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## Motoric Impulse in the Poetry of Julian Przyboś

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Zdzisław Łapiński

## Motoric Impulse in the Poetry of Julian Przyboś

### 1

Even the first contact with the poetic practice of Julian Przyboś worked out in the 1930s renders it possible to grasp its basic orientation. The object of mimesis here is the field of consciousness. This field, with the entire variability of narrative rules in prose and poetry, can be linked with diverse techniques of “the stream of consciousness” appearing in those years. Above all, the common assumption is that all information about the represented external reality is to reach the reader in a roundabout way, through the psychic states of “I” highly concretized in time and space. The orientation on faithfulness to impressions, and not to the objects and phenomena that cause them, and the intensity of metaphors resulting from it, account for the fact that it is not easy to determine an actual state of affairs in Przyboś’s poems. Yet it is indispensable for the reader to attempt this—if only intuitively—if he wishes to understand and experience his poetry in a correct way.

The actual state of affairs in pieces typical of Przyboś’s poetry is as follows:

The scene is set in town or country, during specified period of the day and the year. The hero likes mountainous terrain, he willingly keeps close to streams, rivers and lakes, from time to time going as far as the sea or even the ocean. To feel well he needs a forest or a grove, or even a few trees, plus birds, of course. Sometimes a person close to him is keeping him company but in general he is not afraid of solitude. Towards people he behaves

with reserve. He keeps moving. Sometimes he is carried in a vehicle, e. g., a horse-drawn cart, streetcar, ship or a plane. But ask him about the most proper form of locomotion and most certainly he is bound to say that it is plain walking and hiking. Only when the physical strain of the muscles makes him change the relation between his person and the surrounding does he give an impression of controlling the situation. This pedestrian always directs his attention to the external world: he keeps watching things around him. But at the same time he closely watches his own reactions. The intensive emotions influence the way in which he perceives the world, invokes images from the past and suggests visions of future events. Because he is alone he is not accustomed to talk, or in other words, to use his voice. But he carries on an inner conversation with himself and others. Fragments and scraps of this dialogue reach us—some questions, interjections, orders and succinct statements. This helps us guess the course of events because we learn about everything exclusively through the hero himself. The events are developing fast and are brief, usually a few minutes or even seconds. About other things, indispensable for the understanding of what is going on, we learn from preliminary information and from additional remarks that are made few and far between, and justified as the hero's associations. The main events are the very perceptual processes, particularly linked to eyesight, body motion and muscular tension. These data are intermixed with rising and falling emotional states. Yet the hero is not only a passive recipient of impulses coming to him from the world, from the inner organism or from the depth of the psyche. On the contrary, he reveals feverish and purposeful activity. From a stream of data he selects only those facts which are of significance to him; in conflicting states he makes decisions. The matter is usually solved by an act of will, an expression of the fundamental attitude and drives stemming from it.

This list of details embracing the scenery, impressions of the hero and his forms of behaviour does not impose with its richness but is governed by iron-clad consistency. It suffices to change only one item on this list and the construction of a poem is altered. Let us, for instance, give the main character a moment of rest, put him at the table, and immediately the hero who was putting together a poem in his mind while walking is replaced by the hero who takes down

ready-made thoughts on a piece of paper; and a poem implying only some philosophy is changed into a piece that speaks directly about this philosophy (that is exactly the difference between two programmatic works "Ciężar poematu" *«The Burden of a Poem»* and "Żyjąc" *«Living»*). And what if the author permits the same hero to lie down on his back and close his eyes? Then not only the whole world of the hero is changed but also the entire language organization of a piece is altered, together with its versification, and free verse slowly gives way to prose poem (cf. "Zaokienny neon" *«The Neon Light Outside the Window»* from the cycle *Pióro z ognia* *«A Feather Made of Fire»*).

These transformations are not, let us say it again, accidental. All the listed components bear systematic character. They were worked out by the author gradually as optimal solution for his poetics. It was to express values experienced most strongly and thoughts rooted most deeply. Toward the end of the 1930s rejection of some until then necessary components followed from his tendency to acquire new experiences reflected by new means of expression. In terms of the artistic trends dominating those years it was an attempt to subject oneself to impulses resulting from surrealism and to modify the constructivistic foundations of his own poetics.

