

Wisława Szymborska, Polish, was born on 2 July 1923 in Kornik, Poznan district, Poland. She lives in Krakow. Even before receiving the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature, she was a world-famous poet, albeit less so in the United States than in Germany or other European countries. She has recently received other prestigious literary prizes and medals, and she has benefited from having an excellent translator into Swedish who spends a lot of time discussing her poems with her in person. My co-translator of 25 poems of Szymborska, Joanna Trzeciak (January 1997) is the one Polish woman prominently translating Wisława Szymborska into English, something Szymborska protectively treasures. In that vein, my take on literary translation is: the more the merrier.

This broadside is intended to show that two teams of translators working on the same Szymborska poem produced two strikingly different outputs — a seemingly trivial conclusion, but one mostly vastly unappreciated. Witness New Yorker's Poetry Editor Alice Quinn's comments in NYT of 21Oct96. Ms. Quinn wouldn't have knowingly published a previously published poem. To which I offer this question: Is a publication of a different translation of the original the same thing as a previous publication of some other translation? Apparently and regrettably, yes, at least for Ms. Quinn, and for that matter, for commercial book presses which view competing translations as infringing on their product — but what have they produced that their production allows them to enjoin a free person from publishing a different take on the original matter? Very strange and very anti-trade.

In poetry especially, we all lose as readers when a poet's work is restricted from translation by legal means, finances, corporate greed, and the locking-out of other translators via original author contracts.

The aware reader and buyer of poetry in translation will support multiple translations; will oppose commercial strong-arm tactics aimed at cornering the market of views: of translations, of poem-embodiments.

The aware reader of poetry in translation will vote with his or her pocketbook in favor of the so-called facing-page bilingual translation, where the original and the translated text lie open, side by side, as the book lies open. These editions are more expensive and less profitable to produce, perhaps at times impossible to produce for lack of rights to the original, yet they honestly display in plain view the mistakes and winning moves of the translation, as well as promote acquiring at least a modicum of acquaintance with the original lexicon if not the study of the original language itself.

— Marek Ługowski
19 January 1997
Chicago

**Wisława Szymborska in Polish and English & divergencies inherent
in poetry translation: an informal reading.** Sunday, 19 January, 1997, Borders, Evanston, Illinois.

Wisława Szymborska's

original Polish:

Kropla deszczu mi spadła na reke,
ułożona z Gangesu i Nilu,

z wniebowziętego szronu na wąskach fok,
z wody rozbitych dzbanów w miastach Ys i Tyr.

Na moim wskazującym palcu
Morze Kaspijskie jest morzem otwartym,

a Pacyfik potulnie wplywa do Rudawy
tej samej, co fruwała chmurka nad Paryżem.

Dwa plus dwa, profesorze?
Dwa—mówi profesor.

Jest to odpowiedź lepsza od poprzednich.

Boli, trawa, siedzieć, lawka.
A na koncu alei znówu ta stara jak świat,
niejowiata, nieruniana,
trzy razy stad przepędzana,
podobno niania prawdziwa.

Pan profesor chce do niej.
Znow sie nam wyrzwa.

Trzynasty wiek dalby im złote tło
Dwudziesty—dalby ekran srebrny.
Ten siedemnasty nic dla płaskich nie ma.

notes:

Krynski and Maguire's 1981 translation:

A drop of rain fell on my hand,
condensed from the Ganges and the Nile,

from the heavenward ascending hoarfrost on the whiskers of a seal,
from the water of broken jugs in the cities of Ys and Tyre.

On my index finger
the Caspian sea is the open sea,

and the Pacific meekly flows into the Rudawa,
that very same river that floated as a cloud over Paris

Two plus two, professor?
Two, says the professor.

This time the answer's better than before.

Hurts, grass, sit, bench.
And at the end of the path, once again, old as time,
cheerless, pallid,
thrice banished,
the nanny they say is the real one.

The professor is just dying to be with her.
Once again he pulls away from us.

The thirteenth century would have given them a golden
background,
the twentieth—a silver screen.
The seventeenth had nothing for the flat of chest.

Lugowski and Trzeciak's 1988 translation:

A rain droplet fell on my hand
drawn from Ganges and the Nile,

from the enraptured frost on a seal's whiskers
from the broken pots of Ys and Tyre.

Upon my index finger
the Caspian sea is an open sea

and the Pacific flows meekly into the Rudawa
the same that flew in a cloud over Paris

Two plus two, professor?
Two, says the professor.

It's an answer better than any from before.

Hurts, grass, to sit, a bench.
And, at the end of the promenade, again, old as dust
pale, unamused,
thrice now excused
apparently a genuine nanny.

The professor wants towards her.
Again, he tries to break away from us.

The 13th century would have given them a gold backdrop,
the 20th—a silver screen.
This 17th has nothing for the flat-chested.

Walk of the Arisen:

Rubens' Women