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Miron Białoszewski and Gertrude Stein: The Avant-Garde Poetics as an Insight into Historical Traumatic Experience

Let me start with a reader's intuition. The more one reads the work of writers who are commonly assessed as difficult, or interested in furthering the cause of the "avant-garde" understood as a purely "artistic" enterprise, the more one comes to suspect that these assessments must be missing some important point. The most shaky assumption would be that the art of such poets is deliberately and splendidly useless. Especially in the American avant-garde tradition – including such poets as, for example, William Carlos Williams or Gertrude Stein – the notion of art as something separate from life, the notion of art for art's sake, should be understood as increasingly untenable in the developments of the twentieth-century avant-garde. In fact, these developments show avant-garde to have produced a very "useful" formula – useful for a traditional task: that of telling poets, readers, and communities how they are living or what they have lived through.

Such intuition is not very original. Rather, I would risk saying that it will be a common ground nowadays for most readers of the "difficult" poets, especially in the American tradition, and especially if reading them can be backed up by the illuminating work of such critics as Marjorie Perloff, Charles Altieri, and many others.[1] But it seems that there is a high price that the "difficult" poetry has had to pay for being brought closer to the life of the language users. Paradoxically, in order for this poetry to appear as much a part of life as a part of art, it has had to be packaged by all kinds of discourses which highlight such qualities as indeterminacy, lack of referential value, deferral of meaning, or even the impossibility of reading. For example, Perloff's work relied heavily on "indeterminacy" and lack of referential connections in order to distinguish the work of such poets as Gertrude Stein, Charles Bernstein, John Ashbery, or Lyn Hejinian, from other, more "referential" or traditional poets. For Perloff, the life-like quality of these artists

[1] In the American tradition, the usefulness of the avant-garde is a result of the influence coming from pragmatic thinkers, notably John Dewey, whose ideas on the relations between art, experience, nature, and everydayness help shift the position of art and artist from a rebellious or elitist outsider to a creative participant of the processes making up the life of the community. The situation is not so clear in the Polish poetic tradition. Characteristically, many young Polish poets, writing nowadays in the modes that derive from the broad heritage of the twentieth-century avant-garde, often American, still link the prestige and aesthetic value of poetry with its utter "uselessness."

lies in how they manipulate and expose the linguistic codes that make up the beliefs of the community. The danger of such approach is that the avant-garde poem may appear to be an instruction manual for avoidance of linguistic naivete. But one does not live by instruction manuals. Thus, with varieties of indeterminacy being undoubtedly at work in avant-garde writing, the intuition of its proximity and usefulness for life must re-evaluate the "indeterminate" qualities of language; these must be shown, somehow, to actually give us more of life than traditional reference.

But how is that to be achieved? The situation is not made easier with those critical formations which treat literature, indeed *define* it, as *the* ground on which the aporetic, meaning-thwarting nature of language is exemplified. Deconstruction, for instance, has insisted that either reading itself is impossible (the claim of the early deconstructive critics), or, on a more advanced level of understanding the work of Derrida, that the meticulous study of how the work of literature problematizes reference is the richest critical insight to be achieved, leading the philosopher-critic to a renewed meditation on the presence of the present, trace, source, etc.[2] But if avant-garde, according to my opening intuition, is to be shown as realizing successfully its twentieth-century program of obliterating the artificial borderlines between ordinary life and art – not through simplistically understood mimesis – then deconstruction, understood as a philosophical description of the "nature" of the literary text, may not be the most exciting game to play when dealing with literature, at least its experimental branch. However complex and ingenuous the deconstructive analysis of the work may be, however rich inventory of terms it uses, it usually reduces the text to the same set of conclusions, which will show how the work cannot be identical with itself, or how its sense cannot be totalized. It is undeniable that

