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Michał MAZURKIEWICZ*

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9078-6622>

Sport in Literature: Sports Passion in the Literary Output of Krzysztof Zuchora on the Example of Selected Poems

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Sport w literaturze – pasja sportowa w twórczości Krzysztofa Zuchory na przykładzie wybranych wierszy

Streszczenie

Sport stanowi źródło inspiracji artystycznej od czasów starożytnych – już w antycznej Grecji opiewano z pasją ówczesnych bohaterów aren sportowych. Dotyczy to również literatury, gdzie częstokroć ukazuje się dramaturgię sportowej rywalizacji i gdzie opisywane są różnego rodzaju silne emocje będące jej efektem; niejednokrotnie pojawia się także nostalgia za minionymi czasami, za ważnymi wydarzeniami sportowymi, które się nieustannie wspomina. Niniejszy artykuł zawiera analizę obecności sportu w poezji (na przykładzie dyscyplin sportowych oraz wybitnych postaci) w oparciu o twórczość współczesnego polskiego autora Krzysztofa Zuchory (ur. w 1940 roku). Przeprowadzone badanie wymagało zapoznania się z licznymi monografiami oraz innymi publikacjami (artykuły naukowe, popularnonaukowe i rozdziały w monografiach), zarówno w języku angielskim, jak i polskim, przedstawiającymi szeroko rozumiane związki sportu z literaturą; podstawowy materiał źródłowy stanowią jednak przede wszystkim wybrane utwory poetyckie

* Prof. of JKU of Kielce, associate professor, The Culture Studies Centre, The Institute of Literature Studies and Linguistics, Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce, Kielce, Poland; e-mail: michal.mazurkiewicz@ujk.edu.pl (corresponding author)

wspomnianego powyżej znakomitego autora. Co istotne, interpretacja kilku charakterystycznych wierszy o tematyce sportowej autorstwa Krzysztofa Zuchory powiązana została z analizą źródeł historycznych. Badanie niezaprzeczalnie wykazało, iż dzieła literackie stanowią ważną kronikę wydarzeń historycznych, sport zaś – potężne źródło inspiracji *par excellence* – posiada ogromny potencjał w zakresie kształtowania ludzkich postaw, jak również budowania lepszego pod wieloma względami świata.

Słowa kluczowe: sport, literatura, poezja, historia, bohater.

Abstract

Sport has been a source of artistic inspiration since antiquity, e.g. in ancient Greece the sporting heroes of that time were passionately sung about. This is also true of literature, which often depicts the drama of sporting rivalry and describes the resulting strong emotions; not once does it evoke nostalgia for times gone by, for important sporting events that are constantly recalled. This article analyzes the presence of sport (using the example of sports disciplines and prominent figures) in poetry through the works of a contemporary Polish author, Krzysztof Zuchora (born in 1940). The research carried out required familiarization with numerous monographs and other publications (academic articles, popular science articles and chapters in monographs), both in English and Polish, in which the broadly understood relationship between sport and literature is presented; the primary source material, however, consists mainly of selected poetic works by the above-mentioned outstanding author. Importantly, the interpretation of several characteristic sports poems by Krzysztof Zuchora was combined with the analysis of historical sources. The study has undeniably shown that literary works are an important chronicle of historical events, while sport – as a powerful source of inspiration *par excellence* – has great potential for shaping human attitudes and building a better world in many respects.

Keywords: sport, literature, poetry, history, hero.

Sports Literature – Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that “it is impossible to fully understand contemporary society and culture without acknowledging the importance of sport.”¹ There is hardly an institution or community that sport does not influence in one way or another. It is one of the most fascinating social and cultural phenomena and it can be easily noticed that sporting inspirations permeate different areas of life. Harry Edwards, an American sociologist, rightly states: “In the humanities and arts, one finds manifestations of considerable interest in athletics. Literature, painting, sculpture, philosophy, and even ballet have all attempted to capture and interpret athletics in terms of their respective mediums.”² Given the fact that sporting rivalry has always been ascribed numerous symbolic meanings, there have been many writers attached to or even fascinated with sport.

¹ G. Jarvie, with J. Thornton and H. Mackie, *Sport, Culture and Society. An Introduction*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York 2018, p. 28.

² H. Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, Dorsey Press, Homewood, IL, 1973, p. 7.

