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## In and Out of the Text: Polish 1920s Avant-garde Poetics of Pleasure

### Abstract

“We are related to enjoyment as something which intimately belongs to us, to our corporal existence and inner vitality, yet is separated from and independent from us, and thus can be surprising, bewildering, burdensome, disgusting, overwhelming, terrifying, thrilling, conflicted, uncanny, uncontrollable (and sometimes even pleasurable)” – claims Aaron Schuster (2016: 44). According to the theorist, enjoyment can manifest as its opposite, especially in the context of its representations in literature. In this essay, I would like to look at avant-garde erotic poems from the interwar period that address the fascinating entanglement of the bodily and the textual. The metaphors of reading and writing, lyrical dialogue between some of the poems, metatextual reflections on the nature of erotic poetry, and the problem of embodiment are some of the strategies that Bruno Jasiński (*Moja nieśmiertelność* [My Immortality], *Słowo o słowie* [A Word about a Word], *Na bis* [An Encore]), Tadeusz Peiper (*Naga* [Naked], *Ja, Ty* [Me, You]), and Miła Elin (*Książka* [The Book], *Głód* [Hunger]) use to discuss the joys and challenges of trying to represent jouissance in the text. The starting point for my reflection is Alenka Zupančič’s diagnosis of a similar type of satisfaction coming from sex and talking about sex and her insights on the procedures of intellectualizing sexuality.

**Key words:** love discourse, erotic poetry, Polish avant-garde, Polish poetry

**Parole chiave:** discorso d’amore, poesia erotica, poesia d’avanguardia polacca, poesia polacca

Aaron Schuster aptly argues that our connection to enjoyment is as complicated as the entanglement of subjectivity and language. Schuster, maybe somewhat counterintuitively, sees one of the reasons for that state in the fact that both enjoyment and language are not “naturally flowing inside,” and we can perceive them as foreign elements. “We are related to enjoyment as something which intimately belongs to us, to our corporal existence and inner vitality, yet is separated from and independent from us, and thus can be surprising, bewildering, burdensome, disgusting, overwhelming, terrifying, thrilling, conflicted, uncanny, uncontrollable (and sometimes even pleasurable)” – claims Schuster (2016: 44). It is not hard to imagine joy as an ambivalent and paradoxical emotion. On one hand, a certain stimulus evokes the notion of instantaneous gratification that manifests in our body as delight. On the other hand, its sudden interference with a singular existence comes as a shock, a radical change, or something that unsettles the subject and disrupts its status quo. But Schuster is more radical here. After enumerating all negative conditions possibly deriving from enjoyment, the philosopher, with a hint of irony, suggests that pleasure is the last probable outcome on the list. In other words, Schuster proposes that enjoyment can manifest as its opposite, especially in the context of its representations in literature, where the constituent elements need to be translated from one order to another.

Is it even possible to convert notions of body in ecstasy, or smaller, less-all-engendering types of carnal pleasure, typically chaotic and unruly, into an arbitrary system of signs? As unfeasible of a task as it may seem, the whole idea of erotic literature and art is built around this struggle between the idiosyncrasy of an erotic experience and the tools of expression available in cultural production. Polish philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina brings in yet another context. It is not only the question of supposed inexpressibility that poses a problem but also the daunting idea that the uniqueness of an erotic experience, in fact, is not singular at all: “At a first glance, a common experience seems to be tamed in its commonness, as if used up and a bit foreign. [...] Everyone experiences it so there is nothing to worry about, no reason to feel sorry about yourself. There is nothing to be happy about if our experience is common. Nothing special. Sometimes, we try to poison someone’s joy by simply stating that. In both cases, the awareness of how common an experience is flattening it and takes away the notion of its scarceness and strength” (Brach-Czaina 1998: 136–137).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, when an individual erotic experience enters the realm of social and linguistic, it immediately becomes discursive and, therefore, loses its singularity, posing an unsolvable paradox.

This idea has been of a particular concern for the creators of European avant-gardes during the turbulent times of the 1920s and 1930s. In this essay, I would like

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1 All translations of Polish texts into English are authored by the contributor of this essay.

to look at avant-garde erotic poems from the interwar period that address this fascinating entanglement of the bodily and the textual.<sup>2</sup> It is especially intriguing in the works of experimental poets since one of their fundamental assumptions was to abolish the binary oppositions of content and form, instead offering a vision of the poem, where the theme is expressed through tools that uniquely manifest the content.<sup>3</sup> The metaphors of reading and writing, lyrical dialogue between some of the poems, metatextual reflections on the nature of erotic poetry, and the problem of embodiment are some of the strategies that Bruno Jasioński (*Moja nieśmiertelność* [My Immortality], *Słowo o słowie* [A Word about a Word], *Na bis* [An Encore]), Tadeusz Peiper (*Naga* [Naked], *Ja, Ty* [Me, You]), and Mila Elin (*Książka* [The Book], *Głód* [Hunger]) use to discuss the joys and challenges of trying to represent jouissance in the text. Among the figures these poems bring up are two main perceptions: 1. A notion of love language as embodied, which can manifest in various forms of animalization or personification; and, conversely, 2. A view of language as arbitrary and conventional that creates a critical current in erotic poetry. These representations of the erotic also position the subject differently towards the question of enjoyment.