[2]A collective example of the early application of deconstruction to literary studies is, of course, found in the work of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller. Here is an apt summary of that stance offered by Anna Burzyńska: "'The expression of sense,' understood as obvious, is in fact impossible. To say the least, everything there is to express is another rhetorical figure. Thus criticism… can only 'make visible' the process in which the literary texts 'annul their own foundations'" (52; trans. K.B.). But what if the lack of foundations of "sense" is avant-garde texts' departure point? In that case, doesn't the early deconstructive critical standpoint sound misused when applied to avant-garde? A more interesting option is offered by Derrida himself. Michał Paweł Markowski, one of the French philosopher's most apt commentators, insists that for Derrida the main preoccupation of literature is not the cancellation of reference but a "negotiation" or "suspension" of it. In his recent comprehensive study of deconstruction, Markowski writes: "a literary work simultaneously sends the reader outside itself and questions that gesture; it assumes a 'thetic' metaphysics (a content, a sense, in a word 'logos') only to show it as something impossible" (192; trans. K.B.). As Markowski illustrates extensively, Derrida is interested in literature as a sphere in which these "laws of deconstruction" are most readily seen at work. But it also ensues from Markowski's argument that the exposition of this law in the work of literature serves the purposes of a philosopher, especially if the commentary shifts from literature in the narrow, traditional sense to Derridean arch-Literature: the space of inscription, the ground of reality. The problem, though, is that in the shift the critic abandons literature for Literature and becomes a philosopher: someone engaged in an ongoing debate with Plato over issues of ontology.

deconstruction is a genuinely original reading/writing practice. But it is equally important to realize that the main bearing of this originality is on the internal debate of philosophy. In other words, it seems that within Derridean deconstruction literature is a special sphere, illustrating the work of necessities that can speak against a certain tradition of thinking, or, simply put, a certain philosophical tradition. Not even the blurring of the division between literary and philosophical discourses changes this fact: the blurring helps Derrida to show how literature addresses issues that are strictly "philosophical."

As for experimental poetry, it has always operated on "deconstructive" intuitions. The idea of art becoming a part of life – not of the stillness of a museum – can be realized only by showing the not-to-be-avoided reality of the constant play of absence, trace, and interpretation. If this is the case, deconstruction, just like Perloff's "indeterminacy," should be treated, within commentary on literature, as a gesture that is very useful with the usefulness of an initial clearing of the ground. But the continuous and persistent showing of the deconstructive logic at work at the very basis of demanding poetic texts may be exactly what deconstructive critics want most to avoid – thematizing literature; specifically thematizing it as a locus of deconstruction. Such practice may be fruitless for showing how poetry addresses its non-philosophical, vital preoccupations. If avant-garde is truly to be a counterpart of life, the avant-garde poem must surely be an instance of life's unpredictability. But one does not show how a poem is such an instance by relying on predictable lines of argument that pertains to philosophy; rather, one treats the poem as an interlocutor in real life, by testing it against unpredictable contexts: those that the reader brings into the reading process. What I would urge, then, is that the critic nod thankfully toward the deconstructive findings as a given of the text – as a certain banal reality of the avant-garde text that it is useful to be aware of – and then proceed beyond the talk of how the text manipulates referentiality to examine how it behaves in unexpected circumstances, thus telling us something about our own behaviors.

In what follows, I am going to attempt such a description – one in which deconstruction would not be interesting as a major player – in illustrating how the work of Miron Białoszewski, one of Poland's most notorious "other" artists, is a passage to the traumatic historical experience of both the author as an individual and the whole community of language users. In Białoszewski's poetry, the processes that deconstruction *exposes* at work in literature are poetry's daily bread. Yet, his poetic prose, without engaging in theoretical deliberations, gives the reader a chance to participate in a literary experience that is as alive as literature can be. If the life of the text happens to be part of a historical trauma, then Białoszewski, without mourning the lack of the "totality of meaning," gives us a most engaging and authentic insight to the historical events, even though these are too dramatic to be rendered by traditional mimesis. Because I think that Białoszewski's

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poetic breakthroughs are very much akin to what the American poets had been finding exciting about their work slightly earlier, I will discuss Białoszewski's work in a sketched comparison to the poetics of Gertrude Stein.

Białoszewski's first poems were published in the 1940s, but his book debut occurred in 1956. Till his death in 1983 he published many volumes of poetry and prose, with the latter preoccupying him more extensively in the second part of his career. His output realizes a consistent project: to get away from literature as convention and to imitate the flow of life in its ordinary, everyday contexts. His, like Gertrude Stein's, is the avant-garde of everydayness – a deep belief in an inexhaustible mystery of our most familiar surroundings that can only be approached poetically. The focal point of his oeuvre is the publication in 1970 of *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, which shows the trauma of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising to be the formative experience for the poet. For Białoszewski, the experience of working on this extraordinary book is a psychological breakthrough and a consolidating boost for his creative life.