The drama of the agon inspires a great number of representatives of the literary world who explore the turbulence of life, from challenges and disappointments to great joys. Some of them, like Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Byron or Kazimierz Wierzyński, were also athletes par excellence.³

Sports literature, as defined by Wojciech Lipoński, is “a variety of literature in whose works sport determines their artistic or social function, most often both together.”⁴ Sport has clearly marked its presence in literary creations of various epochs. This is true of every kind of literature, whether it is novels, short stories or works of poetry, drama and non-fiction. Importantly, literature has a tendency to romanticize and celebrate the virtues and excitement of sport, as well as the dedication, discipline and teamwork, often associated with athletic endeavour. Sport is therefore idealized in numerous literary works. On the other hand, some authors (Bernard Malamud, Don DeLillo, William Carlos Williams, Nick Hornby and others) explore the darker aspects of the sporting reality, such as corruption, cheating, an obsessive nature of fandom and the toll that intense competition takes on individuals.

According to the famous definition of the founder and central figure of English Romanticism, William Wordsworth, poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”⁵ Given that sport in its various forms is one of the main purveyors of feelings and emotions, the existence of poems on the theme of sport seems entirely justified, even obvious. A particularly interesting phenomenon is sports poetry which exalts sport, emphasizes its beauty and highlights the humanistic values of physical culture, describing almost mystical experiences of the observer/fan or the athlete, the drama of the agon that pervades people’s memories, as well as glorifying champions. All this can be found in the works of Kazimierz Wierzyński. The literary output of another Pole, Krzysztof Zuchora, is also noteworthy in this context.

Greek poetry begins with the great epic poems of Homer, i.e. the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (8th century BC), in which large sections are devoted to various types of competitions (agon) of the pre-Olympic era. In these works, one comes across interesting descriptions of athletic contests that took place in disciplines such as running, boxing, discus throwing or chariot racing. In the following centuries, the appeal and importance of sport were appreciated by numerous men of letters. Let us recall some selected poets who willingly addressed sports themes in their

³ See for example: M. Mazurkiewicz, *Sport w literaturze i kulturze. Konteksty historyczne i współczesne* [*Sport in Literature and Culture: Historical and Contemporary Contexts*], Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego, Kielce 2020.

⁴ W. Lipoński, *Humanistyczna Encyklopedia Sportu* [*The Humanistic Encyclopedia of Sport*], Sport i Turystyka, Warszawa 1987, p. 174.

⁵ R.L. Brett, A.R. Jones (eds.), *Wordsworth & Coleridge. Lyrical Ballads; the Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and Prefaces*, Routledge, London and New York 2005, p. 237.

works: Henri de Montherlant from France, Bertolt Brecht from Germany, the American Ernest Thayer, the Greek Takis Doxas, the Romanian Tudor George, the Chinese, like Lin Mang or representatives of Italian poetry – Raniero Nicolai, Ermanno Eandi and Enrico Mario Lazzarin among others.⁶

Sports poetry has a long tradition in Poland as well. The most famous representative of this genre of Polish literature is undoubtedly the aforementioned Kazimierz Wierzyński. The breakthrough in the life and literary work of Wierzyński was the famous book of poems, which (in the German translation) was awarded the gold medal in the literary competition during the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam – *Olympic Laurel* (1927).⁷ It is a remarkably apt compilation of the major sporting events of the period 1925–27, singing the praises of the pre-war sports champions: Finnish long-distance runner Paavo Nurmi, Spanish soccer goalkeeper Ricardo Zamora, American sprinter Charles Paddock, and others (the presence of history in sports poetry will be soon discussed through the work of Zuchora). As Michał Sprusiński, poet and literary critic, emphasizes, “being enchanted by youth, physical beauty, and the harmony of action has here acquired a new symbolism.”⁸ The volume, which was highly appreciated by the international audience, brought Wierzyński popularity all over the world. His poems were translated into the most important European languages. In the following decades, many Polish poets tried to equal him – Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Roman Sadowski, Aleksander Rymkiewicz, and, last but not least, Krzysztof Zuchora, whose poetic output will be the focus of this article.

State of the Art, Source Material and Methodology

The relationship between sport and literature is of interest to numerous researchers who establish their own academic associations, such as the (American) Sport Literature Association, founded in 1983, which organizes annual conferences and publishes its journal *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*. The activity of sports and literature-loving scholars has resulted in a growing number of publications devoted to this topic; many of them came out in recent decades, such as (containing interesting “case studies”) *Sport, Literature, Society*, published in 2014 by Routledge (editors: Tadié, Mangan, Chaudhuri).⁹ In Poland, publications

⁶ W. Lipoński, *Historia sportu [The History of Sport]*, PWN, Warszawa 2012, p. 584.