In the field of consciousness, revealed in Przyboś's poetry, the main role is played by experience coming from outside, i.e. perception, and that following from one's own body, i.e. (as the psychologists say) proprioception. As regards perception, particularly the visual one, the critics writing about Przyboś devoted much attention to it.<sup>1</sup> This information is also available, owing to a lucky coincidence, to English-speaking readers. Bogdana Carpenter wrote a very useful

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., A. Łaszowski, "Horyzont Juliana Przybosia" (The Horizon of J.P.), *Gazeta Artystów*, 1934, no. 1, p. 3; M. Chmielowiec, "Próba popularnej recenzji" (A Rough Draft of a "Popular" Review), *Kultura*, 1939, no. 4, p. 6. On some analogies in the domain of visual perception between the poetic insights of Przyboś and the discoveries of experimental psychology see Z. Łapiński, "»Świat cały – jakże zmieścić go w żrenicy«. O kategoriach percepcyjnych w poezji Juliana Przybosia" ("The Whole World – How to Compress It in the Eye." On the Perceptual Categories in the Poetry of J.P.), [in:] *Studia z teorii i historii poezji*, Series 2, ed. M. Głowiński, Wrocław 1970.

introduction to the history of the Polish avant-garde. She writes at length about the visual experiences contained in Przyboś.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, I feel free to give up the discussion of issues concerning perception, and I will deal with proprioception, or rather a fragment of it called kinesthesia, that is, experience gained from tensing muscles and moving the body.

## 2

I do not know whether poets have already been classified according to the position of the body of a person who speaks in poems. If such a taxonomy were to be applied to the contemporary Polish literature then Julian Przyboś (1901–1970) would take one extreme end and Miron Białoszewski (1922–1983) the other: the two most outstanding representatives of two different phases of the Polish avant-garde.<sup>3</sup> In his poems Przyboś stands straight, possibly even tense. This position is more than a natural way of existing in the world, it is almost a manifestation, a reflection of pride from victory over inert matter, from overcoming gravity. Białoszewski, on the other hand, praises lying down. “Leżenia” (Lying Down) is the title of a poem and it is, as it were, a draft of a new literary genre, following from a programmatic posture of the poet.<sup>4</sup> Przyboś is all concentrated on subjecting the world to his energy, so overwhelming that it is enough to make one gesture, one glance to transform the surroundings. This characteristic for our civilization temptation to subjugate nature, this “breathtaking anthropocentrism”<sup>5</sup> is treated by Białoszewski as something to overcome; he does not want to rule the reality, he wants to be subjected to it.

<sup>2</sup> B. Carpenter, *The Poetic Avant-garde in Poland. 1918–1939*, Seattle–London 1983, pp. 110–140.

<sup>3</sup> On some aspects of the body as a lyric medium in contemporary Polish poetry see J. Łukaszewicz, “Próba ciała” (The Body as Test), [in:] *Laur i ciało*, Warszawa 1971.

<sup>4</sup> For brilliant interpretation of “Leżenia” (by J. Sławiński) see T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Sławiński, *Czytamy utwory współczesne (Reading Contemporary Literature)*, Warszawa 1967.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase is taken from C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century*, Berkeley 1973, p. 494.

The straightened body in Przyboś shows high mobility: *hylem tyle, ile bieglem* (I was as much as I ran).<sup>6</sup> But it was an impeded run, rather an effort to start running, impatient gait. The world of Przyboś is the place where you walk: *aż tak idąc, aby tylko przekraczać widnokrag* (walking only to the point of crossing horizon).<sup>7</sup>

For someone taking a horizontal position all the vigorous forms of behaviour seem doubtful: *Boję się bytu za bardzo energicznego* (I am afraid of an overly energetic existence), says Białoszewski.<sup>8</sup> A walking man looks upon a man who is lying down with an air of superiority. On poems from the volume *Było i było* (*There Was and There Was*) Przyboś remarks contemptuously; *owoc nudy czy artystycznej abulii* (it is the fruit of boredom or an atrophy of artistic will).<sup>9</sup>

According to the calculations by Thomas De Quincey, based on, as he writes, "good data".

