‘I, Kafka’: Jews in the Poetry of Rafał Wojaczek

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In Rafał Wojaczek’s first volume of poetry, Sezon (Season; 1969), there is one particularly disturbing poem; or more accurately, a poem disturbing in a different way than other disturbing poems in this disturbing volume. The poem is entitled ‘Ja, Kafka’ (I, Kafka) and it reads:

My heart
has outgrown me
inside I’m all
roots

White blades of grass
sprout from my
lips

The mohel’s daughter Julia
cultivates my sickness
with her trained-
by-father
lips

The image is surrealistic. It is obscene and grim. And it is funny, in a Kafkesque way.¹ But why a mohel’s daughter? In this essay I will analyse the origins and role of Jewish motifs that appear in Wojaczek’s poetry.

Rafał Wojaczek is a legend. He is counted among the few Polish ‘outlaw’ poets, the martyrs of literature. A cult figure alongside Andrzej Bursa and Edward Stachura, Wojaczek was undoubtedly the most talented of the three. In his poetry, graphic sexuality, cruelty, torment, and gender-play intertwine with a delicate tenderness at times bordering on sentimentality. These qualities are moderated by an amazing formal virtuosity, refined syntax, and subtle use of rhyme. Critics often compare Wojaczek to Rimbaud, yet he reminds me rather of Sylvia Plath. (This is a purely coincidental affinity since neither could have known of the other—perhaps a sign of the epoch? Certainly this subject is worth more thorough consideration.)

Rafał Wojaczek lived to the age of twenty-six; he was born in 1945 and committed suicide in 1971. He studied Polish literature at Jagiellonian University in Kraków for one semester, and that was the end of his formal education. Moving to Wrocław, he worked briefly as a dispatcher in the city dump. After that he never had a permanent job. He was once hospitalized in a mental institution and served a short term in prison for disorderly behaviour. An

¹ If I am not mistaken, it was Max Brod who reported that Kafka laughed hysterically at a reading of his Hunger Artist.
alcoholic and frequenter of police stations, Wojaczek always existed on the fringes of official literary and artistic life. Viewed as a hoodlum and troublemaker, he was refused membership in the Union of Polish Writers. Once he provocatively answered a request for his resumé by saying: ‘I attended many schools, grew up in libraries, railway stations, in the homes of people more or less unfamiliar to me, in various sorts of bars, and in other places. I swam in rivers, lakes, and even in great waters. I gave myself to Adventure—“The land was free to me, alas.” At times I died, and then from the other side of life I would cry, “boo!” Enough? P.S. I can write this differently.’

Wojaczek published his first work in 1965, in the first issue of the newly created journal *Poezja*; there he was enthusiastically introduced by editor Tymoteusz Karpowicz. Two volumes of his poetry appeared during his lifetime: *Sezon* in 1969, and *Inna bajka* (Yet Another Fairy Tale) in 1970. Two additional books, *Nie skończona krucjata* (In-Complete Crusade) and *Którego nie było* (The One Who Was Not), prepared by the author, appeared posthumously in 1972. In 1976, a volume entitled *Utworzy zebrane* (Collected Works) was issued in Kraków; however, in the late 1980s, the weekly *Student* brought to light several poems previously censored by Polish authorities. Until recently, the most complete collection of Wojaczek’s poetry was *Wiersze* (Poems) published in Wrocław in 1997. Finally, in 1999 a volume of some sixty previously unpublished poems, *Reszta krwi* (The Rest of Blood), was published in Wojaczek’s hometown of Mikołów.

What is perhaps most striking in Wojaczek’s poetry is that he splits his lyrical persona into separate and often conflicting entities and plays with multiple identities, masculine as well as feminine. Most of his poems are dialogic, yet there are few real partners in this dialogue. An outside reality appears not in order to be described but to serve as a background for, or reflection of, the poet’s inner landscape. It is a dialogue with and about himself. Wojaczek often describes himself from the outside, contemplates his body as an alien object, or disguises himself as a woman. ‘I, Kafka’ reveals all three tendencies. It is narrated from the outside of the speaker’s own reified body, with a feminine alter ego as an actor.

‘I, Kafka’ is dated 1966. This poem and the selection that follows it in the volume, ‘A Jew’, seemed until recently to contain the only suggestions of a Jewish theme in Wojaczek’s poetry. ‘A Jew’ is built upon the same central image as ‘I, Kafka’. Again we see a young woman bending over a dead/sleeping passive ‘I’:

A girl entered
a woman fell asleep
but a Jew
is dreamt

Naked like breath
painful like inside lungs
Shelled from her name
she’s ashamed

Bends over me

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Polish is a gendered language, and the poem’s title reads more accurately ‘A Jewess’. ‘A
girl entered’—entered what? Perhaps only the poet’s imagination.

