

MERMAIDISM The Poetry of Julia Fiedorczyk

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Abstract – The article deals with the range of ways myths function in the poetry of Julia Fiedorczyk. As well as being a poet, Fiedorczyk is also a professional academic, translator. Her writing, rooted in American modernist poetry, while also belonging to the fields of eco-criticism and feminism, is one of the most fascinating bodies of work in Poland today. This article analyses the poetic strategies known as hybridism, describing it on numerous semantic levels. In it, I introduce the category of mermaidism, which is connected with hybridism; it is the creative foundation for poetry which opposes the forces of unification, bonding, thinking of continuum and symmetry.

Keywords: Julia Fiedorczyk; mermaidism; hybridity; ecopoetics; re-mythologisation.

1. Old and new myths

Following 1989, literature written by women in Poland had to deal not only with the political transformation taking place at the time, but also changes within the cultural sphere. Feminist critical approaches from the West began to have a broader influence, making reference to post-structuralist theory, Marxism, psychoanalysis and so on. This facilitated the flourishing of intellectual activity in the ensuing years, involving women writers and poets emerging from academic circles. Following theories from abroad, myths analysed by feminist criticism also arrived on Polish shores, quickly and permanently taking up home in critical and literary writing. Alongside the domestic repertoire, ensuring the permanent presence of the Mother Pole as virgin-knight, new takes on visions of the “witch” and “madwoman” followed, including characters such as Demeter and Ceres, Cinderella, Ophelia and also Athena. And yet above all, every sort of precursors make their feministic mark: Arachne, the Moirai, expressing different strategies of women’s writing, agency and identity¹.

¹ A substantial store of writing is available on this theme: Szczuka 2003, Borkowska 1996, Janion 1996, Kłosińska 2001, Świerkosz 2017, Kłosińska, 1999, Kłosińska 2004, Kłosińska 2010.

In this intermediate period, several manifestations of mythic thinking emerged. Traditional conceptions of myths did not vanish, those referring to pasts both distant and recent, serving as examples, allegories or author masks. They co-existed with attempts to create a new female mythology – some better, some worse. The biggest danger to literary originality itself turned out to be the “handy” narrations with ready interpretations emerging from feminist critique.

The demythologising trend seems most interesting, revealing the erosion of the narrative structures, while also trying to become included in this new reality, in order to eventually remodel it. Within its frameworks, we encounter a new poetic language, testing the limits of expression, testing meanings, deconstructing frames, working to broaden the scope of civic consciousness, understanding in multidimensional contexts the politicality of art (see Fiedorczuk, Beltrán 2015). This poetry also makes use of a rich repertoire of mythical figures, though most often in order to reconfigure the old and create some new meanings.

2. “I am a female poet”

As a result, it is worth taking a closer look at Julia Fiedorczuk (born 1975), a poet, writer, critic and academic. Since 1998, she has been lecturing American Literature and Literary Theory at the Warsaw University Institute of English Studies. She is a respected author of works on the topic of ecopoetics. Two books are worth mentioning here: *Ekopoetyka a konwencje poezji amerykańskiej XX wieku* (Ecopoetics and Conventions of 20th-century American Poetry) and *Ekopoetyka* (Ecopoetics) (co-authored by Gerardo Beltrán), published in 2015. Frequently nominated for literary prizes (Nike Prize 2016, Silesius 2018), Fiedorczuk won the Polish Publishers Association Prize for her poetry debut *Listopad nad Narwią* (November on the River Narew, 2000), going on to win the Wisława Szymborska Prize for Poetry in 2018. She has written the following volumes of poetry: *Bio* (2004), *Planeta rzeczy zagubionych* (Planet of Lost Property, 2006), *Tlen* (Oxygen, 2009), *tuż-tuż* (any moment, 2012), *Psalmy* (Psalms, 2017). The year 2010 saw the publication of her collection of short stories *Poranek Marii i inne opowiadania* (Maria’s Morning), followed by other prose works: *Biała Ofelia* (White Ophelia, 2011), *Nieważkość* (Weightlessness, 2015), *Bliskie kraje* (Near Lands, 2016).

Critics judge her poetry to be reserved, intellectual, and self-conscious – perceptions the poet herself does not deny, stressing in interviews that she very much values “precision” and her own academic poetic background. Fiedorczuk is known for commenting upon her work, saying in an interview with *Dwutygodnik* magazine: “I am trying to integrate artistic and academic

sensibilities” (Fiedorczuk, Łubieński 2016). Joanna Grądział-Wójcik considers her to be part of a “neo-avant-garde” trend in poetry and draws our attention to Fiedorczuk’s “program of multi-layered constellation”: “The author’s works include multi-genre literary (not only) expressions, serving the function of para-texts for poetry, their essence being a self-referencing, meta-critical and aspirational approach to the art of writing. And yet we must remember that this multi-contextual activity, though bound with eco-poetic frameworks, doesn’t have to amount to a coherent whole – it is not by accident that Fiedorczuk makes use of a range of different forms” (Grądział-Wójcik 2018b, p. 124).

