



## Piotr Sommer and Rosanna Warren

### *From Elsewhere*

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*Irena Grudzińska Gross:* Piotr Sommer has published seven collections of poems, two books of essays, and he has translated into Polish several English-language poets, including John Ashbery, John Berryman, Seamus Heaney, Frank O'Hara and Charles Reznikoff. He works for *Literatura na Świecie*, a Polish journal of international writing, and lives outside Warsaw. He has taught at American universities, and Wesleyan University Press has just brought out a volume of his poems: *Continued*.

Rosanna Warren is Emma Ann MacLachlan Metcalf Professor of the Humanities, University Professor, and Professor of English and Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures at Boston University. She is the author of four books of poems: *Departure*, *Stained Glass*, which was named the Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets, *Each Leaf Shines Separate*, and *Snow Day*. The recipient of many awards, from 1995-2000 she was Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and was recently elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In many ways the work of these two poets is diametrically opposed. Sommer's poetry is, as one critic has written, deceptively simple, directed towards the quotidian - it is very idiomatic, colloquial, located in a very concrete place in time, in a specific kind of Polish diction, a bit like a dialect of his generation. Rosanna Warren's poetry on the other hand is emphatically embedded in European culture, in European classicism, in

literature, in visual culture. It is very dense, very literary, rich and full of literary and historical references. It is paradoxical that a Polish poet, coming from a society that is usually considered culturally more conservative, sounds more American, to my ear, than Rosanna Warren who is American.

**Rosanna Warren: *Cassandra***

Don't say that word, comfort

Wherever the splendid sun beats down on sorrow  
No one will

Hear, but the blind  
Beggar already totters from chamber to chamber

in the vault, murmuring, embracing urns  
that have yet to be filled with

a story that has yet to spark or char the mind

**Piotr Sommer: *Morning on Earth***

Morning on earth, light snow, and just when  
it was so warm, practically spring.  
But the thermometer in the kitchen window  
says seven degrees,  
and pretty sunny.

                                  Here's  
the electric company guy I like,  
and no sign of the gas guy  
I can't stand.  
And all of a sudden two Misters M.—  
one I've fallen for, the other  
a bit of a hotshot—

coming back, both nine years old,  
just passing the jasmine bush,  
a huge bouquet of sticks.  
  Behind the door  
the dog's excited, nothing's  
at odds with anything.

*IGG*: Poets do not represent countries and are not ambassadors of their cultures, but poetry, so to say, rests on the most intimate activity of language. And language does have a nationality, so it seems to me. So I have two sets of questions for our speakers. One set pertains to their poetic work, the second to their work as translators, critics and promoters of poetry.

My first question is to Rosanna: In your poems you move freely within the classical tradition, you refer to French poetry and to the visual arts. Why are you reaching for the classical tradition? Is there a message in that choice, and do you consider your poetry American?

*RW*: First of all, my poems aren't all in the classical tradition. I do love Homer, Virgil, and Horace, but I also write poems that regard my American contemporary reality. I like to pass back and forth. Knowing some of the questions that Irena was going to ask, I brought two emblematic books here. One is the essays of Emerson, and one is the anthology edited by Charles Simic and Mark Strand in the 1970s, *Another Republic*. These two books exemplify for me, in a sense, the axis of my literary imagination. On one hand you are right; we are born into a language, and even though much of my own childhood by accident of biography was spent in Italy and in France, and so a lot of my primal imagery is from Italy and France, I am an American. I am an American citizen, English is my maternal language, and the American literature is part of my inheritance. I understand the need of a national myth to create a literature. Think of Virgil writing the *Aeneid* to give the story to Imperial Rome, to Augustus. Think of Emerson, calling for an American poet - who turned out to be Whitman - calling for a destiny in the imagination for this new country. But something in me, personally, rebels against nationalism. I am allergic

to it. I think it's been responsible for not only military mayhem in the ancient and the modern world, but that one can feel oneself at home in the tragedy of one's own country. I suppose every country is a tragedy, that's what one inherits. But there's also the international dream of another republic, a republic in which the citizens, in this case, are named Francis Ponge, Jean Follain, Zbigniew Herbert, Julio Cortazar, Fernando Pessoa, Octavio Paz, Yehuda Amichai. That's the republic I want to be a citizen of.

*IGG:* My next question, parallel to the previous one, is to Piotr. In his poems, he is using a very idiomatic language, spoken language, and is avoiding, as I understand, the classical tradition. At the same time, one can hear in his poetry American and British English. Do you really think about yourself as a Polish poet? Do you feel imbued in Polish tradition, or are you really reaching to the outside?