⁷ K. Wierzyński, *Laur olimpijski [Olympic Laurel]*, Heliodor, Warszawa 2008 [orig. 1927].

⁸ M. Sprusiński, “Anioł śmiechu, lutnista ciemnego czasu. Introduction” [“The Angel of Laughter, the Lutenist of a Dark Time. Introduction”], [in:] M. Sprusiński (selection), *Wierzyński. Wiersze wybrane [Wierzyński. Selected Poems]*, PIW, Warszawa 1979, p. 10.

⁹ A. Tadié, J.A. Mangan, & S. Chaudhuri (eds.), *Sport, Literature, Society*, Routledge, London and New York 2014.

by, for example, Lipoński or Mazurkiewicz have explored multiple links between sport and literature.¹⁰ There are also some scattered articles by other authors touching on selected aspects of those connections, but such works are very few.¹¹

The history of the relationship between poetry and sport is long, though not necessarily sufficiently explored. There are some interesting anthologies, mostly involving English-speaking countries. An example is *Motion: American Sports Poems*,¹² which presents a wide selection of contemporary American poets like William Heyen. In addition, there are anthologies that focus on one sport, such as *100 Scottish Football Poems*.¹³ There are also publications which analyze the specificity of the phenomenon of sports poetry, such as *The Sporting Muse: A Critical Study of Poetry about Athletes and Athletics* (2004), written by Don Johnson.¹⁴ Overall, however, there is a large gap in research in this area.

This article is a case study in which an outstanding Polish poet is presented and analyzed. Research methods included the explorations of primary sources (literary texts) in conjunction with the study of historical sources where sports play an important role, as well as the review of numerous monographs and articles on cultural-historical topics (with an emphasis on sports literature). The poems by Zuchora were selected on the basis of the most characteristic features of the author's work and the importance of the subjects discussed, with the theme of sports heroes an exemplar.

Krzysztof Zuchora and his Literary Output – the Beauty of Sport

Krzysztof Zuchora, born on January 10, 1940, in Głowno (near Łódź), is a Polish poet, academic and lecturer on physical culture, former editor-in-chief of *Physical Culture* journal, and a great advocate of sports values and the Olympic idea. His literary output has two facets. On the one hand, these are monographs and articles dealing with various aspects of physical culture and, on the other hand, poems which are highly inspired by sports, but also by nature. Sport is seen by Zuchora as a broad cultural phenomenon that has great potential to lead to beautiful things. His first volume of poetry, *Jasnowłosej (To the Fair-*

¹⁰ W. Lipoński, *Zapomniani piewcy sportu [The Forgotten Eulogists of Sport]*, Sport i Turystyka, Warszawa 1970; M. Mazurkiewicz, *Sport w literaturze i kulturze...*

¹¹ See, for example: T. Sahaj, *Kibicowskie narracje w utworach polskich prozaików: Wojciech Kuczok i Jerzy Pilch [Fan Narratives in the Works of Polish Prose Writers: Wojciech Kuczok and Jerzy Pilch]*, [in:] Z. Dziubiński, M. Lenartowicz (eds.), *Kultura fizyczna a kultura masowa [Physical Culture and Mass Culture]*, AWF w Warszawie, SALOS RP, Warszawa 2011, p. 175–184.

¹² N. Blaustein (ed.), *Motion: American Sports Poems*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2001.

¹³ A. Findlay, *100 Favourite Scottish Football Poems*, Luath Press, Edinburgh 2007.

¹⁴ D. Johnson, *The Sporting Muse: A Critical Study of Poetry about Athletes and Athletics*, McFarland Press, Jefferson, N.C., 2004.