The intellectuality of her poetry resides next to sensuality, lyricism and engagement in environmental problems, with specific consideration given to the essence of language, where the conventions of erotic poetry come up against references to contemporary physics or philosophy. The fixed link in all of these connections is femininity, something the poet herself refers to:

I cannot imagine writing stripped of gender: I always write as a woman. Just as I cannot imagine that anyone who is a mother could separate that aspect of her experience completely from the part of her in which she is a poet. (Fiedorczuk, Winiarski 2010)

Fiedorczuk does not try to expose her femininity, often limiting herself to the softness and fluidity of metaphors. This point of view, which she has frequently stressed, should be understood as an alternative to patriarchal writing, proving that poetry does not have to be written by men in order to be understood as good – it is enough that her work has an intellectual character: “In fact, I tend to think most of all when I am writing. And I think this is why I write, in order to more intensively – and systematically – think” (Grądział-Wójcik J. 2018b, p. 125). What matters most to her is the connection between writing and living. In a conversation with Olena Sheremet (13.01.2014), she admitted that the declaration “I am a female poet” is an act of courage in a world of publishing dominated by men, where revealing one’s gender has its political consequences. Hence, she treats writing as a battle, not just on a linguistic level, but also in the public domain (Fiedorczuk, Sheremet 2014).

3. Academic inspirations

In interviews, Fiedorczuk devotes a lot of time to her academic sources of inspiration, often repeating that she was raised on Anglo-American modernism, and though she sees herself as a postmodernist, the masters she feels inspired by are Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Laura Riding, Mina Loy, and Hilda Doolittle. It might be said that their work

has been a training ground preparing her to write her own poetry. Their poetic programmes and ways of seeing the world are congruent with her world views, her understanding of poetry, ecopoetics, ethics and above all of language itself. As a consequence, in both her understanding and her practice, poetry must remain obtuse, ambiguous, seeing as reality is always inaccessible to us. Language can be a record of loss, or else of longing for effusive reality, a source of energy, of hunger for existence, “it is erotic, loving and wild energy” (Fiedorczuk, Czartoryski 2017). Fiedorczuk speaks of the essential need to be involved – literature, through its sensitivity, has responsibility for our world; Fiedorczuk stresses that poetry does not define itself, it is not autonomous, it cannot be egoistical, but it must be a gesture, an action, responsibility for life on Earth, it has to be a home shared by all human and non-human beings, while poetry should be one of the ways of inhabiting this shared space (Fiedorczuk, Czartoryski 2017).

Such an approach forces us to consider the deeper, less accessible layers of Fiedorczuk’s poetry. The author herself draws readers’ attention to the figurative aspect of her language, to the numerous rhetorical tropes she makes use of (Fiedorczuk, Drotkiewicz 2015). I would like to note two metaphors she uses, rooted as they are in mythology. A spider weaving its web is an important metaphor in poetic expression, leading to numerous myths about Arachne. The poet herself offers up a way into her work:

I am deeply convinced that there are mutual connections between various elements of reality, between beings, phenomena and processes. At times, I feel this very strongly. I also think that nature’s creative output, its natural *poesis* – the art of a spider weaving its web, the art of a river plotting its own course – is related to the human imagination, which creates images, poems, and perhaps even political visions. (Fiedorczuk, Łubieński 2016)

Another myth she makes reference to is the story of Echo as told by Ovid. Fiedorczuk uses it for a title of her own work, being an allusion to Elizabeth Bishop’s villanelle *One Art*. Fiedorczuk’s poem is supposed to be a literal echo, arousing sensual associations. It does not contain negative connotations, and its mimetic character is meant to conduct a dialogue with the villanelle. It is above all an expression of adoration and respect the Polish poet feels for her American peer:

Echo is the name given to a nymph who vanished due to her unrequited love for Narcissus, but this is also a metaphor of this loss of meaning in language [...]. In the poem *Echo*, I was most interested in telling the story of a specific love. According to the best-known version of this myth, Echo began to vanish when Narcissus rejected her feelings. She began to diminish, until all that was left of her was a voice. In addition, an evil goddess forbade her from speaking in her own name and Echo had to from then on only repeat that which others

had said. This is a very troubling tale about the lack of love and marginalisation. (Fiedorczuk, Mikurda 2006)

4. The hybridity of poetry

Fiedorczuk's work contains other, less straightforward references to myths, to a large degree defining the structure of her imagination. She represents a form of hybridity which involves the binding of heterogeneous elements. The hybridity of her poetry is on the one hand fluidity, and on the other fragmentation, movement from up-close perspectives to seeing the world from a bird's eye view, also involving a lack of synthesis, incompleteness, a conflicted way of seeing and understanding. This form is found on many levels of her creative and academic life. The first indicator is in her decision to combine academic and artistic work, in which she sees no conflict, no opposition, stressing that her artistic and academic outputs co-exist by osmosis, meshing together, creating new entities, new values. In my understanding of hybridity, which I will refer to as "mermaidism", we are not dealing with opposites, but with a point at which various elements meet and the connection which is their outcome. A key aspect of this is the way in which, and the moment when, diverse, ill-fitting ingredients combine.