Traditionally, we would think about sex as a phenomenon opposing rationality. The juxtapositions of body and mind, sex and reason, the instinctual and cognizant are deeply ingrained in Western culture, posing a fundamental aporia for artists and authors attempting to represent the erotic. Breaking these rigid oppositions, Brach-Czaina points to a different type of meaning created by a sexual experience. The vision of a human subject as a meaning-creating entity draws the philosopher to conclude that: “An act of lovemaking as a phenomenon, which in itself demands understanding even before we start perceiving its final sense makes us realize that the carnal and spiritual side of a love coexistence interpret one another. [...] Maybe it is worth noticing the understanding emerging from this situation, in which the meaning is not an intellectual construct attached to an observed event as its explanation is not an intellectual game but content itself that can be captured from within the experience” (Brach-Czaina 1998: 141). In this way, Brach-Czaina does not propose that sexuality may be intellectual but rather notices a type of bodily logic

2 I treat the term *Polish avant-garde* broadly. It includes the futurist work of Bruno Jasioński (1901–1938), Tadeusz Peiper’s (1891–1969) constructivist poetry based on his concept of the equivalence of feelings, and Mila Elin’s (Peiper’s associate, 1909–1942?) relatively unknown texts the majority of which are love lyrics.

3 After regaining independence by Poland in 1918, Leon Chwistek, the theoretician of the first Polish avant-garde group, the formists, emphasized that the division between content and form is outdated. He advocated for the form as a juxtaposition of words and a free flow of content. For the avant-garde, it is no longer about an expression but about an idea. Consequently, eroticism must become something that is usually not associated with sex – it must become intellectual rather than instinctual. In other words, there must be something intellectual/cognizant about our bodies and their senses.

that generates desire. Other contemporary philosophers, including psychoanalyst Alenka Zupančič, signal that there is an inherent connection between the pleasure coming from talking and making love. Following Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, Zupančič states that unconsciousness is, actually, creative, and therefore: “to say that satisfaction in talking (or in any kind of intellectual activity) is ‘sexual’ is not simply abasement of intellectual activities, it is at least as much about elevating sexuality to a surprisingly intellectual activity...” (Zupančič 2017: 2–3). This type of enjoyment is a perspective embraced by some of the poems discussed further in this essay.

## **Word as a body desiring one thousand existences: the Polish poetic erotic**

Historically, Polish lyric developed two modes of engaging with the erotic. First was the oral tradition of folk poetry, often ribald and humorous, which was then adapted by first-rate Polish poets, including the father of Polish lyric Jan Kochanowski (1530–1584). Kochanowski’s epigrams, such as *Do dziewczki* [To a Girl] or *O chłopcu* [About a Boy], whimsically problematized desire for young women or praised the joys of lovemaking (*Do doktora* [To the Doctor] or *Do Wojtka* [To Wojtek]). The second mode emerged in courts of medieval Europe, and it was closely associated with the activity of troubadours, composers, and performers, who focused on topics, such as chivalry and courtly love (Abraham 2010).

For the Polish avant-garde, the point of reference was the model of the erotic poetry established during Romanticism. Popularizing direct expression of feelings, among other conventional forms, and platonic, often tragic relations, the Romantic paradigm imposed a rigid framework on Polish literature. The anthologies of poetry published at the beginning of the 20th century and during the interwar period are perfect examples of Romantic dominance. For example, in the introduction to the 1924 volume *Polska pieśń miłosna* [Polish Love Song], the editor Jan Lorentowicz glorified the diverse forms of erotic poetry in Poland. However, his preference allied with these works that are “expressions of the poet’s soul.” Lorentowicz closely connected the poets of positivism and Young Poland to their predecessors, the Romantics. He also recognized a Polish baroque poet Szymon Zimorowicz, who created “masterpieces of tenderness and emotional simplicity” (Lorentowicz 1924: VIII). Another collection, *Polska liryka mieszczańska* [Polish Bourgeois Lyric] from 1936, edited by Karol Badecki, likewise promoted the objectives of sincerity and immediacy, base concepts for Romantic love discourse (Badecki 1936).

