

Zbigniew Jazienicki

University of Warsaw

zbigniew.jazienicki@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-3419-1955

The Baroque Crisis of the Third Polish Republic. System Transformation, Sarmatian Traditions and Krzysztof Koehler's Classicism*

DOI: 10.12775/LL.3-4.2025.003 | CC BY-ND 4.0

ABSTRACT: The article takes up reflection on the concept of classicism as formulated by Krzysztof Koehler, a representative of the “bruLion” generation. According to the young poet, contemporary classicism cannot be separated from extra-literary reality; on the contrary – it is to document its condition already at the level of its form. Therefore, for a poem to be able to articulate the system crisis as recognized by Koehler in the beginning of the 1990s, far-reaching formal changes turn out to be indispensable. Lyrical poetry must be de-formed so radically that it will be possible for it to be in tune with extra-literary instability even on the level of the form. An unexpected inspiration for such a diagnostic endeavor turns out to lie in Baroque traditions, especially the traditions of Polish Sarmatian poetry. Sarmatian poetics provides the “bruLion” writer with a repertoire of means that he consistently uses in his poetic project that “recognizes the crisis”, so as to grasp the drastic nature of changes taking place in the beginnings of the Third Polish Republic.

KEYWORDS: classicism, latest poetry, the “bruLion” generation, political conservatism, system transformation, Baroque traditions, Sarmatian models

Krzysztof Koehler is one of the most interesting, and, simultaneously, most controversial Polish poets of the last thirty-five years. Belonging to the formation of “bruLion” (a journal published in the years 1987–1999, which became an outpost of independent culture at the end of Polish People’s Republic), he was

* The article was written as part of the research subsidized by “National Program for the Development of Humanities” project no: NPRH/DN/SP/0146/2023/12; subsidy amount PLN 429 804,19

one of those poets who demanded a new poetic language in the post-Communist reality. Soon, Koehler also turned out to be – as I will try to showcase – one of the most vigilant chroniclers of the 1990s political transformation, when, after the fall of Communism, Poland becomes a democratic liberal country. By entering into a debate with Marcin Świetlicki (Koehler 1990), a colleague from the “bruLion” editorial board, and, at the same time, one of the leading representatives of young poetry, Koehler initiated the first important literary discussion in free Poland, which raged between “our barbarians” and “our classicists” (Maliszewski 1995). In opposing Świetlicki, the author of the pamphlet *Dla Jana Polkowskiego* [*For Jan Polkowski*] (Świetlicki 2002: 54), considered to be a manifesto of new poetic approach, Koehler declared himself in favor of classicism; however, he subjected its understanding to extensive re-definition. Indeed, the choice of classicism did not mean formal classicism. While demanding, as other young poets, a new poetic idiom, Koehler opts in favor of such understanding of classicism that will become a record of the transformation processes of the time.

The variant of classicism as formulated by Koehler turned out to be so non-standard and distant from its usual visions that it remained impossible to understand for literary criticism of the time. It is symptomatic that in time, Koehler will describe himself as “avant-garde classicist” (Koehler 2019b), as he reached that far in transforming poetic form. In Koehler’s variant, classicism is definitely not reduced to formal pedantry. Even if it used to be identified with lyric mode of beautiful words or high style in Polish reception, it takes on a radically different form in Koehler’s variety. A classicist makes allowances for far-fetched formal changes that are supposed to make poetic language more flexible, so that the latter would swerve in the spectrum of contemporary life. A change in poetics is indispensable if classicist poetry is to become an alternative for poetic mainstream of the 1990s, that is, a model of conversation poetry inspired by American poets (Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery). Koehler describes his species of classicism as “progressive” (Koehler 1999b) due to the fact that the changes taking place in its poetic structures are supposed to be connected to transformations in extra-literary reality. What would classicism after 1989 even be for – its provocative theoretician asks – if it were reduced to formal pedantry, humble subordination to rules of poetics?

Exceptional due to their polemic temperament, Koehler’s manifestos do not remain hollow. Their extension can be found in the poems as such: there, the classicist experiments with formal solutions with an almost avant-garde vigor. The evolution in Koehler’s body of work takes place at lightning speed, as it covers a brief period of only three years that pass between the debut *Wiersze* [*Poems*] (1990) and the more mature *Nieudana pielgrzymka* [*Failed Pilgrimage*] (1993). The extent of changes taking place between these volumes is so considerable that they seem to have been written by two authors of diametrically different sensibilities. In a poem published at the end of the 1980s we still read:

Podniosłem oczy i wolno się wdarła
W przestrzeń pokoju zatłoczonych rzeczy
Cicha, jak kryształ czystej górskiej rzeki
Majestatyczna sygnaturka z wieży.

I raised my eyes and slowly there broke
Into the space of crowded things in the room
Quiet as the crystalline pure mountain river
Majestic signature of the tower.

Nim oczy przykryć zdążyłem zawtórowały
Jej głośne dźwięki dzwonów,
I rozgadały się w godzinie zmierzchu
Wieże tych wszystkich, które są, kościołów.

