

How to write poetry about violence

The Modern Poland Foundation presents a podcast titled: *How to write poetry about violence*.

Culture is a peculiar system. It seems to work in one specific way, but when you look closely, the rules turn out to be different for each discipline. Let's take a look on how acceptable it is to depict brutality, for instance. We're not surprised to see graphic violence in video games, films or TV series – it's almost customary for some people to complain, but that's all resistance it gets. There are whole novel genres devoted to violence, like crime stories or thrillers, as well as a few internationally acclaimed masterpieces – for example, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* centres around a murder. Violence in theatre has a long and noble tradition – ancient Greek tragedies always included at least one corpse. In 19th century it was already a running joke: in Juliusz Słowacki's *Beniowski*, an anonymous theatre critic complains about another play by Słowacki, *Balladyna*; his final objection is: "in whole play, just one left alive/ the prompter". But what about violence in poetry? It's possible to collect an impressive list of examples, but we seem to lack a good way of describing them.

That's why I decided to write about *A Word on Jakób Szela* by Bruno Jasiński – one of the most radical examples of poetry about violence. The author represented the Futurist movement and was a convinced communist. The radical character of the poem is visible on many levels, first and foremost – in the choice of subject. Jasiński chooses the leader of the so-called Galician Slaughter to be his main character.

The Polish word we use for Galician Slaughter, that happened in February and March 1846, is "rabacja". It comes from German *rauben*, meaning "to rob" or "to plunder"; it doesn't suggest murder. However, the national memory remembers it as a series of brutal and gruesome massacres committed by gangs of revolted peasants on the nobility. It's a very strong memory: 54 years later, one of the characters in *The Wedding* by Wyspiański, a member of intelligentsia who marries a peasant, reminisces: "my grandfather – cut with saw". The peasant gangs destroyed an estimated number of 470 mansions and killed from one to two thousand people.

The memory was kept alive for many years by publications such as *The Galician Slaughter of 1846, or a Detailed Description of Murders, Robberies and Thefts, along with Significant Incidents that Accompanied those Horrifying Scenes in the Context of Bureaucracy's Intrigues* – a book published in Cracow in 1868. The overly long title makes it evident what the anonymous author wanted to preserve for posterity. Firstly – the scale and brutality of the event. Thus, he described the miserable fate of Antonina Wendorfowa, who ran through snow behind a cart where her husband was kept, along with many other dead or alive victims. Then she turned mad and caught a deadly cold. And that's one of the less brutal stories in the book. Other showed the author's delight in describing the murder weapons: flails, axes, pitchforks, steel rods, cutlasses stolen from nobility.

Another piece of information in the title is about the "bureaucracy's intrigues". Given the place of publishing – Cracow was in Austrian Partition – the readers were supposed to know which bureaucracy the author meant. Apart from that omission, the title of this 19th-century booklet fits the current state of knowledge. In historical summaries, the Galician Slaughter is presented as an effect of Austrian provocation, aimed at preparation to a national uprising, organized by the nobles. According

to this interpretation, Szela would be directly inspired by Józef Breindl, a governor of Tarnów, to whom Szela would complain multiple times about exploitation of peasants.

What do we know about the leader of this cruel peasant revolt? Let's start with the facts. Jakub Szela was an illiterate carpenter and farmer, born in 1787 in Smarżowa near Tarnów. He died in Lichtenberg in Bukovina region. Apart from that, the narrative of his life depends on the political views of the interpreter. Some emphasise that he was a very brutal individual (before you ask – Jasiński doesn't whitewash his character – Szela murders his wife's lover in the poem). Others focus on his public activity: he complained a lot about the nobility to Austrian administration. All authors agree that peasant revolt was convenient for the Austrian government in 1846: it weakened Polish nobility and didn't really improve peasants' situation. The rebels hoped for immediate abolishment of serfdom, meaning work on a nobleman's field, which replaced tax. Such hopes turned out to be futile during Austrian pacification of the region. The interpreters disagree on whether calling Szela to Tarnów after pacification meant arrest or attempt to keep him safe; similarly, his subsequent move to Bukovina and receiving land there from Austrian authorities could be understood as either a gift from grateful occupant or a banishment.

Given what movement Szela was the leader of, it's no wonder he's controversial. The assessments of him vary from completely critical (encompassing his historical role, political views and personal characteristics) to favourable (justifying the cruel revolt with exploitation of peasants spanning multiple centuries). A good example of the former opinion is Władysław Ludwik Anczyc. In his poem, Szela says the following words:

Not for me – words of redemption,
Not for me – atonement or repenting,
I am a son of devil, damnation!...
- A murderer cried before passing.

Jasiński's opinion is exactly the opposite, which is clearly stated in the introduction to his poem. He claims that Szela was "the first conscious fighter for peasants' rights" and "the first conscious representative of the class struggle idea that was himself of peasant origin". In both sentences, what makes the controversial hero exceptional is being first and conscious. That means the author wants Szela to represent the needs of general population and to be a conscious avenger. It's the only possible way of turning him into a hero. That's the point of the poem – Jasiński openly states it in the introduction: "If Szela was not an already existing hero, he would have to be uplifted into heroism, for the sake of the martyrdom of peasants visible in their oppression".