Poetry, including love lyric, as a direct expression of feelings or a risk-free, conventional type of art, holding back too explicit images of desire, became a much-detested model for the avant-gardists. For the experimental artists of the interwar period, directness and convention undermined any textual pleasure. In many ways, avant-garde poets of that time followed the master of Polish love lyric, a modernist, Bolesław Leśmian, who advocated for the materiality of language. Leśmian was the first to break with the objective of depicting erotica through the lens of spirituality. In the modern love discourse, the body became the central category. For Leśmian's poetic theory and practice, the question of embodiment, or the way the carnal might be represented in the text, is closely linked to the role of rhythm. In his two essays, *Rytm jako światopogląd* [Rhythm as a Worldview] and *U źródeł rytmu (Studium poetyckie)* [In the Springs of the Rhythm], the poet claims there is a distinct association between rhythm and time. Through its capability to start off again and again after reaching the end, rhythm imposes "sudden immortality to things," and precisely in this quality it should be considered "festive," or "cheerful" (Leśmian 2011: 56). Based on the idea of repetition, similar to other human activities such as work or architecture, for Leśmian rhythm is not the carnal itself, but rather a force that fosters the process of embodiment.

Tadeusz Peiper's philosophy of rhythm pushes these reflections further. In *Nowe usta* [The New Lips] manifesto Peiper addresses rhythm and a specific kind thereof – rhyme.<sup>4</sup> To the poet, those rhetorical devices are essential in building a text as a body and inscribing carnal in a text: "Rhymes of the poem are equally its content as subjects of sentences and should be read with at least equal passion. Everything that a poem contains and what the viewers may find is the content" (Peiper 1972: 222). What is more, the way text is shaped through repetitions, such as anaphora, or even using longer structures as a refrain, give the essay musical value. This strategy also brings attention to that specific moment within the narration, where the main argument is presented, for example, "Poetry is creating beautiful sentences. Poetry is creating beautiful sentences. Poetry is creating beautiful sentences [Poezja jest to tworzenie pięknych zdań. Poezja jest to tworzenie pięknych zdań. Poezja jest to tworzenie pięknych zdań]" (Peiper 1972: 215). In "The New Lips" Peiper also adds longer gaps between different statements to separate one thought or set of images from another or bolds whole sentences or phrases to distinguish

4 Already "The New Lips" as a title draws the attention to body as a central issue. The text includes varied carnal metaphors that refer to the process of writing. The titular "new lips" signify a new artistic expression, while a thought is described as "the saliva for the tongue." Instead of the term "reason" or "intellect," Peiper prefers to use the word "brain." Folk as a literary trend "expands its veins," not "extends influences," and the source of native works of art becomes "a placenta." Moreover, Peiper describes the creative process through associations with intense bodily activities, such as sports or physical labor.

them. Consequently, the essay actually practices what it preaches with each textual strategy introduced both formally and content-wise into the narrative. Curiously, Peiper's central proposal, the concept of equivalence of feelings, remains absent in the manifesto. Instead, the reader is, somewhat whimsically, confronted with either direct exposition of feelings (Peiper elaborates on the idea of being in love with words as a source of every creative process) or what I call "carnal correlative": images, associations, or events that put body as a point of reference.<sup>5</sup>

In short, investigating the "intuitive psychology of matter," as Marinetti (1912: 96) would say, modern Polish poetry in its experimental variant attempted to implement not only body as a theme (including starving, traumatized, or neurodivergent bodies), but also as a device that is visible on the semiotic level of the text. Julia Kristeva defined this element as the realm of the body, the drives, and the unconscious. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* she contrasted Lacanian "symbolic" which stands for the meaning that is produced in language with musicality, rhythm, and sensuousness of the text that "logically and chronologically proceeds the establishment of the symbolic and its subject" (Kristeva 1984: 41). This type of textual embodiment found its most distinctive manifestation in avant-garde erotic poetry. Rhymes and assonances were typical of Anatol Stern's fun and sometimes vulgar erotic verses. Poems, such as *Romans. Peru* [Romance. Peru] or *Pissuary* [Urinals] glorified the beauty of various types of women's bodies and depicted rising desire, but the texts also implement profusion of diverse rhymes, including feminine, identical, or semi-rhymes. Stern frequently used onomatopoeias, which is another strategy to make the poem more sensual.

