

JOANNA PROULX

Translator's Note

The life and work of poet Bolesław Leśmian span two languages (Polish and Russian) and the first forty years of the twentieth century. The chronology of Leśmian's early biography, including the year of his birth, is inexact. Literary scholars proffered 1877, 1878 and 1879 as possibilities. The years 1879-1937 figure on Leśmian's gravestone, placed there twenty years after the his death by his cousin, the poet Jan Brzechwa. In a letter to Czech poet and translator František Kvapil, Leśmian himself reports his year of birth as 1878.

He was born into a decidedly un-proletarian Warsaw family of intellectuals, professionals, and industrialists. The paternal side produced three poets (Leśmian, his uncle Antoni Lange, and his cousin Jan Brzechwa), along with several painters, lawyers, and engineers. The family maintained social associations with literary and cultural figures of the day. Notable stage performers of the time regularly visited the household, both in Warsaw and in Kiev, where Leśmian's father moved with his children after divorcing their mother.

The world around them, however, was resolutely progressing toward a literary and political apotheosis of the "common man" and a collectivist ethos which Leśmian obdurately and eloquently disdained, and which in turn rejected him. Leśmian's wife and daughters paid dearly for his almost wanton inability to earn a living by writing the occasional pot boiler. They were in perpetual debt, often hungry, and led by a patriarch clad in the ill-fitting and skimpy cassock of the *poète maudit*. The good will of friends provided a series of bureaucratic positions in the provinces to pay the family's bills, jobs from which Leśmian escaped to Warsaw, Paris and elsewhere in Europe at the slightest provocation.

Leśmian's maximal use of poetic language—his relentless specificity of image,

aptness of expression and virtuosity of usage—earned him eminent status among Polish critics and fellow poets but significantly less regard among his contemporary reading public. It has also earned him a reputation of “untranslatability,” and so he remains nearly unknown outside of Poland.

After many years of literary and social exile, the “poet provincialist” returned to Warsaw to long-withheld recognition by the literary establishment. His poems were finally being published by the decades-silent *Wiadomości Literackie*, as were favorable reviews in the city’s papers and journals. But whatever darkling star had held sway over the poet’s life, it and not Leśmian had the final say. His essay “Z rozmyślań o poezji” (Reflections on Poetry) is widely considered the final crystallization of his poetics, a clear statement of his philosophical position, and a prescient evaluation of the literary trends of the time. He prepared it as a lecture to be delivered at a meeting of the Academy of Literature on November 8, 1937. A heart attack killed him at home three days before. The original essay, titled by the author as “Traktat o poezji” (Treatise on Poetry), was first published in the Annals of the Polish Academy of Literature for the year 1937-8. The lecture was delivered in Leśmian’s stead, on March 30, 1938, by the poet Kornel Makuszyński.

Leśmian is buried in the Powązki cemetery in Warsaw. [JP]

TRANSLATED BY JOANNA PROULX

Happiness

Something silver occurs in cloud-distance.

The wind rattles doors like a postman with news.

We held out for each other's existence.

Hear the thunder? The atmosphere rends and hews.

You have a soul that's profligate and star-cast.

Remember the haste of inter-plaited breaths?

Why this sadness? Happiness came at last

And we evade its radiance in shadow-depths...

Why does our joy look for meaning in darkness,

Losing its limits and absolving the void?

In its unmeasure all is encompassed,

Except my terror and your tears—it can't hold...

BOLESŁAW LEŚMIAN

Szczęście

Coś srebrnego dzieje się w chmur dali.
Wicher do drzwi puka, jakby przyniósł list.
Myśmy długo na siebie czekali.
Jaki ruch w niebiosach! Słyszysz burzy świst?

Ty masz duszę gwiezdną i rozrzutną.
Czy pamiętasz pośpiech pomieszanych tchnień?
Szczęście przyszło. Czemuż nam tak smutno,
Że przed jego blaskiem uchodzimy w cień?...

Czemuż ono w mroku szuka treści
I rozgrzesza nicość i zatracą kres?
Jego bezmiar wszystko w sobie zmieści,
Oprócz mego lęku, oprócz twoich łez...

(From *Dziejba Leśna*, posthumous collection, 1938.
First published in *Gazeta Polska*, No. 1, Warsaw, 1937.)

TRANSLATED BY JOANNA PROULX

* * *

God has left me—I don't know why...

I know He's not happy in His sky...

My father missed that his death had come,

He slid into his grave—walking home.

Grief and hunger took my sister,

But they all say: “No cause! We miss her.”

My brother clashed against his pain,

I heard him dying, I who remain...

Now my lover withers and pines

Because I loved her at the wrong time.

And while the moonless city sleeps—

I'm here, now, walking down its streets...

BOLESŁAW LEŚMIAN

* * *

Bóg mnie opuścił—nie wiem czemu...
Źle Mu w niebiosach! Wiem, że źle Mu...

Ojciec mój tak swą śmierć przeoczył,
Że idąc do dom—w grób się stoczył.

Siostra umarła z łez i z głodu,
A wszyscy mówią: “Bez powodu!”

A brat mój tak się z bólem ścierał,
Żem nasłuchiwał, gdy umierał...

Kochanka moja teraz ginie,
Żem ją pokochał w złej godzinie.

A ja—nim miasto w mroku zaśnie—
Idę ulicą, idę właśnie...

(First published in *Gazeta Polska*, No. 308, Warsaw, 1932, with the title “In sadness.”)