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### **NANOMOMENTS AND EONS: THE QUESTION OF TIME IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH POETRY**

The article deals with the manifestation and representation of time in contemporary Polish poetry. The focus of the interpretation, which is an attempt at a philosophical-essayistic reflection on chronocentrism, is on the experience of time by the human subject: modern and postmodern man. The discussed areas of metaphorization (the technologizing metaphors, the metaphors of acceleration), figurations and ways of thematization of the temporal questions reflect the contemporary experience: the “un-time” of life, the compression of time, the trauma of temporality, the relativity of humanistic time in regard to the physical time of the clock. The poetry, as the inscribing of the “punctual, present”, illustrates the power of time over the human subject; it becomes the resonator of its own epoch. The microanalyses of Miłosz’s, Szymborska’s, Zagajewski’s, Baran’s and Lipska’s poems display the opposite poles of time: the momentary flashes – nanomoments and eons – “centuries of eternity”.

**Keywords:** Miłosz, Zagajewski, nanomoments, eons, metaphors of acceleration, the “un-time” of life

In Polish poetry of the last half century, time – referred to by Adam Zagajewski as “the rich lover of nothingness” (“Stary Sącz”, Zagajewski 1999: 53, trans. M.M.<sup>1</sup>) – became one of the most important lyrical protagonists, simultaneously constituting a theme whose expansion – rather than resulting from coincidence or literary fashion – appears to be a natural reflection of collective consciousness at the turn of the century. The latter, by coinciding with the turn of the millennium, has intensified the experience of temporality. The growing speed of life in postmodernity forces the subject into a constant race against time, and into the daily experience of “un-time.” On the other hand, the development of experimental sciences, cosmology, geology, or philosophical chronocentrism, whose popularity influences contemporary consciousness, constitutes a natural reason for the increased recognition of the problem of temporality also in poetry. It is only common knowledge that poetry has habitually reflected its own epoch and that it solidifies significant events, trends and obsessions. No wonder then that at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is chronos – a traditional literary theme, represented

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts marked with initials M.M. were translated by the translator of the article.

in a variety of ways – which turned out to be one of the most important literary motifs embodied through various literary creations, personifications and representations whose characteristics speak volumes of its experience by the human subject in the age in which time is compressed, shrunk and accelerated. As Zygmunt Bauman noticed: “[t]ime is not, like it used to be, a vector – it is an impetus without a directional arrow” (Bauman 1994:19, trans. M.M.).

The emphasis laid upon *chronos* is detectable even in the poems’ titles, suffice it to mention Tadeusz Różewicz’s “Time that Passes” (“Czas, który idzie”), Tymoteusz Karpowicz’s “Replacing Place with Time” (“Zmiana miejsca na czas”), Wisława Szymborska’s “Moment” (“Chwila”), or Adam Zagajewski’s “Moment” (“Chwila”). Other poems hide time in their titular metaphors: Karpowicz’s “Decoction from Calendars” (“Wywar z kalendarzy”), Miron Białoszewski’s “Poems in a Jiffy” (“Wiersze na błysk”), Wiktor Woroszyński’s “Your Daily Murderer” (“Twój powszedni morderca”), in which time itself is the titular murderer, or Wisława Szymborska’s “Life While-You-Wait” (“Życie na poczekaniu”), where the titular metaphor encodes rush and mindless existence pressed for time. The examples multiply, suffice it to point out that contemporary Polish poetry contemplates the question of time in a variety of different ways, often inspired by contemporary knowledge. Time, introduced in multiple poems, is stretched between the past of geological periods and the continuity of millions of light-years, between the rhythm of nature and the measurements of culture and history, between the micro-time of subjective experience and the macro-time of projected eternity. Polish contemporary poets turn out to be particularly time-sensitive, and many of them could be referred to, without much exaggeration, in terms of Czesław Miłosz’s confession: “and if they say, that I only heard the hum of the Heraclitean river / Let that be enough as hearing it tired me out” (“A Short Recess” [“Mała pauza”], Miłosz 2011:666, trans. M.M.).

While analyzing Polish poetry of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century one may discover two extreme approaches to the notion of time. On the one hand we are dealing with time’s momentary flashes: moments and blinks, referred to by Adam Zagajewski as “grams of eternity,” and “quarters of a second,” to which the poets have been most likely made sensitive by the pace of contemporary life and the commonly accessible popular achievements of experimental sciences in which time is measured in its microscopic structures. As James Gleick notes:

We have reached the epoch of the nanosecond. [...] Particle physicists may freeze a second, open it up, and explore its dappled contents like surgeons pawing through an abdomen, but in real life, when events occur within thousandths of a second, our minds cannot distinguish past from future. What can we grasp in a nanosecond – a billionth of a second? ‘I tell you,’ Winkler says, ‘it wasn’t on a human scale when we were measuring time to a millisecond, and now we are down to a fraction of a nanosecond.’ [...] Inhuman though these compressed time scales may be, many humans crave the precision (Gleick 2000: 14).

