

Marek Bernacki
University of Bielsko-Biała

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's Poetic Danse Macabre

J.M. Rymkiewicz, *Koniec lata w zdziczałym ogrodzie* [*The End of Summer in a Wild Garden*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2016), pp. 50.

In one of the works in the latest poetic volume by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz *Koniec lata w zdziczałym ogrodzie* [*The End of Summer in a Wild Garden*], there is an idyllic scene conveyed in the tone of the author's confession:

Dobrze jest – słysząc osy brzęczące w oddali
Postawić im na stole kubek pełen malin

I dobrze jest – przeliczać przelotne szerszenie
Te co na telewizyjnej siadają antenie

Dobrze też – fonetycznych mieć trochę pomysłów
I czytać Adalberga starą Księgę przysłów

A potem – na tarasie w fotelu głębokim
Patrzeć na postrzępione wrześniowe obłoki

[It is good – hearing the wasps buzzing in the distance
To put a mug of raspberries for them on the table

And it is good – to reckon passing hornets
The ones who sit down on a TV aerial

It is also good – to have a few phonetic ideas
And read Adalberg’s old Book of Proverbs

And then – in a deep armchair on the terrace
Look at the jagged September clouds]¹

Let’s start with an explanation: the positive energy emanating from this autothematic poem is unique and does not reflect in any other way the atmosphere of other works included in the volume, in which the dominant theme is by no means an authorial reflection on the art of poetry creation, but the motif of death presented in various constellations, manifestations and images. *The End of Summer in a Wild Garden* is patronised by: the elegiac Ovid, the mystical Słowacki, the metaphysically phantasmal Leśmian and the Brothers Grimm (masking in their fairy tales the primordial *horror vacui*), and Lacan’s Nothing (from which we emerged and in which we will eventually be lost, because “when someone dies, they completely disappear” “Stary Staff” [The Old Staff].)² In his latest poetic volume, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz presents the phenomenon of omnipresent death – both in nature and in culture. He shows the face of a dark and hostile force touching both the subject of his late poems (the hero and narrator in one person), as well as his admired poets, composers, and philosophers.

The role of the harbinger of the destructive force lurking in the natural world is performed by an autumn thunderstorm that “comes in the morning and shatters everything” and culminates by striking the poem’s speaker straight in the heart in “Białe są marcinki [White Are the Asters].” Cruelty of nature, inseparably intertwined with death as a mindless destructive force, is shown in the poems whose characters are animals: a cat biting frogs’ feet “for fun” (“Kot szarak łapie żaby [The Gray Cat Is Catching Frogs]”), “a hideous spider mite” – a loathsome parasite eating bush leaves and, like the tick, being a mortal threat to man (“Przędziorek [Spider Mite]”), and a moth: “Deaf, blind, hairy not very pleasant / Like a dark prophecy of a different life,” which falls into the room through an open window, and reacts to the sublimity of an aria from Handel’s opera in no way (“Ćma [The Moth]”). In the title poem of the volume, the process of observation of the withering autumn flowers of hydrangea as well as a bird cherry and

¹ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, “Jak pisać oktostychy [How to Write Oktostichs],” in: *Koniec lata w zdziżałym ogrodzie* [*The End of Summer in a Wild Garden*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2016), p. 44.

² Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, “Stary Staff [The Old Staff],” in: *The End of Summer*, p. 12.

vine – which await the winter attack – ends with a sarcastic couplet, that can be regarded as the author's perverse credo: "What arrives in spring – disappears somewhere in autumn / And that's my only issue here" ("Koniec lata w zdziczałym ogrodzie [The End of Summer in a Wild Garden]").³

The motif of declining-disappearing returns in the poem "Ślimak [Snail]" – a report of its own death maintained in the oneiric convention and presented as a journey to the other side of life:

Spadałem – był to rodzaj sztolni albo jamy
Właśnie czegoś takiego w co zwykle spadamy

Kompletnie ciemno – może rodzaj korytarza
Który – ciągle skręcając – ciągle się powtarza

albo Wewnętrzne ogromnej podziemnej skorupy
Ślimaka – tej do której wyrzuca się trupy

Krzyczałem – licząc na to że ktoś się obudzi
Ale nigdzie w pobliżu nie było już ludzi