Before I go on to explain this phenomenon, I would like to note that we ought to refrain from treating Fiedorczuk's academic works as guides to her poetry, since she herself avoids creating simple connections, more likely as she is to set traps for those readers looking for shortcuts to her work. Quite often, such rope bridges hang over chasms, as they are only half-way completed, and one has to stop in order to make a leap or else to retreat back to solid land and admit to being helpless. It is worth, however, at least at the outset, making use of the well-worn path she has prepared in order to see where it will lead us. Fiedorczuk places herself between many disciplines: literature, academia, literary criticism and philosophy. The area she is most interested in is ecopoetics, understood not only as a theory, but also an "interdisciplinary practice of co-creating both a human and non-human world" (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 137) which rejects the illusory idea of a return to nature. Hence in her theoretical reflection we find the tendencies to deconstruct traditional myths about nature and a search for a new language which would allow the coexistence of that which is human and non-human. In her book titled *Cyborg w ogrodzie* (Cyborg in the Garden) she poses the question: "What is possible in the face of the current ecological crisis?" (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 108). And metaphorically she answers: "A poem is a momentary sort of cosmos, a practical lesson in new ways of being" (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 138).

5. Wilderness

For Fiedorczuk, creating, becoming, vanishing and being are aspects of contemporary poetry which is a place where the unbridled can flourish, something she finds most desirable and attractive (H. D. Thoreau, *Walking*: “In literature it is only the wild that attracts us” (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 20)). And yet wildness for her does not mean nature understood in a traditional sense². Questions regarding where we can find that which is untamed are appropriate, seeing as we no longer have access to territories unaffected by human intervention. Following Gary Snyder, Fiedorczuk answers:

[wilderness] is everywhere; mushroom colonies which are impossible to shift, the same true of moss, mould, yeast and other similar organic colonies, which surround us and live in us. Mice outside our homes, deer on motorways, spiders in room corners, the human body a wild territory, the same true of language. (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 59)

She refers to the poetry of Thoreau, who is fascinated by that which is untamed: she quotes his lines, which do seem very close to her heart: “The most alive is the wildest”. She also adds: “He perceived the surprising analogies between various forms of nature and the creations of the human mind, could see the mutual intermingling of that which John Cage called the unembarrassed aspect of all things” (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 58).

Poetry is to her above all an exploration of the wild aspects of language (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 59). She looks for places where the body, mind and reality connect, for it is there that language can develop unfettered by shame, becoming a transcendental experience (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 60). This is why, according to Fiedorczuk, poetry should ridicule myths and remain uncouth, in order to be able to invent new forms of communication. She believes that on a planet facing catastrophe, only poetry can save us (save and allow us to live). In many of her poems we find a connection between words, water and sunshine. Poetry (*poiesis*) is creation, much like wild nature is self-creation (*autopoiesis*), for example in the process of photosynthesis (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 126).

² “Can the term ‘wild nature’ have any sort of application in times when essentially every corner of planet Earth bears the marks of human activity, in the form of cities, transportation networks, arable fields, along with impurities found in the earth, water, air? This question is answered by Rebecca Raglon [...] introducing the notion of *anthropogenic wildness*” (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 62).

6. Myths of nature

Fiedorczuk's academic and artistic activities are accompanied by the desire to unmask the anachronistic character of beliefs related to myths about nature. This is why she avoids using a moralising tone, seeking a language that allows the expression of connections between poetry and the natural environment, believing in the power of ecological imagination which undermines oppositions such as nature/culture and civilisation/wildness. In her opinion, the basic task of ecocriticism is to "research and deconstruct outmoded conceptual constructions related to trans-human nature" and she is aware that this is very difficult, seeing as the constructions of the human imagination and logical mind have long lifespans, especially if they relate to questions so closely related to definitions of humanity, such as the relationship between human beings and that which is not human (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 14).

As a researcher and poet, she believes that the process of deconstructing myths involving nature is essential. Perceiving nature which people love and hate remains culturally conditioned (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 93). The nature/culture opposition has a teleological and metaphysical aspect, where nature, being a human imaginary construct, is a place where various phantasms are produced and has little to do with reality – hence Fiedorczuk calls for the debunking of dominant myths. Two of them are the most dangerous: the first presents nature as a fallen region of being, a domain of the necessary (*Ananke*), something only human beings can break free of. The second, equally poisonous, weaves a tale about a paradise lost – most powerfully related to Western culture. Eden is a narcissistic projection of the psyche, emerging from a need for order, security and fulfilment (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 148).

