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How to Be a Queen

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The appreciation reviewers express for the exceptional talent of the author of *Paw Królowej* by Dorota Masłowska¹ is usually accompanied by a more or less discreetly expressed disappointment with the book's content. Reviewers suggest (the exception is the review by Marek Zaleski in *Tygodnik Powszechny*) that the book does not offer cognitive enrichment because its representation of the world does not propose anything new. They believe the novel treats about the life of pop stars, describing the mechanisms of career-making, and unmasks the protagonists who are revealed to be poor not only in spirit but also often literally short on money. Such dual reception – undisguised admiration for the language, on the one hand, and disappointment with the book's content, apparently too obvious or banal, on the other, sometimes, however, is the fate of books which are brilliant but still awaiting proper interpretation.

Bożena Umińska appreciated the book enough to compare it to prose by Jelinek (*Przekrój* 2005 no 28). It would seem that the well-known author of reviews thus pays her tribute. Quite the contrary. Her review contains such observations as the following: "Ideas good enough for Austrians will not work for us, Poles." Umińska suggests that Masłowska avoids any positive engagement, "so that no one would think she is a socialist or a feminist thus making her potentially the object of mockery; the negative perception of reality characteristic for Jelinek, however, would surely not get laughed at." Umińska also speaks of Masłowska as a "juvenile malcontent."

The comparison between Masłowska and Jelinek is quite compelling. They use language in a similar way. And it is not the matter of the excellent literary workshop but of a certain conception of language which is much more complex in *Paw królowej*

than it is in *Wojna polsko-ruska*.² The grotesque language of *Wojna* aims at representing a thug as a social type. This crippled language is his only language and the limits of that language are the limits of his brutal world. The critics decided that *Paw królowej* is based on a similar sociological concept, only this time telling about the privileged sections of society. Such reading is to be supported by the choice of protagonists: Stanisław Retro, a singer of fading fame; his manager, Szymon Rybaczko; and several female characters, such as Anna Przesik, Retro's girlfriend; Sandra, Rybaczko's wife; and the ecstatically ugly Patrycja Pitz, whose existential situation is described in the first chapter with "hip-hop rage":

Hej złamasie, to do ciebie mówię, ciebie o to pytam. Co zrobisz, gdyby to do ciebie przyszła tak cholernie brzydka, przyniosła swoje ciało jak turystyczna konserwa, oczami wywracała i chciała cię poderwać, to co, co wtedy zrobisz, przecież nie jesteś zły, tylko jesteś dobry, a jeżeli to właśnie Chrystus do ciebie podchodzi w kostiumie Patrycji i chce to z tobą robić? Pomyśl o tym. (9)

[Hey you, dickhead, yeah, you, I'm talking to you, I'm asking you. What would you do if she came to you, so fucking ugly, brought her body like a can of cat food, rolled her eyes and tried to put the moves on you, so what would you do, you're not bad, you're good, and what if it is Christ himself come to you dressed as Patrycja and wanting to do it with you? Think about it.]

Using what seems like direct speech Masłowska represents the inner life of her characters and the way they attribute meaning to events. Their inner language turns out to be a tangle of phrases borrowed from various language games in which they participate. The characters are parodies of traditionally understood subjectivity defined as the ability to own one's speech: a subject is the one who is conscious of the sense of his or her own utterances. Masłowska's characters are essentially flat because they are reduced to a language which, as in theories of poststructuralism, speaks them. They seem to be puppets, thinking and acting only insofar as they are permitted by the mechanized language which delimits their world. Similarly to Jelinek, Masłowska sometimes breaks up language into its elementary parts and subsequently puts those together according to patterns which produce the effect of objectification. She uses, for example, nouns derived from verbs and passive voice in place of active verbal forms. The character of Stanisław Retro is such a caricature of subjectivity; in his speech we recognize phrases coming from a variety of discourses. I could quote endlessly. I will mention only the excellent scenes of Retro's fights with his successive girlfriends; the description of riding the bus with "the plebeians"; and the ruminations on the possible consequences of murdering Rybaczko:

Zresztą to zabicie nie do końca mu wydało się moralne. Potem po sądach korowody to mało, ale zemsta karmy, to okropne, okropne mu się po prostu wydało, jak się ma czuć taka osoba zabijana? Na pewno niefajnie... I jak to nieladnie będzie o nim świadczyć, każdy skrytykuje go internauta: uważałam, że przez Stanisława Retro menedżera swego zamordowanie to czyn niemoralny! Uważam, że Stanisław Retro nie jest żadnym artystą, lecz zwykłym pedałem i nekrofagiem! (112)

² Dorota Masłowska, *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną*, Lampa i Iskra Boża, Warsaw, 2005.