Before I covered my eyes, there sounded
Loud bells in accompaniment
And in the hour of twilight there talked
the towers of all churches there are.

Aż przebrzmiał dźwięk. I tylko echo niosło,
Jak z dala szum bitewny, kiedy wiatr przywieje
Do wojska, które jeszcze czeka na swój los,
Radość i strach, i gniew, i nadzieję...

Until the sound stopped. And only the echo carried
As battle noise from afar, when wind brings
To the army still waiting for its fate
Joy and fear, and rage, and hope...

(Koehler 2019a: 23)

(trans. E.B.)

The poems created after 1990 already take on a different shape. Instead of a (albeit not consistent) rhyme scheme of AABB within 11-syllable verse there appears a poem that is ostentatiously deregulated, in which the principles of versification are no longer respected. The lines undergo drastic contractions, as if their very form was to confirm changes taking place outside literature:

Teraz to już
tylko będzie
skrót. Nocą –
pociągi przebijają
się przez tunel
mroku. Świerszcze
zamierają
nad ranem.
Ogień pochyla
wiatr. To,
co się dzieje,
trwa jak
znak. Tylko
ja chyłę się
i pochylam
nad zapominaniem.
(Koehler 2019a: 58)

Now it
will only
be brief. At night –
trains pierce
the tunnel
of darkness. Crickets
fade
before morning.
The fire is bowed
by wind. What
happens
lasts like
a sign. Only
I bow down
and bow
to forgetting.
(trans. E.B.)

Or:

Droga, jak
fala, wzgórze,
słowa

The road like
a wave, a hill
words

wiatr
chwieje
korony
drzew–

wind
bends
the tree
tops–

już bez szczeliny dłużej.	now no longer with a chink.
Wiatr, na ostatek, wiatr kroi te słowa	The wind in the end wind cuts these words
w sylaby, tak samo drogi żłobi wzgórze w ślady (Koehler 2019a: 70)	into syllables just as roads are grooves in the hill in footsteps (trans. E.B.)

“The wind / in the end / wind cuts / these words // into syllables”, we read in the meta-poetic commentary. And indeed, this recognition turns out to be confirmed by the very poetic order cut into short, very short lines. Koehler debuted as orthodox classicist, with conventional pieces, so as to let his diction undergo such a significant change after barely three years. Although in his debut pieces he introduces himself as proponent of numerical poem, in the pieces from the following volume he demonstratively breaks up with metric limitations. Flirting with avant-garde trends and avant-garde self-identifications, Koehler gifts the words with freedom (“give / words / freedom”; Koehler 2019b: 73), so that they were no longer limited with schemes of versification (let us remind the reader that “words in the wild” is Filippo Marinetti’s slogan from the futuristic manifesto, which Koehler appears to be paraphrasing). The difference in *Nieudana pielgrzymka* turns out to be so considerable that it could even be presented as a new debut.

Such radical changes in Koehler’s poetics would, perhaps, never take place, but for the circumstances of the Polish system transformation. The change in style takes place at a time when Polish reality becomes subject to processes aiming at democratizing politics and liberalizing economy (that is, the years 1991–1993, when the poems of NP are written). Heretofore familiar reality changes dynamically before Koehler’s eyes. In this context, Naomi Klein referred to carrying out “the shock doctrine” (Klein 2008), neo-liberal modernization whose price and condition turns out to lie in driving society into a state of shock. The neo-liberal “shock therapy” of Polish transformation (consisting, among others, in marketization of the economy and privatization of state assets, but also in mass firings, enforcing labor migration and increasing wealth disproportions) turns out to be such a drastic and dynamic process that it is difficult to imagine it would have no influence on the literary field, including Koehler’s classicism. Only if it manages to adjust formally to the condition of the reality of transforming Poland will it become a “progressive” idiom. Classicism – yes, but only if it manages to catch up with the speed of structural

changes; write down the acceleration of the epoche that deprives one of any kind of certainty. Koehler leaves no doubt as to what stake should be assigned to contemporary poetry: "There is, actually, only one such topic. Whoever can take it up, whoever can become it – is an artist. It is, obviously, MOVEMENT, BECOMING, but not dying out. The latter is maudlin and inevitably leads towards despair or catastrophizing" (Koehler 1991: 15). And should his position not be clear enough yet, in the same interview he specifies: "There are no other topics. This is the topic of THE WORLD. A poem that is not becoming is unnecessary" (Koehler 1991: 15).

