

Piotr Gwiazda, Professor of English

University of Pittsburgh

pkg12@pitt.edu

Seminar: Setting Poetry to Music

ALSCW Conference (2022)

Listening to Grzegorz Wróblewski on YouTube

1. Background

One of Poland's leading literary figures, Grzegorz Wróblewski was born in Gdańsk in 1962, grew up in Warsaw, and moved to Copenhagen in 1985. Described by Marjorie Perloff as “the true poetic chronicler of our 21st century diaspora in all its absurdities and anxieties,” Wróblewski has published over dozens of volumes of poetry, prose, and drama in Poland, as well as several books in Denmark and other countries. Active in the contemporary music scene, he has collaborated with numerous performers and musicians, including Olga Magieres, Bobi Peru, Paweł “Kelner” Rozwadowski, and the punk rock band *Deuter*. As a visual artist, he has exhibited his paintings in various galleries in Denmark, Germany, England, and Poland. English translations of his poetry appear in several volumes, including my translations of *Kopenhaga* (Zephyr Press, 2013), *Zero Visibility* (Phoneme Media, 2017), and the forthcoming *Dear Beloved Humans* (Diálogos Books), in which the two poems under discussion here will appear.

The poems are “Melancholia” [Melancholy] and “Wiara” [Belief].¹ Wróblewski

¹ See Section 3 for the Polish versions and my English translations.

composed the first poem in the 1980s, the second one in the 1990s. In 2014 he and the guitarist Amir Hadziahmetovic recorded their audio versions in Copenhagen. Those were subsequently uploaded to YouTube by his friend and fellow writer Krzysztof Jaworski, where they can still be found. The audio versions feature Wróblewski's recitations of the poems and Hadziahmetovic's musical accompaniment. At the visual level, they include passages from the poems, as well as close-ups of drawings and photographs.

More contextual information might be useful. Hadziahmetovic is a Bosnian musician originally from Sarajevo who, like Wróblewski, is now based in Copenhagen. Their collaboration goes back to the 1990s, when they founded a band named SLURP, with Wróblewski on vocals, another immigrant from Poland Sławek Słociński on drums, and Hadziahmetovic on bass guitar. The band toured widely in Denmark, with many concerts featuring Wróblewski's recitations of his poems. He refers to the YouTube recordings as relatively "minimalistic" in contrast to those earlier live performances.²

The first poem, "Melancholia," is actually entitled "W tej całej naszej melancholii" in the original printed Polish version. This can roughly be translated as "Our Good Old Melancholy," though in my (final) English translation I have opted for "Melancholia." It is one of Wróblewski's earliest published poems. Like most of the poems he composed in Warsaw and in the period immediately following his arrival in Copenhagen, it features motifs of existential anxiety and radical estrangement. The YouTube recording also displays Wróblewski's drawings – specifically the cycle *My Life with Ann*, with its interplay of black, blue, and violet patterns against a white background.

The second poem, "Wiara" is the Polish word for 'belief' or 'faith,' though in this

² Grzegorz Wróblewski, email to the author, June 25, 2022.

case the original printed version came with the title “(Poranna toaleta mężczyzny w średnim wieku. Nieoczekiwane wątpliwości przed wyruszeniem w drogę),” which I translated as “(A Middle-Aged Man’s Morning Ablutions. Unexpected Misgivings Before a Journey).” The poem is dedicated to “the eunuchs of Santa Fe,” which is a reference to the religious cult Heaven’s Gate whose 39 members committed suicide at Rancho Santa Fe (near San Diego, California) in March 1997 in a belief they would join an extraterrestrial spacecraft following Comet Hale-Bopp. The dedication alludes to the fact that prior to the suicide eight male members of the cult, including the leader Marshall Applewhite, underwent castration. In addition to the rolling text of the poem, the YouTube recording features a photograph by the Polish visual artist Wojciech Wilczyk, which was used for the cover of one of Wróblewski’s poetry volumes in Poland (*Hotelowe Koty*, 2010).