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[Anyway, the killing didn't seem quite morally right. Later the hassle in the courts, that's bad enough, but the karma, that seemed most awful, how is such a person supposed to feel when being killed? Uncool, that's for sure... And it would put him in such a bad light, each and every blogger will criticize: I believe that the murder of his manager by Stanisław Retro is an immoral deed! I believe that Stanisław Retro is no artist, but a plain faggot and scavenger.]

The effect of the clash between inner speech and its real sense, perceptible to the reader, serves the aim of exposure and it is because of this effect that, contrary to Umińska's claims, the novel is in fact analytical and critical. For example, Rybaczko never takes care of his child who is several months old. We can infer that from his tactics during the "minor" misunderstandings with his wife:

"No Sandra przypilnuj ją, zobacz jak płacze!" – krzyczy do Sandry. "No zrób coś, chyba jesteś chyba jej matką," ale ona oczywiście że nie słyszy udaje, na gapienie się w dal zawody urząduje między sobą samą, okej, nie ma sprawy, pilotem podgłośnił do wartości ekstremalnych i słucha uważnie. (125)

[“C’mon Sandra, why don’t you mind her, see how she’s crying!” – he yells to Sandra. “Do something, damn it, you’re her mother,” but of course she doesn’t hear, pretends not to, does the stare-into-the-void contest with herself, okay, screw it, he hits the extreme values with the remote, and listens attentively.]

The real significance of this scene escapes the protagonist who fails to recognize the reasons for his wife’s frustration that deepens from one month to the next. The dreams and self-perception of the characters in *Paw królowej* are illusions which separate them from the real significance of the events in their lives. The schematic, female “waiting for love” clashes with male sexual desire as the world of *Paw królowej* is reduced to trivial physiology. Women are victims of systemic violence (expressed in Retra’s case also as physical violence), but so aggressive and ruthless themselves in pursuing their goals that they do not inspire pity. Violence manifest in language is the condition of social acceptance in this world. This is why even Patrycja, predestined for the role of the victim becomes repulsive when the usual roles in her life are reversed and all of a sudden she can address her “admirer.”

Rybaczko, a specialist in manipulating the media, decides to launch the career of this transgressively ugly girl, inspired by the media response to the death of the Pope. Patrycja will probably be a success, as the promotion mechanisms will succeed even in marketing her ugliness and launching her in the media. This will be achieved with the “Christian message” she will carry, addressed primarily to the so-called “John Paul generation” currently recognized as the potential new mass consumer. As he promotes Patrycja, Rybaczko also wants to give a chance to Masłowska whom he chooses to be the author of Patrycja’s songs. Placing a request under the text he has written himself, he explains:

właściwie to nic by pani specjalnie pisać nie musiała, ale żeby była to właśnie pani ważne, szkielec tekstu jest gotowy prawie, najwyżej rymy pani dopisze jakieś, bo to hip hop jest taki... fabularnie jest sytuacja, że brzydka dziewczyna, rozumie pani, przez wszystkich pomiatana...w tle Polska

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Ce, trudne realia, kapitalizm...ogólna rzeczywistości przepychanka, no na pewno wie pani, jak to tam lirycznie przedstawię, trochę przekleństw, bo to ma być manifest prawdy. (147)

[Actually, you wouldn't need to write anything really, but it's important that it has to be you, the draft of the text is basically ready, you can just add some rhymes and stuff, for this is a kind of hip-hop thing...the story situation is that there is this ugly girl, you get it, everybody pushes her around...backwoods Poland in the background, difficult realities, capitalism...gritty reality, you will know how to make that stuff lyrical and all, with some curse words, because this is to be a manifesto of truth.]

Rybaczko places the request with Masłowska for a text which we essentially already have read. This circular narration faces the reader with the disturbing question whether we should not place the entire book in quotation marks as Rybaczko's text. And if we place those quotations in yet more quotations, Masłowska's book will reveal a second bottom and will force us to consider the significance of her "unclear" authorship.

