept in the home archive so far are essays in prose i.e. handwritten drafts and typescripts published primarily in newspapers, and later gathered in the volumes *Sens poetycki* and *Linia i gwar*. Among them are several dozen pages with poetic notations, which, however, barely constitute finished and complete works. They are rather, fragments of poems, lyrical scraps, bits of emerging compositions or noted ideas for new metaphors. If they had finally become part of a published poem, they constitute an intriguing material in which to explore the poet's techniques. Had they been unused, they encourage the search for the causes of their rejection and resignation from exploiting them, sometimes revealing a lot about the principles of the poetic program.

¹ Translator's note: the titles will be given in Polish, succeeded by a working translation in English, since the majority of Przyboś's works still await translation.

² The image of Przyboś originates from lyrical compositions (their reception pertains particular volumes or texts with a critical commentary, arranged by Edward Balcerzan and Anna Legeżyńska in the National Library series, and in the full edition by Rościsław Skręt, which also incorporates the drama *Geometria pijana*), poetic volumes, two comprehensive collections of essayistic and critical texts (*Sens poetycki* and *Linia i gwar*), and a collection of minor drafts *Zapiski bez daty*.

In the poem *Gmachy* [*Edifices*], comparing the hardships of a constructor and a poet, Przyboś wrote that *każda cegła spoczywa na wyjętej dłoni* [*every brick lays in a stretched hand*]. The analysis of the home archive creates a particular opportunity to glimpse at the metaphorical hand of the poet, for eternity frozen in the act of creation, pondering words, constructing metaphors — the building material of poetic edifice. The notes are accompanied by single sketches, drafts and illustrations, the flexible and nonverbal forms of expression, which appear next to the text, sometimes completely unrelated. It often seems that Przyboś simply wrote over on already used paper, on some old and dispensable typescript or handwriting, just to scribble or amuse his daughter with drawings. The cartoon stories about cats and dogs, drawn, as Danuta Kula recollects, to the amusement of Uta, in a sense complete the poems relating to children's poetry. Therefore, I call them small drawings, analogical to rhymes or hide and seek verses. In the volume *Wiersze i obrazki* [*Poems and sketches*] they function as titles, but also they denote genres (sometimes even single ones). The appreciation of the usually overlooked elements in Przyboś, the scattered texts or unknown details, brings into light his state-of-the-art approach to form. The poet incessantly engages in the architextual game, goes beyond and calls into question the generic conventions, establishes new ones, just to transform them again in no time. What attests to this approach toward form are also the unfinished texts from the author's poetic workshop, abandoned during word processing, showing at times the following, more and more refined versions.

The creative and original approach to conventions is often signalized by in the title of a composition, where, alongside a generic term, appears the word *instead*, which indicates participation in a very specific game. In the critical text *Do Janusza Koniusza. Zamiast recenzji ze „Śladu przelotu”* [*To Janusz Koniusz. Instead of “A Trace of Flight” review*], Przyboś distances himself from the traditional form of a review, leaving it, as he writes, to professional critics. He himself abstains from taking up this role. He prefers to speak as a poet, an older and more experienced colleague of the criticized author, who patronizingly offers a bunch of advice on the process of creation. Describing the author's output in the final part he addresses him in a direct apostrophe, encourages the bravery and sincerity, to *exposing his most hidden self*.

A similarly formulated title has a completely different function in the poem *Zamiast sonetu* [*Instead of a sonnet*] (from the yet to be published volume 22 *wiersze* [22 *poems*]). It is one of the numerous poems, which refers to a specific prior text and the place it describes. In this particular case the poem references to Mickiewicz's *The Crimean Sonnets* and the Crimean mountainous landscape. Analogous duality can be observed in the poem *List ze Szwajcarii* [*Letter from Switzerland*] (from the volume *Rzut pionony* [*Vertical throw*]), alluding to Mickiewicz's *Nad wodą wielką i czystą* [*By the water great and clear*] and to the landscapes of Lausanne, or, in the poem *Znasz-li* [*Do you know*] (from the volume *Równanie serca* [*The equation of the heart*]) implying *Do H*** wezwanie do Neapolu* [*To H*** summons to Napoli*] by Mickiewicz, describing the beauty of this Italian region. In most cases the references are brought about by the clash of the 20th-century sensually experienced reality with the 19th-century poet's imagery. Przyboś, following in the footsteps of one of Poland's *Three Bards*, is aware of the fact that Mickiewicz's evocative depictions of Lithuania, Crimea, or Switzerland became part of the national collective consciousness and, in a sense, impose on the traveller the confrontation of what he sees in front of him with its literary equivalent (Kwiatkowska 2015: 112).