I want to make three brief observations about “Melancholia” and “Wiara.” First, these recordings are multimodal compositions. Converting the printed text into sound and image, they can be said to exemplify Roman Jakobson’s concept of “intersemiotic” translation.³ Second, they should be viewed as collaborations between Wróblewski and his fellow artists – Hadziahmetovic for certain, but also Wilczyk and Jaworski – all of whom happen to be his close friends. Third, their placement on YouTube – a platform available to millions of users around the world – is noteworthy. Different textual forms and functions and competing ideas of audience come into play when we consider “Melancholia” and “Wiara” as works intended for an online platform. Before continuing

³ Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 4th edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 157.

with my discussion, I now invite the readers to familiarize themselves with the recordings:

“Melancholia”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKjIYwjnhf8>

“Wiara”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pk1Pr0AROI>

2. Discussion

I find the use of *sound* in the YouTube versions of Wróblewski’s poems to be particularly compelling, as it raises questions of close listening, adaptation, and translation. How does Hadziahmetovic’s musical accompaniment complement the poems? How does it transform them? Lastly, how does it “translate” Wróblewski’s poems for non-Polish-speaking audiences, if that is indeed one of its functions?

The answer to the first two questions is relatively easy: the musical accompaniment both complements and transforms Wróblewski’s poems. According to the poet, the intention behind the audio/visual version of “Melancholia” was to make it sound “psycho” [sic], that is to say to enhance the poem’s depiction of anxiety, derangement, even madness.⁴ The combination of Wróblewski’s agitated voice and Hadziahmetovic’s basic guitar chords succeeds, I think, in creating this effect; the final product oscillates between drabness and drollness. The accompaniment is noticeably dull and monotonous, we might even say “sexless,” like the weather in the poem. It also amplifies the “constant scraping” heard by the speaker, so that “the whole neighborhood / vibrates.” Similarly, Hadziahmetovic’s accompaniment to “Wiara” is purposefully simple and slow; the idea

⁴ Grzegorz Wróblewski, email to the author, June 25, 2022.

was to create, as Wróblewski explains, a certain meditative, even aethereal effect.⁵ The poet's calmer voice combined with the quivering strings and a gentle tapping sound become, at a certain point, almost hypnotic. Ironically, in this poem, and even more so in the YouTube recording, Wróblewski shares his ambivalence about spiritual pursuits in a manner that resembles a prayer.

The last question is the most intriguing – and perhaps the most difficult to answer. Does Hadziahmetovic's accompaniment in any way bring the poems closer to those readers/listeners who do not know Polish? In asking this question, I'm guided by T.S. Eliot's ideas about poetic meaning, which for him exists beyond understanding, beyond mere words; rather, it has to do with elements like sound, rhythm, indeed music. In the "The Music of Poetry," he says: "we can be deeply stirred by hearing the recitation of a poem in a language of which we understand no word." In another essay from the 1940s "The Social Function of Poetry" he elaborates: "I have also found sometimes that a piece of poetry, which I could not construe, conveyed something immediate and vivid, which was unique, different from anything in English – something which I could not put into words and yet felt that I understood. And on learning that language better I found that this impression was not an illusion, not something which I had imagined to be in the poetry, but something that was really there. So in poetry you can, now and then, penetrate into another country, so to speak, before your passport has been issued and your ticket taken."⁶ Basil Bunting goes even further. In his 1985 essay "The Use of Poetry" he recalls how he once read poems in German, Italian, Persian, and Welsh to his students

⁵ Grzegorz Wróblewski, email to the author, June 25, 2022.

⁶ T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), 22 and 14.

and yet, as far as he could judge, they “got as much out of it as they did from many English poems.” He concludes: “We lose very little by not knowing what the words mean, so long as we can pronounce them.”⁷

It occurs to me, however, that we don’t need Eliot or Bunting to tell us what we already know if we have ever read or listened to a poem in a foreign language. Usually, some basic knowledge of the vocabulary and syntax and some familiarity with the context are enough to provide a basic sense of the poem’s meaning. But even if those do not obtain, it is possible to enjoy the poem as it is recited or sung in a foreign language; the experience can be moving, intriguing, exhilarating or alienating, but it is not likely to leave us indifferent. Musical accompaniment can go a long way in making such an experience even more palpable – as it does, I believe, in these versions of Wróblewski’s “Melancholia” and “Wiara.”