A possible clue to the girl’s identity can be found in the words of an untitled poem placed
directly before these two poems: ‘again I see you alive…stranger on the Earth of murderers…’
This phrase refers to the poet’s fiancée (‘…there is a name / Teresa…’) who despite her
Christian name could be of Jewish descent. If so, the poem could be evoking the Holocaust,
albeit in a manner that would become more characteristic in poetry a decade after Wojaczek’s
death. But this explanation does not suffice. The girl in ‘A Jew’ is only dreamed of as a Jew, and
in ‘I, Kafka’ the girl’s name is Julia, not Teresa. Are these poems about three different persons?
Moreover, the situations in ‘I, Kafka’ and ‘A Jew’ are obviously sexual, and if anyone is
martyred it is the lyrical ‘I’—possibly dead, and probably a figure of the poet himself. Why did
the poet dream specifically about a Jew? Why did he need ‘a mohel’s daughter’ to ‘cultivate his
sickness’?

There are only two other vague mentions of Jews in Wojaczek’s previously published
poetry. In ‘Poemat mojej melancholii’ (The Poem of My Melancholy; 1969), which is a kind of
laundry list of Wojaczek’s thoughts, doubts, and questions numbered from one to fifty-eight, we
find an enigmatic note:

Twenty five:
About Polish Jews . . .

In ‘Ballada o prawdziwej krwi’ (The Ballad of True Blood) in the volume Inna bajka
published during the poet’s lifetime in 1970, there is another brief mention:

. . . also not from the peerage,
not blue and not plebeian
not Aryan and not Jewish
innocent or Christ’s . . . ,

This is a clear reference to the Holocaust. Here Jewish blood appears opposite Aryan
blood, and is termed ‘innocent’. Thus far the catalogue of characteristics ascribed to Jews
consists of adjectives: naked, full of pain and shame, stigmatized—but innocent.

This poem was written in 1969 at the height of the antisemitic campaign in Poland; that
context resounds unmistakably in it. Yet Wojaczek goes beyond simple politics, juxtaposing the
blood of symbols (nationalistic and otherwise) and physical blood (veins and arteries, menses,
animal blood used in food, etc.) with what he terms ‘true’ blood, determined by the internal drive
to conquer new realms of spiritual development. It is this blood that ‘must constantly crawl on
the uncharted ways of the sky…in order to broaden its realm’.

It was only in the mid-1980s that the literary magazine Student published several of
poems of Wojaczek’s that had previously been rejected by censors; among them ‘Bohater’
(Hero):
There is a river Jordan or Odra
next to which a naked man
kneels and washes between his legs.

Circumcised he makes a pipe of his foreskin
and tends to
his Jew.

There is a town Jericho or Brzeg
from which an arrow
flies and strikes him in the back

he lies on the ground and the living thing
in his heart shyly
asks for more.

Because of death that flashes
through his guts
and again clouds linger over Poland.

The poem is dated 13 May 1967, a day on which the press was full of news of mounting tensions in the Middle East in the wake of the Six-Day War. The politics are clearly discernible in the background. Yet the poem is not about politics. This is clear from its sexual explicitness; it is about a thinly veiled act of masturbation in which ‘Jew’ is used as the name for the penis. The primary function of such a metaphor, of which many are found in any language, is a mental detachment from one’s body when it is involved in an act regarded by the actor himself as shameful. Thus ‘Jew’ substitutes for a vulgarism. But here a Jew appears also as a live person, and therefore the vulgarization is reversed. Also, the ‘hero’ of the title is an anti-hero: weak, betrayed, shot in the back, and infested with death. As a result he is indeed at the same time both a despicable and a positive figure. Moreover, on the surface the poem is narrated objectively, as if by a detached speaker (‘There is…’), and builds on the ambiguity of the location (Israel or Poland); yet this implies an emotional restraint that in turn strengthens the sense of the poem’s internal unity. Multiple splitting of the speaker’s identity reveals the author’s identification with the imaginary Jew.

The essence of Wojaczek’s preoccupation with Jews is masochistic identification. Here we encounter extreme forms of two powerful themes in Polish culture: the identification of Jews with suffering and oppression, and compassion with all suffering and oppression. This latter trait springs from Polish romanticism and the tradition of independence, with its slogan ‘For your freedom and ours’, and is extremely important for the Polish liberal intelligentsia.

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3 I am indebted to Ann Frenkel for this suggestion.

4 Compare for example Adam Michnik’s speech upon receiving the Shofar Award in 1991: ‘I am a Pole. I must explain now why I accepted an award created for Jews. I accepted it in the name of solidarity…I am not speaking of solidarity with Jewish history or with the Jewish religion, or Jewish traditions or customs, or with the Jewish nation, or the state of Israel…What comes to my mind is solidarity with the Jewish fate. The Jewish fate is the fate of threatened people who have suffered many blows, who know the taste of humiliation, of defeat, and who have
In a letter to his fiancée Teresa, Wojaczek wrote: ‘I was walking the other night in the hall of the [Wroclaw railroad] station, and I saw Rozenfeld. We sat down for a moment, and I said to him, “Listen, sometimes I am more Jewish than you.” And he answered: “This must be some psychological propensity.” He’s right.’