At the same time, the choice of classicism on Koehler's part is not politically neutral. Indeed, with his non-standard variety of poetry the "bruLion" writer joins a long political tradition whose Polish representatives of the early 1990s belonged to a conservative formation that was more than reluctant towards the transformation. Koehler formulates his poetic manifestos at a time when the beginnings of the Third Republic of Poland are criticized, in numerous journalistic statements, by such distinguished representatives of this artistic formation as, for instance, increasingly politically radicalized Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz (the future author of *Wieszanie* [*Hanging*], an essay discussing the 18th century executions of the liberal, Enlightenment and Enlightened elite) or Zbigniew Herbert, whose problems with liberal democracy were equally large. Therefore, it is not surprising that for Koehler, who cooperated with leading anti-liberal journals ("Fronda", "Arcana"), the political transformation appears in this particular shape. Retaining a cool skepticism towards the undergoing transformations, the poet looks upon them from a conservative anti-liberal perspective, in which they appear as a process of systemic de-stabilization. In the face of inter-era chaos Koehler attempts to figure out an appropriate poetic formula that will be capable of capturing in a formal manner the cognitive crisis experienced at the threshold of new reality. In its beginnings, the Third Polish Republic is at the zero point, while the program assumption of Koehler's classicism is that it is supposed to be a poetic articulation of chaos experienced at the time.

Despite appearances, in its recording how the new reality is shaped, classicism is not an avant-garde project, even if within its framework, Koehler performs far-reaching formal modifications. While Koehler seems to experiment with his own language, unexpected allies in his poetic attempts can be found, mainly, in the representatives of Polish Baroque. In order to successfully confront the Third Polish Republic crisis, Koehler goes back several centuries to find methodological inspirations in Baroque poetry. One may wonder about the poet's preferences in history of literature. However, it cannot be forgotten that it is not the first time in literary history that a representative of modern classicism refers to Baroque heritage. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition an analogous gesture was, after all, made by T. S. Eliot, who, despite the disinclination of the academic community, rehabilitated the so-called English metaphysical school. In Polish tradition, in turn, such a gesture was made by Jarosław Marek

Rymkiewicz, the author of manifestos entitled *Czym jest klasycyzm* [*What Is Classicism*] (Rymkiewicz 1967).

The Baroque language turns out to be convenient and useful for Koehler, as it was developed in the era of a cognitive crisis of the 17th century and thus, it constitutes a model language of crisis poetry. How can one express the crisis of the Third Polish Republic? By indebting oneself to poetry that was specialized in voicing experiences of crisis. While comparing the 17th century crisis to the one caused by the transformation may appear disproportional, this does not concern Koehler. Indeed, what he seeks in Baroque past are specific clues as to how to transform his own language so that it became more alert to contemporary experience of the word. As the poet himself explains:

I want to consider myself a classicist, and for a classicist, the novelty of poetic form is not an issue. For me, the problem lies in the novelty of an intellectual approach to the world, to the encountered environment, ways of thinking, valuation, etc. Traditional forms do not prevent one from expressing that. To the contrary. They are like a good old house that cannot be abandoned just because a modern skyscraper was built right next door (Koehler, Baran, Świetlicki 1993: 11).

Thus, Koehler does not leave the “good old house” – or, rather, a noble manor house – of Baroque poetry. As I will show on the basis of selected examples, Baroque poetry is, for him, a prototypical reaction to crisis. And so, in order to find a word for “the disorientation of rapid political change combined with the collective fear generated by an economic meltdown” (Klein 2008: 181) or “the disorientation of rapid regime change” (Klein 2008: 176), Koehler becomes indebted to the repertoire of Baroque poetics in order to express the experiences contemporary to him. He takes the language into the literary past so as to document the acceleration of his own present by the means of classicism.

It is Koehler himself who emphasizes his connection to the Baroque tradition. He refers to his early efforts in brief: “Broad, Baroque, sad and happy” (Koehler 1999a: 6). What is more, while working on the *Nieudana pielgrzymka* poems, he also worked with Baroque in academia. In fact, in the first half of the 1990s he defended a doctorate in Old Polish literature; in time, he became a literary studies professor affiliated at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, and, as follows, the author of numerous academic publications dedicated to Old Polish heritage. At the time of the transformation, Koehler also became a popularizer of noble culture, and especially, the Polish variety of Baroque poetry, that is, Sarmatian poetry emerging among the nobles. In 1995, conservative Polish Television broadcast a three-episode program *Sarmacja, czyli Polska* [*Sarmatia, or Poland*] prepared by Koehler. He also promoted Sarmatian heritage in “bruLion”, where a review of an anthology of Sarmatian poetry released in a Biblioteka Narodowa series was published. While the review was signed by Jakub Teodor Trembecki, a *nom-de-plume*, Koehler was

most likely its actual author (Trembecki 1991). He presents Sarmatian poems almost as if they were poetic counter-culture or “cursed” tradition, which he has to stand up for against academic historians of literature. Can anyone – the “bruLion” author asks – “pierce the armor of philological antipathy towards Old Polish literature, heretofore so efficiently murdered at universities, where one does not read Old Polish poetry, and especially Baroque poetry, and when one does not read it, one does not grasp it?” (Trembecki 1991: 169). According to him, the contemporary situation of Sarmatian poetry may remind one of the situation of English metaphysical poetry at the point when Eliot stood up for it, also contrarily to academic circles. In the following years, Koehler will continue to promote Sarmatian heritage, for instance, in the shape of an authorial selection of noble poetry, for which he will provide an introductory essay (Koehler 2002).