Jasieński shared similar preferences, mastering various rhythmic devices. However, his vision of eroticism did not include instinctual, uninhibited sexuality. Instead, it is closely linked to the realm of social. That is why Jasieński's erotic poetry was often self-referential and problematized the concept of erotic convention and love discourse. Mila Elin was likewise interested in discussing means by which subjects express their desire, and the issue of expressing bodily sensations and feelings in the text was of utmost importance to her modest work. Her famous promoter, Tadeusz Peiper, was probably the most invested in the idea of embodiment in the text as a possibility. Not only did he experiment with rhymes, rhythm, and musicality of the poem, but also employed typography to facilitate this process. Similar to Jasieński, Peiper also frequently implemented the second person in his poetry creating a notion of intimacy in his erotic poems.

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5 Even though Tadeusz Peiper uses the famous concept of equivalence of feelings, I would argue that, in actuality, he does not refer to feelings at all. Instead, think of bodily sensations. I argue that "carnal correlatives," a term inspired by T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative," a set of objects, situations, or events with body as a focus, are intensely present in both his poems and theoretical texts.

Polish avant-garde developed various means to talk about an erotic experience. Among these is positioning sex in the system of economy, a trope clearly visible not only in some poems by Bruno Jasioński, Anatol Stern, or even Mila Elin that refer to sex work but also in Tadeusz Peiper's texts, where erotic experience as such was based on the idea of mutual exchange between lovers. When this dialogue did not occur or was suspended, the piercing lack became a theme of an erotic poem. Most of Elin's poems deal with such bodily and emotional longing. Another suggestion for how to perceive the erotic is to extract it from social conventions. It was precisely the route that Stern took. In many of his poems, he alluded to the primeval understanding of a joyful sexual encounter represented as the opposite of the constraints of Western civilization. Dangerous types of erotica that generated magnetism far from enjoyment could be found through the representations of sexualized technology (here, Jasioński's novella *The Legs of Izolda Morgan* is intriguing). Yet due to its metatextual qualities, poetry that was both erotic and also dealt with the problem of the expression of the erotic is probably the most challenging and fascinating. The type of joy it (re)produces is an enjoyment that originates likewise in the pleasure of reading and writing as in the satisfaction of united bodies.

## The scent of slaughter and roses: bodies hidden in poems

In some other theoretical and poetic works of Polish experimental artists, the apparent contrast between seemingly rational activities, such as writing/reading, and irrational, instinctual carnal sensations was undermined through the negation of this binary opposition. A curious example here was Tytus Czyżewski's philosophy of art. The author assigned a special role to animals who serve as role models for human artists. In the poem *De profundis*, Czyżewski discusses bird singing, ritual dances, and building nests as a type of animal art and emphasizes it as a legacy to be mimicked: "Oh the star of seven colors / the greatest animal artist / I have become his pupil" (Czyżewski 2009a: 79). Another interesting collation one can find in the poem *Mechaniczny ogród* [Mechanical Garden] (Czyżewski 2009b: 92). Two systems of signs, images visually representing flowers, creatures, or natural phenomena, and words signifying them on the linguistic level, are simultaneously implemented, which equates writing with the emergence of a garden in the text. Regarding animal art and highlighting intentionality in the landscape's arrangement, Czyżewski suggests that the division between nature and culture is artificial and needs to be dismantled. The supreme art is born at the intersections of two different types of matter, where the electric instinct flows, creating assemblages run by creative

energy. In this view, embodiment may occur *naturally*, meaning through and thanks to nature, and the poem is treated as a product of a body exactly as a garden is created by plants and a nest by a bird.

Likewise, bodies in poems are not always dug up in search of a semiological component. On the level of imagery, some texts reveal rather explicit associations to erotic pleasure through visions of animals – agents of senses and primeval joy. Curiously, these creatures are not juxtaposed with human rationality. Rather they function according to their own logic. Czyżewski's animals mating with the lightning bolts of electrons, Elin's longing dogs, Stern's composed, sensual cows, Czuchnowski's women and horses, or Grędziński's nonchalant potbellied sea cow all demonstrate a type of wisdom coming from and through senses and instinct.<sup>6</sup> Precisely this fascinating paradox that psychoanalysis attributes to inherent qualities of the language is also at the heart of erotic poetry. Following Lacan's seminars, Schuster emphasizes the complex position of a subject that depends on and is trapped in language but also has an anomalous relationship with jouissance. Consequently, he needs "to examine the fraught connection between language and the body, the symbolic constitution of human reality, with all the equivocations and paradoxes and slippages that belong to the 'illogical logic' of the signifier, on the one hand, and the strangeness or perversity of an animal whose enjoyment is far from being always or unequivocally 'enjoyable', on the other" (Schuster 2016: 44). And, by the same token, in avant-garde erotic poetry through animal actors, this "illogical logic" of a desiring body manifests a whole range of emotions. Jasieński's "Word about a Word" (Jasieński 2008c: 280) presents a profusion of such tropes. The text, which is a direct address to a mysterious beauty from the audience ("beautiful lady in the chair"), balances between ecstasy ("pasturing ecstatically my cow-head words fumble flowers"), cheerfulness ("and love words jump tweeting"), dark passion ("white mice of weird verses"), and sadness exposed at the end of the poem ("why then even when I am happy / my eyes are so sad?"). Published in 1924 in the "Gazeta Lwowska" [Lvovian Gazette] – curiously and meaningfully – as a column, the text is clearly a poem about seduction (Lentas 2008: 485). The subject first talks about the presumed passionate nature of the woman in his poetry reading. He then embarks on a mission to win her affection. While he does not have the financial means to impress her, his weapon would be the power of his imagination and language. Demonstrating his adventurous side, he takes her through "the plantation of the unknown words" and "white oasis" on his "small yacht" surrounded by a "swarm of white fish." At the same time, the text problematizes the complexities of the writing