7. Between *bios* and *techne*

In spite of the effort invested in unmasking myths and phantasms, Fiedorczuk is aware that it is not easy to free oneself from them, hence she seeks forms which are more open, giving hope for their development or else a chance to abandon them. One can see this in her attitude to various feminist trends, since she separates herself from goddess-centred ecofeminism and essentialism which identifies women with nature, the body or reproduction, looking for a place for herself in cyborg mythologies, revealing paradoxes involved in female identities, and beyond³. In her theoretical works,

³ Fiedorczuk perceives in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) by Donna Haraway a source of inspiration for her poetry: "Cyborgs are cybernetic organisms, hybrids containing elements of machine and

Fiedorczuk perceives – within a hybrid cybernetic organism, containing elements of both machine and organism – potentiality understood as a model of being. This new ontology stripped of beginning, avoiding singularity, does not perform cuts between material reality and the imagination. The poet is drawn by the space between *bios* and *techne*, its as yet not fully explored limits. Her favourite word, in spite of its mythological connotations, is “garden”. It often also appears in her poetry. This does not mean a return to paradise, but more a place in between. Gardens for Fiedorczuk “much like the cyborg, are a hybrid – combining the natural with the artificial, bios and techne” (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 187).

Fiedorczuk, in her theoretical works, assures us that she is seeking the wildest places, in order to be able to practise poetry, hence we might expect her poems to contain manifestations of freedom, to be unrestrained and spontaneous. But no, she plants gardens upon wild territories; imposing a certain rigour upon her language, not allowing any excesses: instead of ecstasy, rather: ascetics and precision. This type of antinomianism of the wild and the ordered brings to mind the practices of Gelsomina, the protagonist of *La Strada*, who in places far from civilisation, belonging to neither city nor village, planted tomatoes by the roadside. Gelsomina, though sold to Zampano, a travelling artist who journeys around various towns on an old motorcycle, sold off by the US army, is wild and strange. She is pure poetry, but in the world she has been born into she has been assigned the role of a clown banging on a tin drum, amusing the public. Her painted-on smile and real tears create hybrid entanglements which surround her character. Her oddness and hybrid aspect are reflected in the image of a siren painted on Zampano’s circus hut. This human/non-human, fish-woman creature is also a key to reading Fiedorczuk’s poetry.

8. “Mermaidism”

Her work is rich in aquatic motifs, which are remorselessly subjected to demythologising and re-mythologising. Aspects liberating associations with the subconscious sphere, connotative with corporeality and female experience, are well recognised by feminist critique, which sees water as a space where female subjectivity can be expressed. This is where creative

organism, creatures which reflect social reality, and are fictional at the same time. But cyborgs are also useful tools for criticisms – thanks to them, human awkwardness is revealed, soon to be transformed into godlike creatures with prosthetic attachments, once nature has been dominated. [...] “Cyborg people on the one hand, as a side product of technologization, can contest existing social roles, but on the other it is a fundamental element of the human condition as such, whether we like it or not” (Fiedorczuk 2015, p. 184).

strategies can be perceived, something which to I have given the tentative name “mermaidism”, involving the connection of two or more ill-fitting elements. This is important, seeing as their value should be seen not only through the prism of new forms, but also capturing the moment before they are tied together, as well as sensing the point of “contact”. As a result, a whole spectrum of ill-fittingness reveals itself.

Mermaidism is a place of connection, in its depths hiding some sort of excessive touchiness and pain: “Do you not remember how much the Little Mermaid suffered when walking – as if she were walking on knife blades – when she cast off her fish tail [...]” – Laura Jackson (Riding) asks in her story *A Crown for Hans Andersen*, translated by Fiedorczuk (Jackson [Riding], 2012, p. 79).

Fiedorczuk’s poems are reminiscent of photographs which are very grainy and therefore characterised by significant resolution, as if she brought everything to life as something exceptional and unique. In spite of precise framing, the poems are filled with contrasts, cracks, gaps, things unsaid, surprising juxtapositions. In the introductory divergent reading of her works, we have the impression that the space between and beyond things widens, flowing in a way which is undirected, giving the impression of strangeness to familiar objects and the sense of closeness to unfamiliar things. She brings together elements which at first glance have nothing to do with one another, or else it seems they have come together by sheer chance. This first instinct of lostness and incomprehension changes quickly through intellectual efforts *per analogiam*, into a hybrid whole which is founded on our ability to connect opposites⁴. When our desire to understand is satiated, and congruent meanings emerge, allowing us to perceive their “singularity”, the wound located on the spot where parts connect becomes invisible and we stop sensing an uncomfortable unease.