Koehler remains a classicist in poetry, and a conservative in politics; in contrast to the 1990s liberal discourse, he supports a noble identity formula. According to him, noble identity has the same position as noble literature. Just as literary studies discredit Sarmatian poetry, so transformation politics discredit noble identity. Koehler himself was convinced that noble heritage should be a model for Polishness as identified with patriotism, Catholicism, but also, xenophobia or provincialism. It is not an identity formula that would find appreciation in liberal media that supported Polish transformation, particularly not in “Gazeta Wyborcza” (a daily newspaper of democratic opposition that reached a circulation of over a million copies and had a considerable influence on public opinion), which Koehler criticized. In “Sarmatian accounts”, he compares the newspaper to the 18th century “Monitor”, that is, the leading newspaper of the Polish Enlightenment, which has once conducted an anti-Sarmatian campaign. Its continuation would be found in “Wyborcza’s” publication policy, where, following the Enlightenment model, noble culture once again comes under criticism. In the newspaper pages one could find “a murder conducted on the noble manor. The ignoramus was ‘done away with’. Or – in other words – it was the most real end of the Commonwealth possible” (Koehler 1995: 96). The 1990s are, supposedly, the times of new Enlightenment, when attempts are made to substitute the Sarmatian model of Polishness with a more modern one, that is, European (cosmopolitan) Polishness that would be secular, tolerant and urban. Koehler does not agree with such a substitution: he returns to noble traditions as an alternative subject formula, a “formula for Polish national identity” that he pushes for in his journalistic texts (Koehler 2002: 5).

In Koehler’s private canon an important, if not the most important place is held by Waclaw Potocki (1621–1698), one of the leading representatives of Sarmatian poetry. He recurs several times in the classicist’s own comments, emphasizing Potocki’s influence on his own poetic abilities: “Waclaw Potocki is very important to me; important due to his ethics and good life” (Koehler 1996: 11). Koehler does not conceal the amount of his debt to the predecessor:

“I was taught this by Waclaw Potocki, *notabene*, a 17th century Baroque poet” (Koehler, Wencel 1997: 6). Simultaneously, he considers Potocki to be a Sarmatian representative of “broken classicism” (Koehler 1999b: 78), who no longer respects old rules of composition, but, as a result, he increases the representational potential of 17th century poetry. While favored by Koehler, Potocki’s case remains representative to Baroque as such. Indeed, in the sinusoidal history of literature Baroque constitutes a reversal of classicist aesthetics (of the Antiquity and the Renaissance). What we can see in Baroque is:

an anti-classicist era, if we understand classicism not as a period, but as a certain overriding attitude, common to various eras, whose main feature consist in strife for perfection based in European literature on Horatio’s and Cicero’s models, strife for unambiguous harmony and order, for simplicity and clarity of language at the cost of its colorfulness and variety (Vincenz 1989: XI).

Let us also keep in mind that the very notion of Baroque (from the Portuguese *barocco* – an irregularly shaped pearl or French *baroque* – a wealth of decorations) was an invective before it became a period-related term; it was used to describe aesthetics that did not respect classicist compositional principles. However, there is a method to the Baroque madness, and its significance is perfectly grasped by Koehler, fascinated with the potential of this diction. For him the Baroque “brokenness” of classicism is a reaction to the 17th century crisis. If the world is no longer well-formed, then form must be abandoned by the poetics that is a symptom of the crisis of the time and its poetic manifestation. In this sense, Koehler is also a representative of “broken classicism”: given the new reality, he gives up on the overly static and sterile language of his debut volume.

Let us add here that one of the main topoi of Baroque art is movement, and thus – as we remember – a subject that Koehler himself favors. As a specialist in Sarmatian poetry writes, “the aim of classicism was to lock eternal beauty in an immutable shape. Baroque is characterized by movement” (Vincenz 1989: XVIII). Analogous reflections concerning the 17th century topics are formulated by Jan Błoński in his by now classic work dedicated to Mikołaj Sep-Szarzyński as a representative of “Sarmatian *helicon*”.

By saying that the actual subject of Sep’s poetry is movement I want to say that in everything that surrounds him and in everything that he experiences within himself, Szarzyński feels, above all, change; that for him, movement is something more than one of phenomena: it is, rather, a mode of being, a form in which there exists reality, both external and spiritual [...] As an original and partly subconscious realization, it is most powerfully reflected in style: the sign of movement pertains both to the poet’s images and his versification (Błoński 1967: 77).

In trying to catch up to the speed of the transformation (“I have tried to catch up...”, as he says in one of his interviews; Koehler, Wencel 1997: 5), Koehler repeats methods of Baroque poets. “As is history, so the storyteller” [“jakie dzieje takie pienie”], as the Baroque motto goes; in the 1990s classicism, one should also let go of the metric order that limits one’s linguistic freedom. Koehler does so in a demonstrative way. The basic means aiding in deregulating a poem turns out to be the same means popularized by Baroque poets. This means consists in enjambment, which introduces a dissonance between the division into lines and the syntactic order. As noted by Błoński, the Baroque “wealth of [...] enjambment, systematic lack of symmetry in a sentence and a poem contribute to the effect of momentum in chaos, an effect that undoubtedly founds the poem” (Błoński 1967: 84). While using enjambment, Koehler turns out to be a creator even more radical than the Baroque authors, one almost abusing this poetic means. He uses it with such intensity that in “Koehler studies” he has already managed to earn the opinion of “an enjambment poet” (Staroń 2017: 101). And indeed, one does not need to conduct thorough research to find poems that exemplify this method:

Teraz to już
tylko będzie
skrót. [...]