[I was falling – it was a kind of an adit or a pit
Just something we usually fall into

Completely dark – maybe a kind of corridor
Which – still twisting – is constantly recurring

Or the interior of a huge underground snail
Shell – the one to which the dead are thrown

I screamed – hoping someone would wake up
But there were no people around me any more]⁴

The motif of dream, which in the analysed volume of Rymkiewicz's poetry is ubiquitous and announces a forthcoming death, appears, among others, in two other intriguing poems. In the first one, the poet refers explicitly to "Threnody XIX" or "The Dream" by Jan Kochanowski; however, it is grandmother, not mother, that reveals herself to the lyrical subject in his dream:

³ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, "Białe są marcinki [White Are the Asters]," "Kot Szarak łapie żaby [The Gray Cat Is Catching Frogs]," and "Ćma [The Moth]," in: *The End of Summer*, pp. 5, 26, 29.

⁴ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, "Ślimak [Snail]," in: *The End of Summer*, p. 36.

Śniła mi się moja babka Irena – prześliczna – jak żywa.
– Jareczku – powiedziała. – Twoja Śmierć cię wzywa.

– Ale ja w nic nie wierzę! – Ja też nie wierzyłam,
Lecz ze Źródła Mądrości wody się napiłam.

[I dreamed of my grandma, Irena – gorgeous – as if alive
“Jareczek,” she said. “Your death is calling you.”

“But I don’t believe in anything!” – “Nor did I,
But I drank water from the Spring of Wisdom.”]⁵

The second poem – entitled “Śniło mi się, że idę do szkoły [I Dreamed That I Was Going to School]” – resembles the poetics of the Bruno Schulz’s imaginary-outragic stories from *The Street of Crocodiles*, and refers as well to Tadeusz Kantor’s drama *The Dead Class*. In his dream, the hero of the poem and the author’s *porte parole* finds himself suddenly in Piotrkowska street in Łódź, where he lived as a young boy with his parents, and where he attended the primary school. At the school, he meets Maciaszczyk, the janitor with whom he enters into a short dialogue ending with an expressive image:

– A po co ty tam idziesz – w imię Ojca, Syna?

I krzyknął – a już miotłą zniknął pod podłogą:
– Oni wszyscy umarli – tam nie ma nikogo

[“And what are you going there for – in the name of the Father, Son?”

He shouted – while disappearing with the broom under the floor:
“They all died – there is no one there”]⁶

In the discussed volume, the poems in which Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz recalls the suicidal acts and mysterious departures of well-known artists deserve special attention: the musician Robert Schumann, who jumped into the Rhine from Düsseldorf’s bridge in 1854 (“Wyciągają go z wody [They Are Drawing Him Out of Water]”), Jan Lechoń of the Skamander group, who committed suicide leaping from a skyscraper in New York (“Lechoń”), a Young Polish poet Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, struggling with

⁵ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, “Śniła mi się moja babka Irena [I dreamed of my grandmother Irena],” in: *The End of Summer*, p. 9.

⁶ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, “Śniło mi się, że idę do szkoły [I Dreamed That I Was Going to School],” in: *The End of Summer*, p. 31.

mental illness at his old age and found dead in January 1940 in a snowdrift in the streets of occupied Warsaw (“Tetmajer”), or Mieczysław Karłowicz, a composer and a pioneer of climbing, struck by an avalanche during one of his alpine expeditions (“Nagrobek dla Mieczysława Karłowicza [Tombstone for Mieczysław Karłowicz]”). The poems recalled are in a minor (understood here in the musical sense of the word) mood, showing that culture does not protect man from madness or possession or death; nor does it provide him with eternal life or salvation. Culture, Rymkiewicz suggests, has been feeding itself with the images of death for centuries, and exposing its presence both in mythological writings (the harrowing poem “Umierający Minotaur [The Dying Minotaur]”) and in folk tales that are a reservoir of Jungian archetypal collective consciousness. Such is the poem “Białoruś [Belarus],” whose hero is the bloodthirsty Jarilo (Jarilla), an androgynous deity of spring and fertility; but also poems referring to the dark imagination of the nineteenth-century German storytellers like: “Śpiąca Królewna (Na temat z braci Grimm) [Sleeping Beauty (A Theme from the Grimm Story)],” and “Różyczka (Na temat z braci Grimm) [Rosebud (A Theme from the Grimm Story)].”⁷ The first of the quoted poems, set in the tone of a Leśmian-based narrative that is spun on the border of existence and non-existence, ends with a meaningful distich containing a disturbing message from the subject of the poem: “If you do not understand – death will explain that to you / That is how you get from one fairy tale to another.” These words can be read as a paraphrase of the famous aphorism by Frederick Nietzsche, the precursor of the never-ending cultural semiosis: “Facts do not exist, only interpretations count.”⁸