On the other hand, many contemporary poems recollect a contrary perspective on time: eons, “centuries of eternity” permeating metaphysical reflections, infinities, referred to as “non-time”, over-time, or eternity. Equally vast measurements of time are embodied through inspirations derived from the developments in cosmology: billions of light-years. Here, poetry does not excessively use the achievements of experimental sciences, neither does it speculate on “superhuman” layers of time, although it occasionally points at them. The condition of a contemporary subject’s consciousness, who domesticates theories of temporality by relativizing the experience of temporal measure of his/her existence, is visible in, for instance, Wisława Szymborska’s poems, who – while comparing human existence on Earth against the notion of galactic time – writes:

Carry on, then, if only for the moment  
That it takes a tiny galaxy to blink!

(“No End of Fun” [“Sto pociech”], Szymborska: 1997:111, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh)

What’s the use of asking  
Under how many stars man is born  
And under how many in a moment he will die.

(“Surplus” [“Nadmiar”], Szymborska 1997:241, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh)

Time, so generous toward any petty star in the sky,  
Offered them a nearly empty hand  
And quickly took it back, as if the effort were too much.  
One step more, two steps more  
Along the glittering river  
That sprang from darkness and vanished into darkness.

There wasn’t a moment to lose,  
[...]  
Life, however long, will always be short.  
Too short for anything to be added.

(“Our Ancestors’ Short Lives” [“Krótkie życie naszych przodków”], Szymborska 1997:265, 267, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh)

The above examples capture life as merely a moment – this is how contemporary poetry exposes the relativity of human experience of time. Projected onto light-years, or experienced against the horizon of metaphysical eternity, recalled by theology and theosophy, time is shrinking when experienced subjectively. The more science stretches and popularizes the knowledge of time (from pre-history to star years), the more precisely it measures its momentary structures (so minute that until recently thought of as undividable). The more innovations brought about by the pace

of change are superimposed on them, the less and less of our shrunk presence there remains. Existential experience is determined by the sensorium of time. Experience is ageing at an unprecedented speed and yesterday's thoughts are fading into a museal past, since, as Herman Lübbe has it: "a cultural growth of innovation, understood as the novelty-to-time ratio, becomes a measurement unit of the speed of ageing" (Lübbe 1991:13, trans. M.M.). In the age of accelerated innovation and haste, an almost common experience is the sense of being struck by time, mirrored in a poem which becomes a model for reality. As Edward Balcerzan claims:

[...] The uniqueness of this particular model lies in the fact that, unlike a typical scientific model, it is not a *simplified version* of the object but precisely the opposite: its condensation and complication. [...] Condensation of the psychic content, transformation into signs and the meaning of every-day speech which are located in a poetic "linguistic poli-condensate" (Balcerzan 1972:226, trans. M.M.; italics in original).

The poetry of the past fifty years tells us a lot about human experience of time at the turn of the century. Without doubt, even though particular poems paint very different pictures of time and touch upon a diversity of temporal reflections and a variety of thematic and compositional options, one thing seems to be generally agreed upon. For the poets, what matters most is the psychological and spiritual dimension of time, the content that the human being manages to locate in it, and how that content is felt and experienced. We live in and through time. For the poetry in question, of much greater importance than the soulless and external time of the wristwatch, measuring the sequence of subsequent "nows," is the time tied to the human self. The question of its nature is at the same time the question of values that it both gives and takes.

As Roman Ingarden maintained, in literature

[...] what is primarily represented is, not the time phase in and of itself, but that which *fills out* a time phase. Only the representation of that which fills out time evokes the representation of the time filled out by it (Ingarden 1973:237; italics in original).

Ingarden's thesis, so crucial for the existence of the literary work (and also very obvious today), implies one more general remark related to contemporary poems preoccupied with the question of time. What seems to differ them from similar works of the previous literary periods is the exposure of time as a theme or a lyrical protagonist and its literal location as a foreground factor determining the creation and monologue of the lyrical voice. Thus, what frequently "fills out a time phase" in a poem is time itself, which is less often "frozen" into a poetic image or a great metaphor. More and more often lyrical contemplations are reminiscent of "a lecture"

(maintaining however the poetic diction) on perceiving time and other related issues such as acceleration, alienation, the “un-time of life,” memory, resentment and reaffirmation, or poetry’s ability (or inability) to capture a moment in the “eternal present” of art.

