

THE GARDENS OF WARSAW IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA: TRANSLATING REALITY

In his volume of poems *Sun under Wood* (Ecco Press, 1996) Robert Hass has a poem entitled “The Gardens of Warsaw”. I translated the text since, as a typical Pole, I have always felt intrigued by anything the foreigners think, say or write about Poland. Frankly speaking, when I saw the title for the first time, I had not expected the poem to be of any special interest and tended to treat it as just another occasional lyric, so I was pleasantly surprised after reading it several times to find it worth not only translating but also discussing with my students – whom I would like to thank here for all the help their discussion was to me – and writing about it. Actually it was not its topic – the gardens of Warsaw – that made the poem so interesting to me.

The poem is a description of the city made from two different perspectives: one is an inner perspective of somebody who knows Warsaw very well; the other, simultaneously present in the text, presents a view from a great distance. The speaker knows the names of the streets and churches, recognises the faces of popular actors displayed on posters, is informed as to the congestion of the tenements and fashionable design of rich apartment houses. He knows very well the parks of Warsaw: the Saxon, the Ujazdowski, the Botanical and the Łazienki. All the places and objects mentioned are perceived as if by an inhabitant of Warsaw who is taking a walk around the city centre. One of the linguistic devices producing such an effect is the subjective use of the article “the”:

It rains on the Saxon Gardens, lilacs and apple trees
on the grassy slopes, and on the Ujazdowski Gardens
with their chain of ponds where the black-billed swans
paddle calmly under the archways of miniature bridges
and the Zionist boy is reading a book on a wooden bench.

The definite article used throughout the passage refers to some objects of the Saxon Gardens known to the speaker; the indefinite article in the last line, on the other hand, creates an effect of the speaker’s eye-witnessing the scene: not only does he tell us about the park he knows very well, but actually is there at the very moment and sees the familiar grassy slopes, and ponds, and a particular boy reading on one of the benches.

This personal, eye-witness, Warsaw inhabitant’s perspective is complemented by a strong feeling of a distance. The main image of the description is the “rain above” the whole city. Again, it is grammar that helps to achieve the effect of the rain’s omnipres-

ence: the first part of the description – before we move into the gardens – forms just one, extremely long sentence with the rain as its subject:

Above the dusty pavements, darkening only faintly
 when the clouds pass over, above clanging trolleys
 and the glistening Vistula flinging the broken forms
 of trees and clouds and bridges back into the sky,
 above the Virgin's statue on the street of Honey Cakes,
 above the church of the Holy Cross where Chopin's heart,
 in a glimmering silver box, is turning to fine dust,
 above the kiosks with the posters of Clara Bow and Chaplin
 and Valentino as the Sheik, above the crowded tenements
 huddled around courtyards, above new apartment houses
 with mansard roofs, Viennese grills, King Tut carvings,
 sylph-like women frosted into glass, it is raining a light rain.

The panorama of Warsaw is scanned here very fast as if from above: it is actually not a bird's eye view, but, so to say, a "rain drop" perspective.

It rains also above the gardens, although in the Łazienki the rainy picture fades away, replaced by other images: the small palace and the amphitheatre brings a memory of Paderewski conducting a concert there once. The Brahms's music was so moving that even

the children,
 chasing each other on the grass across the way,
 or turning in fast circles, arms out, till they fall down
 into the dizziness, stopped at a sudden yearning lift
 of the violins, and listened.

There is no rain in this scene any more, it is not an element of the described image but a story related to it, an association, an anecdote told by someone who knows the city, who plays the role of a *cicerone* to the walk around the gardens of Warsaw.

The tension between the actual presence in the gardens of Warsaw on a rainy day and the view from a distance soon finds its culmination and explication: the poem's speaker says:

It is summer as I write,
 Northern California [...]
 I have been reading an old travel guide I found
 bound in dark blue cloth with gilded scrollwork titles,
 in a used bookstore in this little mountain town.

This information builds the basic line of meaning in the text. The poem has been misleading us from its very beginning: we are not walking around Warsaw now, there is no rain whatsoever at the moment. We are warm and comfortable amid Californian landscape, "clear air, a blazing sky in August, / bright shy Audubon's warblers in the pines". The children are going to the beach, it is holiday time, everybody is relaxed, "even the murderers are on vacation".

