

THE “LITERAL” AND THE “LITERARY”: A STORY OF ABANDONMENTS AND RETURNS

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This issue of *Seneca Review* is a fusion of three efforts. They are not quite separate from one another, though, in the sense that there’s one person who links them.

The earliest effort was in the nineties, when I was teaching poetry at Amherst College. It was an attempt by me and my friend Michael Kasper, a verbo-visualist and a writer, to see how far we could go toward producing an anthology of contemporary Polish poetry, commissioned by Neil Astley of Bloodaxe Books. We got somewhere, but not far enough. Thirty-five poems by six poets in this issue — Andrzej Bursa, Halina Poświatowska, Julian Kornhauser, Bohdan Zadura, Maciej Cisło, and Zbigniew Machej — are a substantial sample of our endeavors.

The second effort is represented by a few poems of Jerzy Ficowski, whose work I introduced to my friend Jennifer Grotz, an American poet and professor at the University of Rochester, in the spring of 2011, when I was teaching there for a semester. Jennifer bravely began learning Polish, and we have been translating Ficowski for a few years now. The translations published in this issue are taken from our planned selection of Ficowski’s poetry.

The third, most recently “completed” part of the issue is a group of thirty poems by seven Polish poets — Aleksander Wat, Miron Białoszewski, Krystyna Miłobędzka, Rafał Wojaczek, Piotr Matywiecki, Wojciech Bonowicz, and Justyna Bargielska — translated together with a group of mostly Hobart and William Smith Colleges faculty who attended a weekly seminar in the Fall of 2013 and Spring of 2014, when I was the Trias Writer-in-Residence there. The seminar started thanks to an idea of David Weiss, the editor of *Seneca Review*, who suggested we might devote an issue of the magazine to our work. The regular contingent consisted of six writers: Melina Draper, Caroline Manring, James McCorkle, David Ost, Vinita Prabhakar, and David Weiss.

There are a few things that I took into account, when choosing the poems.

I chose from among poets who are a pleasure to read in Polish — not just because of “what” they say, but rather because of “how” they say what they say; or because it wouldn’t occur to me to divide the what from the how.

I chose those who could add a sample of somewhat different and newer tastes to what has so far been available of contemporary Polish poetry in English, and whose work might modify the commonly held, if not clichéd opinions about it.

I chose poets who, at the beginning at least, did not have books in English; such was the case with those I translated with Michael Kasper. Some were not complete strangers to English, having had a few poems scattered in magazines or anthologies; in the twenty-odd years since, some, I discovered, already had small books published in English. And naturally there are a few poems here that had been translated into English before. And I chose poems that, even in such a brief presentation as this issue, might be able to preserve something — conceptually, if not linguistically — of their authors’ singularity.

I chose poems that I thought translatable enough. Being “translatable enough” means that — though they cannot be the same thing in both languages, neither as individual poems, nor as artifacts “representing” individual poets in the two languages in the same way — they can still be interestingly dragged from one language and place and time to another language and place and time. And that what actually can be dragged across will do, at least for the famous “time being,” before one day they are returned to, if they are, to be improved, and then abandoned again. When we discovered that the translation wouldn’t work sufficiently, which happened once or twice, we dropped the poem from our deliberations, as if surprised that the little thing refused to behave, and moved on to another one.

Last of all, I chose short poems and very short poems, because all of us participants seemed to leave with a smile, when our sessions ended with something more or less “finished.” Some poems needed to be worked on again during the following sessions anyway. Today, nearly two years after the seminar ended, a few spots look to me like they could do with some more discussion. Reading through them again, before this issue goes to print, I’m giving them some further “final” touches.

Toward the end of our second semester, I realized that sticking to “the no-book-in-English criterion” would be too limiting. Of the poets I cotranslated with Michael Kasper, Julian Kornhauser had since had a small book come out in English; and I learned of Andrzej Bursa’s book only a few weeks ago. It seemed more indispensable then to take on board three other poets — Aleksander Wat, Miron Białoszewski, and Jerzy Ficowski — all three dead now, but very much alive among the younger crowd (including boys like me); and much more alive and active in the Polish language today than many Polish poets who are a lot better known in the States.