The poet knows that the experience, especially that gathered during travelling, is unique, because even if one returns to the same place, neither the circumstances will be identical, nor

the traveller himself will look at things from a different perspective. However, it is possible to try repeating these experiences in language (Marciniak 2009: 89) and thus confront the past and the present feelings, one's own and somebody else's, linked by the object of observation. Przyboś reads Mickiewicz's Crimean landscapes in a different light, contrary to Mickiewicz, seeing Crimea *unlike [...] the grand one from Sonnets* (in the poem *Zamiast sonetu*). Yet he could not remain indifferent to the Romantic poet's virtuosity. Therefore, he remodeled his concept simultaneously by creating an architextual avant-garde sonnet-like composition. The 14-verse piece is divided into two parts in the following proportions: 13 verses plus 1-verse point. The first part, which in sonnets is usually descriptive in character, is the touching of landscape of sorts, a moving image that slides into the poem. The final thought enclosed in brackets diagnoses feelings (*Tak miesiąc serca nie boli mnie bardziej*) [(*This way the heart muscle doesn't hurt me more*)] (Kwiatkowska 2011).

Przyboś's genologic decisions are never coincidental, nor are they an expression of disdain for the existing conventions. Even the choice of the noncommittal form of *Zapiski bez daty* is a clear statement that the included texts will combine features of various genres in the field of literature, journalistic writing and literary criticism. The artistic freedom found in the program does not exclude the discipline of composition so typical of the poet. Outlines of the table of contents from [*Diary Without Dates*] were kept in the poet's home archive and speak volumes about the consideration the poet gave to the arrangement of particular drafts, connected and linked by the same subject issues³. Przyboś put the titles in one column, while in the other he added titles of drafts, which were yet to be placed in the volume.

Also the analysis of the essays in French, kept in different typescript variants, at various editorial stages, helps to recreate the author's specific method of working with a text. The alterations made at the stage of author's translation revision can be traced for instance in the draft on abstract painting⁴. Przyboś entirely changed the preliminary parts of the article and reworded the title. Its original version indicates the uncertainty concerning the fate and evolution of this branch of art. Among the crossed out and revised ideas are phrases such as *where it's heading for or perspectives*. The final heading *The Crisis of Abstract Painting* provocatively and ingeniously suggests unambiguous diagnosis.

This desire for precision in formulating headings, which are not to be unequivocal, but should reflect the message conveyed in the composition in the most comprehensive way, is partly determined by the focus on the reader. The project of the reader embedded in Przyboś's texts is very apparent and connects with the importance the author assigned to the reception of his works, meetings with readers, or contact with the broadly defined public. Many a poem (among others the poems (*List do brata na wieś* [*A Letter to a Brother in the Countryside*], or *Świetlica* [*Clubhouse*], from the volume *Najmniej słów* [*The Minimum of Words*]) speaks of a meeting with a reader, reconstructing dialogue with a receiver of his poetry.

Przyboś willingly accepted various forms of encounters with his readers, he did not shun from speaking in public, he appeared in the then contemporary media, gave interviews to literary magazines, took part in polemics, discussions, radiobroadcasts, and responded to all manner of surveys. Not only did he speak about literature, but also about current issues (for

³ In the folder 12. The text was taken from the newspaper clips kept in Julian Przyboś's home archive, accessible thanks to the courtesy of Ms Danuta Kula and Ms Uta Przyboś.

⁴ In the folder 15.

example he voiced his opinion on the location of the Monument to the Heroes of Warsaw)⁵. He was receptive to new forms of expression, could adjust to the circumstances and his capabilities, strongly limited by his poor health by the end of his life. Apart from numerous interviews, which he gave in agreement with the traditional genre convention (frequently titled or subtitled *conversations*⁶), he carried on correspondence, in which not only did he state his opinions in various surveys, but also prepared more complex forms. In 1970's in *Nowe Książki* [*The New Books*] (issue 5, vol. 497 of March 15, 1970, pp. 257–260) a correspondence interview with Julian Przyboś, conducted on behalf of the editors by Michał Sprusiński, titled *Chaos i rygor* [*Chaos and Rigor*] was published. The poet meticulously collected clippings with such publications, categorizing them and sometimes adding handwritten comments in the margins.