-Haired One), was published in 1968, and his latest, *Łaskawość (Kindness)*, in 2017, with new individual poems continuing to appear in the public domain to this day. As writer and literary critic Marian Grześczak states, “The sense of concreteness facilitates describing sport, at which Krzysztof Zuchora is a true master. He trusts the word, but cautiously, because as a sports expert he knows that it is clearly a realm of energy, real and often measurable...”¹⁵

As for the creative process, the author describes it in one of the interviews as follows:

First, there is always the pressure of time, then a word extracted from silence and later an organizing thought appears, the flow of the poem. I believe that every writer’s activity should address the problems that trouble him most, fill the spaces he needs to fill. For me, the pitch is such a place where nature and culture, muscles and thoughts, sport and art come together naturally.¹⁶

The poet’s large-scale activity was noticed nationwide – he received the title of Honorary Citizen of Głowno, was awarded the Knight’s Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta for outstanding merits in his social activity aimed at developing and popularizing sport among young people, and then he was honoured with the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta. He received it from President Andrzej Duda for outstanding services to the Polish Olympic movement. Zuchora is also a recipient of the Gold (1996) and Silver (twice, 2004, 2012) Olympic Laurel, a special award of the Polish Olympic Committee, introduced in 1967 as a sign of recognition and respect for Polish artists (writers, painters, filmmakers, photographers or architects) who shape the humanistic values of sport and its image in society.¹⁷

The poems – translated by me and presented below – selected from the vast literary output of Zuchora constitute a representative sample of his perception of sport. The author places emphasis on different aspects of the sports reality, focusing on its noble facet. Therefore, there is sincere love expressed towards the special place with its own spirit – the stadium, which sports fans get accustomed to and which they usually treat with affection. Moreover, there is fascination with the figure and the Olympic idea of Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympic movement. Last but not least, there is visible appreciation of sports heroes, who are an integral part of the history of sport and history in general, such as the American legless marathon runner Bob Wieland, Polish legendary

¹⁵ M. Grześczak, *Review excerpt on book cover*, [in:] K. Zuchora, *W zatoce serca [In the Bay of the Heart]*, Heliodor, Warszawa 2000.

¹⁶ J. Ślawska-Szalewicz, “Krzysztof Zuchora poeta, eseista, pedagog” [“Krzysztof Zuchora Poet, Essayist, Pedagogue”] (blog post), *Okiem Jadwigi*, October 28, 2012. Accessed on: <https://www.okiemjadwigi.pl/krzysztof-zuchora-poeta-eseista-pedagog/> [Access: November 20, 2021].

¹⁷ “Wawrzyn Olimpijski” [“Olympic Laurel”], *Polski Komitet Olimpijski [Polish Olympic Committee]*. Accessed on: <https://olimpijski.pl/pkol/projekty-i-konkursy/wawrzyn-olimpijski/> [Access: May 5, 2021].

sprinter Irena Szewińska or the unfearful alpinists taking part in the famous rescue action in 2018, aiming at saving their stranded colleagues on Nanga Parbat.

First of all, let us take a look at the poems dealing with the stadium – the place that is special for every sports fan. It evokes emotions and is usually remembered throughout one’s life. The place where the stadium is located, for example, the country where the World Cup matches, and, to a lesser extent, minor events are held, forms a ritual center of the world for the sports community.

Stadium

I know this place
warm
and tender
like the hollow of one’s hand

here the stone of a scream
so suddenly gets stuck in silence
like a discus in the tall
grass of the air

(1968)¹⁸

Thus, the stadium constitutes an extraordinary place, imbued with emotions, a kind of “sacred” space, with its own spirit. It is loved by devoted fans who feel attachment that is often connected with a sense of nostalgia. Overall, it can be analyzed from many perspectives. Lipoński defines the stadium in his *Humanistic Encyclopedia of Sport* as follows: “an architectural structure combining a sports competition area with an amphitheatrically located spectator area.”¹⁹ However, this technical description is not a full definition as it is devoid of emotions (both positive and negative), so much present and so strong.

The poem is definitely written by a sports lover. Sport would be clearly incomplete without the dedicated fans who immerse themselves in the games. Michał Lenartowicz and Jakub Mosz rightly state that “The aura of a football club is created by the fans, who become involved in the life of the club through actions that create identity.”²⁰ In other words, they are characterized by a strong sense of belonging, motivated by the need to identify with their chosen team. This identification is linked to an emotional involvement in the course of events on the pitch, but also in wider issues outside the stadium.²¹ The attachment of

¹⁸ K. Zuchora, *Jasnowłosej [To the Fair-Haired One]*, Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź 1968, p. 29. All translations – M.M.

¹⁹ W. Lipoński, *Humanistyczna encyklopedia...*, p. 341.

²⁰ M. Lenartowicz, J. Mosz, *Stadiony i widowiska. Społeczne przestrzenie sportu [Stadiums and Shows. The Social Spaces of Sport]*, SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2018, p. 135.