Mermaidism as a creative attitude, which goes up against the powers of unification, coherence, creating continuities and symmetries, is found in Fiedorczuk’s direct statements – when asked whether the world’s symmetry conceals an answer to our most important questions, the poet answers in humble disagreement:

J.W.: *It is said that you – and I quote here – think that the secrets of the universe are contained in symmetries, analogies and repetitions. How do you arrive at such a, rather esoteric, conviction? From being the zodiac, always symmetrical, Pisces [laughs]?*

J.F.: Well now you see, yesterday was Charles Darwin’s birthday, radio stations constantly broadcasting mentions of the theory of evolution (a topic very close to my heart) and today I am of a mind to proclaim that everything is

⁴ I took the concept of not understanding from Didi-Huberman (2011).

chaos, there is no order, only coincidence, and that this is incredible, that out of this somehow emerge encounters, desires, passions, all the beautiful nonsense of human and not only human existence. Symmetry is surely a matter of perception. (Fiedorczuk, Winiarski 2010)

In actual fact, Fiedorczuk's poetry is characterised by fluidity, changeability, transformation, constant becoming, represented by the ocean, sea or river. Water flows through her poems and creates a natural environment for them. Revealing through them the phantasms of the world of consumption, such as in the image of the Little Mermaid trying on leggings (*Za górami / Beyond the Mountains*)⁵, border on utopias about soft, safe "concavities". Among dominant figures, we can find fish, birds, and sirens⁶:

Kiedy byłam rybą
 Kosmos jak zawsze okrągły
 Miał przytulne ściany
 Śniłam o boskich płetwach
 Pióropuszcach i życiu
 Po wodzie
 Mówiono ogon
 Odpada ale jest nagroda
 Para bolesnych stóp
 Nie wierzyłam w bajki. Zapusiłam
 Skrzydła jak liście
 Czarnych paproci
 Och gdzież ja nie byłam!
 Kiedy byłam rybą
 Nie było w ogóle dni,
 Seksu, ani różnicy.
 Ciepło przychodziło
 Z zewnątrz teraz
 Mam w płucach nieznośnie
 Lekkie powietrze
 Mam pokusę morza
 W zielonych tęczęwkach
Bio
 (Fiedorczuk 2004, p. 12)

⁵ "Mała Syrenka przymierzy/ lśniące legginsy. Będzie miała w sieci/ Nylonową przyszłość" – "The little Mermaid will try on/ shiny leggings. She will have in the fishing net/ A nylon future" (Fiedorczuk 2004, p. 240).

⁶ The motif of fluidity, of submerging, appears in Fiedorczuk's *White Ophelia*, in an erotic scene involving two women. This is a sort of fantasy, a utopia of lesbian love: "'Let us lie down', she said. They lay down facing one another, thighs entangled, feet touching. 'Your feet are cold', Anna said to Eliza, who was stroking her cheek. 'I know', she said, 'They are always cold'. Anna's head was spinning; she kept closing and reopening her eyes, thinking: A river runs through us. Thinking: I want to submerge myself in you" (Fiedorczuk 2011 p. 130).

When I was a fish
 Space had cozy walls
 And as always was round
 I dreamed of divine fins
 Feather headdresses and life
 Upon the water
 It was said the tail
 Drops off but there is a reward:
 A pair of aching feet.
 I did not believe
 In fairy tales. I grew
 Wings like the fronds
 Of black ferns.
 Where did I
 Not go!
 When I was a fish
 There were no days,
 No sex, no difference.
 Warmth came
 From outside. Now
 In my lungs I have unbearably
 Light air.
 I have the lure of the sea
 In my green irises.
 I look at the sky: o you
 miraculous turret. I dance
 For you.
 (Translated by Bill Johnston)

9. Between the fish

Fiedorczuk places herself subversively between the fish, reformulating her own animal/non-human self. In our patriarchal culture, womanhood and its animalistic representations were presented as monstrous. This deformation, which leads to disrupted perceptions, marking women out as demonic, aroused reactions of repulsion, along with fascination and shivers of horror at witnessing something incredible. Our imaginations have been fed such images since the times of antiquity, found on the edges of waking and dreaming. In Christian Europe, representations of half-human/half-animal creatures were religious in nature, used to stigmatise sinners. Deformed, disproportionate, animalised characteristics assigned to hybrid human bodies were always intended to be warnings and cautionary tales – often, signs of divine retribution and also a reminder that the transgression which caused His wrath had to be atoned for (Courtine, Gdańsk 2011, pp. 352-353). On the other hand, on the edges of officially religious monstrosities, remaining a signature example of a different order in the world, is the intended being. For

Paracelsus, marine oddities are like comets which God shows to human beings. He stressed the intention behind the creation of monstrosities, and so they are for him not anti-values to life, but life itself (Paracelsus 2013).

Undoubtedly, Fiedorczuk consciously plays with this convention, one which gives women negative meanings, and turns them into a new sort of poetic material. Hence, we can look at fish, and also mermaids, as transitory forms, and though in official culture they can seem a danger to the norm or canon defining that which is human, they are rather, like other monstrosities, innovators on the route towards the creation of new solutions in our world:

Obudziłam się
I byłam kobietą
Od stóp, po końce włosów
[...]
Wstałam i miałam
Stopy
I czemuś dziesięć
Śmiesznie małych palców.
(Fiedorczuk 2000, p. 31)

I woke up
And was a woman
From toes to my hairs' ends
[...]
I rose and I had
Feet
And somehow ten
Sweetly tiny toes.
(Translated by Marek Kazmierski)

It is worth trying to answer questions such as: where did the sub-marine dream of being a fish come from in Fiedorczuk's poetry?