Consequently, we have to read "Patrycja's song" as play with hip-hop conventions on the level of language and world view as well as on the level of "the author's reflections" it contains, which will then become a parody of all "reflections" one could formulate in this language, and not just an expression of a "juvenile malcontent" as Umińska would have it. The many self-reflexive elements of the novel mostly escaped critical notice. This self-reflexivity does not concern, as it used to in the 20th century avant-garde novel, the creative process, but the mechanisms of the book's promotion and reception, and, among others, the creation of the book's "author," in a situation when it is systematically impossible to own one's language. Rybaczko, the king of the media, knows full well whom to target with Patrycja's song and why he needs Masłowska:

telefonu [szukaj] do jakiejś osoby znanej, ale umiarkowanie, żeby wszystko niszczliwości miało znamień, w alternatywnych klimatach było utrzymane, względem kultury oficjalnej marginalne, aby trafić również do tych wszystkich punków i vegetarianów różnych zbuntowanych, do różnych tych lasek zjeżdżających...one z Pitz na pewno będą się identyfikowały, cosmoświnie do gazem depilacji, jeszcze tylko nazwisko odpowiednie znaleźć, które by to wszystko firmowało...a ta Masłowska jakaś...teraz o sławie przebrzmiałej, która właśnie ze względu na to może okazać się tania, poza tym autentyczna taka, w bloku mieszkająca, zna realia społeczne i socjalne. (146)

[he's looking for] a phone number to someone well-known, but not too well-known, to keep everything low profile, to keep it in the alternative climate, marginal in relation to the mainstream culture, to get also to all those punks and vegetarian troublemakers, all those wilted hoes...who would surely identify with Pitz, cosmofoes with gas hair removal, he only needs the right name to front the whole thing...and there's this Masłowska...of now passing fame, so she may be cheaper, but still so authentic, she lived in the projects and knows the social realities first hand.]

The "author" is merely the tool of the system here, and her name serves as the marker of authenticity of the homogenized content intended to reach the homogenized audience. Self-reflexivity is related also to the problem of reception, or to the functioning of the text and its author in culture, understood as a network of discourses of various

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media: from the press which shapes public opinion, through magazines which create fashion and stars, to advertising and internet forums. The book is doomed to a reception determined by the patterns set by the different discourses. Among those, there is the right-wing press:

Należy tłumaczeniu na inne języki tej książki ewentualnemu zapobiec, ponieważ postawy bohaterów zdradzają niski moralny poziom, co w złym świetle na Zachodzie stawia Polskę i powszechnie kultywowane tu wartości. Tę piosenkę celowo wypromowali Żydzi i masoni, zamiast wypromować pisarzy bardziej zdolnych, takich jak Stanisław Lem, Bruno Schultz i Witold Gombrowicz. (119)

[The potential translation of this book into other languages should be prevented, because the attitudes of the protagonists betray poor moral standing, which puts Poland in a bad light in the West, together with the values generally cultivated here. This song was purposely promoted by the Jews and the Masons, instead of promoting writers who are more talented, such as Stanisław Lem, Bruno Schultz, and Witold Gombrowicz.]

There is also the Catholic humanism of the reviewers from *Tygodnik Powszechny* or *Gazeta Wyborcza*:

człowiekowi drugiemu dobre słowo dać, a nie że wciąż tylko kurwa i jej najlepsza koleżanka mać to jedyne co do powiedzenia innym masz, powiedz to MC Doris, banala się boisz, słów dobrych, o co ci dziewczyno chodzi, czy optymistycznie raz spojrzeć aż tak boli, czy optymistycznie raz spojrzeć ci szkodzi? (33)

[Have a kind word to give to another, not just the usual motherfucker, is that all you have to say to your brother, say it to MC Doris, are you afraid it would be lame, are you afraid of a kind word to say, what is it with you girl, can't you be more optimistic, afraid to be more optimistic?]