²¹ See, for example: M. Mazurkiewicz, ‘If God Be for Us, Who Can Be Against Us?’: Religion and Religiousness in Polish Football, 2008-2017, “The International Journal of the History of Sport” 2018, vol. 35, no. 1, Special Issue: *Sport and Christianity: Historical Perspectives*, p. 108–121.

fans to their stadium is usually very strong and enduring. American sports columnist Thomas Boswell believes that the most mysterious quality of stadiums is their almost magnetic attraction. It is the inexplicable that draws people to the stadium – sometimes, it seems, even against their will.²² Stadiums, like temples, are places that stand out in some way from their surroundings and are sanctified by tradition. They have their own calendar of events, with their own holy days. Although the stadium is physically separated from the rest of the world, it is not independent of it, just like the rest of the world is not independent of it. It is, therefore, a common good without which men – like the faithful without a temple – would be impoverished in a sense.

The community of the stadium (co-created by athletes, coaches, referees, and fans, who love their teams) helps shape the sports performance. For those in the stands who come together and fraternize for the duration of the sporting event, age differences and social barriers disappear as shown by the conversations between people who did not know each other before the game, the spontaneous shaking of hands or, especially in euphoric moments, even an embrace. This is how social bonds are formed between individuals who have almost nothing to do with each other outside the stadium. Memories of sporting spectacles and the stadium atmosphere awaken nostalgia, fans often confirm it themselves. Scholar John Sexton's habit of visiting Yankee Stadium (baseball) brings back, as he puts it, "connections to past games and championships, along with players who were larger than life [... and there] he finds a connection to something deeply meaningful."²³ During the Covid 19 pandemic time, lovers of sports were deprived of the opportunity to experience emotions due to the suspension of most games overnight. This allowed many fans to sincerely appreciate the importance of the stadium reality. Former Polish national football player Jerzy Gorgoń, for example, remarked: "Now, in the age of the pandemic, I notice more clearly what sport means in people's lives. I would like to watch the European Championships, the Champions League and later the Olympic Games, but it's impossible now, I miss them a lot. I cannot imagine my life without sport. It is a nightmare."²⁴ Indeed, despite the fact that contemporary stadiums are sometimes dangerous places where hooliganism thrives, a life without going to matches would be unbearable for a large number of people.

²² T. Boswell, *Why Time Begins On Opening Day*, Doubleday, New York 1984, p. 19.

²³ M. Hoven, J.J. Carney, and M.T. Engel, *On the 8th Day: A Catholic Theology of Sport*, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2022, p. 111.

²⁴ L. Błażyński, *Gorgoń: Wolę futbol z moich czasów. Był ładniejszy dla oka, bardziej radosny*, [Gorgoń: I Prefer the Football of My Times. It was Nicer to the Eye, More Joyful] „Przegląd Sportowy”, April 21, 2020. Accessed on: <https://www.przegladsportowy.pl/pilka-nozna/pilka-nozna-jerzy-gorgon-o-zyciu-futbolu-czy-robercie-lewandowskim/c76c4wp> [Access: April 25, 2020].

One might conclude, therefore, that there is a certain inherent power of the stadium, the existence of which not everyone is aware of. Let us have a look at another example of a poem by Zuchora dedicated to this special place.

In the Sunny Crown of the Stadium

You, who are standing in the sunny crown of the stadium
 and holding the scepter of infallibility in your hand
 who carry me high up onto the mountain tops
 to show me in a while
 your indifference
 go down from the heights
 stand close by
 put your hand on your chest
 see how my heart keeps beating
 like crazy
 pounding within the four walls of darkness
 as if it wanted to scream out abruptly
 all of its brightness
 and to stand once
 in the vivid blaze of light

this race hasn't started yet
 the starting command hasn't been given yet
 this race will not last longer than necessary
 so that the feet could sing out two bars
 of Homeric hexameter

and your hand is shaking
 and the pupils of your eyes are growing enormous
 as if long ago
 it had been all over

(1995)²⁵

There is a call for someone who is observing the action in the stadium (God? A sports hero? A mysterious role model to follow?). There is also anticipation of the race, visible nervousness. Nevertheless, the scene is permeated with hope. We can see that the sporting ritual has been repeated since ancient times, anchoring sporting practices in tradition.