*PS:* This is not true - we all belong to the classical tradition and having read it as much as one could, having been under the spell of it, you may try things in language that do not respond directly to it, in a way that they are expected to respond, i.e., they do not ring the common notes. And only in that respect can I respond to your other point about me being perhaps a strange creature, a sort of amphibian trying to be somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic rather than in the Polish language. If there is anything of notice, of sense and of music, in what I have been writing and trying to write in Polish, it is the quality of how the language moves, and how well the sentences are oiled, and how they pop and change. If one aspires to that type of writing, its quality in translation is fading away to such an extent that I think the best Polish poet of the second half of the century, Miron Białoszewski, can never be known in any language that is not Slavic. I feel it is very easy to take that type of writing, which is relying so heavily on melody and intonation and syntax, for not belonging to what we all know is supposed to be the paradigm of the Polish tradition after WW II. Now if you treat that paradigm as unmovable, as something that is being as solemn as it has always been, and being as solid as it has been, and prophetic as it has been, and so much prepared to give you a lesson, then, I am not part of that tradition at all. But I think there is a different

tradition, and it's being looked at with quite a bit more interest and excitement by some younger Polish colleagues of mine, and that part of tradition begins with Aleksander Wat in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a tradition which is so Dada, even though Wat went away from the Dada beginnings so quickly. I think Wat is not really a "quotidian," everyday poet. He is looking for ways to deal with classical tradition very intently. Why then mention him as an example for me, as a great model? Well, I mention him as a great model because of the way he does it, the way he undercuts his own possible, potential pomposity. He is so absolutely out of this world. And this tradition is connected, or reconnected by Białoszewski so beautifully in the late 1950s and 60s, including some of the people who belong to a different tradition, who are commonly identified as part of The Polish Tradition, like Zbigniew Herbert and Wisława Szymborska, whom I love deeply, because they are so lovely in the Polish language. So that would be my very brief argument for why I do not live in the middle of the Atlantic, and why I feel very deeply connected with the classical in my way. And as an illustration, let me read you a poem by Białoszewski:

**Miron Białoszewski: *A Ballad of Going Down to the Store***

First I went down to the street  
by means of the stairs,  
just imagine it,  
by means of the stairs.

Then people known to people unknown  
passed me by and I passed them by.  
Regret  
that you did not see  
how people walk,  
regret!

I entered a complete store:  
lamps of glass were glowing.  
I saw somebody - he sat down -

and what did I hear? what did I hear?  
rustling of bags and human talk.

And indeed,  
indeed,  
I returned.

(translated by Czesław Miłosz)

*IGG*: Let me explain what I meant, because it also leads to my second question to Rosanna. What I was pointing to was the kind of emphatic ways in which the poet indicates, to the reader, how the poem needs to be read. And I associated the way in which your poems are written - the way in which you name the poem, for example, *Cassandra* - to your translating activity, and this choice indicates not only your personal need, but also a sense of what you think your culture, or your - because I wouldn't use the word nation - your poetry needs.

*RW*: Well, I have more selfish motives. I am not translating for my culture; I'm translating for me. So, if it's Sappho, or if it's Pierre Reverdy, or whoever it is, it's my own vitamin deficiency that I'm supplementing. I can't live without it. The consequence of a number of people doing this is that it enlarges one's own language, and one's own imaginative possibilities of a literary time. And any really lively literary culture, say Republican Rome, with Latin poets, say Catullus, translating from the Greeks, and Horace, which is Imperial Rome, still translating from the Greeks, or even Elizabethan England, any really lively time in a literary culture will have these feverish blood transfusions going on.

*IGG (to PS)*: My parallel question is why are you translating American and English poetry?

*PS*: I began in the mid 70s precisely for the reason that Rosanna is mentioning. I discovered that I'm feeling a little bit tight, in the dress, in the disguise, rather, that Polish poetry was wearing. The predictability

ingredient was so big for me at the time that I was looking for a way to catalyze my disobedience. I have my models in Polish, naturally, but it was interesting to see what those guys over the small water or big water were doing. This is how it happened. I was trying to learn, and understand, and see, and get the confirmation, and I got it many times. In the mid- and late 80s, when things were already impossible, you couldn't write a Polish poem without a signal, a strong signal, of how deeply against the regime you were. I'm not surprised that my younger colleagues in the late 80s were also happy to bump into someone like Frank O'Hara, who intensified our curiosity with Miron Białoszewski, who was also sort of "off," who was also gay, who was also not solemn. Those discoveries may have even - yes - pushed the pendulum, a little bit, towards a more hooligan type of writing.

*Question* (from audience): You mentioned the loss of the dialect of Warsaw in the translations of your poems into English. How much does it change your poetry?