In the discussed volume, there are several historical poems. They are: a prelude to the dark twentieth century forefelt by the poet Stefan Malarme: “The whole future is now a bloodstained wall” (“Pled w kratę [Plaid with a Grid Pattern]”), a reminiscence of the bloody oblation made by Polish officers murdered in Katyń (“Dla Przemysława Dakowicza [For Przemysław Dakowicz]”), a prophecy of the inevitably impending Second World War hecatomb (“Piłsudski”), an account of Joseph Stalin’s last mo-

⁷ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, “Wyciągają go z wody [They Are Drawing Him Out of Water],” “Lechoń,” “Tetmajer,” “Nagrobek dla Mieczysława Karłowicza [Tombstone for Mieczysław Karłowicz],” “Umierający Minotaur [The Dying Minotaur],” “Białoruś [Belarus],” “Śpiąca Królewna (Na temat z braci Grimm) [Sleeping Beauty (A Theme from the Grimm Story)],” “Różyczka (Na temat z braci Grimm) [Rosebud (A Theme from the Grimm Story)],” in: *The End of Summer*, pp. 15, 17, 25, 21, 34, 18, 33, 42.

⁸ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, “Wyciągają go z wody [They Are Drawing Him Out of Water],” p. 15, and Friedrich Nietzsche, “W opozycji do pozytywizmu... [In opposition to positivism...],” quoted in: Michał Januszkiewicz, *W-koło hermeneutyki literackiej [A-round of literary hermeneutics]* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007), p. 19.

ments, with the tyrant listening to Mozart's *Piano Concerto in A-major* before his death ("Chan słucha Mozarta [Khan Is Listening to Mozart]"), a sarcastic philippic directed against General Jaruzelski shown as a bloody renegade-king sitting in the Mouse Tower by the Gopło lake ("Pogrzeb generała Jaruzelskiego (Oktostych z dodanym dystychem) [The Funeral of General Jaruzelski (Octostich with an Added Distich)]"), or a Cassandra-like vision of Russian supremacy over contemporary Poland coming from the East ("Bal w Pałacu Staszica [The Ball at the Staszic Palace]"). An important function for the ideological meaning of this volume is performed by two poems in which the author, an eminent expert on the Polish Romantic period, refers to the metempsychosis theory popular in the nineteenth century. Both works – "Metempsychoza [Metempsychosis]" and "Teoria wiecznego powrotu (Metempsychoza 2) [Theory of Eternal Recurrence (Metempsychosis 2)]" – have been written as intertextual references to Juliusz Słowacki's works, and their content, conveyed through the lyrical subject's mouth, is a testimony of the non-Christian vision of history reduced – as in Stanisław Trembecki's *Sofijówka* – to the fatalistic concept of the Great Period: "So the world coming out of the grave is ready / and half dead – half demonic."⁹

In this collection of forty-three octostichs, each of which is an intricately finalised philosophical and anthropological minitreaty, the poems in which the author does not engage in a dialogue with cultural texts (poems, images, treaties or musical compositions), but uses the convention of a lyrical intimate monologue, deserve special attention. The poem "Afonia [Aphonia]" shows the difficult art of man's quest for silence; for cleansing oneself of superfluous words and chatter which cannot measure up to the experience of an untold death at the moment it arrives. The lyrical subject of this poignant poem – like the lyrical "I" of "Urania," the farewell poem by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz¹⁰ – entrusts its dying body to elements of the natural world: the oaks dropping the autumn leaves, the wind announcing the coming of winter and the dead apple tree planted once by the grapevine. A melancholic aura is evoked by the poem closing the volume, provided by the poet with a significant title: "Zachód słońca w październiku – żałobna