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6 In his essay, Tadeusz Kłak elaborates on the "animalistic eroticism" of some of the lesser-known avant-garde poems and poets. (See Tadeusz Kłak's *Kobiety i konie*. "Teksty" 2 (14) (1974), pp. 77–85).

process with its highs and lows and the ambivalent relationship the author has with his readers. The poet becomes an entertainer who needs to sustain the audience's attention, similar to how the suitor tries to satisfy his capricious and demanding mistress. In "Word about a Word," writing is a miracle-creating process, but it requires effort, performative skills, imagination, and sacrifice. It is represented as a challenging labor, which, in the end, does not bring satisfaction. The poem also suggests that both sex and writing are aimed against depression, and, unsuccessfully, attempt to provide refuge for the tortured subject.

Interestingly, in "Word about a Word," Jasiński returns to one of the early images that he associated with writing, namely the vision of pregnancy and giving birth as symbols of the creative process.<sup>7</sup> The male subject acquires this quality complicating his gender status. In psychology, womb envy as a phenomenon was first introduced by neo-Freudian psychiatrist Karen Horney and is an equivalent of the previously described Freudian penis envy. Warnes and Hill define it as: "envy and fascination with the female breasts and lactation with pregnancy and childbearing, and vagina envy [that] are clues and signs of transsexualism and to a femininity complex of men, which is defended against by psychological and sociocultural means" (Warnes and Hill 1974: 25–29). The link between writing and childbearing positions the former as a subversive activity set against so-called social norms. It also points to the undeniable materiality of the process. Both phenomena function, at least on the surface, as *creatio ex nihilo*. There is no child until it is born, and there is no poem until it appears on the page. In "Word about a Word" the subject, similarly to a mother, has a "belly like a new ark full of creatures" and is exposed to public judgment "People stare when from my mouth's crack / a newborn appears." He also admits that writing/childbearing is an offering. It involves a sacrifice of matter, namely body, and physical strength is needed to sustain pain: "I have a constant pain in my guts / and I learned how mothers suffer." In both cases, the result is a mystery: "unexpected surprises," "weird verses," and "unknown species." The pleasure that comes with these processes, if any, lies in submerging into the dark enigma of being.

A similarly mysterious experience is desire. The avant-garde poems attempt to deal with the origin of this erotic energy and try to investigate its relation to writing. A juxtaposition of "Hunger" by Mila Elin (Elin 2023a: 48) and "Naked" and "Me, You" by Tadeusz Peiper shows an intriguing trajectory of desire. Peiper's texts are more particular and self-sustained. In both, the active male subject speaks to

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<sup>7</sup> I write more about this trope analyzing an early poem *Mięso kobiet* [The Meat of Women] in my article entitled *Suitors with Their Stomachs Full of Lovers: Cannibalistic Tropes in the Texts of Polish Futurists*. In: *Polish Literature as World Literature*. Eds. Piotr Florczyk and K. A. Wiśniewski. Bloomsbury, New York 2023, pp. 87–100.