Sport obviously creates a space where people seek self-fulfillment. A fan's love for his or her beloved team, instilled at a young age and then developed over a long period of time, brings not only emotional elation but also the stability that comes from the consistency of the fan ritual. In spite of all the contemporary criticism, sport can also have a very positive impact on societies, which is expressed in the Olympic ideals. According to the International Olympic Com-

²⁵ K. Zuchora, *W słonecznej koronie stadionu* [In the Sunny Crown of the Stadium], Heliodor, Warszawa 1995, p. 13–14.

mittee, “The three values of Olympism are excellence, respect and friendship. They constitute the foundation on which the Olympic Movement builds its activities to promote sport, culture and education with a view to building a better world.”²⁶ The poem entitled *Olympism* shows this noble Olympic perspective, the author paying tribute to Pierre de Coubertin. This literary work best explains Zuchora’s attitude to great people, outstanding individuals with a vision.

Olympism

according to Pierre de Coubertin

the light and the air
 brighten the eyesight and widen the breath
 in it there is the first joy of a child
 who just starts to walk
 he already wants more
 he’s running, catching his balance with difficulty
 straight into the arms of love and beauty
 he raises his hands as a sign of victory
 reaching out for the sun
 but inside of him there is also suffering of a marathon runner
 who’s yearning to catch up with escaping life
 he’s running with a frail hope in his heart
 that behind the finish line he will find a shade of an olive tree
 and the light of myth which broadens the space
 (2001)²⁷

The direct reference to Pierre de Coubertin, French aristocrat and pedagogue,²⁸ is followed by a poem in which the Olympic sport is presented as something noble, arousing enthusiasm and a need for development, both physical and spiritual. Thus, sport as such broadens the horizons. And although suffering is an integral part of any rivalry, the hope of victory is demonstrated as a universal value. As Zuchora himself puts it in one of his articles, de Coubertin considered sports fields as “places dedicated to the cultivation of *kalokagathia* – goodness and beauty – where the worship of effort is combined with the worship of

²⁶ “What are the Olympic Values?”, *International Olympic Committee*. Accessed on: <https://olympics.com/ioc/faq/olympism-and-the-olympic-movement/what-are-the-olympic-values> [Access: July 1, 2023].

²⁷ K. Zuchora, *Wieniec ze słów. 100 wierszy na stulecie Polskiego Komitetu Olimpijskiego (1919–2019)* [*The Wreath Made of Words. 100 Poems for the Centenary of The Polish Olympic Committee*], FALL, Kraków, Warszawa 2019, p. 67.

²⁸ See for example: J.J. MacAloon. *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981.

harmony.”²⁹ As for Olympism, he saw it as “a force that demolishes obstacles on the way to full human development.”³⁰ All this is visible in the above poem.

The sporting rivalry is permeated with ambition and determination, which is especially noticeable in the case of those who are considered underdogs, but thanks to their strong will achieve unexpected successes. The poem *Marathon Runner* has great potential to move the reader. Here, Zuchora focuses on the accomplishments of Bob Wieland, an exceptional figure who went down in the history of sport.

Marathon Runner

40-year-old American Bob Wieland,
 who seventeen years ago
 lost his both legs in the Vietnam War,
 covered the course of the New York Marathon
 in four days, two hours,
 twenty-eight minutes and seventeen seconds

they say:
 Pheidippides died
 twenty-five centuries ago
 of the excess of the light that he carried
 in the clenched fist of the heart
 from Marathon to Athens

saying this – they lie
 he was seen yesterday in New York
 running legless only on his hands
 down the deep gorge of streets
 in search of the truth about himself
 which the war killed in him

so that we remember

(1995)³¹

Zuchora is always fascinated with the ancient roots of sport. The story of Pheidippides, the legendary Athenian messenger who supposedly ran about 40 kilometres (from Marathon to Athens) to announce the defeat of the Persians, became an inspiration for modern marathon running. One of the best Victorian poets, Robert Browning, dedicated a poem to him, which inspired Pierre de Coubertin to invent the race now known as the marathon. The sad event – the death of Pheidippides – was, as Zuchora shows, connected with great joy

²⁹ K. Zuchora, *Coubertin a media [Coubertin and Media]*, [in:] Z. Dziubiński, M. Lenartowicz (eds.), *Kultura fizyczna a kultura masowa [Physical Culture and Mass Culture]*, AWF w Warszawie, SA-LOS RP, Warszawa 2011, p. 371.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ K. Zuchora, *W słonecznej koronie...*, p. 38.

aroused by the message he conveyed. The memory of Pheidippides is still alive, his spirit is reborn in the following generations of athletes.