Asked about the poem, its author confirmed that the real life situation was exactly as presented in the text. He had found an old guide book in a second hand bookshop in California and – never being to Warsaw himself – decided to create a purely imaginative picture of the city. The guide-book narration put him into the actual reality of War-

saw of 1922, so what he was doing in the poem, was bridging simultaneously (at least) two gaps: an abyss of time between 1922 and 1996, and of space between Warsaw and Berkeley. As a translator of the poem I had to ask myself why the poet undertook such an effort and to what effect.

An obvious thing to do was to check the reality based information given in the poem: it is, after all, a guided tour around a particular city – not just a city, but Warsaw itself. I studied the city maps and guide-books as well as did some e-mail consultation with a friend of mine who lives in Warsaw to make sure what is what. Now, I found out that the Avenue of the Third of May and Jerozolimska Street do not cross. In 1920s the former was a continuation of the latter; what is now called the Avenue of the Third of May is a kind of a subway street roofed by a bridge which is a new part of the Jerozolimska. As to the church of Holy Cross and Chopin's heart, it is impossible to say whether it turns to fine dust in a glimmering silver box or not, as the box is set into the wall and all that is visible is a stone plaque. The Street of Honey Cakes – Piernikowa? Miodownikowa? – is not mentioned in the Warsaw street finder at all. If we agree that it is actually meant to be Miodowa (one may suppose that the name is an incorrect English translation of the information included in the guide-book), there comes another problem: no statue of the Virgin Mary in Miodowa Street, as far as my informer's knowledge goes. Perhaps there was one before the war.

Here we touch upon a serious historical problem: the guide book we are reading together with poet gives a picture of Warsaw in the 1920s – in the meantime the World War II took place, the city was completely levelled in 1944, and rebuild, or in fact built anew, in the '50s according to some pre-war plans, but also modernised in order to fit the vision of a Socialistic capital. In this way neither the streets nor the buildings, nor even the gardens we might know and see, are the same that the author of the guide book might have had access to. The objects that I had problems in finding on the modern maps might have existed before the war together with the posters of Clara Bow, Chaplin and Valentino as The Sheik. It has all vanished in the abyss of time but in the case of Warsaw the time gap is in a way doubled: the changes and the resulting incompatibilities are caused not only by the sheer fact of the passage of time but also by the historical events – the uprising, the destruction of the city by the Germans as well as its re-shaping during the Stalinist-era reconstruction.

One might ask if the topographical details are at all important for the meaning of the poem. And my answer is: yes, they are, it is an image of Warsaw, not of just any city. On the other hand it is – to quote Robert Hass's words – a "purely imaginative" picture of the place; on yet another hand then, the poet imagines it on the basis of the information from the guide-book and not just on his own impressions and knowledge of the general character of the pre-war East-European capitals; on still another hand though, it is not a poem about Warsaw in a sense for instance Artur Oppmann's poems are. What is the poem about then?

The text, with an exception of the last eleven and a half lines, is a relation of a relation of the city's picture as seen in 1922. The lines of tension in the poem link Californian summer of 1996 with its Audubon warblers and Warsaw late spring of 1922 with its nightingales. The rain seems to be the main theme of the poem, then we discover that it is not so, still it is very important, as it serves as a kind of filter through which the reality is perceived. Rain is universal, so it may belong to any imaginative city's picture, it may even prove helpful as it gives all the objects a somewhat unreal charac-

ter, it weakens the borders of things, creates a kind of mist that blurs the shapes. Thanks to the rain there are no strong contrasts, the picture is dim and unclear, the details fade.

I read the image of a rainy day in Robert Hass's poem as a metaphorical representation of the difficulties we encounter in every act of reality perception. Between human beings and the world there is always a distance, an obstacle, a dirty window pane, a smudged glass that makes the image behind it unclear to the beholder. Every act of describing, reading, remembering, imagining must take account of this obstacle's presence. And the further we are from the object, the thicker the layer of dirt on the pane, and no matter how hard we try to get near to the object, the image we produce will always be distorted. That is why in Hass's poems there are the streets and junctions that do not exist in the today's perception of the city, and a nonexistent statue, and a silver urn with Chopin's heart.