(Koehler 2019a: 58)

Now it
will only
be brief. [...]

(trans. E.B.)

Brevity turns out to be a signature of Koehler who does not adhere to schemes of versification, building poems out of short, very short lines multiplied at a rapid speed. There is no other possibility: if poet is to give voice to new reality, he cannot use a “pure” poem: from now on, the poem undergoes cramping when it comes to the meter.

Już
bardziej
czysto
nie potrafię
trwać.

(Koehler 2019a: 65)

I
cannot
be more
pure
in enduring.

(trans. E.B.)

This passage can be read as an autothematic statement: as a declaration in which Koehler manifests the inability to make “pure” poetry any longer. This declaration is confirmed by the poetics in which every subsequent word is moved to another line. This is how Koehler radicalizes the poetics of Baroque so that it would make it possible for him to reflect the destabilization of the surrounding world, its acceleration enforcing “a race of enjambments” (Wążyk 1964: 19). Even if reality may seem to be well-ordered, this order is immediately countered by metric disorder and enjambments that interfere into the poetic image:

Jabłonie na tle
nieba. Mrok
jak gumka
powoli je
ściera.
(Koehler 2019a, s. 62)

Apple trees against
the sky. Darkness
eraser-like
wipes them
away slowly.
(trans. E.B.)

A cheerful, friendly landscape? Nothing more misleading. Having portrayed for a brief moment the familiar sight (of a Polish countryside? A house orchard?), Koehler suddenly plunges this view in the darkness “of dark conciseness” (Błoński 1967: 123), “eraser-like” wiping or erasing it with subsequent enjambments:

Rzeczywistość
układa się
we wzór:
zwyciężony
tropi tylko
wątki klęski
(Koehler 2019a: 57)

Reality
arranged
into a pattern:
a loser
only follows
mentions of failure
(trans. E.B.)

Given Koehler’s poetological choices, the possibility of arranging the world into a pattern seems a very distant horizon (although let us keep in mind that these are theological poems, whose “pilgrimage” expressed in the title has a clear metaphysical vector). How can one give order to the world in poetry which is presented itself as disordered? The order of a statement (“Reality / arranged / into a pattern”) seems to be denied by the performative order (the metric arrangement) which expresses reality turned inside out, devolving into subsequent lines which are not subject to any metric “pattern”.

By bringing the language to state of such despair that it would become an expression of a world broken by a crisis, Koehler also uses enjambment so as to set loose syntactic relationships in a language. The lines in *Nieudana pielgrzymka* are reduced to “sentence-like” gerund clauses, key words devoid of predicates which create asyndetic strings characteristic for Baroque epigrams:

Księżyc. Jęczmień.
Świerszcze. Ile
błyskawic jeszcze?
(Koehler 2019a: 54)

Moon. Barley.
Crickets. How
much more lightning?
(trans. E.B.)

Łagodne fale łąk
pałaki gór w tle.
Dęby. Lipy. Orzech.
(Koehler 2019a: 63)

Gentle meadow waves
bow-shaped mountains.
Oaks. Lindens. Walnut.
(trans. E.B.)

Ogień. Popiół. Dym.
Woda. Szelest.
(Koehler 2019a: 116)

Fire. Ash. Smoke.
Water. Rustle.
(trans. E.B.)

[...] Kroki.
Świerszcze. Oczy.
(Koehler 2019a: 55)

[...] Footsteps.
Crickets. Eyes.
(trans. E.B.)

Koehler's language becomes so cramped that the lines are made up of just several recurring words. The contraction of lines is such a consistent practice that for a reviewer of *Nieudana pielgrzymka*, the volume brought on associations with Japanese haiku, a record of the present moment constructed of seventeen syllables (Maliszewski 1994: 7). Koehler respects the principle of haiku inasmuch as he notes down his impressions by the means of the smallest number of words in poetry as compressed as possible. "Sound, shadow, smoke, wind, flash, voice, point, a human life celebrated. / A sun no longer rises once it has passed" (Naborowski 1961: 158), as Daniel Naborowski (1573–1640), a Baroque poet, wrote. Koehler also likes using asyndentons, juxtaposing this concise form with more developed description.