The second part of the poem is an emotional reference to a special situation, one of those that stand out in the history of sports. The author speaks of the enormous achievement of the legless athlete (finishing the New York Marathon in 1986³²) and expresses the hope that it will not be forgotten. The question of the superhuman effort of the indomitable disabled athlete is what makes a huge impression. Sport is a solution to the problems of life, it can be something like a healing process, which is confirmed by the example of Wieland. Such personalities as the great runner should be remembered, because memory is one of the most important elements of the legacy of outstanding athletes.

Sports heroes, noble and sometimes idealized, often appear in Zuchora's poems, and rightly so. Society has always needed heroes who do extraordinary things for it. Tony Mason states that "Heroes should not be written out of history. They provide examples to be followed, people to believe in, inspiration to contemporaries and perhaps a slice of 'necessary fantasy.'"³³ Their fame seeps into the national psyche, touching both the individual imagination and the collective sensibility.³⁴ This is also true of the greatest athletes. Another example from Zuchora's literary oeuvre is the poem dedicated to one of the best female athletes in the history of athletics who is one of the most important figures in the pantheon of Polish sports heroes – Irena Szewińska.³⁵

Memory of Irena Szewińska (24.05.1946–29.06.2018)

You kneel down at the start of the short run
all by yourself as if to pray

the stadium dies down the sky lowers itself
silence reigns like a field before a battle

the shot has roused the winged feet
the lacerated running track writhes in pain

behind the finish line the Nike of Samothrace
waits with an olive wreath for the victory

(2019)³⁶

³² SCOUTING; *Fast Forward in Reverse*, "The New York Times", November 11, 1986, p. 20.

³³ T. Mason, 'Our Stephen and Our Harold': *Edwardian Footballers as Local Heroes*, [in:] R. Holt, J.A. Mangan, and P. Lanfranchi (eds.), *European Heroes: Myth, Identity, Sport*, Frank Cass, London 1996, 71.

³⁴ R. Holt, J.A. Mangan, *Prologue: Heroes of a European Past*, [in:] R. Holt, J.A. Mangan, and P. Lanfranchi (eds.), *European Heroes...*, p. 9.

³⁵ See, for example: M. Petruczenko, *Prześcignąć swój czas. Kariera Ireny Szewińskiej od kulis [Outstripping her Time. The Career of Irena Szewińska from Behind the Scenes]*, Ringier Axel Springer Polska, Warszawa 2019.

³⁶ K. Zuchora, *Wieniec ze słów...*, p. 68.

Szewińska, as she is portrayed in the above poem, is fully concentrated. She is aware of the control she has over the stadium and of the upcoming victory. After the initial silence, suddenly the signal sounds for the start of the race and everything changes. There is an overwhelming sense of speed and the reference to the Nike of Samothrace, depicted as a winged victor. It should be noted that the wings are a symbol of boundless freedom and limitlessness, but also of imagination, pushing boundaries and realizing dreams. As always in sport, there is pain and suffering of the competitors and the most precious thing – victorious glory. Irena Szewińska knew its taste very well – she stood on the Olympic podium seven times, winning 3 gold, 2 silver and 2 bronze medals. In interviews, she emphasized the necessity of mobilization and belief in victory. Here is an example: “I always mobilized before the most important competitions and achieved the best results there. I was nervous until the starting gun. After that, my legs carried me by themselves and that’s probably why the fans liked me, because I rarely let them down. [...] I ran to win, not to break a record.”³⁷

Alpinism (or mountaineering) has always attracted the attention of people who are addicted to the rugged beauty of nature and seek an exciting adventure. Public awareness of the dangers that await the risk-takers is growing; nevertheless, the temptation to conquer the highest mountains is usually great. Therefore, it is not surprising that there have been so many rescue actions that have gone down in the history of the Himalayas. On January 25, 2018, the team consisting of Tomasz Mackiewicz from Poland and Élisabeth Revol from France climbed to the top of Nanga Parbat, but encountered numerous obstacles during the descent and called for help (on a satellite phone). The course of the rescue action on that mountain went around the world and resonated in the media.³⁸ The brave Polish alpinists: Adam Bielecki, Denis Urubko (Russian-Polish), Jarosław Botor and Piotr Tomala were later honoured by the prestigious American Alpine Club (The David A. Sowles Memorial Award) and received the *Przełqd Sportowy* [*Sports Review*] Award in the “Feat of the Year” category. This is how the event inspired Zuchora:

³⁷ S. Szczepłk, *Dla zdrowia, przyjemności i po zwycięstwo* [*For Health, Pleasure, and For Victory*], “Rzeczpospolita”, September 13, 2011. Accessed on: <https://www.rp.pl/sport/art14264931-dla-zdrowia-przyjemnosci-i-po-zwyciestwo> [Access: June 5, 2023].