the more passive female addressee. As a model example of a blossoming poem, "Naked" is built according to the rule of expansion, where the initial image grows through sequentially added components. This device, together with the anaphora "naked," facilitates the rhythmic flow of the text. Desire's flux travels back and forth like a returning wave. In "Me, You," this smooth dynamic is disrupted by contrasting verses through the first part of the poem. On the symbolic and semiotic levels, it gives an impression of an unresolved argument or conflicting values. Towards the end, when the subject switches from stating facts to a request ("Give me your night today. Today"), the pace slows down. Both of Peiper's erotic poems present a view where the desire may be fulfilled as a hope, or a call comes. Additionally, through diverse rhythmic devices, the texts become desire-generating machines inviting the reader to follow the flow. A very different picture emerges from Mila Elin's "Hunger." The poem builds on a series of negations (for example: "I don't blossom," "I don't have butterfly glance," the letter is "unsent"), which implies that there is a lack of action. The female subject is hoping for her desire to be met by the love object, but from the start she is also aware that the satisfaction will never come. In the end, she admits: "When you don't show up and, / I instead sink my hunger in a suburban puddle." This intriguing conclusion suggests that desire, as all energy, needs to be used or disposed of. It demands some kind of action from the subject. It can be satisfied by a lover, it can be redirected to another activity, or transferred into writing. But it cannot be neglected, ignored, and left unattended. That is what Elin's poem does: it channels desire through the text and simultaneously, it points to its physical disposal. In this way, the reader does not become an element of the desired flow.

The image of writing and reading as sensual, carnal experiences that cause bodily reactions is present in Jasieński's "My immortality" (Jasieński 2008a: 257), Peiper's "Naked," and Elin's "The Book" (Elin 2023b: 49–50). In the last text, the female subject treats reading as an erotic encounter. For her, the pages become the eyes of the lover, and the gaze makes the meeting possible. The bodily sensations she experiences are similar to those that one would feel when being touched by a lover or caressing him: "With my lips, I feel the rapid pulse of blood, / with my pupils I drill the pages." She also compares herself to "a book that no one writes," again signaling erotic unfulfillment. In both "My Immortality" and "Naked," a text becomes a kind of signature transferred onto a woman's body through an erotic act of creation. Jasieński's subject "kisses" his poem into a "white female torso," while in "Naked" the addressee becomes "a sheet of paper," which the subject writes on. For a love object, the task becomes either to "stay silent and vapor" (Peiper) to serve the artist as an inspiration ("during the wedding night with your white virgin / you will suck a caress of her like a poem") like in Jasieński's text. All the poems, at least on the surface, present a rather traditional notion of gender

roles.<sup>8</sup> In this view, a woman is a reader (so a subject that should react to the text) while a man is a writer (so an actor initiating an encounter). Although reading here is depicted as a creative activity, women are assigned a place of the audience/consumer and muse/inspiration, pushing them to more passive positions.

## Love as a novel or a telegram: discourse and convention

This quite stereotypical representation of women in seemingly progressive texts is one of the complex ways in which Polish poetry of that time engaged with erotic convention as a theme. On one hand, with the aim to reinvent the means of speaking about body, sexuality, and desire, these works exposed clichés used and misused in love discourse. On the other hand, intentionally or not, they reproduced some of these platitudes, especially regarding gender dynamics. As a form of a social agreement convention in aesthetics is defined by Siegfried Schmidt as: “shared knowledge in our society that all participants who intend to utilize surface texts as aesthetic communicative texts must be willing and able to behave not according to the fact-convention primarily, but according to the norms and meaning rules valid for the aesthetic interaction in that situation” (Schmidt 1982: 52). In the specific case of love discourse, these rules apply to a particular medium (e.g. sonnet, romantic comedy, or love song), features determined by the genre (symbols and images, typical framing devices, or keywords), and the selection concerning what is represented and what has to be omitted.

Among the experimental poets most obsessed with convention as a theme, Bruno Jasiński produced a few intriguing works. Especially his original impressions on a modern variant of court poetry in “An Encore” (Jasiński 2008b: 65) and “A Word about a Word” are worth investigating. Both poems depict a poet as today’s troubadour, a type of performer whose task is to serve the convention. Akehurst and Davis emphasize that thanks to these court entertainers a particular kind of speech emerged: “Metaphors, metonyms, euphemisms, and other hermetic expressions are used by the troubadours as disguising devices in the representation of real or imagined sexual activities. [...] The joys of lovemaking and songwriting, even when not inspired by real-life experience but only imagined in daydreams, should not be

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<sup>8</sup> Mila Elin’s poetry is more nuanced. The poet transgresses so-called traditionally feminine passivity through either expressing her lust, engaging in seduction games, or initiating an encounter. See Agnieszka Jeżyk: *Erasing Herstory: Mila Elin, the Avant-garde’s Forgotten Female Poet*. “The Polish Review” (2023) 68 (3), pp. 23–54.

