

Świrszczyńska according to Góra

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Selecting and organizing poems which are to be published in an anthology, much like working on any authorial publication, should follow a specific concept. Most editors usually decide to include in their selections poems from different years and devoted to different topics, so as to give a “true and fair” view of the poet’s *oeuvre*. Sometimes, the arrangement is “biographical,” and it reflects the evolution of the poet from youth until old age. Often, these two designs intertwine and complement one another. The editor presents the readers with their own way of reading, composing their story from other people’s words.

Published by Biuro Literackie in 2013 as the eleventh volume in the series “44. Poezja Polska Od Nowa” [44. Polish Poetry Anew], the selection of poems by Anna Świrszczyńska was arranged and provided with an afterword by the Silesian poet Konrad Góra. As the name of the series suggests, exactly 44 poems should be featured across 72 pages, but Góra decided to include in the selection, as one work, the cycle *Miłość Antoniny (Jestem baba)* [Antonina’s love (I’m a woman)], consisting of 19 poems. In the afterword, Góra provocatively writes that he does not feel obliged to explain his decision.¹ He takes advantage of his rights as the “creator;” he is aware of the fact that he is not only editing the collection but also telling his own story, using Świrszczyńska’s poems. Góra has explored such dualities before: guided by his anarchist beliefs, his anthology is what Jesse Cohn calls a dialogue between what is written and what is rendered contemporary in reception.² In an anarchist reading, the text must be constantly in flux: the written does not

¹ See Konrad Góra, “Najgorszy jest język” [Language is the worst], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, *Kona ostatni człowiek* [The last man is dying], selected and with an afterword by Konrad Góra (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2013), 67.

² See Jesse Cohn, *Underground passages: Anarchist resistance culture, 1848–2011* (Oakland, Edinburgh, Baltimore: AK Press, 2014).

petrify meanings, it is only a folding of reality that allows the reader to connect with it; it never recreates the moment of its creation – it constantly processes it. Góra is aware of the fact that one cannot ignore one's influence on the work one is working with. Instead of trying to (some-what artificially) limit it, Góra devises a narrative based on dialogue. He treats Świrszczyńska's poems as a living element of reality, full of agency and strength; he traces their meanings as far as he can and reinforces shared themes. Treating literature as a living and causative element of reality, its immanent part, is close to Dawid Kujawa's approach. Kujawa argues that poetry should be read and studied in a social context.³ According to Świrszczyńska, the poet "should be like a room which consists only of windows that are wide open onto the world."⁴ Windows themselves are a void through which one looks at and interacts with reality – but they can also be closed to control the exchange between the outside and the inside. This is what Góra does.

Unlike many earlier authorial anthologies of Świrszczyńska's poems,⁵ Góra chooses not to include her pre-war works in the collection. Neither does he place Świrszczyńska's final poem at the very end. These two strong gestures of omission show that Góra opposes a cliché reconstruction of the poet's biography that usually starts with the debut and ends with the last poem. The collection is not organized around a specific subject matter, although such an interpretation is suggested by the title, which refers to the *topos* of the last man or mortality in general. *Vanitas* motifs are clearly present, but they do not govern the collection.

Góra's arrangement is chronological: the poems appear in the same order in which Świrszczyńska's poetry collections were published – starting with *Czarne słowa* [Black words] and ending with *Cierpienie i radość* [Suffering and joy] which was published posthumously. The arrangement of the poems within these collections remained unaltered. The number of poems from individual poetry collections – depending on whether, as Góra argues, we treat *Miłość Antoniny* as one work or count each poem individually – differs accordingly.⁶

War poems dominate in Góra's selection, and other poems resound against their background. *Budowałam barykadę* [I was building a barricade] is Świrszczyńska's most important formal experiment, the result of a long struggle with the memory of events that could not be described using conventional literary language. Such an experience cannot be ignored; it defines the poetess's *oeuvre*, and the attempt to process this experience, even if unfinished, is also noticeable in the collections published before *Budowałam barykadę*.

³ See Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000* [Kisses of the people: Poetry and criticism after 2000] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021).

⁴ Anna Świrszczyńska, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, *Poezje wybrane* [Selected poems] (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1973), 13.

⁵ The original selections of Świrszczyńska's poems were made before Góra by Tadeusz Żukowski, Krzysztof Lisowski, Czesław Miłosz, Anna Janko, Bartosz Małczyński, Eliza Kącka and Barbara Gruska-Zych. In 2023, Adam Pluszka published a complete collection of Świrszczyńska's poems.