Apart from general poetic reflections on time, I am mainly interested in the lyrical experience of its compression: how it translates into lyrical communication, how the lyrical monologue is organized and which metaphorical constructions are used. Of particular importance I find the question of if and how Polish poetry of the turn of the century reveals the specificity of experiencing time in Modernity and Postmodernity, and also, to which of the temporal aspects it is inclined, and what and how it inscribes into the “punctual present”<sup>2</sup> (Paul Celan’s *punktuelle Gegenwart*; “Der Meridian,” Celan 1998:334) in view of the experience of the present.

The pressure of time, sometimes verging on the subject’s enslavement by temporal units, is exemplified by a set of metaphors, which might be referred to as the “metaphors of acceleration,”<sup>3</sup> and from which there is no liberation even at night. With reference to the space of civilization, Zagajewski notices that

Dream is but a conveyer belt  
Which hands me over to the next day  
(“The Philosophers” [“Filozofowie”], Zagajewski 2010:42, trans. M.M.)

while Józef Baran observes:  
An innocent alarm-clock

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<sup>2</sup> Celan writes that a poem “always has this one singular punctual present” (“Meridian”, Celan 1998: 335, Polish trans. F. Przybylak, English trans. M.M.).

<sup>3</sup> The insight into the problem of acceleration connected with the sense of time and the modes of its representation in literature is presented in a proceedings volume *Fast and Faster. Essays on Cultural Rush (Szybko i szybciej. Eseje o pośpiechu w kulturze)* edited by D. Siwicka, M. Bieńczyk, and A. Nawarecki, Warsaw 1996. Of particular importance for the interpretation of the metaphors of acceleration are the conclusions reached by D. Siwicka in “Speed: Images and Values” (“Szybkość – wyobrażenia i wartości”) and M. Zielińska in “Speed and Literature” (“Szybkość i literatura”), and related to evaluating speed in philosophy and literature both of the previous and contemporary periods. Siwicka writes: “[...] the notion of speed became almost inseparable from the postmodern analysis of the contemporary period, which – when dealt with by aesthetics – has its origins in Futurism, a convulsive apogee of faith in speed and its beauty. [...] The postmodern man is not a conqueror. [...] He thinks of it [speed] – following Paul Virilio – from the victim’s, rather than the conqueror’s point of view” (Siwicka 1996: 28-29, trans. M.M.). Zielińska captures the meaning of speed in the following way: “one acts quickly when what is there seems – subjectively – insufficient, unwanted, unbearable, dangerous, etc. In other words speed is accompanied if not by a sense of immediate crisis or threat, then at least by a sense of dissatisfaction with the current condition. Hence, a speed-generating situation has a decisively negative connotation” (Zielińska 1996: 51, trans. M.M.).

Ticking behind my ear  
In my dream grows to monstrous proportions  
Of a machinery which feeds  
My hair into the cogs of passing

I woke up  
Screaming  
As it was massacring my body  
(“A Dream” [“sen”], Baran 1979:79, trans. M.M.)

The metaphor’s technical component, so common when expressing time, highlights one of the most obvious paradoxes of the present. We try to catch up with time by increasing the speed of life, and the more we try to save time, the harsher our confrontation with it turns out to be. Our race against time, doomed to failure, is represented by machines. As Emil Cioran notices in *The Portrait of a Civilized Man*:

These means and methods help in reaching it [the disaster] faster and more effectively. He already ran towards it, but that wasn’t enough, he desired to drive there. This is the only sense in which they truly help save time (Cioran 1994:30, trans. M.M.).

Technical devices, in theory supposed to save time, in fact facilitate our defeat and lead us faster to an end, making the experience of the compression of a moment even stronger.