A Memoir presents the Warsaw Uprising – one of the most controversial and tragic events in the Polish history – from a perspective that is rather rare among those Polish literary works which in one way or another are concerned with the critical moments in the history of the nation: the perspective of a civilian survivor. This perspective is intentionally narrow; Białoszewski wants to understand what happened by speaking from within the event. Although he does make use of reflection and hindsight, *A Memoir*'s most powerful and constitutional layer is a relentless, excruciating relieving of the most basic feel of the survivor experience. Such positioning of the narrative voice works against the grain of the Polish literary tradition. Maria Janion has discussed at length the scandal of *A Memoir*: it refuses to generalize about the war, or to glorify the patriotic military effort (231-233). As a critic noted, *A Memoir*'s protagonist is "a human being in a given situation, not a Pole in History" (quoted in Janion 231; trans. K.B.).

This is to say that Białoszewski speaks against placing war in the sublime of the demoniac, the unrepresantable, the unspeakable, or the deeply subjective. Paradoxically, by sticking to the minutiae of the personal experience, and giving us what critics called a "microhistory,"[3] Białoszewski presents the experience of the many. My intention is to outline Białoszewski's technique of a continuous linguistic navigation amidst chaos by which he offers sharable experience.

The comparison between Białoszewski and Stein is not original. Krzysztof Ziarek has already noticed the affinities between the two, placing Białoszewski somewhere between

[3] The phrase was coined by Kazimierz Wyka, who says that microhistory is "more difficult to grasp and remember than big History, as it does not follow any scheme" (quoted in Janion 227-228; trans. K.B.).

Stein's avant-gardism and contemporary American LANGUAGE poets. Discussing Stein and Białoszewski in the context of Heidegger's discourse on art, Ziarek emphasizes the radical inessentiality of experience as the poietic site if the "now." It is this "now" that Stein activates, as she pursues its "intense existence" in a language that questions the essentiality of the grammatical rule. Commenting on "Stanzas in Meditation," Ziarek writes: "The tireless repetition of… phrases, combined with the absence of punctuation marks, creates the impression of language in a melted state, free to combine… in ways unexpected, or even repressed by discursive practices" (163). Ziarek demonstrates aptly how Stein's cryptic repetitions manage to highlight those aspects of language and the reading processes that are usually repressed, thus bringing language closer to life's mercurial ways, its very element of unpredictability. It is this avoidance of objectification and stasis that, according to Ziarek, places Stein's texts at the heart of the "event," i.e. "the ever shifting matrix of relations"; and it is in this sense that the texts are both imitative and partaking of "intense existence" (164).

Similarly, Ziarek highlights flexibility and unpredictability as the primary features of Białoszewski's poetry and prose. Like Stein, Białoszewski avoids submitting his language to the censoring machine of grammar or literary convention. Citing an earlier, seminal study by Barańczak, Ziarek re-emphasizes the colloquial and spoken layers of Białoszewski's works as a tool that returns the word to its living dynamic, its endless capacity for transformation (249).

The reading of *A Memoir* is a difficult experience. For the poet's English translator, Madeline Levine, his form is, as she puts it in the introduction to the American edition, "a rambling monologue which wonders from incident to incident, with frequent digressions from a basically chronological structure" (13). Apart from this intent – to order events chronologically – the text foregrounds no other organizational principle, swamping the reader with a tireless, uninterrupted avalanche of details, disjointed remarks, descriptions of scenes, or actions. No generalizing superstructure, no comprehensive overview emerges. Levine comments: "Białoszewski eschews the historians' attempt to create a pattern out of, or impose a meaning on, the random incidents which are for him the only reality of the uprising" (15). On the grammatical level, the text may resemble Stein's cubistic angularity and flexibility. In Ziarek's description "the chatter prose… of *A Memoir*… is composed mostly of fragments, one word sentences or sentence equivalents which effectively heightens the sense of increasing disorder and destruction" (253).

As numerous studies have already noted, Białoszewski's purpose is to retain the spoken qualities of delivery in the text. From the poet himself we learn that the creation process was a succession of writing, later dictated and tape-recorded, finally transcribed. Thus, each page of *A Memoir* presupposes the presence not so much of the reader as of

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a listener.[4] Having searched for years for a form that would render the uprising adequately, Białoszewski is surprised to find out that the form he needs is already there, lurking in his numerous, if random, retellings of the event to chance listeners, usually friends:

> For twenty years I could not write about this. Although I wanted to very much. I would talk. About the uprising. To so many people. All sorts of people. So many times. And all along I was thinking that I must describe the uprising, somehow or other *describe* it. And I didn't even know that those twenty years of talking (I have been talking about it for twenty years, because it is the greatest experience of my life – a closed experience), precisely that talking, is the only proper way to describe the uprising. (*Memoir* 52; Polish version 39; author's emphasis)