⁶ In the first case, poems from *Budowałam barykadę* [I was building a barricade] (10) dominate, followed by poems from *Jestem baba* [I'm a woman] (8), then *Cierpienie i radość* [Suffering and joy] (7), and finally, ex aequo, *Czarne słowa* [Black words], *Wiatr* [Wind], and *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* [Happy as a dog's tail] (6 poems each). In the second case, poems from *Jestem baba* constitute almost half of the collection (26 poems), and *Budowałam barykadę* drops from first to second place. *Jestem baba* is the most extensive of Świrszczyńska's poetry collections used by Góra. In terms of the ratio of the number of poems in the original collection to the corresponding number of poems in the selection, *Budowałam barykadę* dominates, and second place goes to *Wiatr*. *Czarne słowa*, *Cierpienie i radość*, *Jestem baba* and *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* follow.

Czarne słowa

After the end of WW2, Świrszczyńska lived in Kraków. Between 1944 and 1968, she got married, gave birth to a daughter, her mother died, and she also separated from her husband. A year before her final separation from Jan Adamski, Świrszczyńska used the voice of the people of Africa in her poems:

It [the poetry collection *Czarne słowa*] consists of two parts. The first part features African stylizations, poems in which Świrszczyńska used the conventions of African songs. She does not imitate them. Instead, she produces moving poems which are an expression of bitter and sarcastic knowledge of life.⁷

Świrszczyńska's "Black language" was a guise underneath which the poetess addressed themes that were important to her, mainly issues concerning femininity (childbirth, motherhood, the duties of a wife). Góra calls these poems "the first successful transpositions from non-European sources,"⁸ drawing attention to the "pure, almost pre-human primordially of this poetry."⁹ For Świrszczyńska, this stylized language was a disguise which allowed her to maintain distance and discretion, so praised by her pre-war critics.¹⁰ According to Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, *Czarne słowa* differs significantly from Świrszczyńska's early poems. They were written by a mother and a wife, an adult, an experienced "archetypical" woman. Góra writes in the afterword: "This is the language of prophetesses immersed in our animal past; we expect metaphysics, and we get African songs [...]."¹¹

This provocative sentence refers to the opposition between Miłosz's metaphysics and the pre-human animal nature of African songs. Wiesław Paweł Szymański writes:

Świrszczyńska has carefully observed that in the world of primitive beliefs and cultures, man is equal to the world which surrounds him, and he is even, as it were, below that world, because the reality of matter is at the same time a magical reality.¹²

Both Góra and Szymański point to the important role of the material in these stylizations. The language reflects animistic beliefs, which locate the spiritual in tangible corporeality. This realization – anchoring the I in a living Black body which is experiencing hunger, pain, and aging – matured over time, giving rise to Świrszczyńska's idiosyncratic poetical language. In *Budowałam barykadę*, it expresses the trauma of the uprising.

The poems that Góra selected from *Czarne słowa* focus on the experience of hunger, emphasizing the material nature of (living in) reality and the limitations of the individual. *Kołysanka* [Lullaby] is the first poem. It establishes Świrszczyńska as the midwife of the last man's agony – the lyrical I says: "Umrzyj, mój mały synku. [...] umrzyj cichutko, / mały synku" [Die, my baby son. [...] die quietly, / my baby son]. This image returns in the last poem selected from *Czarne*

⁷ Jadwiga Bandrowska-Wróblewska, "Nota biograficzna" [Biographical note], in: Świrszczyńska, *Poezje wybrane*, 152.

⁸ Góra, 66.

⁹ Góra.

¹⁰ Świrszczyńska, "Wstęp", 10.

¹¹ Góra, 65.

¹² Quote after: Bandrowska-Wróblewska, 152.

słowa, namely *Głód* [Hunger], where the lyrical I simply recounts her “makabryczne zamiary” [macabre intentions]: “Urodziłam dziecko w porze suszy, / kiedy nie ma mleka w piersiach kobiety” [I gave birth to a child in the time of drought, / when there is no milk in woman’s breasts].

Wiatr

The collection *Wiatr* [Wind], consisting of the cycles *Cierpienie* [Suffering], *Matka i córka* [Mother and daughter], *Groteski* [Grotesque], *Migawki włoskie* [Italian vistas], and *Ekstazy* [Ecstasies], does not focus on a specific subject, although some themes are repeated throughout. *Wiatr* shows Świrszczyńska slowly coming to terms with post-WW2 world and her own personal tragedies which followed. She connects life before the war, the wartime, post-war married life, and the present using free associations, reciting a monologue in her head. *Wiatr* is an excellent title, by the way: it refers to an element whose most constant feature is change. Water, earth, and fire are forever changed for the lyrical I after she lost her loved ones. This realization is also informed by the memories of the war: the lack of water in occupied Warsaw; the soil in which the insurgents were buried; the fire which consumed the capital. And only the wind is the same, constantly blowing and moving, taking with it only what it can carry: such as people who, still alive, left Warsaw after the fall of the uprising.

