

ERRATA

Jan Twardowski's poem corrected

In September 2013 issue of *Sarmatian Review*, Patrick Corness' translation of Jan Twardowski's "*Carpe diem*" contained several formatting mistakes. The name of the person by whose permission the poem was published in translation was likewise omitted. Below we correct the mistakes.

Carpe diem

Jan Twardowski

Love while we can people are soon gone
 leaving empty shoes and unanswered phones
 only the trivial drags its bovine hooves
 what's important happens so fast it catches us out
 the ensuing silence so normal it's unbearable
 like innocence born of sheer confusion
 thinking of someone who's left us

Don't be sure you've time, for unfounded
 certainty
 robs us of our awareness just as all happiness
 comes at once like pathos and humour
 like two passions always weaker than one
 fleeting as a thrush's song in July
 like a slightly harsh sound or a stiff bow
 in order to see aright eyes are closed
 though being born is a greater risk than dying
 yet we still love too little and always too late

Don't write of this too many times rather write it
 once and for all
 and you'll be gentle yet strong like a dolphin

Love while we can people are soon gone
 and those who don't go don't always return
 and speaking of love you never know
 whether the first is the last or the last is the first

*Translated by Patrick Corness
 Published by kind permission of Dr. Aleksandra
 Iwanowska*

Vladimir Putin's title in 2010

The review of Alexander Etkind's *Remembering Katyn* (SR, April 2013) contains one factual error. On p. 1762 the review states that President

Lech Kaczyński was "maneuvered out" of the meeting between Prime Minister Donald Tusk and President Vladimir Putin on April 7, 2010. At that time, Putin was prime minister and not president. He later admitted that he and Medvedev came to an agreement to alternate the office of presidency between themselves.

Anna M. Cienciala, University of Kansas

Reading poetry, reading paintings

Joanna Pollakówna and Jacek Sempoliński

Anna Gašienica-Byrcyn

Natalia Astafiewa, a Warsaw-born Polish-Russian poet and translator who prepared a Russian anthology of Polish women poets titled *Polskije poetessy*, has opined that the twentieth century "belongs" to the extraordinary talented Polish women beginning with Maria Skłodowska-Curie (Nobel Award in Physics, 1903 and Nobel Award in Chemistry, 1911), and ending with Wisława Szymborska (Nobel Prize in Literature, 1996).¹ Joanna Pollakówna (1939–2002), a poet and art historian, is one of these remarkable yet little-known women. Her poems originated in the world of visual arts in which she was immersed as a professional art historian.

Pollakówna studied history of art at Warsaw University and at the Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences. By her own admission, contemplating paintings is the greatest joy of her life. She also finds the act of writing about art to be enormously gratifying, even though it requires a different kind of concentration than "mere" contemplation. Her best-known essays on art are contained in the volumes titled *Formists (Formiści)*, *Clay and Light (Glina i światło)*, and *Venetian Longings (Weneckie tęsknoty)*.² These can be compared to Zbigniew Herbert's *Barbarian in the Garden* and *The Still Nature with the Bridle*, two books by a master poet that provide the parameters of excellence in writing about art. Czesław Miłosz was so impressed by Pollakówna's collection of essays *Thinking about Paintings (Myśląc o obrazach)*

that he spontaneously offered her an award he himself conceived in 1994.³

Pollakówna wrote *ekphrases*, or poems about paintings, using language that describes the visual arts. She had notable predecessors. In ancient Greece Simonides maintained that poetry is “spoken painting” and painting is “silent poetry”;⁴ the same idea reappears in Pollakówna’s poems. Her poems are a series of verbal paintings “rephrasing” specific works of art and creating poetic images that correspond to them. She is particularly fond of Jacek Sempoliński (1927–2012), a painter of metaphysical concepts, and she rephrased many of his works. Sempoliński was a representative of two trends in Polish art—the richly sensual Colorism, and Arsenal 55, the anti-social-realist movement that developed in the 1950s in defiance of communist rule in Soviet-occupied Poland.

Pollakówna made her poetic debut at the age of eighteen in the communist-run journal *Nowa Kultura*. She has never been a part of any official poetic group, nor is she a follower of the Polish women poets who preceded her: Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, a master of lyrical poetry and a talented painter of the interwar period; or Halina Poświatowska, a modern poet of erotic verses; or Wisława Szymborska, a poet of irony (Legeżyńska 271). She is not indebted to the three major trends that these three female poets represent: she invented a way of writing all her own and has few followers to date.