In Zbigniew Herbert’s poetry time is a steam-engine, “a black monster, approaching with a hiss of white atmospheres and ready to swallow everything when the round guillotine of minutes will strike 12.31” (“Railway Landscapes” [“Pejzaże kolejowe”], Herbert 2011: 207, trans. M.M.). In the poetry of Bronisław Maj and Adam Zagajewski the metaphor of time is depicted as “iron trains setting off slowly and disappearing into the mist, like the 19<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>4</sup> (“Iron Train” [“Żelazny pociąg”], Zagajewski 1994: 55, trans. M.M.), or “[a] car, speeding on a highway, in France,” looking out of which it seems that even “trees are in a hurry” (“A Fast Poem” [“Szybki wiersz”], Zagajewski 2010: 155, trans. M.M.). It is a “wild express train, which lifts us above,” and which has no intention of “stopping on a small, quiet station” (“The King” [“Król”], Zagajewski 1999: 27, trans. M.M.), and “a train rumbling at the crossover,” while the traveller glimpses at the pastoral images “[w]hich will no longer belong to him: life dictated by four seasons [...] and by

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<sup>4</sup> This is how Jerzy Sosnowski describes the symbolism of the train in the novels of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “[i]t seems that the train has always been used as a symbol of misfortune. We have all the characteristic components making up the “railway semantics” in the turn of the century novel: the symbolic function of a train ride, emotionally negative imagery, the association between movement and obsession, a sense of the traveller’s loss of influence on his own fate, and finally – fear” (Sosnowski 1996: 130-131, trans. M.M). These symbolic meanings are also characteristic of the “technical metaphors” in the aforementioned novels.

Sundays in a small town” (\*\*\*, inc. “Do I have the right to search time?” [\*\*\*, inc. “Czy mam prawo do przeszukiwania czasu?”], Maj 1981: 5, trans. M.M.). In Baran’s poetry, time is expressed through similar metaphors, with particular emphasis on their technological nature which symbolizes dehumanization of the subject’s notion of time and its growing emptiness:

We have long lost track of time  
[...]  
Only the journey still matters, the rumbling of wheels  
A conductor punching our tickets once a year

The clock is ticking in a train compartment  
[...]  
We are throwing days into the firebox  
[...]  
We close and open our eyes  
And it’s this droning rumble of wheels again  
So we last  
We still last

(“A Ballad of a Rumbling Planet” [“ballada o turkoc’cej planecie”], Baran 1979: 11, trans. M.M.)

In Zagajewski’s poem “At Dawn” (“O świcie”) the beginning of the day – which is the beginning of the race against time – is indicated by a lorry which “pulls up to a brown wall of a slaughterhouse” and “in the morning, when the stars go out [...] the train moves faster and faster” (Zagajewski 2002: 25, trans. M.M.). The moment of time’s relaxation, “when the day is ending,” is brought about by an image of “railway engines falling asleep under the plumes of blossoming locust trees” (“Moses” [“Mojżesz”], Zagajewski 2002: 9, trans. M.M.).

The technical nature of the metaphors highlighting the compression of time is translated into the language of poetry by the contemporary everyday experience. Gleick describes it in the following manner:

Our world handles time in smaller and smaller coinage. Second-saving technologies can be simple [...] or clever. [...] Perhaps we will soon learn to expect and understand speech that is even more rapid. As we surround ourselves with these quick technologies, we sometimes begin to doubt ourselves. We measure ourselves against our machines, and we worry that we are lagging behind. They are faster than we are. A poor human can’t keep up. Then again, we can. [...] Even computers, terrifyingly speedy as they are, keep us waiting, we may note smugly.  
Who can say just where we began the slide down this long, strange slope of milliseconds? [...]  
And the effect of all that rapid technological change? We get dizzy. We feel the instability of our own place in society. [...]

Pruning minutes and seconds and hundredths of seconds has become an obsession in all but a few segments of our society (Gleick 2000: 126-127, 89, 21).

Apart from metaphors technologizing time, contemporary Polish poems display another figurative cycle in which time is approached in terms of theriomorphism and animalization with the emphasis on predatory qualities and on being ready for a quick jump. In Zagajewski's poetry, "hours, like lions, devour the stock of life" ("News On the Hour" ["Co godzinę wiadomości"], Zagajewski 1983: 37, trans. M.M.) and "[t]ime, like / A greyhound, sleeps on the threshold" ("So Low" ["Tak nisko"], Zagajewski 1983: 30, trans. M.M.). Or elsewhere: "[T]here were no predators in the park / Apart from time" ("The Cruel One" ["Okrutny"], Zagajewski 2010: 130, trans. M.M.). In Aleksander Rybczyński's poems we have "time standing by on wristwatch bands" – like a dog on a leash, waiting to be released. From the subject's perspective keeping time on stand-by only intensifies the "unreality of time" ("Sensitive Places" ["Czułe miejsca"], Rybczyński 2003: 105, trans. M.M.).

