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Polish poet Jan Lechoń's uniquely expressive poem "Czerwone wino" (Red Wine)

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Do we need another poem about autumn? I think this one deserves to be better known.

"Czerwone wino" by twentieth-century Polish poet Jan Lechoń (1899–1956) is a "Polish alexandrine": each line has thirteen syllables, with two main stresses, on the sixth and twelfth syllables, with a pause (caesura) after the seventh syllable. My translation is in accentual verse,[1] for two reasons. One is that regular metre, particularly the iambic hexameter traditionally used to translate alexandrines from other European languages into English, is apt to make a modern poem sound antiquated in English. According to "British Literature Wiki", "The orthodoxy of iambic pentameter and four line stanzas saw its last great users in the nineteenth century with Tennyson".[2] As a recent Polish reader puts it, "Czerwone Wino" is a poem which "hasn't aged" in Polish[3]; "Red wine" seeks to be of a similar vintage. The second reason for relinquishing metre is that in the original, *images* are a key element, defining nine of the twelve lines; my aim was to find as convincing equivalents for these as possible, without having to field additional lexical constraints. Entirely free verse, however, would depart too much from the original's steady alexandrine rhythm. I have tried to capture something of the original's conversational cadence, held in metrical check, by keeping to a rhythm of four stresses per line, with a faint pause mid-line to echo the Polish caesura, e.g. "Their skin is so green, so mauve at its curve" for "*Tak ich skórka zielona, a brzegiem liliowa*".

Likewise, I have not attempted rhyme in my translation. Rhyme would introduce another barrier for most readers approaching a poem from the already (relative to the antipodes) obscure historical quarter of WWII-era Polish émigré writing. As has often been noted, English is not as conducive to unforced-sounding rhymes as are Slavic languages like Polish or Russian with their inflected grammar readily providing echoing morphemes. In relation to Russian, translator Bill Bowler comments: "While retaining the stanza breaks to evoke the original, I decided to translate the poem into free verse, a very robust and flexible form in American versification. This allowed me to stick close to the meaning, line by line." As he puts it:

> Translating poetry represents a set of compromises. The pull between form and content poses a big challenge. You can try to recreate the rhyme and meter of the original – both dominant elements in Russian poetry – but it will force you to compromise semantic accuracy, word choice and order, lexical levels, etc. [4]

On the other hand, not reproducing Lechoń's *abba* rhyme scheme of the first two stanzas, as in "*słońce/trzciny/godziny/spadające*", does count as a loss, given that it helps shape the sound and therefore rhythm of the poem in Polish. The closest that my version comes to *abba* rhyme is in the second stanza, where for "*liliowa*" I chose "mauve" over "lilac" for the internal half-rhyme it created with "curve", half-echoed by "words" at the end of the next line.

[1] See Dana Gioia, "Accentual verse", for an attractively clear definition.
[2] Edna St. Vincent Millay is arguably a counter-example here.
[3] In an online review of a recent selection of Lechoń 's poems, the reader singles out "Czerwone wino" and one other poem as "living poetry", that "still catches you by the throat" (@almos)
[4] See also Conor Kelly, "Due to the nature of Russian grammatical endings, many words rhyme with each other and allow poets wide avenues for poetic expression"; Derfder, "When I in Czech or Slovak […] I have much more possibilities when building rhymes"

abba rhyme is in the second stanza, where for "*liliowa*" I chose "mauve" over "lilac" for the internal half-rhyme it created with "curve", half-echoed by "words" at the end of the next line.

Turning from form to semantics, the hardest line to render in English is the last line in that second stanza, in some ways the heart of the poem: "*Ach! jak tu odpowiedzieć: czy jestem szczęśliwy*?" In an illuminating essay on being Polish in America, poet, translator and critic Stanisław Barańczak (1992, 12) contrasted the meanings of the Polish word "*szczęśliwy*" and the English "happy":

> Take the word 'happy,' perhaps one of the most frequently used words in Basic American. […] The Polish word for 'happy' (and I believe this also holds for other Slavic languages) has a much more restricted meaning; it is generally reserved for rare states of profound bliss, or total satisfaction with serious things such as love, family, the meaning of life […] Accordingly, it is not used as often as 'happy' is in American common parlance. The question one hears at […] parties / 'Is everybody happy?' / if translated literally into Polish, would seem to come from a metaphysical treatise or a political utopia rather than from social chitchat.

Barańczak's arresting contrast between "rare states of profound bliss" and the banal party-host question "Is everybody happy?" suggests how ill-equipped the English "happy" is to carry the weight of feeling in Lechoń's line, "*Ach! jak tu odpowiedzieć: czy jestem szczęśliwy*?" Yet none of the various alternatives I considered – "content", "contented", "glad", "satisfied" – was an improvement. "Truly happy", is a closer match to "*szczęśliwy*" than mere "happy", but is in the wrong register for a lyric poem, smacking of self-help manuals. In the end I opted for "Ah, how to answer, then: am I happy?", cutting the exclamation point after "*Ach*" (perfect in modern Polish, melodramatic in English), adding a
comma and "then" before the colon to slow the rhythm and suggest a self-searching pause.