Fotosynteza
A trzeba wyjść na ląd, opierzyć się i patrzeć
Prosto w słońce.
(Fiedorczuk 2004, p. 6)

Photosynthesis
And yet on land you go, grow feathers and then gaze
Straight at the sun.
(Translated by Marek Kazmierski)

This fantasy reveals a collective intuition relating to prehistoric forms in the cellular memory of all living things covering prehistoric ages, while in the individual sphere this means a desire to be open to other life forms, often paid

for with suffering, and also desire to feel the tension between that which is and that which could be or else was:

Lądy i oceany

Dosłownie ogień jest nam bliski
 Czasami czujesz go w podszwach stóp.
 To znak, że kiedyś wszystko było boskim oceanem
 Zaś głęboki czas ziemi wyraża się w liczbach tak zatrważających,
 Że ich odkrycie odmieniło bieg ludzkich myśli.
 Która rzecz jasna, spodziewa się gruntu
 Pod nogami i przychylniej aury
 Z tej perspektywy słońce jest czymś w rodzaju wieczności,
 A może upartym podtekstem.
 (Fiedorczyk 2006, p. 5)

Lands and oceans

It is precisely fire that is dear to us.
 At times you feel it on the soles of your feet.
 It's a sign that everything was once divine ocean,
 while the deep time of earth is expressed in such disquieting numbers
 that their discovery has changed the course of human thought.
 Which, it goes without saying, expects the ground
 beneath its feet, and a favorable ambience.
 From this perspective the sun is something like eternity,
 the sea a stubborn subtext.
 (Translated by Bill Johnston)

10. "Play of possibility"

Fiedorczyk's poems reveal the sense that the borders between the human and non-human are fluid. In this vision we see an interaction between the worlds of culture, fantasy and nature, as a result leading to knowledge, enriched by the imagination, suggesting images deforming that which is into that which is possible. Jacob calls this modality the "play of possibility" (Jacob 1987). Our emotions: desires, concerns, fears, and curiosities are aspects which drive or disable the creation of such entanglements of possibility and past existence (Wieczorkiewicz 2009, p. 276). Fish hint at the fluidity of borders between worlds, such as the human and non-human, especially so the mermaid, a figure transmigrating from one form to another. Ovid himself wrote that "Our bodies also, always change unceasingly:/ we are not now what we were yesterday/ or we shall be tomorrow" (Ovid 1922). In the borderline sphere, which is governed by lability, a different sort of time order is in place: the old and the new, usually following on from one another, exist side by side and create new values without intermingling. Various manifestations of existence

can combine, co-existing on the basis of a certain sort of compromise (Wieczorkiewicz 2009, p. 165).

Fantasies of piscine roots, in a visual sphere accepting the form of a cross between a woman and a fish, are not blind accident, no product of crazed imagination, but testimony of a different sort of order, and also a submarine recollection of transfer from one life form into another:

Fotosynteza

Tamte podskórne
Czasy podpływają bliżej. Są moje
Na ułamek światła, momentalny bezdech
I rozkoszny strach, który się zaraz rozproszy
W musującej toni,
(Fiedorczuk 2004, p. 6)

Photosynthesis

Those subcutaneous
Times swimming ever closer. Are mine
For a flash of light, instant of apnoea
And delightful fear, which will scatter soon
In effervescent depths,
(Translated by Marek Kazmierski)

11. Mermaid tail

Ought we not to agree that the fish/mermaid tail is a painful sign of transference in nature itself, but also an intermediate state between nature and culture, art and technology? It also indicates that every living creature is formed of borrowed materials, while death, according to Louis-Vincent Thomas, is a process of returning that which was borrowed, meaning a separation of the elements. Every creature is thus only an intermediate and temporary link in the never-ending chain of life (Thomas 1991, p. 27). Fiedorczuk, in her poem *Kochankowie na otwartym morzu* (Lovers on the Open Seas), writes:

To jest planeta zagubionych rzeczy
I ja jestem jedną z nich, pomyślała. Znów mam płetwy. Ruch
Jest łatwy jeśli jest ślizem, łatwy, kiedy się jest gołębiem w powietrzu
Wykonującym ślizg. Wszystko jedno życie, kiedy na niego czeka i mówi
“teraz jestem twoja, należę do ciebie, należę do morza, do ziemi, do ciebie”.
(Fiedorczuk 2006, p. 31)

This is a planet of lost items
And I am one of them, she thought. I have fins again. Movement
Comes easy when you are a loach, easy, when you are a dove in the air

Performing slides. It's all the same life, when it waits for him and says
 "now I am yours, I belong to you, belong to the sea, to earth, to you".
 (Translated by Marek Kazmierski)

Imagining a half-woman, half-fish is part of cultural processes, but also a record of experiences passed down over millions of years. Referring to the play of possibility and being convinced of the closeness of species, Italo Calvino in his *The Complete Cosmicomics* presents a story of an uncle-fish and his family, which has climbed out of the sea onto dry land and there, leaving their watery lives behind, swapped fins for limbs. The main protagonist, delighted with life on land, is surprised to find that his fiancée, having listened to the stories of the uncle (who remained a fish), decides to go back into the water⁷.