This realization links Białoszewski again with Steinian spontaneity which, as we learn from Marjorie Perloff, can be illuminated further by the context of Wittgenstein's ideas about language. Białoszewski's amazement at finding his form already at hand, for example, echoes Wittgenstein's choice of method for his *Investigations*:

> After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into… a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. (quoted in Perloff 65)

Perloff comments: "Wittgenstein himself understands that this mode of 'investigation' cannot have… an underlying theme or master plot" (65). Instead, there is "sudden change, jumping from one topic to another" which Perloff sees as similar to Stein's method of "beginning again and again" (65). For all three writers the intention is the same: to pay attention to the singularity of each situation, and to avoid the essentialist model of language in which meaning results from stable referentiality and rules that are antecedent to the event. Just as Wittgenstein realizes that he must allow the thought to flow freely in a fragmentary rhythm, so does Białoszewski realize that there is no encompassing, coherent, unifying narrative of the uprising, and that his form has already happened to him – in random exchanges with chance listeners. In other words, the three poetics – Stein's, Wittgenstein's, and Białoszewski's – are similar in their insistence that no pre-given rule determines meaning. The ordinary situations are watched and studied as "complete," authoritative, always having advantage over theoretical prescriptions.

[4] Białoszewski said in an interview: "Talk is better [than writing]…. *A Memoir* as a whole went through the ear" (quoted in Janion 221n; tans. K.B.).

Janion has pointed out how Białoszewski brings war down from ideological pedestals, examining it in surprisingly un-heroic and mundane sequences, day by day and night by night, profaning the war's mythologies and "saving life" (223). In this regard, Białoszewski's work corresponds clearly to Stein's pursuit of "intense existence."

And yet, with all these similarities among them, the two projects differ as well, *A Memoir* emphasizing a different context, goal, and outcome of linguistic experiment than Stein's. As Perloff has illustrated, Stein's playful repetitiveness questions the totalizing orders and schemes of thinking. The American poet's angular syntax is subversive, proposing utterances that cannot be explained by grammar, performing an artistic defamiliarization, a healthy dismantling of the scenes she comes to. This strategy has artistic as well as theoretical and political resonance. Now, although Białoszewski also values the subversively authentic usage over grammatical convention, we have to mind the fact that he approaches a different kind of linguistic scenes: those in which the dismantling is already performed for him, in a violent way. "Life saving" is a rich phrase that has undertones going beyond the discussion of literary form: it can, and should, be understood literally. Thus, there is a tonal, contextual, and structural difference that the critic should discern approaching Stein's "intense existence" and Białoszewski's "life-saving," a difference that stems from their identical approach to language – language as an inessential faithfulness to the event.

"Eventfulness" of literature works differently for Białoszewski, at least in his *Memoir*. Here, the poet's task is to try to keep pace with the process in which reality is dismantled *for him*, in which the reduction of reality to its basic elements is not an act of artistic innovation or daring, but a violent imposition from without. If Białoszewski takes apart his language in a fashion reminiscent of Stein, he does so for re-constructive purposes: his ambition is to render, as faithfully as possible, the feel of life under constant threat of annihilation. The poet's language travels back in time and, at the instant of the telling, lives the life of a besieged and hunted civilian around whom the contexts of meaning-making are shifting and crumbling literally. Similarly, the language, or the subject in language, progresses in fits and starts, hesitates, errs, changes directions, always seeking and miraculously finding passages in which to escape death: death of language, death of experience, and, most importantly, death of the author. In other words, Białoszewski's operations catch up with the pace of destruction and save more permanently habitable spaces, in which the tricky ways of physical survival can occur, and in which memory can get back to those instances. Just as the main character copes with reality that is violently falling apart, so does the language work toward reconstruction, primarily the activation of memory, and the imitation of the actual experience.