Polish literary scholar Paulina Słoma offers a lucid reading of "*Czerwone wino*" which emphasizes its painterly quality, displaying a poet at work "painting" images: "*Choć maluje go jedynie przy pomocy słów, czyni to bardzo plastycznie*" (Although he paints it [the landscape] with words alone, he does so very graphically). While this reading is perceptive and persuasive, it does not mention the central line ending "*czy jestem szczęśliwy*?" Yet the gap between the poem's glowing images and the speaker's undeclared mood is at the core of its overall meaning. "*I wszystko tu coś znaczy tylko brak nam słowa*" ("And it all has some meaning, we just lack the words") provides a cue for the suddenly subjective response "*Ach! jak tu odpowiedzieć: czy jestem szczęśliwy*?" by turning from what is being described to the idea that each image has "meaning", even if cannot be expressed. The vivid images of autumn sun, shivering reeds, plums changing colour, work as an enigmatic "objective correlative" (in T.S. Eliot's famous formulation) to the unstated feeling. The poem immerses the reader in this feeling, while giving nothing away about what is actually going on in the poet's life. The unsaid is also evoked by the mysterious depths of the ocean plumbed by the imaginary diver in the last stanza.

There is an overall impression of autumnal ripeness, verging on over-ripeness; beauty without hope ("*jezioro z ołowiu*"/ "leaden lake"), a sense of unnatural stillness, even claustrophobia, and underlying these, I'd argue, emotional, existential pain. Yet there is also an evenness, a degree of control, that gives way when the poet unexpectedly asks, "am I happy?" then returns in the final stanza, where he shows himself wringing essences (if not happiness exactly) from available sights and tastes. If all he is doing is spending "dreamy" hours ("*senne*" is literally sleepy, but "*sen*" can mean dream or sleep) watching the sun setting, stars falling, plums ripening, why is he *not* "*szczęśliwy*"? There are some clues in what is known of Lechoń's life at the time he wrote "*Czerwone wino*", as well as before and after.

after the stellar success of his first major volume *Karmazynowy Poemat* (Crimson Epic), a work redolent of a lifelong preoccupation with Polish Romanticism and classicism: the best-known line is, "*A wiosną - niechaj wiosnę, nie Polskę zobaczę*" [In spring may I see *spring*, not Poland].[5] This personal crisis occurred in the wake of WWI and the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1921, which established the Second Polish Republic, a Poland independent for the first time since its late 18th century Russian, Prussian and Austrian Partitions. At the time "*Czerwone wino*" was published, in 1942, in the volume *Lutnia po Bekwarku* (Bekwark's Lute), Lechoń was living precariously in New York, having escaped from Nazi-occupied Paris in 1941. The poem may have been written in New York, in Paris, where he lived from 1930–1940, or even in pre-war Poland, which he visited from France. In New York, from the first, Lechoń struggled to stay afloat financially and mentally. He edited the Polish émigré literary magazine *Wiadomości polskie* but had an uneasy relationship with the émigré community. In pre-war Warsaw (unlike in wider interwar Polish society which was strongly religious and conservative), in the social circles gathered around the celebrated "Skamander" group of poets of which Lechoń was a founding member, his homosexuality had been tacitly accepted. Among émigré Poles in America, however, it was frequently stigmatized. A fellow émigré in New York reported Lechoń's liaison with an American man to the FBI, which suspected East European creatives of being communists – ironically, far from the truth in the case of Lechoń, who was an impassioned anti-communist nationalist (see Stephan). This led to delays with the progress of his application for US citizenship; he feared being deported to now Soviet Poland.

A source of lasting anguish to Lechoń was the sense that his country had been lost to him – first under Nazi occupation, then Soviet occupation and effective annexation. There was a painful irony in the fact that his homosexuality was anathema to those who most closely shared his political outlook. He was unable to write, "oppressed by a sense of émigré obsolescence and poetic sterility" (Aldrich & Wotherspoon 2002, 261). In 1956 he ended his life by leaping from the twelfth floor of Hudson hotel.

These details provide context for reading his poetry, and the patriotic, exilic element is particularly significant; for a Polish poet at this time, loss of country meant the loss of a readership in his language, his medium. Yet from the opening lines of "*Czerwone wino*" there is an invitation to readers to slip into the state of mind the poem conjures, to recognize it (or something like it) from our own experience. As for many other readers of the Polish, for me, the pull of this voice remains compelling. I hope something of it can be heard in my translation.[6]

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[5] Characteristically, this line's anti-patriotic sentiment belies the work's passionate concern with Poland's fate, historic and poetic.

[6] With thanks to Chris Miller, Sarah Rice and Kevin Windle for constructive critique and encouragement.

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Czerwone wino
Jan Lechoń

Bardzo wcześnie jest jesień. Coraz wcześniej słońce
Za jezioro z ołowiu w drżące spada trzciny.
Dzień jest po to, by sennie płynęły godziny,
A wieczór, by oglądać gwiazdy spadające.

Renoir chyba w sadzie pomalował śliwy,
Tak ich skórka zielona, a brzegiem liliowa,
I wszystko tu coś znaczy, tylko brak nam słowa.
Ach! jak tu odpowiedzieć: czy jestem szczęśliwy?

Jak nurek schodzi w mroki tajemniczych głębin,
Gdzie się przepych koralu bogato rozpina,
Tak ja wypijam wzrokiem czerwoność jarzębin,
Lub próbuję wargami czerwonego wina.

Red Wine
Jan Lechoń

Translated by Mary Besmeres

Autumn is very early. Earlier each day the sun
Slides behind a leaden lake into shivering reeds.
The day is for letting the hours go dreamily by,
The evening, for watching the falling stars.

Renoir must have painted the plums in the orchard,
Their skin is so green, so mauve at its curve,
And it all has some meaning, we just lack the words.
Ah, how to answer, then: am I happy?

As a diver descends into the dusk of secret depths,
Where the splendour of coral richly unfurls,
So I drink in deeply the red of the rowan,
Put a glass to my lips to savour red wine.