Wordsworth must have traversed a distance of 175 to 180,000 English miles – a mode of exertion which, to him, stood in the stead of wine, spirits and all other stimulants whatsoever to the animal spirits; to which he has been indebted for a life of unclouded happiness, and we for much of what is most excellent in his writings.<sup>10</sup>

It is a pity to say that the Polish romantic poets were no match for the English walker. They had some brilliant performances (e.g. Antoni Malczewski conquered Aiguille du Midi – 3,843 m in the Mont-Blanc range in 1818) but they lacked persistence. It was Przyboś who was to make up for these shortcomings.

He makes his first steps in *Sponad* (*From Above*, 1930), his

<sup>6</sup> J. Przyboś, "Znowu na rodzinnych polach" (On Native Lands Again), [in:] *Pisma zebrane*, ed. R. Skręt, Kraków 1984, vol. 1, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> J. Przyboś, "Ziemią gwiezdnie pojętą" (On Earth Conceived as a Star), *ibidem*, p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> M. Białoszewski, *Rozkurz* (*Pulverization*), Warszawa 1980, p. 117.

<sup>9</sup> J. Przyboś, "Z powodu *Było i było* Mirona Białoszewskiego" (*Ex re: There Was and There Was* by M.B.), *Poezja*, 1966, no. 2, p. 98; cf. J. Kwiatkowski, "Abulia i liturgia" (*The Atrophy of the Will and the Liturgy*, 1963), [in:] *Klucze do wyobraźni*, Kraków 1973.

<sup>10</sup> Th. De Quincey, "William Wordsworth" (1839), [in:] *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, ed. D. Wright, Harmondsworth 1980, p. 135.

third book of poems. He appears there on several occasions as a concrete person, as someone who acts and, at the same time, informs about it. This action (in the physical sense) is walking; he will not stop doing this till his last poems. Perhaps he is under an illusion that he can—as a shepherd in one of his lyrical pieces—“to walk a stream” (or anything else in his surroundings), but he certainly knows how to “walk a poem.” When he wants to check the verity of his great predecessors he takes a closer look at their poetic gait:

In Slowacki's “Szwajcaria” there is no experience of a tourist and a walker; the trip during which, after all, you have to climb, puff and blow and sweat it out, changed under Slowacki's pen into some swans floating on a lake, some angels' flights to the peaks.

Przyboś contrasts this poem with Mickiewicz's “Na Alpach w Splügen” (At Splügen in the Alps) where “an impression of height and toil of the Alpine climber” is rendered properly.<sup>11</sup>

If we were to look for an ideal form for the Przyboś walker we could find it in the following description.

In a Parisian square towers the most beautiful monument of our poet. On a tall column Mickiewicz—with an image of a pilgrim—walks violent and inspired and in a moment of clairvoyant hope makes a sign with his raised hand, leading us to something that only his eyes can see.<sup>12</sup>

### 3

Thus, a poet is someone walking and making a pointing gesture. The gesture motif is not often present in the poems by Przyboś but it is always very expressive:

Liczyłem sekundy na drzewa, rozważane zawieją  
i, w gniewie,  
ramieniem wzdłużonym od okrzyku zerwałem  
most, który się przed wzgórzem ociągał i zwlekał.

[I counted seconds on trees, swang by stormwind, and, in anger, with arm extended by a shout I tore away the bridge that dragged on before a hill.]<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> J. Przyboś, “W błękitu krainie” (In the Azure Land), [in:] *Linia i gwar*, vol. 1, Kraków 1959, p. 294.

<sup>12</sup> J. Przyboś, “Mickiewicz,” *ibidem*, pp. 269–270.

<sup>13</sup> J. Przyboś, „Z błyskawic” (From Lightnings), [in:] *Pisma zebrane*, vol. 1, p. 62.