*PS:* I don't know how it works and how much is not there. Naturally, any intonation may get lost in translation.

*IGG:* But "dialects" still exist. In English language poetry you hear a difference in Australian poetry, American poetry, and émigré writers writing poems in English.

*RW:* If it is a good poem, it has its own stage directions built in, you can hear the tone of voice, you can hear the situation, you can hear the urgency of desire or conflict or whatever is behind it. And as for all the different dialects in English - English of the country England is already a bastard language. It's a wonderfully hybrid language in ways we all know, with the Angles, and the Saxons, and the Normans, and the Latin, and the Greek, and the Gallic, etc. The proliferation of Englishes out across the globe, in often commercial, military and other ways, is the way languages travel, creating a lot of scar tissue as they go.

*Question:* I have a question for Mr. Sommer. We have to remember that Poland was founded in the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, so the classical tradition consists of Mickiewicz, or Sienkiewicz, is that correct? Compared to Virgil, there's a different classical tradition ...

*PS:* I'd say that Mickiewicz would be part of the great poetry tradition. I was very intrigued by one late poem by Wislawa Szymborska, written after the death of her partner - with what great satisfaction I'm using this word "partner" in the case of Wisława Szymborska, you don't even know - the wonderful Polish prose writer Kornel Filipowicz. She wrote a series of poems related to each other, not a sequence of elegies- elegies are, again, a classical genre and she reinvented that genre for him. One of the poems that she wrote was called "Chmury," which means clouds, and she used a specific rhyme from a very well known poem by Adam Mickiewicz. But I wouldn't really be able to divide traditions into those compartments, Greek and Roman and Polish, because there's a way to look at them, maybe especially when you happen to be a writer, that transcends those time barriers, and genre barriers, and language barriers- there's something about the internationality of the tradition, so to say.

*RW:* I would say that the Greek and Roman poets that I'm closest to are not classical, they are brutally contemporary to me, they are right here at my imagination. To me, translating and writing shade into each other, I don't really separate them so much. Writing is to me a matter of hearing voices, it's almost a form of dementia. If I can't hear the voice that is going to go into English, whether it's coming from a poem that is burbling around inside of me, or out of Catullus, well, I'm paralyzed. And periods of life in which so much externally is going on that that sense of hearing is deadened and all I can do is to go through the motions of normal life are periods of complete hell. Some people call hearing voices an affliction, a clinical affliction, and it can be, but there's another form of hearing voices that is necessary to give full dimension to consciousness, I think.

*Question (to PS):* Do you have a desire to make something absolutely different than the tradition you mentioned?



*PS:* You do not necessarily want to communicate with everybody, I don't think. You find your alliances in sentences, so to say, and in friends, and in poets whom you love and admire, and you try to live up to your models and to your heroes and to your friends, and that's the most exciting thing for me. But that also means a little bit of invention. I wouldn't feel well writing a poem that is not new enough, just a copy of something that I may have read. No, that wouldn't be fun. If I discovered that, I probably would never want to publish it. You don't really live and feed on replicating. You live and feed on what you have digested, and want to give back, winking to those dead models, like Catullus or whomever.

*RW:* It's a particularly acute question when you're translating a poet from the past. One of my models and heroes is David Ferry. In Ferry's translations, say of the *Odes* of Horace, or the *Georgics* of Virgil, he manages somehow to create a kind of illusory English, which feels a little timeless, but it doesn't feel antique, or antiquarian, and it also is kind of Robert Frostian in having very American intonations of spoken syntax, but without any crudeness or vulgarity. It's an extraordinary balancing act, I think, that Ferry achieves. You feel, first of all, that he has a marvelous ear, really, one of the best ears in contemporary American poetry. You feel it is a voice you can trust, it has the dignity that you would want Virgil or Horace to have, but nothing stuffy or pompous about it. Virgil and Horace aren't pompous or stuffy, unless they intend to be. And it has a convincing voice that we -early 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans - can understand. I aspire in my translation to something like that. I would like my translations of Sappho to sound fresh, because her poems are completely fresh, but I also don't want them to sound crudely American, in a way that wouldn't be right for her.

*PS:* Probably it is somewhat different in the case of poets who are more or less contemporary. There is the valid question of how much, while translating, you want to make them part of the current stream of Polish writing. And then the question of how much you want to leave them as foreign is also valid. You balance those two things. You do not try to indicate that "The Dream Songs" by John Berryman were written in

Polish. You need to do something to it; whether you can do it or not that's another story. You don't want to make a Frank O'Hara sound like he is from Warsaw, you want him to be seen and perceived as somewhat different, as foreign.