

Anna Adamowicz

Three Poems¹

Introduction

As legend has it, when the seven-year-old Jean-Michel Basquiat was recovering in hospital after being hit by a car, his mother brought him the classic *Gray's Anatomy* as a gift. The handbook's illustrations inspired his subsequent artistic output. Another legend tells the story of Erysichthon, the godless king of Thessaly, who cut down a sacred oak, for which he was punished by Demeter with insatiable hunger. What took the form of a myth in Erysichthon's case, however, with the passage of time, and under the name of polyphagia or hyperphagia, became the subject of medical research and description. However, this condition is hardly a comprehensive explanation in the case of Tarrare, a French circus performer and soldier, who not only suffered from unrestricted craving (devouring everything from rats and stones to morgue cadavers), but his oesophagus and stomach were also unnaturally capacious. Obviously, he was turned into an exhibit of oddity by the teething eighteenth-century study of anatomy. Nonetheless, much of this story could still be perceived as a mere gruesome legend. On the contrary, the most meticulously described case of hyperphagia was that of a man called Charles Domery, a soldier of Polish origin living in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, who had a penchant for a meat-based diet and who became notorious for, among other things, wolfing down 174 cats in the course of one year. All these peculiarities and oddities are hallmarks of Anna Adamowicz's poetry and she included them directly into her poems. Anatomical peculiarities can also be observed in her poem "systems: the spine" [*układy. kręgosłup*], which addresses deformities in the spinal curvature.

¹ The three poems translated here into English by Lynn Suh were originally published in Adamowicz's collection *Animalia* (2019, Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie): "do ośmiolatniego Jean-Michela Basquiata" (19), "układy. kręgosłup" (23), and "Erysichthon – Tarrare – Domery" (29).

The kind of historical explanation included above requires some erudition or reliance on sources on the part of the reader. It also exemplifies the conservative, or classically-informed element of Adamowicz's work. She oftentimes selects themes firmly embedded in history, intertwined with the biography of some more contemporary person, to then unveil in them moments of corporeal abuse and deformities in order to work through such topics in the realm of a poem, i.e., deviating it from the marked line, engrafting new threads, "through the resonant materials in the bones" ["przez rezonujące zrosty na kościach"].

The poems presented here deal with the motif of anatomical deformity, through which the reader is confronted with corporeality; yet this time the motif is sustained as a kind of basis, the skeleton of a piece of writing whose sole function is to bend, twist, and distort, like the eponymous worshipped spine. A similar gesture can be pinpointed in the majority of Adamowicz's pieces from her two books of poetry published to date. It might be called—to use an anatomical analogy—the ossification of a certain structure of meanings and manners of introducing characters, along with their stories, into poems. The most interesting, however, is yet to come, when the said bone structure begins to deform, break, and dissolve. Consecutive degrees of metaphorisation begin to operate, and instances of interceding vocabulary from other registers allow us to move out of the sphere of historical anecdote. What transpires in each and every one of the texts presented here can be aptly characterised as somatic distortion. Tissues cease to adhere closely to the bone structure, a damaged spleen leaves the body only to turn into an external organ, and a bent spine is pulsating like Europe: "it would wander, / spread, accumulate", "flopping in a shallow puddle, swallowing its own / amniotic fluid" ["będzie błąkać się, / plenić, nabrzmiwać", "wijącą się w płytkiej kałuży, łykającą własne / wody płodowe"]. The body pours itself out, expands, and externalises itself, yet concurrently, the things that it is composed of appear to be fluid and unstable, and not vulnerable to any sense of form.

Each story in Adamowicz's poems, if seen from afar, resembles an ostensible macabre oddity; but if studied more closely, through the mindful eyes of the poet, it turns out to be a tale of variegated, liquid, and malleable connections, and also of their material tensions. Apparently, the poet's eyes carry out a dissection but, in fact, they only partially emulate the methods of Enlightenment scientists, which is to say, science itself. No living tissue is cut and removed here to be experimented upon, clinically or poetically. On the contrary, tissue is reproduced by allowing the incremental growth of mean-

ings. Therefore, what we have called the classically-informed aspect of her poetry, eventually yields to the affective element, i.e., to the pulsating body-poem, much too elusive for the gaze of the anatomist or physiologist.