There is a curtain of rain between the guide-book image and the actual Warsaw of the '20, the city as it then was; another one comes between the guide-book and its American reader, and yet another divides the guide-book reader from his own vision written down in the form of the poem. The historical facts that entered the space between the two extremes of this continuum of perceptions-distortions produce an additional curtain of rain that leaves dirt on our perceptual window panes.

The distance that has to be negotiated in the act of perception hidden behind the poem, is not only great but also intricate. To my reading, the impossibility of grasping the reality, of reaching any conclusions as to the true character or meaning of any object of the world is the main topic of the poem. It is a poem about the distance dividing us from the world we try to see and describe, and the impossibility of overcoming it. On the example of the image of a distant, unknown city, the text reflects upon the conditions shaping our dialogue with the world, it reflects upon the concessions we have to make in order to communicate, upon the uncertainty as to the harmony between what we perceive, what we communicate and what is received by the reader.

The feeling of uncertainty is present throughout the poem: not only in the places where the "so-called" reality negates its own description, but also in the image construction. First of all, looking at the map of Warsaw, we notice that the man walking through the city's gardens does not really know where to go. He starts from Jerozolimska / Third of May Street, moves north, to the Saxon Garden, and then, as if changing his mind, goes back south to Ujazdowski Park, Botanical Garden and the Łazienki Park. He notices just one or two details in the parks he passes through, as if without stopping there, and gives more information on the Łazienki Park and its small palace, orangery and amphitheatre.

This latter element of the scenery introduces one more instance of the poem's uncertain reality – the anecdote on Paderewski's concert. The image of children listening to Brahms is a loop in time: the music opens up a separate space in the story where there is no rain, but the time distance grows even bigger. The concert took place "once", in a reality which is past in relation to the reality of the 1922 Warsaw, which is past in relation to the reality of the guide-book reading, which is past in relation to the poem writing, which is past to our reading it.

In this way the contrast between the picture of Warsaw (which picture? which Warsaw?) and the picture of the sunny California introduced at this very moment of the poem, is even more powerful. The feeling of tension and incompatibility between the

two completely different spheres of reality as if sums up the otherwise perhaps unnoticeable signs of uncertainty, the “rainy” character of the reality representation. “Clear air, a blazing sky in August, / bright shy Audubon’s warblers in the pines” – nothing can be more different from “the bull’s-eye / circles-within-circles the rain makes lightly / on the face of the lagoon and on the feathers of nightingales”.

But this is not the final tension in the poem: in the old guide-book found in a Californian used book shop there is an inscription: “From Kazimir to Hilda, / with patient hope and deep respect. Come back, / my dear. Be sure to see the bell of Kraków”. These words open up another separate world, which is incommunicable and imperceptible to us. The book you are reading right now – the inscription says – meant something to someone, formed a part of somebody’s story, was an element of somebody’s reality, a reality which is infinitely distant from us. Behind the inscription there is a particular perception of reality mediated by a particular reading of the guide-book. All we learn about it comes from a trace – these few words – and, again, whatever we think we know about it will always belong to our perception of the world, and that means it will be far away from what the Kazimir and Hilda thought they knew about it, and what belonged to their perception of the world only. Found in the bookstore, read and then made into the poem, the guide-book has entered our story and become an element of our reality, which may incorporate the story of Kazimir and Hilda but only from our point of view, form the distance which divides us from them.

Now, I think the time has come for me to add one more level of complication to the image, the one I am responsible for myself, namely the poem’s translation. The obvious thing is that the translation constitutes another link of the above presented chain of perception perspectives, or – using a different metaphor – another layer of dirt on the pane dividing us from reality. The translator’s perception of the structure described above constitutes the basic level of image construction in the text of the poem’s Polish version. It is the translator who decides what shape the reality presented in the poem actually takes. The translator’s perspective superimposes itself upon the whole intricate construction unified by the tension between the pre-war Warsaw and contemporary California. The task here is, then, not to create a new line of tension but to recreate the original one. Is it possible?