considered as limited to a purely verbal game independent of the principle of erotic and sexual pleasure shared affectively and emotionally between the writer/performer and the reader/listener” (Akehurst and Davis 1995: 83). With two amusing narrators, a liftboy and a poet, Jasiński turned these rules upside down. Skillfully playing with the convention, the author of *The Legs of Izolda Morgan* used the figure of courtly love to talk about the role of an artist and the place of poetry in modern society. His variant of a Middle Ages court in “An Encore” was a skyscraper with a modern princess-strzyga, *femme fatale* Chryzolinda, who devoured knights en route to the present-day castle and pushed their dead corpses down the elevator. In “A Word about a Word” the stage changed to a room where a poetry reading took place. The narratives of both poems worked exactly the opposite of the mechanics of fairy tales and legends, where the castle or stage usually functions as a space of safety. Traditionally, the daredevil had to leave the court to acquire the identity of the real knight. The quest to explore, fight, and conquer was a rite of passage. This pre-modern foundational myth of masculinity, so closely linked to geographical discoveries but also the beginning of imperialist thinking is the foundation of modernity. In the times when there is nothing more to discover, the dragon/machine/elevator dwells in the modern castles, the high-rise, or hides in the boredom of a literary salon or a bourgeois bedroom. By the same token, the suitors are the ones entering from the outside with the hope not only to conquer but also to transition in the face of the unknown, while the poet never leaves the venue, only painting the marvels of faraway lands and weird creatures with his words. The quest for knowledge is an attempt to reveal the mystery, which is one of the contexts in which one can perceive writing. To unfold the truth behind the text, to decode the concealed meanings are the tasks that every reader undertakes when confronted with a poem.

From this perspective, both “An Encore” and “A Word about a Word” are monologues of a poet, where in the former, the subject appears to be in control of the ups and downs and the frictional movements of the elevator, while in the latter he becomes a vessel for forces more powerful, such as laws of nature. In the first case, the poet is in charge of the desire he wishes to induce in the audience, and in the second, after an elaborate performance, he is still exposed as a fake or a failed artist. Jasiński’s “lift-boy” (“An Encore”) from the debut 1921 volume *But w butonierce* [Boot in a Buttonhole] boasts that he “was read by little white girls / with big swollen eyes / Underlining with a pencil / these pornographic pages,” whereas in “A Word about a Word” the poet in the end has “such sad eyes.” Consequently, “pornographic pages” mentioned at the beginning of “An Encore” imply that this seduction on the part of the author is equally as pleasurable of a process and as deadly of a conclusion, but Jasiński’s latter, 1924 poem, does not leave room for ambiguity. After losing his innocence, the reader might experience enjoyment, yet, for the writer, the process always involves pain and sacrifice.

The connection between eroticism and modes in which it could be textually manifested is also complex and confusing. Trapped in the aporia of the imperative of expression and limited repertoire of means of expression the subject may find pleasure in embracing the convention, exposing it, or transgressing it. For the avant-garde poets, conventional forms always functioned as a foundation for implementing two other strategies of representation. Mila Elin and Tadeusz Peiper, for example, refer to the most conventional forms typical for erotic poetry of the 1920s: a letter, a romance novel, and a telegram. Elin's "Hunger" was a text problematizing love discourse as such. The starting point for the subject was to emphasize how unfit she is for the poetic clichés that were constructed to talk about love, desire, and eroticism. The previously recalled negation, the author of *Wachlarz z białych kwadratów* [The Fan of White Squares] uses to disprove all qualities that make the love experience cinematic: beautiful weather ("afternoon heat"), perfect body ("butterfly glances and hands of suede"), or arousing circumstances ("no time to flourish with rose's red"). Conversely, the fear of rejection has an impact on her bodily reactions, making her physically shrink. The woman speaking in the poem describes herself as "a short night," and as "streetlamp's short shade." She also lowers her head as if ashamed for not following the well-established forms generated by love discourse. The reader is left with an intriguing ambivalence, however. Is the subject afraid of the lover's unfavorable reaction, or is she reluctant to express her desires because of an aesthetic dissonance? While the answer is open-ended, Elin's conclusion seems to be that there is no escape from love discourse when you desire someone, so the fantasies quickly embrace the well-established forms. Consequently, the letter that appears in "Hunger" needs to be "unsent" as it does not follow the rules imposed on this mode of love poetry. Tadeusz Peiper's "Me, You" also confirms this reflection. According to Peiper, as it seems, all relationships strive to be narrated and are conventional and discursive. The poet explicitly states: "Love is sometimes a romance novel. Also, a telegram," referring both to the duration of a certain relationship and modes in which it could potentially be expressed. As with other themes in avant-garde poetry, also a particular affair demands an appropriate narrative form. In this way, reality and text intertwine so that "the ink of dawn spills over the earth." Peiper suggests that writing is not only a way to represent the world through words. It also creates reality through language, as it is not just given to us.