3. *The Poems in Polish and English*

<p>W tej całej naszej melancholii</p> <p>pogoda przeciwna głowie</p> <p>bezpłciowa i bardzo szara</p> <p>sąsiedzi ciekawi ciała</p> <p>to im pokazuję rozcięty palec</p>	<p>Melancholia</p> <p>the weather is uninspiring</p> <p>sexless and very gray</p> <p>the neighbors want a proof</p> <p>so I show them my bleeding finger</p>
---	---

⁷ Qtd. in Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 58.

(aż odskakują od dziurki)	(they recoil away from the keyhole)
natomiast pewien kot	meanwhile some cat
złapał tłustą muchę	has caught an obese fly
taką co lubi gówno	the kind that likes shit
udusił i wypuścił obrażony	strangled it and let it go indignantly
nie znam tego kota	I don't know this cat
i nie wiem kim jest	or who he is
oprócz tego ktoś ciągle szura	also there's this constant scraping
tak szura że wibruje od tego	so much scraping the whole neighborhood
cała okolica	vibrates
no to ja paznokciem się bawię	so I play with my fingernail
i tak go sobie na boki przekręcam	twist it this way and that
a czasem lekko naciskam	or press it lightly
on przecież nieznacznie różowy	after all it's barely pink
do kredki świecowej podobny	like a wax crayon
choć nie	actually no
nie do kredki świecowej	not like a wax crayon
bardziej może do drugiego paznokcia	more like my other fingernail
w sumie sam już nie wiem	in fact I don't really know
ale go sobie na boki przekręcam	I just twist it this way and that
tak z czystej ciekawości	out of pure curiosity
lekko naciskam	or press it lightly

<p>(Poranna toaleta mężczyzny w średnim wieku. Nieoczekiwane wątpliwości przed wyruszeniem w drogę)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Kastratom z Santa Fe</i></p> <p>Wiara w bursztyn.</p> <p>W oczy perskiego kota.</p> <p>W pierwsze przebiśniegi.</p> <p>W mężczyzn, którzy głoszą nadejście.</p> <p>W Towarzystwo Poszukiwań.</p> <p>W piramidy.</p> <p>W życie po śmierci.</p> <p>W biodynamiczną żywność.</p> <p>W tajemnicze techniki walki.</p> <p>W numerologię.</p> <p>W rok 2000.</p> <p>Wiara w duszę.</p> <p>Wiara w ciało.</p> <p>W rany lub znaki na ciele.</p> <p>Wiara w starość.</p>	<p>(A Middle-Aged Man's Morning Ablutions. Unexpected Misgivings before a Journey)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>For the eunuchs of Santa Fe</i></p> <p>Belief in amber.</p> <p>In the eyes of a Persian cat.</p> <p>In first snowdrops.</p> <p>In men who proclaim the end.</p> <p>In Society for Research.</p> <p>In pyramids.</p> <p>In life after death.</p> <p>In biodynamic food.</p> <p>In secret fighting techniques.</p> <p>In numerology.</p> <p>In the year 2000.</p> <p>Belief in the soul.</p> <p>Belief in the body.</p> <p>The wounds or marks on the body.</p> <p>Belief in old age.</p>
--	---

Wiara w płaską Ziemię.	Belief in flat Earth.
Wiara w siebie.	Belief in oneself.
W morza, lądy i teurgię.	In sea, land, and theurgy.
W chiński taoizm.	In Chinese Taoism.
W słońce.	Belief in the sun.
W zaćmienie słońca.	In the solar eclipse.
W splot słoneczny.	In the solar plexus.
W Zakon Nowych Templariuszy.	In the Order of the New Templars.
Wiara w logiczną odpowiedź.	Belief in the logical answer.
Wiara w czynność oczyszczania.	Belief in the cleansing act.