³⁸ See, for example: *Polish climbers carry out ‘Killer Mountain’ rescue*, “Deutsche Welle”, January 28, 2018. Accessed on: <https://www.dw.com/en/french-climber-elisabeth-revol-rescued-by-polish-team-from-nanga-parbat-peak/a-42338959> [Access: June 5, 2023].

Nanga Parbat*To Adam Bielecki**Denis Urubko**Jarosław Bator**Piotr Tomala*

in the mountains death is sometimes more important than life
 it waits for salvation in the rock crevice of the heart
 blinded by the snow already insensitive to pain
 in the tent of air hanging on a line

hope goes down by itself gasping for breath
 it has frostbitten hands frostbitten legs
 it holds on to the fixed ropes stretched in the wind
 listens out for someone coming up to help

I heard a calling between the poems:
 they arrived to save halfway to heaven
 the life lifted up shortly over the abyss

overwhelmed by the sight of the icy wall
 for a private examination of their own conscience
 they brought down with hope the immortal soul

(2018)³⁹

Nanga Parbat, one of the eight-thousanders, is rightly nicknamed “Killer Mountain” as it is generally considered extremely difficult to climb. The poem above reflects this popular opinion. There is risk, a constant threat of death that seems to lurk everywhere. Nature is portrayed as unspeakably cruel, completely impervious to human attempts, no matter how drastic the reality becomes and how much help is needed. What the author notes is that there is always someone willing to help and give hope to the tormented. It is a matter of conscience, of being honest with oneself. The rescue team – after an amazingly fast nighttime ascent in freezing cold – saved one person (Revol), but found it impossible to reach and save the other (Mackiewicz, left behind by her colleague in critical condition). Overall, those to whom the poem is dedicated are heroes, but there will always be a moral dilemma as to whether more could have been done. Such considerations have always been the essence of sport and any human endeavour.

Conclusions and Final Remarks

There is no doubt that sports rivalry exerts a strong attraction – a kind of inexplicable magnetism. The drama, the struggle against adversity, the test of

³⁹ K. Zuchora, *Wieniec...*, p. 72.

character, the unexpected course of contests, defeats and victories, issues of courage, loyalty, and honour are just some of the elements of athletic competition that draw both active athletes and passive (though often equally committed) participants of the games. As an extremely complex reality, sport produces phenomena that are sometimes very distant from one another, which is visible in literary creations. Although some authors explore the darker and more problematic aspects of the sporting world, sports literature generally arises from a strong interest in it, which often turns into fascination and passion. For a fan who focuses their attention exclusively on matches and points, the discovery of the existence of such literary works can be an enlightening experience.

The way sport is portrayed in literature depends on the perspective of the author and the themes they explore. Anyone familiar with Zuchora's works will, hopefully, sense that there is more to sport than mere entertainment; there are strong emotions, there is agon, drama, nostalgia for the old times, admiration for sports history and heroes, but above all, there is a palpable hope for a better world. Sport, as it is presented here – although not devoid of sad or even tragic moments – brings colour into our lives, shows the right way, clearly uplifts people and helps them rise above their potential. All in all, this poetry is a great reminder that it is not sport itself, but the human being that is at the center, against the backdrop of all kinds of sporting competition.

The translation process of the presented poems has definitely required a certain amount of sports knowledge. The author of this translation is a scholar who specializes in the history of sports and researches its presence in broadly understood culture, including literature. He is also an amateur poet, occasionally publishing his literary works (including sports poems) and having some experience in translating poetry. All this has undoubtedly played a role and contributed significantly to the final result visible above. It should be emphasized that Zuchora's poetry – elegant in style – is characterized by both simplicity (at a broader level) and certain elements of ambiguity; the latter manifests itself in the existence of a deeper layer of meanings that do not necessarily have to be discovered immediately. Thus, like any good poetry, these works grow on us.

Last but not least, it is worth noting that sports poetry – albeit quite a niche phenomenon – is still alive in Poland. One can come across interesting sports poems in contemporary literary magazines and anthologies. Therefore, it seems justified to hope that Krzysztof Zuchora will find worthy successors in the next generations of writers fascinated with sport.

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