In certain aspects of the poem, the task is not too complicated: the contrast between the sunny California and rainy Warsaw remains intact. Still, on the apparently simple level of word or phrase equivalence, the translator encounters some funny problems, which nonetheless have to be answered. What should be done with the in-existent crossing, for example? Should its description be left as it is or corrected? Choosing the first solution means treating the original text as “God’s truth” and in this way ignoring what was said about the intricate imperfection of its vision; the other way out – the correction – gives priority not to the reality presented from the author’s perspective, but to the actual effort undertaken in the text, the effort of getting to know the reality, of grasping its actual shape. My choice in this particular moment is “u zbiegu” (at a confluence of roads); to my knowledge and imagination of Polish, this word’s meaning does not state it definitely under what angle the two streets meet, so it includes both an image of crossing of streets (an image of Hass poem’s) and of a continuation along the same line (an image of the Warsaw map or the actual situation).

I decided to apply the same policy in the case of all inaccuracies: I put the name of the street “Miodowa” in the place of “Honey Cakes”; I weakened the glimmering shine of the silver box containing the aches of Chopin’s heart (I did not dare, though, to get rid of it all together.) I had some problems with the “King Tut carvings” mentioned as ornaments on the facades of “new apartment houses”. To cut the long story short: King Tut is an exclusively American way of referring to the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamon, whose very rich tomb was discovered in the 1920 which initiated a fashion for Egyptian style in decoration. On the one hand, then, there is an element of the pre-war Warsaw’s character, on the other – a clear sign of the contemporary American perspective showed in the name “King Tut”. I decided not to mention the name of the pharaoh here at all: its full version is simply too long and would not squeeze into the line, so as there is no familiar form in Polish, my choice is a rather neutral “egipskie zdobienia” [“Egyptian decorations”].

I think the decisions have not destroyed the original line of tension; at the same time I am sure that leaving these elements as they were in the original would introduce nothing but confusion into a text of translation meant to be read by Polish readers, and we must remember that the author did not intend to create a distorted vision of Warsaw, just the opposite. The inaccuracies and differences entered it in spite of the author’s effort to overcome the distance. They are not an element of his artistic strategy but an inseparable feature of every act of perception. The poem is a translation of translation of reality; my translation adds one more layer to this structure.

The final product is a fourfold reflection of the “actual reality” – although we do not and cannot know what the “actual reality” is and how to get to know it. What is more, the text’s interpretation, put down in a form of its translation, has to negotiate not only the distances of time and space, as the original poem does; in every translation there is also the additional dimension of the language difference. I will not enter into discussing it now, still it is obvious that there is a different reservoir of imagery – a separate vision of the “actual reality” – behind the two linguistic systems. I cannot hope for my translation to bridge these distances. What I do hope though is that it can take account of the uncertainty of perception and the nevertheless incessantly undertaken effort of translating reality.

Robert Hass

The Gardens of Warsaw

The rain loves the afternoon and the tall lime trees
 just where the broad Avenue of the Third if May
 crosses Jerozolimaska Street (it is 1922)
 have carved green channels deep into the summer.
 Above the dusty pavements, darkening only faintly
 when the clouds pass over, above clanging trolleys
 and the glistening Vistula flinging the broken forms
 of trees and clouds and bridges back into the sky,
 above the Virgin's statue on the Street of Honey Cakes,
 above the church of the Holy Cross where Chopin's heart,
 in a glimmering silver box, is turning to fine dust,
 above the kiosks with the posters of Clara Bow and Chaplin
 and Valentino as the Sheik, above the crowded tenements
 huddled around courtyards, above new apartment houses
 with mansard roofs, Viennese grills, King Tut carvings,
 slyph-like women frosted into glass, it is raining a light rain.
 It rains on the Saxon Gardens, lilacs and apple trees
 on grassy slopes, and on Ujazdowski Gardens
 with their chain of ponds where the black-billed swans
 paddle calmly under the archways of miniature bridges
 and a Zionist boy is reading a book on a wooden bench.
 It rains on the Botanical Garden where the magnolias,
 blooming, toss off grails of pure white idly.
 It rains also on the Lazienki Gardens lightly
 and the small palace with its cream-colored walls
 and columned porticoes shimmering in the bull's-eye
 circles-within-circles the rain makes lightly
 on the face of the lagoon and on the feathers of nightingales
 furtive in the elms and on the bronze statue of Stanislaus
 in the sweet scent of the orangery where the water laps