Adamowicz's poems are particularly powerful due to the interpenetration of what is traditionally (i.e., by Western metaphysical reflection) located at opposing poles: the inner vs the outer, the self vs the we, the body vs the mind, the skeleton vs amorphous tissue. The basic gesture of questioning the corporeal unity of a hero or lyrical subject or, to be more precise, their convictions about this unity, leads to the undermining of the subsequent levels of biological and social relations. After all, the poems seem to suggest, no legal provisions regulate us, nor any hierarchy or duty. We are rather—as Krzysztof Pacewicz put it while attempting to elaborate a new, anti-metaphysical ontology—a *flux*, i.e., a network and community of fluids, flows, and amorphous collectives.² Quite some time ago this stance was underscored by David Cronenberg in his feature films *Crash* (1996) and *The Fly* (1986), where he set about experimenting sadistically on his actors' carnality and fleshness. Adamowicz goes a step further: she shows that where biological multiplicity reigns and anthropocentric classifications fail, the world is no longer fuelled by psychoanalytically understood drives, but rather by basal affects, tensions, and interactions. Here, neurobiologists and philosophers like Antonio Damasio and Catharine Malabou take up the baton. Adamowicz keeps reflecting on the ailments, accidents, and cases which muddle and obfuscate the metaphysical sources of the "self" (all these meanings of "accident" are collated by Malabou in *The Ontology of the Accident*, where she describes the creative and destructive plasticity of our being).³ If we fail to notice this element, Adamowicz's poems shall remain for us rather classical, artisan works and singular stories which gradually transform into *exempla* or allegories. That is what the lion's share of Zbigniew Herbert's and Wisława Szymborska's poems looks like. However, if we pay attention to it, weaving the tale of homeostasis maintained by this strange system that we are living in and which we are, it will no longer prove feasible and, as a result, the poem will stop signifying and begin to produce (relations).

Jakub Skurtys

² Cf. Pacewicz Krzysztof (2017), *Flux. Wspólnota płynów ustrojowych*, Warszawa: PWN, pp. 29–33.

³ Cf. Malabou Catherine (2012), *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread, Cambridge: Polity Press.

to the eight-year-old Jean-Michel Basquiat

that moment—the hum, the scream, the glimmering scales
outside and in, then nothing, and then you're waking
without spleen, instead of myriads of cells
crumbling before the hand materializes.

the spleen—the body's Manhattan undulating like medusa,
able to cleanse fluids, treat blood,
neutralize pain and sift out trauma,
digesting everything in black bile.

without it no injury would vanish, it would wander,
spread, accumulate, finding its only outlet
via the shoulder shaking to the rhythm of jazz,
through the resonant materials in the bones

systems: the spine

for A.O.

i adore your back, from which a wing sprouts
fashioned from ribs, comprised of the shoulder. its agile flutter
wakes me in the night as the heart aflutter.

your back's my god, the spine's a serpent
entwined between the ribs as among the stones,
and placed in a river taking a sharp turn,
a serpent to be stroked in expectation of an attack.

and they, stubborn, want to stretch you out, scaffold with rods
like Europe, flopping in a shallow puddle, swallowing its own
amniotic fluid, warped at so many points of contact
with the body

Erysichton - Tarrare - Domery

i ate my dinner, your dinner, a family, two armies,
a few cats and eels, some candles, a little carrion,
maybe an infant, i honestly don't remember,
i devoured memory as well, time, names.

in saying i ate what i'm trying to say is
that the walls of my stomach are full of ulcers
open to other worlds.
the belly like outer space lurching back and forth in acid.

to swallow animals and people,
to carry them to a safe place;
to consume an unimaginable amount of meat,
in order to feed this motley crew;
to devour oneself, to get away
from the universe, which consumes