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The difference between Białoszewski and Stein can be elaborated further by focusing on the American poet's famous decision to diminish the role of nouns in her writing. For her, the traditional dominance of nominalization is a trademark of the "discourse of patriarchal culture." Ziarek provides relevant commentary: "Stein's implicit critique of the exclusion of domesticity and ordinary language from high modernist art takes the form of undoing definitional and descriptive patterns in reference to everyday objects" (165). However, while Stein *re-introduces* domesticity into art by removing the most stable parts of speech and withdrawing the obvious referential impulse inherent in them, Białoszewski must re-establish habitable spaces, notably domestic ones, by, paradoxically, active *re-construction* of points of reference. Even though, just like Stein's, Białoszewski's goal lies in avoidance of linguistic petrifaction, it is not in his interest to eliminate substantives from the language. It is not stable *reference* that is a problem in *A Memoir*, but the very *reconstruction* of reality, language, and self. In the process, these elements – physicality of the world, linguistic searching for points of reference, and a sense of the self – become aspects of one whole, a larger entity that we could perhaps call *living*. Thus, Białoszewski will take all parts of language as they come to him, just as a survivor gladly accepts whatever the waves wash upon the shore, not reflecting on the political or theoretical status of the life-saving flotsam jetsam.

Interestingly, it is nominalization that his narration often foregrounds. The gerundial nominal form is very frequent in *A Memoir*, even obsessive, often a result of Białoszewski's notorious colloquialisms or word deformations: "latania," "rozejścia się," "palenia," "przechodzenia," "przesiadywania," "przepojęciowania," "popalenie się," "bez mienia powodu," "najtrudniejszy do iścia" etc. Janion comments on the frequency with which the word "latanie," in a variety of its derivations – approximated by Levine variously, for example as "scurrying" or "running" – occurs in the text (234). The semantics point to chaos and shiftiness; but the word-formative impulse works against it, searching for something substantial. The gerundial forms both make the text more dynamic and, paradoxically, try to control the dynamics. This tendency to turn verbs into nouns can be seen as one of the adaptive features of language that copes, the poet trying to slow down reality that is becoming a dangerously speeding verb and hold on to temporarily created substances. As we shall see further, the anchoring quality is especially conspicuous with those nominalizations that engage the bodily. Speaking of such other gerundial forms as "kucanie" (crouching) – which functions as an opposite to "latanie" – and "leżenie" ("laying down") – occuring in Białoszewski's poetry – Janion points out how these forms serve to create not so much *reference* as a sense of temporary anchorage (237). While Stein re-introduces domesticity by avoiding nouns as the most "referential" parts of speech, Białoszewski reconstructs this human sphere by getting around

the problem of referentiality and using his idiom as a spontaneous tool whose use is discovered on the go.

Let us now take a closer look at a few passages from *A Memoir*, which will allow us to examine in more detail the way Białoszewski's language achieves its reconstructive powers. The coping of his language is operative on a few levels, engaging, and ultimately combining into one expressive form, a number of spheres, the most important of which are memory, language, and the physical layer of existence that engages the bodily.

In one of the passages we encounter the following event:

> All of a sudden – bombers. They are diving at the rooftops, scattering their bombs. Now they're gone. Now they're back again. Farther. Nearer. Now they are flying into Baroque Street. We do too. They fly blindly. We too. We is I. And someone else. Like me. We. Two of us. Here. Only. Neither here nor there. Because now. They're here! We run. Into some one-storied what (?)… empty… it races, we race along (?) the downstairs rooms (?) of something's halls (?), which already is changing, howling, clanking. We rush on, bricks are flying, the bombers harry us. A proverbial brick. One. And there are so many here: ping! ping! We raise our collars. What kind of stupid instinct?! We jump. Ping! ping! Just don't yield. To chance. Everything's important. Because he is flying in zigzagz. In spurts. Between the walls. Sssshh-boom. Falling plaster. Whitewash. Something. From the rain gutters. Wait? No. Don't stand still. Zoom. That hill is flying, maybe we can sit down… I don't know how many times we jump; suddenly ping! ping! Nothing. Feints. Only… As was necessary, in my opinion. (78; 66)

As the survivor keeps on moving, the language that copes uses whatever resources are handy. There is no difference in the fragment between its "literary" and strictly descriptive or relational values: the literary tropes become tropes of survival. The fragment uses all sorts of figurative movements: its has a rhythm, it uses repetition, onomatopoeia, indeterminacy, metaphor ("proverbial brick"), elements of internal dialogue ("Wait? No. Don't stand still"), editorial omniscience ("as was necessary in my opinion"). The word use in the fragment is unusual, slanted, diverting from expectable collocative patterns, or even ordinary semantics. For example, for the Polish version's narrator, the bombers "kucają na dachy." A word for word translation would produce: "the bombers are crouching onto the rooftops." Levine's translation ("[the bombers] are diving at the rooftops") is unable to render Białoszewski's diversion from use: in English bombers can "dive," whereas in Polish it is only the idiom imposed by the event that makes the narrator talk about the bombers by using the terms that really apply to his own body –