Contemporary poetry hardly offers any consolation as it notices the growing power of time over the human subject. In this respect Zagajewski offers a disillusioned advice:

Don't let poetry relax you  
Don't even bother reading it, you've got no time anyway  
Because it is time that keeps you in check  
Holding you in its talons, if it be a bird  
And strangling you slowly [...]  
(“The New World” [“Nowy świat”], Zagajewski 2010:29, trans. M.M.)

The Present, shrinking in its various forms as a result of oppressive acceleration, provokes a meta-poetical reflection. Maj declares:

I shall never write a long poem: all  
I have learned here, does not allow me  
To lie: it lasts  
Between two gasps of air, in one  
Look, or heartbeat  
[...] that which is here with me  
Will suffice to write a dozen or so  
Lines, a poem, short as the life  
Of a cabbage butterfly, a flash of light on a wave [...]  
(\*\*\*, inc. “I Shall Never Write” [\*\*\*, inc. “Nigdy nie napiszę”], Maj 1981:9,  
trans. M.M.)

Zagajewski claims that what is written today, is “a fast poem – instead of a hymn” (“A Fast Poem” [“Szybki wiersz”], Zagajewski 2010:155, trans. M.M.), and even that takes too long since inspiration is slow, and contemplation cannot be hastened:

What is my work?  
 A lot of still waiting [...]  
 I write so slow like I had two hundred years to live  
 (“The Room” [“Pokój”], Zagajewski 2010:176, trans. M.M.)

Contemporary Polish poetry offers numerous works which expose the experience of time’s relativity and the disproportions it presents in the humanist context through a meta-poetical reflection. The bigger the pressure of acceleration exerted by the soulless time of civilisation or otherworldly temporal measures, the more the valuable and creative time seems to shrink. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the poetry of the turn of the century is particularly sensitive to time’s smallest units – moments. Georges Poulet called them “creative acts of time” (Poulet 1977:67, trans. M.M.), barely perceptible and yet vital for the constitution of subjectivity and for preserving its relative continuity in time. These short moments, crumbs of time filled with their inner contents and released from the pace of hours at the service of the postmodern rush, become moments – or nanomoments<sup>5</sup> – of illuminations, epiphanies and revelations. Contemporary Polish poetry, somehow against the objective insignificance of the flashes of time, recognizes them with utmost attention. Even the most relative moment remains stable at least in one respect, namely its exceptionally high anthropological significance, especially when – as in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz – it is capable, through an epiphanic experience, of grasping the aporia of an “eternal moment,” an intersection of times belonging to different orders and constituting its complicated essence.

The dwellers of the present, or, as Ewa Lipska calls us, “the scholarship holders of time” (and paying their taxes) (Lipska 2002:17, trans. M.M.), more and more often look for “hours beyond hours.” Contemplating the moment, and somehow stopping in it, they try to conquer time in the same way as it conquers them. They do not always want to be associates of the rushing years, consumed by their pace. Lipska writes:

I used to be time’s associate  
 But I declare bankruptcy  
 (“Bats’ Black Cloister” [“Czarny klasztor nietoperzy”], Lipska 2002:10, trans. M.M.)

Clearly, poetry is in no position to take control of either the moment or time. But it can tame it, without negating the conviction that, in the final analysis, it is time which governs us. And when the borders of nanomoments shrink, hastened by the

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<sup>5</sup> I use the category introduced by Józef Bańka within the philosophy of recentivism. He discusses nanomoments (from Greek *nanos* – dwarf and *nyn* – now), among others, in the books: *Traktat o czasie. Czas a poczucie dziejowości istnienia w koncepcjach recentywizmu i prezentyzmu* (Bańka 1991) and *Czas w sztuce. Recentywizm i skok do bezpowrotnej terażniejszości* (Bańka 1999).

civilizational rush and the experience of the “un-time of life,” poetry opens itself to a radically different perspective of time: the non-time of eternity. Across the poetry of the age of chronocentrism:

Rarely sidles someone serious –  
In a monk’s habit, who hasn’t got time,  
Who only has time for eternity  
(“Sénanque”, Zagajewski 1999:63, trans. M.M.)

Yet it is not only the moment which reverberates in Polish Modern and Post-modern poetry. Of equal importance turn out to be the embodiments of super-human and infinite time: eons and “centuries of eternity.” It is because, as Czesław Miłosz writes:

[...] it is the same eon.  
Fear and desire are the same, oil and wine  
And bread mean the same.  
(“Readings” [“Lektury”], Miłosz 1996:223, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee)

These questions, however, might constitute the subject-matter of a different article.

*Translated by Marcin Mazurek*

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