In contemporary science, Darwin's claim that changes in form take place randomly, and metamorphoses cannot be explained as some sort of general notion nature has, still holds today. Nature makes use of that which exists, choosing useful examples, hence perfecting and degeneration are preserved, or removed (Wieczorkiewicz 2009, p. 163). In the poem *Elektryczność (Electricity)* this intuition makes itself felt:

Pod spodem płetwy
 Przetną kryształ wody
 Jeszcze pluśnie ogon,
 Potem przepadnie w zieleni, zwinna
 Jak iskra (rozzarzona cząstka
 Płonącego ciała, oderwana od całości).
 (Fiedorczuk 2004, p. 11)

Down below are fins
 Slicing the water's crystal,
 The splash of a tail,
 Then it will vanish in green, lithe
 As a spark (redhot particle
 Of burning flesh, torn from whole).
 (Translated by Bill Johnston)

⁷ It may be that Calvino's template was found in the axolotl (*ambystoma mexicanum*), an amphibian which, placed in water, behaves like fish. It is known that it was *Latimeria* (a rare genus of fish that includes two extant species: the West Indian Ocean and the Indonesian coelacanth) which produced *Labyrinthodontia*, and *Ichthyostegalia* is such an intermediate form. Few amphibians managed to adapt to land-based existence, giving rise to the evolution of reptiles. Some zoologists contend that this process of adapting to life on land was accidental, adventitious in relation to migration and ability to colonise the new island habitats of standing waters.

This recollection from a distant past described by Calvino, and also by Fiedorczuk, forces us to think that not only fish and mermaids, but every living being is a transient form, and thus open to change (Żylińska 2013, p. 15). Margrit Shildrick contends that the body is unstable, and though it materialises, and has a gender, it always, to use her terminology, “seeps through”. This fluidity, instability, wildness as represented by women with fish tails, also marks a connection with other bodies. The dream of being a fish/mermaid is based on a “radical opening to the multitudinous possible ways of becoming” (Żylińska 2013, pp. 52-53). Fiedorczuk frames this process of “co-becoming” in a similar way, postulating that we ought to broaden our perception of what it means to be human to include that which surrounds and permeates us. Water, air, plants, and animals are all a part of our being, but also of our bodies (Fiedorczuk 2019).

Gilles Deleuze presents proposals of a new ethics, which focuses on “the body becoming”, rather than being a pre-agreed, unchanging human subject. He holds that we ought to broaden the stream of life, opening up to that which is non-human and cross over beyond the limits of that which has already been imagined by people (Żylińska 2013, pp. 53-54). His assumptions seem close to the approach taken by Fiedorczuk, who sees the world as a singularity of matter both living and non-living:

Słowem się spotkamy
 Gdzie kończy się ciało
 W ciepłych łezkach ziemi
 W czarnych
 Piórach fali
 Tej upartej
 Która jednak
 Musi się wygładzić.
 (Fiedorczuk 2004, p. 21)

In a word we shall meet
 Where the body ends
 In warm tears of earth
 In dark
 Feathers wave
 Of this stubborn
 Which nevertheless
 Must grow smooth.
 (Translated by Bill Johnston)

The concept of a “body becoming” as a machine capable of affecting and subjected to affectation, submerged in the stream of life, is a subject which interests researchers of new technologies. In biotechnological processes, living and non-living elements enter into intimate relations with one another.

A point of reference might be matter itself, which, regardless of whether it is animated or inanimate, is constantly organising itself and creating systems (Jacob 1987, p. 51). Joanna Żylińska writes that

alliances (organic-inorganic) proposed by biotechnologies show that there exists a pattern which dismisses both thinking about life as something which permeates machinery, in order to power it, and thinking of technology as something added *post factum* to an innately living individual. (Żylińska 2013, p. 54)

12. Bricolage

Life understood as a manifestation of wildness and a technical process which includes all historical, genetic, affective investments also assumes creativity, something attested to by Fiedorczuk's poetry. Her creative research is also founded on using existing elements, fitting them together by changing forms, and arranging them in diverse combinations, in effect generating a new language and forms of expression different to those which had come before. In poetry and art, as in evolution, genetics and technologies, we thus have an endlessly wild and pain-filled bricolage (Jacob 1987, pp. 65-66). And in this sense the fish/mermaid tail – organic or artificial – is a useful element which can be attached to other bodies, which then always leads to surprising outcomes.