Of the three I decided to add, only Aleksander Wat (who started as a dada poet before World War II) had, until he went out of print, real distribution in English. One of the most exciting Polish poets of the twentieth century, Wat never lost his dada instinct; partly because of that, I think of him as a founder of a very interesting, linguistically adventurous “line” in Polish poetry. What characterizes his own work is a unique mixture of the comic and tragic. Over the decades, this particular existentially linguistic, or linguistically existential, line has been rather overshadowed by the industry of the solemn.

Both Miron Białoszewski, a great experimental postwar writer, and Jerzy Ficowski, quite neglected as a poet until not long ago, are part of this unpredictable line of Polish poetry. Both have appeared in anthologies and magazines in England and the States, but their books in English, were published (like those by Kornhauser and Bursa) by small presses in 1974 and 1981, respectively, and were hard to come by even back in their day. Białoszewski and Ficowski are particularly tough to turn convincingly into English, but despite that, all three — Wat, Białoszewski and Ficowski — would be central to any presentation of twentieth-century Polish poetry. This goes “against” the established American notions of what Polish poetry is supposed to be.

The same goes for Krystyna Miłobędzka, one of the great Polish experimental poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, right from the publication of her first book in 1970. We began our seminar with Miłobędzka, and spent a lot of time translating her five miniatures before they reached a stage we decided we could live with — that is, live with happily. Her book in English did not exist at the time, but has appeared since.

Let me say a few words now about how things worked.

I usually brought cribs for everyone in class, or emailed them before we met. I introduced the poet briefly and then read the poem aloud in Polish, usually twice, referring to the original, which I also handed out — if only to be glanced at by everyone, when I was later explaining particular sounds or alliterations or rhythms or specific “mechanics” of what the Polish was doing. And I referred to the original whenever my literal turned out to be not enough (they were often not enough; they were meant not to be enough). In other words, in our collective deliberations we tried to come to terms with all the suggestions of such a spoken, “expanded literal.”

Part of my intent was to make the ground as even as possible, under such uneven circumstances. This also is the reason why Polish phrases, sentences, or lines had at least two alternate versions. Despite my efforts to make the “literal versions” pretty literal, sometimes (depending on what was going on in the specific poem) they wound up resembling more “finished” translations. I didn’t mind that. And, who knows, perhaps the single least expected piece of news that I brought to the seminar was the idea that “literal translation” is usually an empty, or at least a very relative, construct, doubtfully meaningful without additional linguistic, cultural, historical contextualization.

I should also add that in this particular exercise, translation was not a free literary activity, designed for practicing the art of paraphrase, only vaguely connecting with the original — even though paraphrase might have been quite a temptation for the poets in the seminar, who did not know Polish and had to rely on a foreigner with his unpredictable English.

And I might say this now rather than wait for a better moment: what a great pleasure it was not to have to be comprehensive or representative, two words often used to justify the unjustifiable. And not even to pretend to be democratic, the way that contemporary poetry anthologies often feel obliged to be, in terms of space and names. If there’s any principle that can help to represent poems fairly, it’s one that identifies what works and what can be done to make them work. In other words, it’s a relief that this particular constellation of poets and poems can be just a sampler.

A final word. My phrases about translation tend to carry quotation marks, a common Polish distancing or shortcutting device. So, just in case they are unclear, here are a few glosses.

I apply quotation marks to “completed,” because usually translations have time limits or, to use an even more elegant word, *deadlines*, but only rarely do they reach their most successful shape within the time they have before they get abandoned. Then, they often get to be revisited and reworked — only to be abandoned again. The same refers to “ready” or “finished” or “final,” when they mean something close to “completed.”

I apply quotation marks to “literal translation,” against the general notion that there is anything clear or certain about it. Because I think it’s difficult, if not impossible, to delineate the borders of what “literalness” in translation may be, that is, where it ends, and perhaps where it starts, too. It may depend on a specific poem, but it also has to do with who the literal translator is and how far he or she wants to go.

I put “against” in quotation marks to refer to the predominance of a certain type of Polish poem in the States (lyrical, political, parabolic). Naturally my “against” is not really against anything. Or if so, only in order to make room for a few different poetry names and sensibilities. No specific poetics would need to be read antagonistically, if the predominant, “stronger” ones didn’t usurp the right to be that, and if they didn’t do so much, as they usually do, to eliminate others from their “democratic vistas,” or to put the “weaker” ones down.

I’m leaving “stronger” and “weaker” in quotation marks, without any further gloss.

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