What is more, the gesture is, in a way, built into the grammatical structure of this poetry owing to the dominant role played in it by deixis.<sup>14</sup> Przyboś devoted much space in his essays and other prose works to the relation between words and gestures. Delivering an official praise of the novelist Tadeusz Breza he said:

While reading Breza's prose I gain sometimes an impression as if his speech returned to the sources of the word, to gestic genesis of human speech: to hand movements, to making a face, to expressing with one's entire person what is now expressed only by language.<sup>15</sup>

Przyboś points to those features of Tadeusz Breza's prose which can be analyzed nowadays using the extensive though somewhat chaotic research on para-verbal and non-verbal communication. It is interesting, however, that the poet does not perceive, in the picture of this communication as used by the novelist, the most striking thing while underlining secondary matters. It is with difficulty that we can find in Breza's prose a return to what is primordial—in psyche, behaviour and language. His sensitivity reacts primarily to signals exchanged by the people from a milieu with long-lasting traditions and well-worked out manners, where every shade of a gesture, face expression or intonation contains palpable information, owing to its conventionality. Breza moves in the social territory; he is interested in conventions and wants to depict communication process, or relations among people. Przyboś finds himself most at ease in the natural environment, he seeks spontaneity and reveals expressive functions which bind man not so much with another fellow man but with nature. At the basis of his poetics there is the remembrance about "the gestic genesis of human speech." Hence, we have the curvature of perspective from which the writer was seen and whose praise Przyboś was to voice. The same motif is taken up by Przyboś on another occasion when interpreting Mickiewicz's poem "Farys."

They say that the primitive man expressed himself with gestures and motions of the whole body. Then expression was limited to skimpy motions of the tongue and thus human speech started, and then the word acquired force and meaning

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<sup>14</sup> See Z. Łapiński, "Miejsce na ziemi i miejsce w wierszu. O składnikach deiktycznych w liryce Przybosia" (A Place on Earth and in the Poem. On Deictic Elements in P.'s Lyric Poems), [in:] *Przestrzeń i literatura*, ed. M. Głowiński and A. Okopień-Sławińska, Wrocław 1978.

<sup>15</sup> J. Przyboś, *Odrodzenie*, 1946, no. 3, p. 2.

as compared with the former inarticulate shouts accompanying gestures and body motions. The primitive man would shout and gesticulate a lot using up an enormous amount of physical energy to invoke the simplest image. The primitive language was all directed externally, it was meant for the eyes. The speech of a cultured man became sparing, the word—a minor motion of the tongue—gains significance, it does not point to things outside but calls things up in imagination, it is turned inward. A cultured, strong man provides the word with the power to stimulate inner feelings, images and ideas.<sup>16</sup>

In the poetry by Przyboś “cultured man” did not quite eliminate “the primitive man.” They just switched their places. The primitive man became the hero of the poem who is present in it bodily; the cultured man—its creator present in it only as a hidden maker of the piece. “Inarticulate shouts” change into onomatopoeic dissonances. “In order to create the simplest image” the hero still uses up an “enormous amount of energy” which, however, is not physical but psychical. The language is “still directed outward, meant for the eyes,” but this time only in “imagination.”

To sum up, external mobility gave way to internal one, that is to say, physical actions turned into psychical ones. But this transformed man does not break links with his forefather, he does not renounce entirely his archaic deposits of personality. His spiritualism remembers about physiological aspects, the psyche—about body, the motion of thoughts—about the motion of muscles.

#### 4

We put our muscles when we want to do or make something. But their stimulation, the preliminary phase of operation, and a specific “image” of future actions of the muscles may also arise under the influence of closely watched external events with which we tend to identify ourselves. Psychology uses in that instance the word “empathy.” Empathy permits us to co-feel the states experienced by others, and by a further analogy—the states and processes of nature.

In the 1930s the notion of empathy was a household word of psychology, it became even a component of common knowledge.

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<sup>16</sup> J. Przyboś, “Słaby i mocny wiersz” (Weak and Strong Verse), [in:] *Czytając Mickiewicza*, Warszawa 1950, pp. 179–180.

Przyboś was interested in discoveries of *Gestaltpsychologie*, and he knew earlier works of the German experimental school so that we can certainly surmise that he had contacts with the concepts of Theodore Lipps or his disciples and popularizers. They also could have a share in developing one of the aspects of his poetics. One way or another, the idea of empathy was underlying many of his images.