The original and single genre forms emerge from these kinds of dialogues, with a receiver or another text, through the clashes with other people's opinions, ways of perception and views on the world, from the search for similarities and investigation into the reasons behind divergence. As a consequence of Przyboś's creativity, the forms, whose designations were taken from common language or created from literary un-marked terms, begin to denote single, potentially repeatable, genres. Such is the case with the afterthought about Stanisław Pigoń's autobiographical book *Z Komborni w świat* [*From Kombornia into the World*] (Kraków 1957). Przyboś wrote about it in *O pamiętniku Pigońa słówko osobiste* [*A Private Word about Pigoń's Diary*], marked with his initials J.P.

The poet strongly senses and emphasizes the similarity of both Pigoń's and his own experiences — the story of *a boy who repeatedly and heavily pounded on the tall doors of science* (p...). He compares Gwoźnica to Kombornia, he wonders about moral values and the concept of peasant honor, he expresses his opinion on the attitudes and beliefs of the diaries' author. This personal, confession-like tone makes the work transcend the framework of the critical review. It rather serves as evidence of the specific conglomerate co-induced by Przyboś's creative potential and speaks of his identity. The awareness of one's origins, the attachment of extreme importance to peasant origin and related sensibility, shaped by close contact with nature and absorption of folk stories and legends (old Pilecka's storytelling), combines with extraordinary erudition, the love of knowledge and the belief that culture completes nature. It is possible to understand the world, to get to know it by close contact with nature and imitation of its might in the creations of culture. This parallel, prominent for instance in the mountain-like lofty buildings in the poem *Gmachy* [*Edifices*], or the cathedral resembling an inverted abyss in the poem *Notre-Dame*, allows Przyboś to synthesize two personalities, as he writes in the poem *Były dyrektor biblioteki* [*The Former Library Director*], the meadow and book sides. Thanks to these personal thoughts, the *private words* of sorts, the autobiographical and read experiences can be put together, merged into one, and can show how they influence one another and shape the perception of two words, nature and culture.

⁵ Statement, voice in discussion, conversation — these are terms accompanying his remarks on the Monument to the Heroes of Warsaw, published in *Rejsy* magazine, or opinions in "Życie Literackie" or the series *Rozmowy z pisarzami*. The discussion about the Monument to the Heroes of Warsaw still continues. Julian Przyboś's project. *Rejsy* talks with the poet. 1957. Conversations with poets. Julian Przyboś, "Życie Literackie", no. 325, pp. 2–3, 7. The clips with both his appearances Przyboś scrupulously kept in an unlabelled cardboard folder containing categorized newspaper materials.

⁶ For instance: *Rozmowa z Julianem Przybosiem*, "Nowiny tygodnia. Dodatek społeczno-kulturalny »Nowin Rzeszowskich«", no. 20 (463), May 30, 1959, pp. 1–3.

According to Stanisław Balbus, even a single literary composition can form a genre if it has and archtext, a superior structure, which can guarantee a renewal, even if such a series does not exist yet (Balbus 2009: 27). Przyboś seems to be a forerunner of such single genres. *Widokówka, Chowanka* [Postcard, Hide and Seek], a collection of rhymes, which are chronologically ahead of, among others, *Szumy, złępy, ciagi* by Miron Białoszewski. In the following volumes the archtextual references signalized so far in the poems' titles more notably give place to the single genre forms — the poems, which speak, but also are, leaving a mark of their unique, material form. *Telefon dwuletniej Uty* [2-year-old Uta's Phone], *Butterfly*, or *Katedra jest biała* [The Cathedral is White], are compositions which, on the one hand, very strongly refer to visual experiences by invoking certain images and denoting material reality, while on the other hand, they often point to a fissure between word and reality, impossible to be covered. Only child's expressions literally depict reality, inasmuch as their imagination is unaffected by other people's experiences. The myth of children's directness introduced in *Wiersze i obrazki* [Poems and Pictures] reduces the archtextual references (though a child does not know generic categorization), substituting them with single, potentially repeatable, genres. Poetry and reality intermingle with one another, just as in the much later volume by K. Miłobędzka *wszystkowiersze*.