Wiatr consists of 83 poems in total and Góra chose 6 for his collection. The title of the first poem is the title of the whole. *Kona ostatni człowiek* [The last man is dying] completes the narrative about a body given over to the elements which began with the poems from *Czarne słowa*. The next poem, however, is completely different: full of communist pathos, featuring a communist Legend with a capital L. In the afterword, Góra emphasizes:

including *Pamięci Che Guevary* [In memory of Che Guevara] in the collection is conceptualized as a counterpoint, as a binary. Through this poem the collective endeavor is juxtaposed with the impulses of one silly heart.¹³

Góra described the role played by this poem perversely. The poems with which he juxtaposed it concern individual experiences (with the exception of *Idziemy w pętach* [We walk in chains] from *Czarne słowa*) and in *Pamięci Che Guevary* the legions of the dead and the living are united by the Legend which transcends death. Still, everyone can relate to the personal experiences from the previous poems; they are rooted in materiality. The Legend’s “ciężki trzewik patetyczny” [heavy shoe of pathos],¹⁴ mercifully, does not concern everyone. Perhaps only some, those with “ogłupiałe serca” [stupid hearts], dream of it.

The poems from *Wiatr* reflect the changing and inconsistent nature of this collection – they enter the narrative which appears to center on *vanitas* and create – however small – deviations which open the door to change: the influx of new contexts which expand the story,

¹³Góra, 67.

¹⁴Anna Świrszczyńska, “Pamięci «Che» Guevary” [In memory of Che Guevara], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, *Kona ostatni człowiek*, 12–13.

adding new dimensions to it. *Siedemdziesiąt lat* [Seventy years], *Pies* [Dog], and *Prawo do zabójstwa* [The right to kill] still revolve around the motif of death, but they address it differently: either by focusing on the universality of the theme, its characteristic tenderness, or the role of women. Death evokes life, but the most important, though unnamed, concern of these poems seems to be reproductive work. The poems selected by Góra create a story about a woman who is constantly engaged in recreating the world around which men only “przebiegają przebrani za jakichś Indian, naruszają tło” [run dressed as Indians, disturbing the background].¹⁵ The feminist scholar Katarzyna Szopa also reads Świrszczyńska in this critical framework:

My reading of Świrszczyńska's poetry is guided by a thesis; it is based on the assumption that Świrszczyńska's poetry is a radical emancipatory project, inspired by the tradition of left-wing feminism, at the heart of which lies the fight for the conditions of social reproduction. This project [...] is characterized by an ecstatic gesture, which not only goes beyond specific historical conditions but also goes beyond the material reality in which Świrszczyńska's work was embedded.¹⁶

The last two poems chosen from *Wiatr* are part of the cycle *Ekstazy*. The history behind the first poem is indeed interesting. It opens with the line “W kościach zamiast szpiku – krzyk” [In the bones instead of marrow – scream] and Świrszczyńska titled the poem *Krzyk* [Scream]. In Góra's selection the poem is entitled *Natchnienie* [Inspiration]. I do not know what prompted this change, but I must mention that it took place. Since the next, last, poem from *Wiatr* is *Śpiew szalonego* [The madman's song], leaving the original title would have strengthened the important connotations related to suffering. However, something must have motivated the change of the title.

Szopa writes that according to Świrszczyńska poetry is born from the disagreement with the existing order of the world. It reveals the entire complexity of the present, whose tangled threads carry within themselves the germ of the new.¹⁷ In this sense, what matters for Góra's selection – also in the context of the amended title – is a poem which is not included in *Kona ostatni człowiek*. Still, Góra refers to it in the afterword. The poem in question consists of four lines divided into two stanzas, two sentences:

Moje cierpienie
jest dla mnie pożyteczne.

My suffering
is useful to me.

Moje cierpienie
to ołówek, którym piszę.^{<?>}

My suffering
is the pencil with which I write.

This simple poetic credo echoes in a slightly longer form in the introduction to *Poezje wybrane* [Selected poems]:

¹⁵Góra, 65.

¹⁶See Katarzyna Szopa, *Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego* [Explosion of imagination: Anna Świrszczyńska's poetry and the reproduction of social life] (Katowice: University of Silesia Press, 2022), 25.

¹⁷Szopa, 15.

I am an advocate for emotional poetry and I myself write such poetry. I believe that without emotion and passion there is no art. [...] The proper and most important area of study for the poet is their inner life.¹⁸

The possessive pronoun, used twice in the quoted poem to describe suffering (“**My** suffering / is useful to **me**. / **My** suffering is the pencil / with which **I** write”) [emphasis JZ]), is a testament to the above.