She is the author of several collections of poems characterized by references to transcendent reality, as well as by sensuality and sensitivity to the physical beauty of the world. The titles of her poetry volumes remind us of her fascination with the duality of light and darkness or, on a metaphysical level, *sacrum* and *profanum*. In her poems the motif of light is both an attribute of reality (*a gush of light dripping down the leaves/chlust światła skapującego po liściach*) and the hint of a meta-world existing in the metaphysical dimension. In an essay titled “The Alchemy of Light” she writes:

What is less corporeal than light? Elusive and fleeting for all the senses except eyesight. Because of its spiritual nature, it has always been identified with the divine.

Cóż jest mniej materialne niż światło?
Nieuchwytnie dla żadnego ze zmysłów, poza
wzrokiem. Dla swojej, w oczywisty sposób
duchowej natury od zawsze utożsamiane bywało z
boskością albo z emanacją boskości (*Glina i
światło*, 19–20).

She then inquires about paint, clay, and the primordial substance, *la materia prima*:

What is more corporeal than oil paint? Thick, it
only cools on the surface, it is velvet-like and gluey
under the surface.

Cóż jest bardziej materialne niż farba olejna?
Gęsta i zawieszista, położona grubiej zastyga tylko
po wierzchu na długo zachowując pod
powierzchnią swoją atlasową lepkość (*Glina i
światło*, 19).

The motif of clay and light resonate with the ancient concept of the duality of the corporal and the spiritual. Natural light symbolizes spiritual light; the clay is the physical aspect of human beings. In the poem “On Painting” (“Nad malarstwem”) dedicated to Jacek Sempoliński, Pollakówna meditates on the metaphysical meaning of art’s contrast of the light and the dark:

This projection – a cut with the light
into space
Is this a question about meaning
about the beginning
or a shadow?
Is this the shade of a colorful thought
where the world
slides and falls on the curve
swarmed by the wind
like a swaying crown of a tree
on the dome of a pitcher?

Ten rzut – w krojenie się światłem
w przestrzeń
Czy to pytanie o sens
o początek
czy to cień?
Czy to cień myśli barwnej
w której świat
po krzywiźnie się zsuwa i spada
jak po kopule dzbana
rozchwiana korona drzewa
rozmrowiona przez wiatr? (*Powolny pożar*, 15)

Pollakówna and Sempoliński work in two different media, but they seem to follow the same direction. They want to unite all the possibilities of life in a single moment of revelation, linking physical experiences with the spiritual one so that one becomes free from fear, aggression, brutality, constraint, degradation, contempt, impossibility, chaos, and emptiness.⁵ Pollakówna and Sempoliński regard their creativity as a natural activity, a part of their normal life. Pollakówna prays for a poem as for a sign that she is truly alive:

Again a prayer for a poem.
For what? For a sign of my life?

Znów modlitwa o wiersz,
O co? O znak życia –
mojego? (*Dziecko-drzewo* 3).

Through their acts of creation they immerse themselves in the current of life and, in Pollakówna's words, transform an ordinary day into a bright one:

to force one's way through oneself
to make shine the subdued rhythm of hours
in a moment

byle przez siebie przedrzeć się
byle w jednym blasku rozjaśnić
godzin matowy rytm (*W cieniu* 34).

Because life passes quickly:

Nothing will save our allotted time
a bunch of lilies of the valley so fragile
like a shade
or the sunset

Nic tego czasu nie ocali
garstka konwalii tak ulotna
jak cień łamliwy
zachód słońca (*Lato szpitalne* 29)

Only through our work can we leave a trace of our existence:

We are what we will mold
with our grasping hand
...
adding light
that cannot be created by metal and stone
...

so that the shade of the light would soak through time
brushing against us

Tyle z nas ile z siebie pracowitą ręką
...
ulepimy mozolnie i dodamy blask
trudno krzesany przez metal i kamień
...
żeby się cień światła przesiąkał przez czas
o nas się otarł (*Żwir* 16)

Thus a work of art is seen by Pollakówna as a sacred sign in the brief span of life.

Her poetry is personal and reticent at the same time. Anna Legeżyńska has remarked that Pollakówna tries to transform her life and thoughts into verses as if using an alchemical process, transforming the material of life into the material of art.⁶ Her poems touch on the crises of emotions, longing, loss, suffering, pain, death, fragility, limitations, and fleeting time. She tries to retain these sparkles of her existence and comprehend them as providing moments of revelation.

Jacek Sempoliński's paintings are likewise attempts to affix his existence on canvas. They are very personal. He is unable to paint what people are talking about. In his youth Sempoliński painted still nature with pure colors and clear brush strokes. In his seventies he painted the light. His later paintings include those in which narrow parallel splashes of light between the trees are created with thick paint. The light seems to be absorbed by the thick, clay-like paint, expressing a depressed emotional state.