Many of the single forms are inspired by utilitarian genres, which manifest in Przyboś's lyrical compositions (for instance *Do młodego poety w Warszawie. List czy Jadłospis* [To Young Poet in Warsaw. Letter or Menu], while the official correspondence kept in the home archive more often than not shows the poet's views on aesthetics. Apart from the formal letters, (such as the request addressed to the president of The Office for the Control of the Press, Publications, and Entertainment for granting the permission to edit and publish a monthly on literature and art "Rzecz"), voluble open letters to editors of periodicals, written in a journalistic style, have been preserved as well (mostly of interventionist character). In this manner Przyboś addresses the editors of "Życie Warszawy" on the matter of a new building being built, offering garages and workshops, contrary, as the poet believes, to the residents' expectations for a shop and a post office to be built. This letter, written with rhetoric ease and journalist feel, in such a manner to interest and endear readers, clearly demonstrates the characteristics of the era (Supersam is obviously the anticipated market).

Indeed, in Przyboś, genre conventions merge, just as life and literature intertwine. The lyrical settings remain rooted in the reality, and the majority of poems were inspired by authentic events, experiences or observations. How the world is perceived is one of the most important themes in his poetry. Therefore, amidst simple sentences, phrases or remarks noted here and there, it is difficult to distinguish at times the ones with the potentially large charge of lyricism and separate them from ordinary notes, facilitating the organization of everyday life. Przyboś's home archive contains many small notes written by the poet on some redundant scraps of paper, in everyday newspapers' margins, on backs of theatre programs, or partly used page sheets. Sometimes, these are undoubtedly ordinary memo notes, scraps of everyday life, a list of chores to do, a title of a book, someone's address or name, or a list of addressees, to whom a new poetry volume should be sent. At times, however, to serve as a reminder, Przyboś notes a poetic idea, a metaphor, a shred of poetry. The boundary between these two types of notes sometimes becomes blurred. For instance the enumeration of a series of mechanical terms noted in the margins of a diary from 1964 (among others: centrifugal, rotary-screw, reciprocating compressors, grinding

machines, theory of machining, fundamentals of mechanics, polymers, heavy cogged gear, resilience and plasticity⁷) raises some doubts.

Przyboś was preparing a collection *Nike i słownik. Kompozycja wierszy na dwudziestolecie dla teatrów poezji* (Warsaw 1964), he gave a few lectures outside Warsaw, discussed the profile of a newly emerging poetic monthly, he served on many juries judging competitions, he was looking for a translator for a French edition of Strzemiński's *Teoria widzenia*. There is no indication that Przyboś needed information about the technical issues, next to which he also scribbled down the book title *Podręcznik telemontera budownictwa łączności* by Piotr Binder, first published in 1956 and reprinted many a time. Still, the points written down by the poet are not the table of contents, or key issues discussed in the book. The assumption that in the 1960's Przyboś gathered specialist vocabulary as building blocks for metaphors seems implausible, too. The poems depicting machine tools, lathes, railway engines, or dynamos belong to the avant-garde poet's past, along with his fascination for new technologies. The abovementioned note does not have the features of superimposed order, does not carry any poetic charge, and it would be extremely difficult to find any metaphoric meanings behind it. Neither does it have any direct connection to the articles next to which it was scribbled down, pertaining, inter alia, a cancellation of visas to East Germany, the meeting of E. Ochab and J. Cyrankiewicz with an American minister visiting Poland, or a J. Broz-Tito's visit to Lenin-grad. However, for some unknown reason, it has been meticulously kept in the folder with other newspaper clips, the fragment of newspaper was definitely sectioned out of consideration for the technical notes, while none of the articles were kept in their entirety.

The same folder contains clips on literature and culture, where Przyboś highlighted fragments which interested him, or added a brief comment, usually regarding the problems discussed in the retained articles. In addition, there are a few pages, mostly fragments of theatre or conference programs, with their margins filled with metaphors and phrases known from the poet's compositions. Such intermixture of data, the inability to draw a clear boundary between the utility note and literature was surely not Przyboś's intention. The poet paid attention to form consciously constructed structure of his compositions, with precision and scrupulousness forming complex, though apparently simple constructions. The hesitation accompanying the classification of some of the notes only confirms the innovative character of his poetry, putting forward new forms, which undertake the game with tradition and exploit the richness of modern Polish.

Translated by ALICJA SEMPOWICZ-KALCZYŃSKA

⁷ In the folder 17.

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