This is something perfectly understood by the sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz. Commenting upon her work titled *Gry wojenne* (War games), she proclaimed that she had for a long time perceived trees as “complete beings”, but there finally came the moment when she saw through this and began to see a similarity between all of nature's creations. She understood that nature, in some way limited, designs its own self. Abakanowicz sensed that she wanted to intervene, deciding to add a different sort of material to the stumps of felled trees; juxtaposing trees and iron elements she thus created a form which was hybrid and “mermaidic” (Abakanowicz 1989, p. 156). Some years later, she spent time in the lake district of Masuria, where she recalls being taken aback by

muscular corpuses, scarred, filled with might and personality. They lay there, tensing their hulls, amputated limbs, pathetic in their gestures – uncertain what of: suffering, protest or else helplessness. I wanted to touch them, to study the details of shapes, in order to transform, to shift into a different sort of endurance. (Krukowski, Abakanowicz 1995, p. 161)

This way of understanding the mermaidic bricolage is also something referenced by the work of other female visual artists, who in their artistic

projects attempt to draw attention to the false game played by Europe, hiding its dislike of migrants, trying to reach the old continent, as well as indifference shown by democratic nations to changes in the climate. On 3 May 2017, as part of a show titled *Syrena herbem twym zwodnicza* (Sirens be your muddled coats of arms), exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Ola Koziół staged a performance of her piece titled *Ciągle ten sam śpiew Europy* (All the time Europe's same old song). The artist took on the character of Siren-Europa, singing her seductive, deceptive song.

In her own commentary, Koziół explained her actions:

When I think about who the siren is today, I see her as Europe, seductive, calling all those escaping war, drought, and poverty to cross seas, all those seeking a new, improved life. Europe, which entices with songs of a better world, draws people to her shores, yet offers them nothing other than the possibility of dying during the journey. (Unpublished text by Ola Koziół)

Agnieszka Zawadowska, in an unpublished commentary on her performance, draws our attention to a new way of seeing sirens. Previously, they guarded bridges, cities, states, homes, churches, and now according to Zawadowska they had themselves become trapped behind refugee camp barbed wire fences, behind tall walls, their tails filled with plastic flotsam, trash and dead fish. At times, their tails become bags from Ikea tossed onto a rubbish heap, or else a torn sleeping bag belonging to a homeless immigrant, who had managed to cross over to the promised land. The artist shows European countries as lacking empathy, unwilling to share with others, sensing the end of their own life cycle, surrendered to decadent wastefulness. The dried-out tail dumped on rubbish heaps makes it impossible for the mermaid to return to her native water. Such a return is pointless anyway, seeing as the seas are poisoned, while rivers dry up.

We find hybridity everywhere, having ourselves become hybrids as technology develops – although it might be said that we have always been such. The prosthetics we use, even as healthy people, turn us into a form of complex structure. In the past, a human being riding a horse was seen as something odd, and centaurs, in order to become cartoon characters, have made a long journey through our collective imaginations. At present, we do not imagine being able to function day to day without cars, computers and smartphones. Our daily lives, our thinking, creativity, fantasies are all based on mechanisms which bind different elements together. This is neither good nor bad. For are our ability to count and create wholes, our tendencies to go from quantity to quality, or else our fondness for playing games with metaphors not something unseemly? We do not even have to answer these questions. We treat these functions as natural, necessary, good, and at times beautiful. The danger is to be found in our idealism, in our pursuit of

perfection at all costs. We are satisfied with easy dualisms, superficially giving our reality an ordered form.

Dreams of symmetry and a unified reality blind us to the world which is imperfect, formed of unstable, ill-fitting parts. And we do everything in order to strip our ways of seeing of doubts, of unease, and all impurities are automatically removed. Meanwhile, the world is worth seeing, as shown in Fiedorczuk's poetry, on several levels simultaneously:

Matematyka

[...] co nas w mroku łączy, rozdziela i łączy, łączy, rozdziela i łączy;
zaczyn nowego dnia.

(Fiedorczuk J. 2012, p. 39)

Mathematics

[...] something connects us in the dark, separates and connects, connects,
separates and connects;
the onset of a new day.

(Translated by Marek Kazmierski)

In conversation with Daria Lekowska, Fiedorczuk said: "Poetry was always situated on the line between the expressible and inexpressible. The same is somehow true of metaphors, through the ways in which they combine diverse elements – sometimes opposites – simultaneously avoiding moulding them together into one" (Fiedorczuk 2017, p. 120).

Fiedorczuk's whole body of work encourages us to see disconnections, connections and that which remains on the outer edges and hides in the depths, for it is thanks to those elements that our sensitivity becomes more focused, revealing mermaid places which retain painful memories of a past life and the moment of changing form, surrendered to the powers of forgetting.

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