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"kucają" ("they are crouching"). Usually, in Polish, bombers do not "crouch." Typically in the fragment, words are wrenched from referential sockets: "what (?)… empty… it races, we race along(?)" ("co? puste, lata, latamy"). Instead of reference we have "free talk" based on intuition, and impromptu creativity so typical of colloquial encounters. It is characteristic of such exchanges that they continue even if the interlocutors are temporarily lost. It is because the interlocutors create a space in which they make allowances for the other participant's attempts to *make* sense*,* however clumsy, ineffectual, or bizarre they may be. Such is the situation of the reader of the above passage. When the narrator says: "That hill is flying," readers must enter such a space of charitable allowance and rely on surmise and conjecture.

The point here is not to *suspend* or *problematize* reference, but, indeed, to *re-find* reference. But now reference is not a term burdened with a history of philosophical inquiry but a matter of poetic creation and pragmatic survival. And an even more crucial point is that, despite Białoszewski's erratic conduct in the passage, communication with the reader/listener is possible; reference is re-found, even if only temporarily, in the reading process. Neither reality nor the possibility of reading – the narrator's "reading" of his situation and the reader's reading the text – is negated. In fact, the text works *against* such impossibility. Dissemination, dispersal of meaning, Mallarméan "blank," deferral of meaning, do not have to be "exposed" in this text, since the text has no pretense to any totalization of sense or arrest of the signifying play. Lack of totality and an ongoing "play" – play of life against death – are the very *reality* here. And yet, reading, understanding, and sense are possible; indeed, are the crucial bid of the text. In relation to such passages, it would be banal to work with the tools of *deconstruction;* applied to poets like Białoszewski, the talk of deconstruction would be sheer paraphrase.[5]

Moreover, such fragments question the division into reality, human subject, and language as a tool of representation. Instead, these three are shown to be a continuous entity: just as reality is blurred, so is language and the sense of the self: "We too. We is I" ("My też. Ja to my"). Not just *reference* is suspended: the basic entities that make up human life are spun out of stability. Such is the language that matches disintegration. There are moments here in which the language literally, "does not know" what it is describing, or doing. What matters, however, is that the state of unknowing is inscribed in the prose, and that the prose works against it.

[5] Analyzing a poem by Białoszewski, one that develops over surreal, vertiginous word play dominated by complex sound relations and the use of nonsense, a critic concluded: "Paradise for a deconstructionist? No, rather hell. One deconstructs structures. Here, it would be necessary to reconstruct deconstruction" (Balcerzan 24; trans. K.B.).

The technique of inscribing uncertainty in the process of writing/talking is also operative in the following passage:

> We take off. We run. Barefoot. Along Ogrodowa Street. A barricade. We squeeze past. To Solna. Something's burning. Explosions. Beams are sailing through the air. Noise. They fall into the fire. With a thud. We dash along Solna. To Elektoralna. A barricade. We squeeze through… Somewhere beyond Orla Street a whole house is on fire on the left. Actually, it's being consumed by flames. There are hardly any ceilings left. Or walls. Again *the beams groan*, collapse. It's hot… The cornices again, but not as gray. Yellow. Which means in this dawn (it was barely dawn) they seemed to be covered with gold leaf. Perhaps this is where I saw the *pigeons*. The ones which *flew* up. Or just those cornices. In a different style. With little Corazzi *angels*. With garlands. Tympanums… Suddenly it is really dawn… On the left, on a gentle curve of Dluga Street, is the Palace of the Four Winds. The whole building is on fire. It's already destroyed. The flames are howling… *The beams groan*, collapse. The tympanum, with its bas relief, is still standing. The twinkling medalions. The carved gates of the inner courtyard. And those *Four Winds*. On the pillars of the gate. They have gilded *wings*. *They gambol, shine*. They seem to be dancing even more gaily than usual. We run on. (39-40; 25-26; emphasis added)