Translation by Magda Heydel

Warszawskie parki

Deszcz bardzo lubi popołudnie, a wysokie lipy
 u zbiegu szerokiej alei Trzeciego Maja
 i Jerozolimskich (jest rok '22)
 wcięły się w lato zielonymi klinami.
 Na zakurzone chodniki, lekko ciemniejące
 gdy w górze płyną chmury, na dźwięki tramwajów
 i poblyski Wisły, która łamie kształty
 drzew, chmur i mostów, by je odbić w niebie,
 na figurę Matki Boskiej z ulicy Miodowej,
 na Kościół Świętego Krzyża, gdzie serce Chopina
 w srebrnej szkatule obraca się w proch,
 na kioski z plakatami Sary Bow i Chaplina,
 i Valentino jako Szejka, na ludne kamienice
 stłoczone wokół podwórka, na nowe mieszkania
 z mansardami, wiedeńskimi kratami, egipskimi zdobieniami,
 postaciami nimf zatopionymi w szkło, pada lekki deszcz.
 Pada na Ogród Saski, na bzy i jabłonie
 na trawiastych skarpach, na Park Ujazdowski
 gdzie pod arkadami mostków czarnodziobe łabędzie
 wiosłują sobie spokojnie ze stawu na staw,
 a żydowski chłopiec na drewnianej ławce czyta książkę.
 Pada na Ogród Botaniczny, gdzie magnolie
 kwitnąc leniwie wychylają kielichy czystej bieli.
 Pada także drobniutko na Park Łazienkowski,
 pada na pałacyk o kremowych ścianach
 z kolumnowym portykiem, który delikatnie drży
 w tarzach strzelniczych lekko rysowanych deszczem
 na twarzy jeziora i piórkach słowików
 pochowanych w wiązach, i na brązowym pomniku
 Stanisława w stodkiej woni oranżerii, woda tam chlupocze

against the mottled marble stairs of the amphitheater
 where Paderewski once conducted Brahms, and even the children,
 chasing each other on the grass across the way,
 or turning in fast circles, arm out, till they fall down
 into their dizziness, stopped at a sudden yearning lift
 of the violins, and listened. It is summer as I write,
 Northern California. Clear air, a blazing sky in August,
 bright shy Audubon's warblers in the pines.
 I have been reading an old travel guide I found
 bound in dark blue cloth with gilded scrollwork titles,
 in a used bookstore in this little mountain town.
 It is inscribed: "From Kazimir to Hilda,
 with patient hope and deep respect. Come back,
 me dear. Be sure to see the bell of Kraków."
 The children clear the table, fetch fleecy towels
 for the beach. Congress in recess, guards are sleeping
 at the embassies. Even the murderers are on vacation.

o żyłkowy marmur schodów amfiteatru, w którym
 Paderewski dyrygował kiedyś Brahmsa, i nawet te dzieci,
 biegające po trawniku z drugiej strony ścieżki
 lub wirujące w kółko, aż się zakręci w głowie
 i upadnie, stawały w nagłym tęsknym uniesieniu
 skrzypiec, i słuchały. Gdy to piszę, jest lato
 w Północnej Kalifornii. Przejrzyste powietrze,
 jaskrawe niebo sierpnia, pośród sosen jasne,
 płochliwe gajówki Audubona. Czytam właśnie stary
 przewodnik znaleziony gdzieś w antykwariacie,
 w małym górskim miasteczku,
 oprawny w ciemne płótno, z ozdobnie tłoczonym tytułem.
 Wewnątrz dedykacja: „Od Kazimierza dla Hildy,
 z cierpliwą nadzieją i głębokim szacunkiem. Kochana,
 wróć. Nie zapomnij obejrzeć dzwonu w Krakowie”.
 Dzieci sprząają ze stołu i biorą włochate ręczniki
 na plażę. W kongresie letnia przerwa, śpią strażnicy
 w ambasadach. Nawet mordercy są na wakacjach.

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