When it comes to the use of formal means, Koehler turns out to be an even more ingenious poet. Following Baroque poets, he attempts to compose contemporary *carmina figurata*, "figurative songs" that take on the shape of an object thematized within them (Rypson 1989: 129–249). And thus, when trying to express the experience of instability, the classicist subordinates to it the graphic design of the poem, arranging the lines in a two-dimensional plane:

W dalekie kraje.
Mowa nie zniesie
Tego: w bezlistne
drzewa;

To distant lands.
Speech won't bear
it: into leafless
trees;

w bezlitosne ramiona
śmierci. Łąki
schodzą się
tam na spotkanie

ino merciless arms
of death. Meadows
come there
to meet

i krasa gajów,
nasze staranie,
aby zostawić

and the beauty of woods
our attempt
to leave

w wielkim
mroczniejącym
spokoju
to niestrudzone
(Koehler 2019a: 99)

in great
darkening
peace
the tireless
(trans. E.B.)

Attempting, in accord with his program declaration to report "on what / happens" (Koehler 2019a: 55), with the very order of the lines in the poem Koehler tries to illustrate how wind blows, an element that symbolizes the changeability of the era. The *Wind of Change* from the 1990s hit by Scorpions also moves the constructions of the poem. In Koehler's variation of the Baroque *carmina*

figurata the changes are supposed to be expressed by the very jagged lines of the poem. By aligning the poem to the center and composing it of short lines, Koehler seems to experiment with “visual prosody” (Perloff 2009: 19) of the poem, whose short lines wave as a flag in the wind. “In such poetic fractions, enjambment almost plays the role of the subject of a statement, an independent creator of the meaning given, while the reader’s eye follows only the path of print on the page. It may happen for graphy to become an equivalent of something undefined, perhaps even metaphysical, wind” (Staroń 2017: 98), as Ireneusz Staroń noted.

It may seem controversial to term Koehler’s poetry as “songs”. However, despite appearances, his *carmina* turn out to be not only *figurata* (Latin for figurative), but also as *sonora* (Latin for sonorous) as possible, even if this sonority is not achieved by the means of metric schemes:

osaczony gra na trąbce pogoń: kołatki, bębny –	the hemmed plays pursuit on trumpet: knockers, drums –
to jedyny język.	the only language.
Coraz więcej rozumiem, lecz moja pieśń rozbrzmiewa tylko jedną melodią. (Koehler 2019a: 57)	I understand still more but my song sounds with only one melody. (trans. E.B.)

When in Koehler’s poems the “song sounds / with only one / melody”, it is not the melody of meter carrying out the principles of *ars poetica*. In this regard too does Koehler repeat a gesture of Baroque authors, who used a deregulated form so that in that shape could a 17th century world, devoid of regularity, properly sound out. “A listless and mean world can only afford listless and mean poetry” (Mrowcewicz 2005: 195), as Krzysztof Mrowcewicz wrote about 17th century poetics. Koehler’s songs, where metric order cannot be found, must also find themselves in such a state of listlessness. However, this does not mean that it is impossible to hear a peculiar kind of musicality within them:

It is musicality that is “breathless”, clanky, jerky, but, in a way, melodious, rounded up, considered and finished in terms of sound. What interested me was the original rhythm of this poetry, which I would call “the shame of sound”: musical restraint and fragmentation of the phrase, an extremely consistent syncope. As if the ideals of avant-garde became one with Leśmian’s syntax, and to that, a distant note out of Baroque mannerism

was added [...] The whole thing is endearingly his own, including the innovations and discoveries in the field of verse (Maliszewski 1998: 112).

Whether Koehler uses avant-garde poetics or, rather, poetics of “Baroque mannerism” remains up for debate. I would like to agree with the remaining statements by Maliszewski. If Koehler’s poetry retains sound, it is a sound by design devoid of harmony. Simple lines constructed out of basic metrical feet (trochees, amphibrachs) do not create complicated constructions. Their “nervous, syncopic trembling” (Śliwiński 1994: 75), unpredictable cuts in the lines (enjambments), irregular pulsing, as if taken from the Old Polish psalmody seem to reflect the trembling of the era itself.

Another feature subordinated to expressing the world in crisis is the sound structure that utilizes phonetic instrumentation. Not only are Koehler’s *carmina* shaped according to the way “the wind of change” blows, but also, these blows win in the phonic arrangement. Koehler’s poems are constructed so as to recreate the “rustle” of new times by the means of onomatopoeia. One could swear that lines set into movement by the wind really do “rustle”:

Doskonałe
powietrze
wypełniło
tę przestrzeń.

Perfectly
did the air
fill
this space.

Wiatr chce
ją jeszcze
nasyścić
swym
szelestem
(Koehler 2019a: 73)

The wind
still wants
to saturate it
with its
rustling
(trans. E.B.)

W topole
wdziera się
wiatr.
Szelest.
(Koehler 2019a: 74)

Wind
enters
the poplars.
Rustling.
(trans. E.B.)

Szelest papieru.
Trzaski szczap.
Cisza. Więcej
nic. [...]
(Koehler 2019a: 92)

Paper rustling.
Logs cracking.
Silence. Nothing
more [...]
(trans. E.B.)

Wciąż ten szelest,
to parcie nieustanne
jednej w inną
rzecz.
(Koehler 2019a: 116)

Still the rustle
this constant pressure
of one thing
into another.
(trans. E.B.)