## The beautiful failure. Enjoyment, eroticism and the avant-garde

In their quest to modernize Polish lyric, including love discourse, the efforts of the avant-gardists of the interwar period are invaluable. Their most revolutionary

practice lay in combining two objectives: viewing language as a material, tangible, and living phenomenon and disconnecting spirituality from the representations of the erotic imposed by the Romantic paradigm. In this way, the development of avant-garde erotic poetry was also fundamental for Polish literature, distinguishing it from other futurist and constructivist cultural movements in Europe primarily focused on narrating modernity through an experimental approach to the language. Yet their attempt to fully represent erotic experience in the text through the medium of language had to remain a beautiful failure. While poems tried to implement the idea of embodiment through varied semiotic devices more or less skillfully balanced between the desire to depict the singularity of an erotic sensation and the imperative to achieve it through a shared system of signs, texts engaging with love discourse as a convention could even be considered anti-erotic. It is a case of Bruno Jasieński, a devoted hater of the bourgeoisie's lifestyle, whose erotic poems almost always were actually texts about social injustice, the purpose of writing and reading, or the horrors of conventional love lyrics. In this view, Jasieński's poem "My Immortality" may sound like a totally contrasting declaration. Here, the poet-subject, exhausted by the attention of the critics and readers, decides to withdraw from the public into the privacy of a bedchamber. This move also signifies a transition from socially engaged poetry to erotic poetry, which functions as the sincerest mode of literary expression.

The paradox in the poem is just one of the aporias that love discourse is built on. Reflecting on Andrei Platonov's *The Anti-Sexus*, Alenka Zupančič emphasizes that the problem also lies in the structure of the Other and its relationship to enjoyment or what type of connection to enjoyment is ascribed to the Other by the subject: "In order to remove the enjoyment from the Other, one has to remove the Other from enjoyment. This suggests in fact that enjoyment and the Other are structured like a matryoshka: enjoyment is 'in' the Other, but when we look 'in' the enjoyment there is also the Other 'in' it, and so on... Enjoyment is in the Other, and Other is in enjoyment" (Zupančič 2017: 29). Any artistic work, and especially erotic poetry, does not exist without a singular or multiple Other in mind. The Other can stand for an addressee or the object, the reader or audience, or can just be a projected Other within the subject. It is also possible that it engenders all of the listed actors simultaneously. An erotic poem might be conventional or transgressing typical discursive practices, a textual body might remain an abstraction undermining the idea of embodiment, yet a real pleasure comes from overcoming the monological features of poetry and reaching out towards the Other through the dual process of writing and reading. In this particular process, to paraphrase Beckett's *Mantra*, of trying again, failing again, failing better lies the mystery of a successful love poem.

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## Abstrakt

### W tekście i poza nim. „Poetyka przyjemności” w polskiej poezji awangardowej lat dwudziestych

„Przyjemność kojarzy nam się z czymś, co ściśle do nas należy, z naszą cielesną egzystencją i wewnętrzną witalnością, a mimo to jest od nas oddzielona i niezależna, a zatem może zaskakiwać, dezorientować, obciążać, odrażać, przytłaczać, przerażać, porywać, rodzić konflikty, budzić »niesamowite«, ustawiać poza kontrolą (a czasem wywoływać pożądanie)” – twierdzi Aaron Schuster (2016: 44). Innymi słowy, przyjemność może objawiać się jako swoje przeciwieństwo, zwłaszcza w kontekście jej reprezentacji w literaturze. W niniejszym eseju chciałabym przyjrzeć się awangardowym wierszom erotycznym z okresu międzywojennego, które poruszają temat fascynującego splotu tego, co cielesne i tego, co tekstowe. Metafory czytania i pisania, liryczny dialog pomiędzy niektórymi wierszami, metatekstowe refleksje na temat natury poezji erotycznej, problem ucieleśnienia to tylko niektóre ze strategii, którymi posługuje się Bruno Jasieński (*Moja nieśmiertelność, Słowo o słowie, Na bis*), Tadeusz Peiper (*Nago, Ja, Ty*) i Mila Elin (*Książka, Głód*), omawiając radości i wyzwania związane z próbą przedstawienia *jouissance* w tekście. Punktem wyjścia moich refleksji będzie diagnoza Alenki Zupančič dotycząca podobnego rodzaju satysfakcji płynącej z seksu i z mówienia o seksie oraz spostrzeżenia słoweńskiej filozofki na temat procedur intelektualizacji seksualności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dyskurs miłosny, erotyki, polska poezja awangardowa, poezja polska