It's especially interesting that Jasiński doesn't gloss over the ambiguous character of the peasant dictator and his struggle, despite openly declaring the tendentious stance of the poem. For instance, he claims that Szela was "a defender of the peasant issue, indifferent to the abstract argument of all-national good". This statement establishes a conflict of values – one issue has to be chosen, and the other – rejected.

Perhaps it's the consciously insoluble conflict that makes Jasiński's poem so full of aggression. Violence is visible even in the metaphors, also when such choice of describing an image seems unjustified at first glance. For example, the author describes a wedding. The last image includes a grotesque vision of the moon being drunk. It would seem that it's a perfect spot to introduce a humorous element. However, even here Jasiński chooses to write about death:

Roaming skies – back and forth.
He could not hit the spot.
He ran up the roof of church.
Bumped the tower, crashed the clock.

In the bushes – bit by dogs.
The whole village heard the bawls.

Why did he opt for such brutal imagery? We need a wider context to explain it. Jasiński utilizes folk poetry style elevated to a higher level. On the one hand, he uses rhythms typical in folk songs, countryside-related metaphors or folk imagery. There are many syntactic parallels and nature descriptions are meant as commentary to the scene; the poet also uses so-called “negated metaphors” (sometimes called “Slavic antithesis”). In actual folk poetry they look like this:

On the other side of the lake
A green lime tree stands
And there, on the lime tree, on the green one
Three birds sing a song

They were not birds -
They were three brothers
Arguing about one girl
Which one would get her.

The negated metaphor seems like a simple tool, but it proves useful. It seems it digresses from the topic, but because of it, we start imagining the brothers as ruffled up birds. Jasiński uses a similar construction in the scene where Szela discovers his young wife cheating on him with a farmhand:

Did the sun hide in clouds
like woodpecker by a tree?
Did the light from the sun
get slashed with the blackest shade?

No, no shade, no cloud is here
No sudden rain will come -
It's Jakób Szela standing
In middle of the barn.

The poet doesn't have to elaborate much on the character's rage and threatening pose anymore – it was implied with the image of a sudden storm cloud appearing.

The fragment quoted above also shows what differentiates Jasiński's writing from folk poetry. The poet likes to show off with impressive rhymes. Because of that, his work seems like a contrived simulation of what would folk culture become and what works it would produce, if it was given similar development conditions as the official culture.

It's time to come back to the initial issue of aggression in the poem. Jasiński tries to emphasise the rage, sense of injustice and will for vengeance that are available in peasant culture – the same way he uplifted its creative character with sophisticated literary tools. Those elements are not an import form outside – currently we can hear it in songs by the band R.U.T.A. They combine punk and folk elements; the lyrics are just as aggressive as some fragments of *A Word on Jakób Szela*. Jasiński

doesn't work on neutral issues, either. He struggles with a vision of Polish history that prioritises the all-national community, and proposes an image of multiple centuries of injustice and guilt, stemming from huge social inequalities. Every entity that would try to deny this vision would be unjust according to the poet.

The best example of this can be found in the peculiar scene of confrontation between Szela and Jesus. It happens during the Slaughter itself, on a bloody baulk. Jesus came to look into a rumour: "seems the peasants beat the nobles / seems they cut them with the saws". It would seem that there is no argument one could put against helping murder victims. However, Jasieński builds the following retort:

Couldn't see you when our pain
was flooding these whole lands
Our peasant blood's not worth to you
an ounce of noble grain.

Lift your dress up to your knees,
walk just oh so carefully,
cause here our blood has soaked through
each and every lump of ground.

Jasieński means that the noble blood is on the ground only right now – during the slaughter; he doesn't deny its brutality. But if we look at the history more globally, the soil accepted much more peasant blood spilled throughout the centuries. All the rhetorical exaggeration in the poem leads to this exact conclusion. And regardless of genre, convention, artistic form – it would be hard to find this point expressed that bluntly anywhere else.

Perhaps it's enough if we finish here. Neither history nor literature are miraculous cures that would dissolve conflicts. However, we can gain knowledge from them; we can learn what the conflict is about and where are its roots. And that's actually quite a lot.

The podcast was produced as a part of the "Listen everywhere" project of The Modern Poland Foundation. The recording is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0. license; that means it can be legally played, downloaded, shared or quoted for free. All podcasts are available on our website: wolnelektury.pl.

The podcasts were co-funded by the Polish History Museum, as part of the "Patriotism of Tomorrow" programme. The media partners of the project are: Bookeriada, eLib.pl, Nie czytasz? Nie idę z Tobą do łóżka!, Lubimyczytac.pl, Link to Poland, culture.pl, Koalicja Otwartej Edukacji, Artifex, Galeria przy automacie, Wydawnictwa Drugie, Radio Pryzmat, Radio Wolna Kultura.

Written by Paweł Koziół, translated by Monika Grzelak, directed by Borys Kozielski, read by Jarosław Kozielski.