Toward the end of his life Sempoliński created thousands of drawings and paintings in colors of gray, violet, and navy; in these the metaphysical motif is expressed in yet another way. In his works he attempted to create the process of passing from life to death. Life is represented by a modulated and shiny solid in space, while death is a vanishing figure of irregular spots in mixed colors. Sempoliński's wish was to create the flow of time, both the movement and act of the passing of time. His paintings begin with an object or a trace of an object so that one cannot determine what the painting represents without reading its title. Some art critics describe Sempoliński's work (using Delacroix's words) as a "feast for the eyes."

Sempoliński's triptych *Melt: Earth/Metal/Blood* (Wytop: *Ziemia/Metal/Krew*) is typical of the artist's creative process, his spiritual searches, and his presence in the world. According to Pollakówna who discusses the triptych in her essay "Clay and Light," the painter experienced a spiritual transformation as he moved from the dark *melanosis* through yellow *xanthosis* to the red *iosis*. This transmutation took place on the canvas painted with unique strokes of brush and fingers, creating a kind of light emanating from the warm color and shivering cold that form the melt. In this triptych and in other works Sempoliński places pigments of colors in such a way that he creates "geological" layers that transmute light from their dark clay hues. These layers are painted with dark colors overgrown by yellow veins. The rough clots and stains of red and green color evoke the earth, or rather the landscape that comes from within the depths of the earth and from the inside of the artist himself. Heavy clay is contrasted with the light; in this way the artist creates a rendition of the divine light shimmering with warmth. This concentration on light links Sempoliński to the tradition of Titian, Tintoretto, and Jacopo Bassano.

The section titled *The Earth* portrays the burning magma that transforms into a stone as it cools down and turns motionless. The world becomes hard like a rock, dangerous and unfriendly. In it, to use Pollakówna's comment, "pain changes into a monolith," "air becomes a clod," and "consciousness becomes like a stone." However, the earth's depths with its burning magma create shining metal ores. The section titled *Metal* has been painted in dark violet colors with a crimson shade and a silvery shine. The metal comes from the depths of the earth, and it is a gift of power.

The third part of Sempoliński's triptych, *Blood*, is violet with strikes of red. The color echoes the artist's personality and life. Of course blood also symbolizes sacrifice and purification. As Eliade has noted, a creative act demands sacrifice—one has to sacrifice to art one's blood and tears.⁷ Pollakówna notes all this in her verses:

To repeat the act of God

to force the mush of clay
to scatter a golden sediment

And even more:
from the red soil,
from the white lead
and the scarlet of madder,
to draw gold and the light from the gold.

In the yellowish light
in the golden/dark drizzle

Powtórzyć boską czynność
breję gliny
zmusić, by wytrąciła złoty osad.

I jeszcze więcej:
z czerwonej ziemi.
bieli ołowiu
szkarłatu marzanny.
dobywać złoto - i światło ze złota
W żółknącym świetle
w mrocznozłotym świetle (*Skąpa jasność* 25)

In another poem titled "An Interpretation through Colors" and dedicated to Jacek Sempoliński, Pollakówna indicates that the final outcome of the creative act is joy and perhaps salvation:

In these few drops of green and white
there is a salvation of suffering and redness
What? —happiness

...
Angels know that
among white and green they forgot
the eternal for one moment.

W tych kilku kropelkach zieleni i bieli
Jest odkupienie męki i czerwieni –
Co? —szczęście

...
Wiedzą to anieli
Wśród bieli i zieleni zapomnieli
Na jeden błysk nieśmiertelni. (*Lato szpitalne* 32)

Sempoliński is concerned with form, but for him form is not merely a shape, it is a sphere of meaning that arises from the creative act. A moment occurs that transforms the lack of form into form. It is a brief moment that completes the creative process, and it is often unconscious. Sempoliński is concerned with this final moment.

There are various manifestations of aggression in his works. One of them is expressed through vertical lines and is a form of opposition to the order of things. Sempoliński's aggression has to do with his subconscious feeling that he is not a great painter and makes frequent mistakes. When he feels overwhelmed by mistakes, he throws himself on the canvas with a knife. He tries to free himself from his own captivity. The traces of a knife are visible in his works. He has made dark holes in his canvases at times. Sempoliński's *szamotanie* (a Polish word designating the struggle of a tied-up man) is an integral part of his artistry.