“Rustle” is one of key words in Koehler’s poetry. Simultaneously, attempts are made at recreating “rustling” by the means of alliteration, that is, by putting together fricatives over the space of several lines:

świerszcze szurganiem wydeptują próg (Koehler 2019a: 67)	crickets shuffle to wear down the threshold (trans. E.B.)
a dalej – w mgle ściskającej przestrzeń jak puszka szklana – dach i chłodu śliska ściana.	and further – in a mist squeezing space as glass box roof and chill slippery wall.
Jesień. Słowa [...] (Koehler 2019a: 83)	Fall. Words [...] (trans. E.B.)

Like the metonymy of change, the wind forces its way into Koehler’s poetry in order to – as we remember – “cu[t] / these words // into syllables”, but also in order for them to be audible due to sonic orchestration. As a result, some poems both look and sound as if they really were impacted by the wind:

Mowa nie zniesie Tego: w bezlistne drzewa;	Speech won’t bear it: into leafless trees;
w bezlitosne ramiona śmierci. Łąki schodzą się tam na spotkanie (Koehler 2019a: 99)	into merciless arms of death. Meadows come there to meet (trans. E.B.)

“Speech won’t bear / it”, and thus, Koehler operates with phonetic instrumentation beyond the order of the statement. Sometimes he puts next to each other onomatopoeic words that enrich the irregular sound of his poetry, e.g. Gentle meadow waves / bow-shaped mountains. Or:

Wiatr i życie. Lipa, zżęte łąny. Jeszcze nas Czeka	Wind and living. Linden cut down fields. We are yet To see
długie pożycie (Koehler 2019a: 66)	long co-living (trans. E.B.)

Koehler's poetry might bring about associations with Baroque traditions for one other reason: the subject matter. Indeed, similarly to Baroque creators Koehler often uses "the language of paradox", as Cleanth Brooks wrote about John Donne's poetry (Brooks 1960: 3–20), or the "rhetorics of paradox", as Jan Błoński wrote about Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński's poetry (Błoński 1967: 98–130). For Koehler, reality appears as unknowable, and the impossibility to know it is expressed by the means of aporetic language. And thus, in many poems in *Nieudana pielgrzymka*, one goes blind in the (dark) brilliance:

[...] Ślepy blask, co nie otoczy	[...] Blind the brilliance that won't surround
światłem. (Koehler 2019a: 56)	with light. (trans. E.B.)
Oczy	Eyes
zalepia blask (Koehler 2019a: 65)	glued by brilliance (trans. E.B.)

In the vastness, one becomes small:

I tak to jest:	And that's how it is
malejemy w ogromie. (Koehler 2019a: 59)	we become small in the vastness. (trans. E.B.)

In silence, one becomes deaf:

Kiedy ich cisza tłoczy się we mnie. (Koehler 2019a: 62)	When their silence crowds inside me. (trans. E.B.)
---	--

In a conversation, one is silent:

Póki rozmawiam z Tobą, milczę, patrzę w ogień; (Koehler 2019a: 97)	While I talk with you I am silent, looking into the fire (trans. E.B.)
---	---

In strengthening, one becomes weak:

Wiatr. Coraz więcej wiatru we włosach,
pomału potężniejac stajesz się martwy jak

Wind. Still more wind in the hair
slowly strengthening, you become dead

brzask nad doliną Neckaru [...] (Koehler 2019a: 79)

as dawn over the Neckar valley [...] (trans. E.B.)

...and in living, one loses life:

Kopię
życiu
grób.

(Koehler 2019a: 95)

I dig
a grave
for life.

(trans. E.B.)

As I have tried to showcase, by the means of such methods derived from Baroque, Koehler attempts to write down his own experience of the world at the threshold of the 1990s, when he radically changes his own writing style. He abandons classicism, identified with formal polish, so as to open himself up to the perspective of transforming Poland with the “brokenness” inspired by the techniques of 17th century poetry.

Simultaneously, Koehler’s choice of classicism did not mean agreeing with the cognitive crisis as described in his poetry. The poem’s main task remains in almost journalistic “arduous” reporting on what is going on in Polish reality right after the fall of Communism, one that forces the writer to undertake formal changes (“Arduous reporting / On what / Is going on”; Koehler 2019a: 55). Indebted to Baroque aesthetics, Koehler fulfills this task in an exemplary way. However, favoring classicism at the threshold of the 1990s meant that Koehler’s ambitions remained larger than simple mimetic copying, in a poetic form, the crisis that he experienced and that disoriented the subjectivity of his poems. As Ryszard Przybylski wrote, in the contemporary world, the basic task of classicism turns out to lie in finding Orpheus’s lost lyre, that is, restoring harmony to a world irrevocably devoid of this harmony. It is one thing to reproduce the crisis one experiences in poetic structure, a more difficult task turns out to consist in getting out of this crisis. This also seems to be the task Koehler gives to his classicism which, in the end, becomes directed at metaphysical space that is impossible to put into words. The still point and the egress outside the speeding earthly world turns out to lie in *logos*, towards which the author, in accordance with the title of his volume, makes a humble pilgrimage. Although these pilgrimages must, out of necessity, end in failure, they point towards the existence of harmonic space. They are directed towards the divine order, which the young poet would also like to introduce into the crisis circumstances of the Third Polish Republic, even if such an effort must end in failure.