Here, retaining the error and accident of impromptu composition activates memory: the poet bumps into associations that disclose the scenes of memory. Running through the fragment is a thread of auditory associations that link the sounds of the raging flames, crumbling architecture, the sound of an imaginary wind, and the flight of the pigeons (see the emphasis added in the quoted fragment). Again, it is the strained collocations that activate memory. In the original, burning beams give off a sound that is collocatively reserved for the sound of the wind – "szumią" (26), thus anticipating the find of the architectural decoration – the "Four Winds" – later in the fragment. Also, the winged statues of the Four Winds, animated by the flames, correspond to scattered fluttering of the pigeons' flight. The auditory imagery – both consistent and idiomatic – returns and binds the shifting scenes. Thus, the poet's idiosyncratic usage – his erratic, hardly referential utterance – actually succeeds in constructing an amazingly complex net of associations, in which the singularity of the event – a dramatic chunk of personal history – integrates effortlessly with the system of larger, historical imagination of the whole nation, if not the whole European culture. Białoszewski deals simultaneously with the very minutiae of the personal experience – the question of where and when he saw the pigeons, what it felt like to be amidst the pandemonium, where they ran, etc. – and with the global significance of the scene. Here, it is the whole storage of western cultural ideals that is being destroyed.

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But for Białoszewski the work of association is not a matter of mere psychology or memory. The primary reason why reference, or *correspondence* of language to reality is not an issue for Białoszewski is that in his poetic imagination there is no division between the psyche, the language it uses, and the so-called external world. Białoszewski does not *represent* what happened to him; he re-lives it textually, drawing as much on his psychic impressionism and linguistic mastery as on something we can tentatively call the "memory of the bodily." Consider the following commentary, which, for its brevity, I quote in both versions:

> I am speaking of changes sensed by smell, by touch, on the run, by extending your hand, with the powdered ruins and smoke in your breath; in general, things sensed in profile, because after all it was night. (103)
>
> Mówię o zmianach na tak zwany niuch, dotyk: od dreptania, wyciągania rąk i wpadania kaszy gruzowej i dymu w dech; w ogóle coś w sylwecie – bo przecież to noc. (89)

There are many such passages in the book. It is because the scenes of the uprising are reductive. They reduce the so-called reality to a number of elementary sensations, or to handfuls of sensory data. The poet does not observe emotions, but merely gestures, movements, the constellations of the body, the air, the space, and the walls – a choreography of survival. The body, as much as language, is a locus of memory and, seeking to activate it, Białoszewski must recreate the network of bodily sensations. The language finds its bearings through the bodily, as did Białoszewski himself, when he had to get more permanent holds on reality.

In the most formative layer of his prose, Białoszewski combines the idiomatic nature of the event, language, thoughts and bodily actions into one whole. For their powerful effects, the passages rely on referential and collocational dislocations, uncertainties, and choppiness. In those fragments, the world is literally an unknown: its properties can only be surmised, and life is a matter of the success or failure of such continuous effort. Just as in the poetry of Stein, the meaning for the reader resides not in decoding the referential value, but in the following of the rhythms of not-knowing, in making a textual living out of permanent play of guesses. Like the narrator, the reader must perform something that John Ashbery, writing of Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, called: "the painful continual projection of the individual into life" (13).

Let us pause at this remark. In his review Ashbery makes it clear that he thinks Stein's unusual poetic procedures to be a perfect counterpart of life, in its unfathomable rhythms: "Just as life is being constantly altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of

elaboration [in Stein's work] seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening" (13). It is interesting to observe that this formulation comes from a writer famous for his opacity, difficulty, and the avant-garde stance. Clearly then, the avant-garde poetic that Ashbery captures so aptly does not consist of creating gaps between language, language users, and their circumstance. For Ashbery, and apparently for Stein too, these entities co-create a space that, although it cannot be totalized or reduced by any final statement in the language, is the only reality there is. If Stein's work could be commented on by pointing how it cancels referentiality, this approach will not be interesting in itself; it should only be a beginning to a further speculation on how avant-garde poetics is in fact closer to human daily existence, by exposing the process in which humans, thrown into their shifty "realities," are continuously engaged in making up their habitats. It would be fascinating, for example, to have a diversion from the language of negativity and bump into a new language, one that, having absorbed the negativity, could help us see how, in poetry, we are disclosed as different individuals by various contexts of landscapes, objects, or people. It would be even more fascinating if such language helped us understand how our life, our decisions, are affected by such disclosures.

Such language would demand that the discourses of negativity, such as deconstruction, are applied in the discourse on literature on different basis than so far. Much has been said about how the "economy of différance," or the "deferral of meaning" are *essential* to literature. But thus taken – as a form of grounding discourse – some potentials of deconstruction may be wasted. When dealing with Stein, Ashbery, Białoszewski, and many contemporary poets working with their legacies, the often hypertrophic apparatus of deconstruction is useless if treated as a method of returning literature to philosophy by revealing something *essential* about poetic enterprise. More interestingly, deconstruction is treated by poets themselves as a certain companion voice to their endeavor. These implications, however, cannot be examined here. Thus I propose to conclude by discussing Białoszewski from an alternative critical platform, one that is much less prone than deconstruction-as-method to making overarching claims that appropriate literature. The platform – a broadly understood pragmatism – belongs to the American critical tradition that was among Gertrude Stein's formative fascinations.