The extent of Wojaczek’s fascination with Jewishness was revealed only with the recent publication of a volume with his previously unknown poems, Reszta krwi (The Rest of Blood; 1999). Several poems speak directly to Wojaczek’s personal identification with Jews:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I feel unsure as if spat on} \\
\text{I gesture as if playing the violin} \\
\text{I always wanted to be a Jew} \\
\text{('Marche Funebre')}
\end{align*}
\]

In the first two lines Wojaczek masterfully blends two popular stereotypes of Jews—as easily insulted and defenceless, and as artists—to present the result as desirable in the third line. Solidarity with the underdog assumes the form of invitation to suffering, and even outward masochism:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I have to be very focused} \\
\text{The face is in a vision} \\
\text{The genitals of a Jew are in a jar} \\
\text{I’m marked too therefore I’m cautious} \\
\text{('I have to be very focused')}
\end{align*}
\]

Still, this martyrdom is not seen as noble or ennobling; it has a questionable and self-deprecating quality (with negation often serving as the means to simultaneously undermine and strengthen the identity of the speaker). In the following poem, such denial is indeed a confirmation of identity, albeit the one that is ‘faceless’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Don’t be afraid of comedians} \\
\text{A good actor is always a woman}
\end{align*}
\]

always faced hard choices. It is, finally, the fate of people who have been rejected and persecuted.’ New York Review of Books, 30 May 1991.

5 Rafał Wojaczek, ‘Listy do Teresy’ Odra, 1 (1993), 33. Aleksander Rozenfeld is a Polish Jewish poet belonging to the same generation as Wojaczek.

6 Rafał Wojaczek, Reszta krwi (Mikołów, 1999). According to the editors, the volume is a selection from the poet’s output. It contains poems that Wojaczek decided not to put in the four collections he prepared for publication, as well as the ones that were withheld by the censors. Unfortunately, the editorial note does not provide details.

7 Compare Sylvia Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’:

I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

Many lines in Plath’s and Wojaczek’s poems can be compared side by side.
and you’re not that Jewboy

That Jewboy was thirteen
Born in a foreign province
never saw the prince naked
so he ran away
Now he writes poems
though with no face of his own

(‘66’)

The ambiguous game of disguises, consisting of endorsements and renunciations, and played with the awareness of playing with marked cards, was always deadly serious for Wojaczek. It was always played at the edge of life, bordering on death, as in this poem dedicated to Teresa:

I was Jesus, now I’m your brother
—again a Jew.
You bought my body and death
swollen in it—you survived.

(‘I was I am’)

For Wojaczek it was different with women, even with Jewish women. A Jew—a Jewish man—was always next to death, in its shadow, or already dead. We may assume that this close identification held a special attraction for him. In ‘I, Kafka’, we even do not know whether the speaker, with ‘white blades of grass / sprout from my / lips’, is still alive as he is attended by ‘the mohel’s daughter Julia’. Women in Wojaczek’s poetry are mistreated and abused, and submissively accept their fate or even perversely enjoy it. Still they are always on the side of life. While deprecated on the surface and negatively idealized, women are the ‘true’ authors of his poems:

8 Wojaczek often assumes a woman’s voice in his poems; for example his third volume, Nie skończona krucjata (‘In-Complete Crusade’) contains a cycle of poems ‘Głos kobiecy (z nieznanej poetki)’ (A Woman’s Voice [Poems by an Unknown She-Poet’]). Here is a typical example, the poem ‘Kobiecość’ (Femininity):

Being a man means beating your woman
I agree I offer my cheek
At other times you curse my mother
I listen I nod eagerly
You tell nasty stories about me
When others repeat them I say you were right
When I undress with the best of intentions
You laugh at my puny breasts and bony thighs
I allow you to sneer I laugh myself
The persons of animals magnificent like real Jews
In every kindhearted moment I am caught by the person
Of a solemn bitch a Jewish princess
Agile like water swelling with light
Now she’s a paralyzing glow
As if an enormous moon veiled the face of the sky
She starts confessing to me with a hollow
Half-song like the growl of a dog now she’s barking
A poem merciless like any good poem
... (Untitled)

In the dressing room of the poet’s imagination, Jewish costume was perhaps the second most important after women’s dress. Wojaczek’s imaginary Jew was stereotypical, characterised by adjectives such as ‘innocent’, ‘painful’, ‘stigmatised’, ‘ashamed’, and the like. The way Wojaczek used this stereotype—namely, through his identification with it—was unusual. Still, the root of this identification was clearly romantic and archetypical in Polish culture.

Polish romantic tradition and literature at one time facilitated access to Polish culture for Jews. The same romantic tradition of solidarity with the oppressed seems today to be behind the interest of Poles in things Jewish (most often sentimentalized in a ‘shtetl-like’ manner). Wojaczek’s case may well illustrate this peculiar reversal, especially as it predates the current ‘Jewish fashion’ in Poland.

This appendectomy scar does look gruesome
When you leave I don’t ask when you’ll be back
When you’re back I don’t ask where you’ve been
You wonder that I keep saying I love you
This simply means I’m a widow in advance

As we see, the abused speaker of this poem is going to survive her tormentor.

9 The familiarity with Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Polish romantic idiom in general among Jews born in pre-war Poland is truly imposing, though overlooked in scholarship.