The first impression of Sempoliński's paintings is that they are immersed in darkness. But paradoxically, because of this darkness they better foreground the light. In Sempoliński's works it is often "the light without the light," so to speak. In the poem "Płótno" ("Canvas") by Adam Zagajewski, the poet suggests that the dark painting could change into a coat, a shirt, a flag, or a shroud. A dark canvas can also symbolize the universe and evoke the cold and empty days of depression. It captures the fleeting moment of passing from life to death. In a sense it is liberating, stripped as it is of everything that is fleeting and mortal. As Sempoliński once remarked, darkness shares something with an act of faith, and therefore with light.

The drama of darkness and light in Sempoliński's paintings and Pollakówna's ekphrases creates a subtle relation between these two artists. In Pollakówna the dark color of clay is transformed into the shining rays: "the light emanates from the oil paint" (*Skąpa jasność*) and "the sun breaks through the ash" (*Powolny pożar*). In Pollakówna's verse Sempoliński's paintings become a luminous combination of rays sounding with colors and rhythms. The paste paint, called clay by the poet, seems to look dark and unclear but it emits fire that is light.

Pollakówna sees the artist as one who listens to the streams of hues and "choruses of colors," to "their blossoming polyphony" and then he/she creates a magical transmutation of light from the dark pigments of paste paint. It is the ancient process of transformation of dark material into the light, of paint into the sublime experience

that a work of art can offer, so that a painting, a sculpture, or a poem portrays the spiritual conquest of the artist, his/her metaphysical epiphany. Her verses thus become a metaphysical mirror that reflects rapture, pain, silence, writing, painting, faith, hope, fear, life, and death. The artist wants to "force a piece of clay to radiate golden sediment" (*Skąpa jasność*). The poet's words turn into the "golden beaming dust" offered as her gift to the world.

An awareness of the passage of time is connected not only with the mortal human body but also with inanimate objects: "Even the small objects – safety pins/straps, combs – know the taste of eternity" ("Przecież nawet małe przedmioty – agrafki/rzemyki, grzebienie – znają smak wieczności"), writes Adam Zagajewski in the poem "Eliade."⁸ However, those objects found by archeologists in the dust, soil, and clay are perishable. They vanish with time into oblivion. The same is true of the visual arts: frescoes fade away, mosaics crack, paintings perish and temples are destroyed. The poet asks herself why art remains a magnet in spite of that:

Where does this longing lead us
calling us from the paintings
from the blobs of paint folded
into the dark tenderness of velvet
into someone's robe of plum color
to whose infinite heaven?

Dokąd wzywa ta tęsknota.
co z obrazów na nas woła,
z maźnięć farby ułożonych
w ciemną czułość aksamitu,
w czyjąś szatę barwy śliwek,
w czyjeś niebo nieskończone? (*Skąpa jasność* 8)

Pollakówna tries to allow objects to "express their individuality." Because everything has a light of its own—jewelry, clothes, weapons, houses, woods, mountains, springs, and the ambiance that envelops them—each of the objects invoked by the poet emanates this unique light. Similarly, Sempoliński tries to express the unique emanation that each object exudes, if viewed with sufficient attention. The poet and the painter display an unquenchable desire to cross the line of "Otherness." They also fear losing the ancient art objects that disintegrate

with time, and they treasure the emotions evoked by contact with objects that are distant in time. Pollakówna reminisces with sadness:

That time was not colorless
it had something like
a fragrance of a muddy meadow
like a pain
of being unable to possess
the fleeting of desired objects
from grasping hands

Ten czas nie był bez barwy
miał w sobie
coś z ciepłego błotnego zapachu łąk
coś z męki
nieposiadania
umykania z rąk
przedmiotów upragnionych (*W cieniu* 24)

In the poem “Dust” (“Proch”) Pollakówna writes about the fragility of the material world, about objects that perish and about life that turns into dust physically and spiritually:

How oft you lose everything, careless memory!
Buildings, paintings follow me like a grey dust storm
And the dry crumbs of thoughts once encountered
settle
And the life I lived crumbles
—That is the dust into which I change.