According to the philosopher Donald Davidson, language that has no essence – that is the language that Derrida also describes – thrives on "wit, luck… private vocabulary and grammar… on rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely" ("Derangement" 446). Such language is not separate form the palpable reality; it is simply a part of it, as is the subject. Instead of reference, which presupposes stable values, both linguistic and ontological, we have linguistic coping and dynamic finding of one's bearings in the world. Here, language is a skill which, alongside other

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skills such as, for example, simple body movements, belongs to the adaptive repertoire of the organism. The task of such language is not to *represent,* but to *move on*. Using a term from Davidson, we might say that Białoszewski's language gives us "reality without reference."[6] Echoing Wittgenstein's critique of the magical view of stable reference, Davidson's model of conversation gives us a continuum of the language users and their environment. This view, as Davidson says: "erase[s] the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally" (445-446). As such language happens, the issue is not the adequacy of its correspondence to *reality,* but its adaptive success. But within the pragmatic tradition, to which Davidson can be provisionally linked, there is no difference between the successful adaptive operations we perform in life and the operations of the artist. Whether Białoszewski succeeds as an individual – in overcoming the trauma and grappling with the crucial experience of his life – is the same issue as whether he succeeds artistically. This question, it seems to me, is much more interesting in case of Białoszewski – and in case of Stein – than the question of how the text thwarts, or exposes the aporias of meaning-making. If Białoszewski knows his language – if he re-learns it successfully – he survives, and he saves the experience for the reader, regardless of the indeterminacy that is at the very heart of it.

Does Białoszewski know his language? If we agree that his technique leads to a successful "projection of the individual into life," to recall Ashbery, or a successful finding of one's "way around the world generally," as Davidson puts it, we must follow up and say that *A Memoir* overcomes the problem of representability. Events such as the Warsaw Uprising do not need to be "represented" – they have to be poetically recuperated from unspeakability. *A Memoir* is fueled by the faith in the possibility of doing just that. Maria Janion quotes a remark by Białoszewski which functioned as authorial commentary to the first edition:

> And maybe it is possible. Because they say it isn't. To tell about it. About what one has lived through. That is – about what happened. Because if we know about anything, we do so only through telling about things, from descriptions, from pictures. Actually we know twice as much, because we also know about what did not happen, and was made up by those who ascribe a certain inconvenience to reality. I don't ascribe it. (quoted in Janion 227)

As we know from numerous studies, such inconvenience, when it occurs, is psychological in nature. In such cases the trauma blocks the language, incapacitating the wit-

[6] This phrase is a borrowed title of Davidson essay from 1977, collected in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation.*

nesses. But this shows that the problem is not of philosophical or strictly *linguistic* nature. Białoszewski operated on a simple belief that beats all sorts of skepticism, epistemological or linguistic. We know about the world through what we say about it, he insists, thus displaying an attitude that eschews the artificiality of philosophical problems, such as, for instance, skepticism in its various forms.

If Białoszewski manages to find form for his witnessing, it is also a form of overcoming the trauma. The narrator of *A Memoir* functions on two temporal levels, the past and the present, and if he "saves life," the feat applies to both levels. By activating memory in fragmented colloquial rhythms, Białoszewski learns his language again, reclaims it and his world – indeed the world of the community – from the speechlessness of trauma. As a witness of trauma, he is caught between the unspeakable and the need to speak out, and his task is one of re-finding his own self amidst such pressure. Białoszewski does that in conversation since this form poses the constant need of understanding oneself and sharing this understanding with others. As Davidson would put it, it is a matter of "triangulating"[7] one's meaning-making against other participants of the scene and the physical circumstance. By doing that, Białoszewski's poetry evokes a sphere in which a minimum of communication is possible.

But the final conclusion is that this minimum is enough. The sharable reality is a result not of stable reference, but of communicative work, which does not violate what must remain unspoken, but makes the sphere of the unspoken clearer and more available to us, by the same token clarifying what can, and should, be said.

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[7] Davidson developed the idea of "triangulation" in a number of essays. For a good discussion of this term, see Thomas Kent's "Interpretation and Triangulation."

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