⁹ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, "Pled w kratę [Plaid with a Grid Pattern]," "Dla Przemysława Dakowicza [For Przemysław Dakowicz]," "Piłsudski," "Chan słucha Mozarta [Khan Is Listening to Mozart]," "Pogrzeb generała Jaruzelskiego (Oktostych z dodanym dystychem) [The Funeral of General Jaruzelski (Octostich with an Added Distich)]," "Bal w Pałacu Staszica [The Ball at the Staszic Palace]," "Metempsychoza [Metempsychosis]," and "Teoria wiecznego powrotu (Metempsychoza 2) [Theory of Eternal Recurrence (Metempsychosis 2)]," in: *The End of Summer*, pp. 6, 10, 24, 41, 7, 30, 38.

¹⁰ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, "Afonia [Aphonia]," in: *The End of Summer*, p. 16; and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, "Urania," in: *Muzyka wieczorem (Music in the Evening)* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czytelnik, 1986), p. 5.

piosenka [Sunset in October – a Mournful Song].” Its elegant voice – beautiful and classically unequivocal – evokes the thought of Ovid’s *Tristia*:

Już zachodzi słońeczko za brzoźki sosenki
Lisy jeże śpiewają ostatnie piosenki

I wiewiórka też śpiewa żałobną piosenkę
nakłada szarozółtą zimową sukienkę

I zaraz zaśnie w dziupli albo pod wykrotem
Ja piec gazowy zapalę w najbliższą sobotę

Spać! Spać! Już słychać dzikie Nicości okrzyki
W mroku świecą błękitne gazowe płomyki

[The sun is already going down behind the birches pines
Foxes hedgehogs are singing their last songs

And the squirrel is singing its mournful song, too
Putting on a yellow-gray winter dress

And soon it will fall asleep in a hollow or under a fallen tree
While I will switch on a gas stove next Saturday

Sleep! Sleep! You can hear the wild cries of Oblivion
Blue gas flames are glowing in the dark]¹¹

Reading the latest (and probably the farewell) volume of one of the most outstanding living Polish poets, it is hard to resist the impression that these beautiful – yet extremely pessimistic, bitter and devoid of the eschatological hope perspective – poems fall, *nolens volens*, into the tone of the hymn of praise in honour of human spirit and human thought written by a great predecessor of the author of *Koniec lata w zdziczałym ogrodzie* [*The End of Summer in a Wild Garden*]. It is Czesław Miłosz, struggling at his old age with the seismic consciousness of the omnipotent nihilism as the end of human existence, who wrote:

Gdyby tak było, to jednak zostanie
Słowo raz obudzone przez nietrwałe usta,
Które biegnie i biegnie, poseł niestrudzony,
Na międzygwiazdne pola, w kołowrót galaktyk

¹¹ Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, “Zachód słońca w październiku – żałobna piosenka [Sunset in October – a Mournful Song],” in: *The End of Summer*, p. 47.

I protestuje, woła, krzyczy.

[Even if that is so, there will remain
A word wakened by lips that perish,
A tireless messenger who runs and runs
Through interstellar fields, through the revolving galaxies,
And calls out, protests, screams.]¹²

(translated by Czesław Miłosz)

The words of the poet Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz – those from his earlier poetic books as well as these from the latest collection – certainly belong to the category of the words whose aesthetic power is enormous and whose message is eminently human in its meaning.

Marek Biernacki

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's Poetic Danse Macabre

The article discusses the latest poetic volume entitled *Koniec lata w zdziczałym ogrodzie* [The End of Summer in a Wild Garden] written by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, one of the most famous Polish contemporary poets. The author of the article first of all focuses on the motif of death, which is presented in most of forty three poems included in the mentioned volume in various symbols and constellations. The author shows also an intertextual poetic dialogue in a space of culture led by the poet.

Key words: poetry of Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz – motif of death in poetry – intertextual poetic dialogue in the space of culture

¹² Czesław Miłosz, „Sens (Meaning),” in *Wiersze wszystkie* [All Poems] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2011), p. 1036.