Jakże ty wszystko trwonisz, niedbała pamięci!
Gmachy, obrazy, w szarawej zamieci
ciągną się za mną jak kurzawa senna.
I wyczytanych myśli pył osiada suchy
i przeżytego życia sypią się okruchy...
—To właśnie proch jest, w który się przemieniam.
(*Powolny pożar* 16)

In her last collection of poems titled *You Embraced Me with Coldness* (*Ogarnąłeś mnie chłodem*), which contains Pollakówna’s poetic testament, the poet invokes the beauty of the world, especially the light and the life-giving power of the sun. She wants to take a painting with her into the other world, the world of the dead:

Those eyes that try to penetrate Your beauty
cannot absorb it—wasting it awfully.
When you finally shut my eyes into tight darkness
Please leave me one picture to sail together
And let it remain motionless under my dead eyelid

like a marvelously decorated lid of a traveling chest.
 (“A Prayer for a Picture” in *You Embraced Me with Coldness*)

Te oczy, co wpijają się w piękności Twoje
wchłonąć ich nie umięją – tak strasznie trwonią je.
Gdy mi oczy zatrzaskasz wreszcie w szczelną
ciemność
jeden mi obraz zostaw— niech odpłynie ze mną
i niech trwa nieruchomy, pod martwą powieką
niby skrzyni wyprawnej cudnie zdobne wieko.
 (“Modlitwa o obraz,” *Ogarnąłeś mnie chłodem* 19)

One wonders which painting the poet—and we—
—would like to take on our journey to eternity. Δ

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NOTES

- ¹ Quoted from Anna Legeżyńska, *Od kochanki do psalmistki. Sylwetki, tematy i konwencje liryki*

kobiecej (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2009), 9.

² *Formiści. Studia z historii sztuki*, vol. 14 (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1972); “Glina i światło,” *Glina i światło* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1999), 237–45; *Weneckie tęsknoty. O malarstwie i malarzach renesansu* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2003).

³ *Weneckie tęsknoty, passim*.

⁴ Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Historia Filozofii*, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1993), 33.

⁵ Jacek Sempoliński, *Władztwo i służba. Myśli o sztuce* (Lublin: Drukarnia L – Print, 2001), 357.

⁶ Legeżyńska, 270.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 32.

⁸ Adam Zagajewski, *Dziki czereśnie. Wybór wierszy* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1992), 160.

MORE BOOKS (continued from Page 1815)

***Polish Armies of the Partitions: 1770-94*, by Vincent Rospond.** Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2013. 48 pages. ISBN 1-84908-855-8.

No. 485 in Osprey’s “Men-at-Arms” series, this short and well illustrated book offers brief histories and descriptions of various Polish military units in the final years of the Polish Commonwealth, until the third partition erased Poland from European maps. In 1795 the nascent Polish democracy succumbed to Russian, Prussian, and Austrian authoritarianism, with all the retrograde consequences for European history this would entail even after Poland’s recovery of independence 123 years later.

The book begins with a historical summary that includes a map of the country’s progressive partition (5); this would have been enhanced if it were in color. This is followed by descriptions of Polish and Lithuanian military in three periods: prior to the first partition; from the first to second partitions; and from the defense of the May 3 Constitution until the end of Polish freedom. Prior to the first partition, we are presented with the Commonwealth’s armies and the Bar Confederation. In terms of organization, the Commonwealth was understaffed, with many soldiers “on leave at any given time”; this

compelled reliance on “private armies’ of local magnates” (7). The Bar Confederates had “no central organization” (11) or uniforms. A four-page description of Polish and Lithuanian Crown forces between the first and second partitions follows. Finally, there is an extended treatment of the Polish and Lithuanian forces “at the beginning of the 1792 War in Defense of the Constitution” (16), detailing specific cavalry, dragoon, and infantry units. Under “Miscellaneous Crown Troops” (37–38) a short description appears of Kościuszko Insurrection forces (garrison of Kraków, Warsaw militia, Volunteers of 1794). There is also a half page on the “Army of the Targowica Confederation” (43). The book ends with a twenty-eight-item select bibliography that includes both English and Polish sources. Eight full-color plates, more than thirty black-and-white illustrations, and twenty-five tables detailing uniform specifications (especially colors) of various units round out the booklet. Students of militaria and designers of authentic costume reproductions will find this little book useful. The whole series aims at describing “the uniforms, equipment, history and organization of the world’s military forces, past and present,” with detailed full-color artwork. (*John M. Grondelski*)

***Monsieur Cogito précédé de Inscription et suivi de Rapport de la Ville Assiégée*, by Zbigniew Herbert. Oeuvres poétiques complètes II. Trans. by Brigitte Gautier.** Lille: Le Bruit du temps, 2012. 477 pages. ISBN 9782358-730471. Paper. Bilingual (French/Polish).

This is a complete bilingual edition of Zbigniew Herbert’s poetry in French. Handsomely printed with financial help from the Polish Instytut Książki.

***Nature morte avec bride et mors*, by Zbigniew Herbert. Trans. by Thérèse Duchy.** Lille: Le Bruit du temps, 2011. 224 pages.

A French translation of *Martwa natura z wędzidłem*.