There are ads and tales about stars from women's magazines:

Do napisania książki została wybrana autorka piękna i bardzo wysoka, tak aby ta książka mogła czytelnika bardzo ciekawić i interesować. Otwory w ciele autorki sklejono klejem Lancome do w ciele otworów. Dzięki temu nie menstruuje ona, nie poci się i nie oddaje moczu, co czyni tę książkę jeszcze bardziej zrozumiałą i interesującą. W ręce trzyma gumowy noworodek "My baby" 153 złote. Kup go i bądź jak ona. (97)

[A beautiful and very tall writer was selected to write [the novel], so that the book would interest and entertain the reader a lot. The holes in the writer's body were glued with Lancome glue for the body holes. Thanks to that she does not menstruate, sweat, or urinate, which makes the book even more understandable and likeable. In her hand she holds a rubber newborn, "My Baby," 153 złotys. Buy it and be like her.]

The space of culture is not the space of conversation and interpretation of meaning, but the space for mercantile exploitation of the author and of his social exclusion. (This is how we need to understand the absurd passage showing Masłowska as a "public enemy" who spends her nights punching holes in a grapefruit, an activity that had already been described in *Fakt*.) Media culture is thus shown as the space of alienation. Masłowska uses the play with the objectified receiver, represented by the media engaged in com-

mentary and promotion, as a strategy of opposition against the omnipresent discourse of mass culture (which, it is worth remembering, erases the opposition between high and low culture, a phenomenon exemplified by cultured Rybaczko who differs significantly from the thug businessman Silny).

Masłowska often employs the grotesque effects produced by the clash between ideological discourse and the “naked” reality. For example, the tragic ending of Patrycja’s song, where she is run over by the tram and where “the ambulance takes [her] to heaven in a black bag” (28) seems grotesque enough. There is also a passage which beautifully parodies discourse of motherhood exploited by the media:

“w ciąży cierpiąlam na wątrobową choleostazę,” mówi piosenkarka znana, “...objawiało się to świdzemieniu całego ciała...tak było, ale...wszystko już zrozumiałam. Kiedyś posiadałam złe cechy charakteru, teraz ich nie posiadam.” “Na uzależnienie od kokainy cierpiąlam...to był błąd ale teraz już wszystko zrozumiałam...na Bemowie mamy piękne 75 metrów mieszkanie... Kiedyś kokainę ćpałam, ale teraz wydaje się dużo większe, bo wyburzyliśmy ściany.” (14)

[“When I was pregnant I suffered from choleostatic liver disease,” says a famous singer, “...the symptom was the itching of the body all over...I had it, but...but now I understand everything. Once I used to possess bad character flaws, now I don’t possess them any more.” “I used to suffer from cocaine addiction once...and that was a mistake, but now I understand everything... Now we have this beautiful apartment in Bemovo, 75 square meters...I used to snort cocaine once, but now it seems much larger when we tore down the walls.”]

Masłowska’s linguistic play depends on the operations of clashing and overlapping stock phrases and clichés, in order to reveal the strangeness and lifelessness of language. The book’s hip-hop rhythms, however, effect a magnetic pull on the reader so that we breathlessly read and cannot tear ourselves away from the reading. Thus despite its ugliness and the ugliness of the world it represents, the language of the book is disturbingly lively, captivating, and poetic. The reason for this is the live presence of the book’s author, who attempts to break through language conventions, an invisible but palpable presence behind the tectonic shifts revealed on the surface of the text in the form of grotesque. The real subject of the book is, then, writing under the conditions of media language. The stake is the autonomy of the author, but also his intimacy, guarded against the network of language relations which uproot one from one’s own experience.

Masłowska is also one of the characters of her novel. We find out, for example, that she moved into a bad neighborhood, Praga, and rides a bike with no logo. These are signs of the conscious refusal of the markers of social prestige. She has a small child. She allows the voice of the mainstream culture to tell about her experiences. According to that voice, she has become “a housewife who trudges around her house dragging along the abdomen of the vacuum cleaner” (the word cluster suggests a woman annihilated as a person and dominated by her reproductive function). In this scenario, her fate as an author has been sealed: “Kuczok Wojciech gives a reading in Silesian Kielbasa, and she stays at home, at home. Hey, people, put down this shit, those knives, she has never written another book again!” (135). These words hide the author from view, but also point to “Masłowska” as their distributor, about whom

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we find out, primarily, that she has mastered the skill of evading discourses which would like to trap her and simultaneously disown her of her language. Masłowska is not what the language pattern prepared for her as a woman, then mother, would have her be; different from what the language of those around her would fabricate her as. Her book is also different. It follows in the steps of the linguistic and philosophical discoveries of *Ferdydurke*.

Translation: Krystyna Mazur