In this sense, even though Koehler’s poetry does not represent typical engaged poetry, it is difficult not to read it as political, in which an openly conservative poet expresses his resistance towards reality that appears to him in a crisis state of chaos. Does he want a nostalgic return to the stability of the

previous system? Absolutely not, as an anti-Communist poet, he would ever agree to such an option. Still, the space of the era change he records appears to him as a space of disharmony, which also demands an intervention that would put it in order. This is where Koehler's poems meet with politics, and he engages in it from conservative positions as a proponent of such orderly arranging of reality that would be modeled after Polish, or, to put it bluntly, Sarmatian past. If the world is no longer well-formed, Koehler suggests, in order for it to be re-organized one should use forms that already exist in our tradition.

REFERENCES

- Błoński, J. (1967). *Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński a początki polskiego baroku*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Brooks, C. (1960). *The Well Wrought Urn*. Dobson Books Ltd.
- Klein, N. (2008). *Doktryna szoku. Jak współczesny kapitalizm wykorzystuje klęski żywiołowe i kryzysy społeczne* (przeł. H. Jankowska). Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie MUZA.
- Koehler, K. (1990). O'haryzm, *bruLion*, 14–15, 141–142.
- Koehler, K. (1991). Poeta – słowo wyjąłowane (rozmawiał A. Michajłow). *Dekada Literacka*, 15, 5.
- Koehler, K. (1995). Monitor, *Arcana*, 1, 95–105.
- Koehler, K. (1996). Jestem silny (rozmawiali R. Chojnacki, M. Czyżowski). *Studium*, 4, 9–11.
- Koehler, K. (1999a). Kuszenie rymem (rozmawiał K. Czanganik). *Gazeta Krakowska*, 289, 4.
- Koehler, K. (1999b). Progresywny klasycyzm, *Polonistyka*, 2, 73–78.
- Koehler, K. (2002). *Słuchaj mię, Sauromatha. Antologia poezji sarmackiej*. Wydawnictwo Arcana.
- Koehler, K. (2019a). *Obce ciało. Wiersze z lat 1989–2019*. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Koehler, K. (2019b, 19 grudnia). Jestem bardzo awangardowym klasykiem (rozmawiał A. Mirek). *Nowy Napis*. <https://nowynapis.eu/tygodnik/nr-28/artukul/jestem-bardzo-awangardowym-klasykiem>
- Koehler, K., Baran, M., Świetlicki, M. (1993). Nowe „Dziady” (rozmawiał P. Rodak). *Res Publica Nowa*, 6, 9–12.
- Koehler, K., Wencel, W. (1997). Pełnia i tkliwość (rozmawiała E. Bładowska). *Pro Arte*, 7, 4–6.
- Maliszewski, K. (1994). Krytyczna schizofrenia. Kазus Koehlera. *Nowy Nurt*, 4, 7.
- Maliszewski, K. (1995). Nasi klasycyści, nasi barbarzyńcy. *Nowy Nurt*, 19, 1, 7, 11.
- Maliszewski, K. (1998). Cisza świata, dźwięk wieczności. *Topos*, 1–2, 111–112.
- Mrowcewicz, K. (2005). *Trivium poetów polskich epoki baroku. Klasycyzm – manieryzm – barok. Studia nad polską poezją XVII stulecia*. IBL.
- Naborowski, D. (1961). *Poezje* (red. J. Dürr-Durski). Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Perloff, M. (2009). „Nadać kształt”. Williams i wizualizacja poezji (przeł. M. Wiśniewski). *Literatura na Świecie*, 1–2, 14–49.
- Rymkiewicz, J. M. (1967). *Czym jest klasycyzm. Manifesty poetyckie*. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Rypson, P. (1989). *Obraz słowa. Historia poezji wizualnej*. Akademia Ruchu.
- Staroń, I. (2017). Ścieg sensu. Międzywersy Krzysztofa Koehlera. W: K. Bakula, D. Heck (red.), *Efekt motyla. Od teorii chaosu deterministycznego do indeterminizmu praktyki literackiej i artystycznej* (t. 3, s. 91–101). Księgarnia Akademicka.
- Śliwiński, P. (1994). Mniej, więcej, coś. *Res Publica Nowa*, 9, 75.
- Świetlicki, M. (2002). *Zimne kraje. Wiersze 1980–1990*. Lampa i Iskra Boża.

Trembecki, J. T. (Koehler K.) (1991). Chwała filologii, *bruLion*, 17–18, 169–170.

Vincenz, A. (1989). Wstęp. W: A. Vincenz (red.), *Helikon sarmacki. Wątki i tematy polskiej poezji barokowej*. Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.

Ważyk, A. (1964). *Esej o wierszu*. Czytelnik.