Przyboś went much further with this idea, further than any academic psychologist would dare. In his poems we come across not only experiences stemming from identification with the milieu but also a conviction that the milieu reciprocates. Hence, the sense of exchangeability of muscular experience, an impression that my internal actions may find an outward extension and that someone may draw experience from me. Then there is nothing simpler than to say: *kwiat za ciebie wytknął złoty języczek uwagi* (flower stuck out the golden tongue of attention for you).<sup>17</sup> Or:

obarczony węglarz, za mnie zrzucając wór,  
pochylił się,  
wyprostował,  
odsapnął.

[burdened coalman— in place of me— throwing off his sack / bent down / straightened up / took a deep breath.]<sup>18</sup>

The last quotation comes from a poem about the birth of a poem. The effort of the coalman is as if a muscular equivalent of the poetic strain and an event relieving one from that strain. Thus empathic images not only keep recurring in the experience of the hero of lyrical lines but retain also, according to the author, the direct contact with the very act of creation.

## 5

Przyboś oriented his effort mainly on the contents on the edge of consciousness, the contents that followed to the same degree from internal biography as from the current situation in the world

<sup>17</sup> J. Przyboś, "Z zakretu. z drogi naglej" (At the Turn of the Road. Suddenly), [in:] *Pisma zebrane*, vol. 1, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> J. Przyboś, "Ciężar poematu" (The Burden of a Poem), *ibidem*, p. 253.

in which the "I", the hero and narrator of events, found itself. The reader could only be a voiceless spectator at the drama of creation. But the poet was highly sensitive to the vicissitudes of his pieces, to their literary life. He maintained that a poem is fully realized only when recited, and he was sorry that the practice of today pushes spoken poetry on the sidelines. Thus, he used to sit on juries of various recitation competitions, travelled to meetings where he recited his own poems, recorded in the radio pieces that he was reading himself.

Writes one of the critics participating in those recording sessions: "Przyboś had a voice [lacking] natural stamina, muscularity [...]. He rebelled against physiological handicaps and limitations. When voicing his poem he was putting up a fight with his voice." Sometimes he suffered from grotesque defeats but was capable of imposing on the listener his own truth about poetry. "The listener discovered that the true nest for a poem is always the human body."<sup>19</sup>

Corporal experiences related to motion and productive effort of the organism find expression in Przyboś also, or, maybe primarily, in the sound composition of a poem. A poem is born not only in the eye and the heart but also in the throat. A printed poem resembles a petrified product of the articulatory apparatus function, i.e. the lungs, vocal chords, tongue.

In one of his poems we find the term: "baby-poem."<sup>20</sup> The poem being born is treated by the writer as a corporal extension of his own substance. The "organic" character of a piece—a fairly old and cliché metaphor—acquires here concreteness and sounds almost literal.

The poet kept coming back in his essays to what he called "the hatching ground of hearing and movement." He described it in the following way:

It is a directional tension of the gift of tongue toward two senses of expressiveness: to the sense of hearing and to the sense of muscle movement when the poet tries to grasp yet unspoken phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> A. Gronczewski, "Podwieczerek z torturami" (A Torturous Entertainment), *Miesięcznik Literacki*, 1988, no. 23, pp. 69–71.

<sup>20</sup> J. Przyboś, "Jaskółka" (Swallow), [in:] *Pisma zebrane*, vol. 1, p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> J. Przyboś, "Nowość potrząsa kwiatem" (Novelty Shakes a Flower), [in:] *Czytając Mickiewicza*, p. 27.

Looking at Julian Przyboś *oeuvre* from the “motoric” angle permits to notice the relationship among seemingly diverse components. The walker motif stands for personalization of thought, that man—and according to the writer, the most successful embodiment of him, the creator—is by nature a motoric being; the motif of gesture and its role in human speech genesis points to the motoric principle of language. In turn, the notion of empathy binds the experience of the subject to the rest of its surroundings, i.e. to other people and nature, organic and inorganic. Finally, the persistent concern of the poet for the most appropriate realization of his poems, reciting them out loud (in spite of rather discouraging results) testifies to a belief that the author must convey a quantum of verbal energy to the listener in a completely literal and physical sense.

But the above attempt at grasping and commenting on the function of motoric experiences in the poetry does not reflect the fact how deep is the writer’s intuition in getting at the basic features of language and how consistent he is in his poetics.

It is worthwhile recalling here that during first 3 decades of this century linguists wrote a lot about articulation experiences as superior to acoustic data in the speech reception process. And aestheticians dilligently studied these works before structuralism overshadowed these problems. But Jan Mukařovský, before dealing with the “semantic gesture,” delivered a lecture *O motorickém dění v poezii* (1927),<sup>22</sup> while Mikhail Bakhtin wrote penetratingly:

Often the acoustic side of the word plays a relatively minor role in poetry; the motion which produces acoustic sound—the strongest in the articulation apparatus but embracing the whole body, the movement indeed implemented in reading or co-experienced by the listener or experienced only as a possibility, is much more essential than what we hear and what plays the service role of calling on appropriate productive movement. Or even more subservient role of sense cipher. Or the role of the basis for intonation which requires sound flexibility of the word but is neutral to sounds quality and for the rhythm, which, of course, is motoric in character.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Prague 1985.

<sup>23</sup> M. Bakhtin, “Problema sodержaniya, materiala i formy v slovesnom khudozhestvennom tvorchestve” (1924), [in:] *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, Moskva 1975, pp. 66–67.

This lost train of thought was revived in the works of psycholinguists some time ago. A few competing “motoric theories of speech perception” were born. I would like to quote here a compact outline of one of such theories worked out within the last 30 years by Alvin Liberman et al. In its newer version it looks as follows:

The first claim of the motor theory [...] is that the objects of speech perception are the intended phonetic gestures of the speaker, represented in the brain as invariant motor commands that call for movements of the articulators through certain linguistic significant configurations. These gestural commands are the physical reality underlying the traditional phonetic notions—for example, “tongue backing,” “lip rounding,” and “jaw raising”—that provide the basis for phonetic categories. They are the elementary events of speech production and perception. Phonetic segments are simply groups of one or more of these elementary events; thus [b] consists of a labial stop gesture and [m] of that same gesture combined with a velum-lowering gesture. Phonologically, of course, the gestures themselves must be viewed as groups of features, such as “labial,” “stop,” “nasal,” but these features are attributes of the gestural events, not events as such. To perceive an utterance, then, is to perceive a specific pattern of intended gestures.

Equally important for us is the second assumption:

The second claim of the theory is a corollary of the first: if speech perception and speech production share the same set of invariants, they must be ultimately linked. This link, we argue, is not a learned association, a result of the fact that what people hear when they listen to speech is what they do when they speak. Rather, the link is innately specified, requiring only epigenetic development to bring it into play. On this claim, perception of the gestures occurs in the specialized mode, different in important ways from the auditory mode, responsible also for the production of phonetic structures, and part of the larger specialization for language. The adaptive function of the perceptual side of this mode, the side with which the motor theory is directly concerned, is to make the conversion from acoustic signal to gesture automatically, and so to let listeners perceive phonetic structure without mediation by (or translation from) the auditory appearances that the sound might, on purely psychoacoustic grounds, be expected to have.<sup>24</sup>

I shall not summarize the arguments for the theory presented here but would like to observe how much it explains the intuitive tendencies of Przyboś. For example, empathy, operating within a poem within the framework of the represented world, as we could suppose

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<sup>24</sup> A. M. Liberman and I. G. Mattingly, “The Motor Theory of Speech Perception Revised,” *Cognition*, 1985, no. 21, pp. 2–3.

so far, now becomes a principle almost organically binding the sender and the recipient of a poem. On the other hand, the aim by all means to read poetry aloud can be seen from another perspective as a result of a characteristic but erroneous belief that the motoric reception of a poem requires acoustic experience. It may be surmised that on the basis of similar hypotheses it will be easier in the future to describe and understand everything that Przyboś put into his programmatic metaphor:

transmitując ruchy i trud mego ciała  
na struny głosowe i na napęd  
napomykającego o nich znacząco języka...

[transmitting the movements and toil of my body / onto vocal chords and on the motor / or that language that significantly alludes to them...]<sup>25</sup>

Transl. by *Bogdan Lawendowski*

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<sup>25</sup> J. Przyboś, "Więcej o manifest" (Plus a Manifesto), [in:] *Utwory poetyckie*, Warszawa 1975, p. 572.