The most difficult aspect of the poetic profession is that when one looks inside [one] they need to see there over three billion people against the background of an infinite number of galaxies. [...] In my theory, the poet has great ambitions. He dreams of a career comparable to that of Orpheus, Socrates, Buddha, Prometheus, and Lenin. [...] A constant fire burns within him, a rebellion against human suffering and human injustice screams within him.¹⁹

Świrszczyńska writes with the pencil of her suffering, rebelling against generalized suffering, and at the same time urges the reader to react in some way. In *Poezje zebrane* [Collected poems], these four lines are broken up by an additional couplet: “Daje mi prawo pisać / o cierpieniu innych” [It gives me the right to write / about the suffering of others].²⁰ The structure of the poem changes slightly, which affects the message: in the original version, the pencil – the poet’s tool – is considered useful. The poem is set in the lyrical I’s most intimate world: in the “world of pencil and suffering.” The additional couplet breaks the connection between usefulness and the pencil, and usefulness is now attributed to a more abstract right to write. In a way, it opens suffering to the presence of a third party, and it opens the present to a possible future.

Although Świrszczyńska, as characterized by Czesław Miłosz, could be an icon of suffering (in her youth she suffered hunger, poverty, and shame; she went through hell during the uprising; her marriage was not happy, and motherhood was for her a source of ambivalent feelings; then came old age with its illnesses and misfortunes²¹), the ideals related to building a just society remained alive for her. Góra writes in the afterword:

This woman – this woman! – is stubborn and will not let go: she will describe our world using our own language; the language of statements and resolutions, the language which we use to complain to our mother: and then our mother raises our cries to her lips and we can go play again [...].²²

Góra points out how groundless patriarchal requirements are – in his narrative, Świrszczyńska is not the addressee of grievances and sufferings, she does not raise them to her lips and does not take it upon herself to comfort those who suffer. Instead, she amplifies the message uttered by the disadvantaged. She becomes a medium through which the wrongs reach the right people, whose duty is to put an end to them. Thus, suffering becomes an inspiration, and the erroneous title of the poem becomes a signpost for the reader.

¹⁸Świrszczyńska, “Wstęp”, 15.

¹⁹Świrszczyńska, “Wstęp”, 16.

²⁰Świrszczyńska, *Poezje zebrane*, 78.

²¹See Czesław Miłosz, *Jakiegoż to gościa mieliśmy. O Annie Świrszczyńskiej* [What a guest we had. About Anna Świrszczyńska] (Kraków: Znak, 1996).

²²Góra, 65.

Jestem baba

Jestem baba [I am a woman], published in 1972, focuses on the female experience of the body, a theme first introduced in *Czarne słowa*, with all the accompanying joys and sufferings. This time, however, Świrszczyńska defends women who do not fit the female bodily ideal (the old, the overworked, the beaten, the fat, the dirty, and the sick). She wants to speak on behalf of those whose voices are not heard.²³

Jestem baba marks the first important move towards taming, reclaiming, reality after the war – it focuses on being embedded in the present, on experiencing the world through the body. This bodily focus is political. According to Katarzyna Szopa, Świrszczyńska examines

the exploitation of women in patriarchal economies, both in colonial-capitalist economies and in state socialism, which was made possible by maintaining the division into the private and the public with clear gender divisions of labor.²⁴

Świrszczyńska writes about women because she opposes the suffering associated with bio-power; she opposes the objectification of women and the fact that they are reduced to mothers and caregivers.²⁵

Góra included eight poems from *Jestem baba* in his selection. Most of them are portraits of women from lower classes – poorly “taken care of” by the state – they live and work in the countryside (they are defined by, on the one hand, poverty and, on the other hand, a multi-generational background that does not fit into an economy based on profit), they are old and sick (they are abandoned because they can no longer reproduce but they can thus at least reclaim their exhausted bodies), or they are young and still unaware of how the biopolitical machine works.

The poems selected by Góra speak about the experience of female materiality, the body consumed within the framework of the “patriarchal-capitalist economy of dispossession, exploitation, and social alienation.”²⁶

Jeż z żelaza [The iron hedgehog], the last poem selected from *Jestem baba*, reprises the poems *Kołysanka* [Lullaby] and *Głód* [Hunger] with which Góra opened his selection. The emotional charge is the most powerful in *Kołysanka*: the fantasies about the death of an infant contrast with the convention of a lullaby. It resonates somewhat more gently in *Głód*, in which murder is a desperate act of mercy. In *Jeż z żelaza*, death gives way to its brother – sleep – as the lyrical I explains why it is reluctant to confront the world. Góra skillfully follows the path of Aristotelian rhetoric: *Kołysanka* moves the reader emotionally (*pathos*), *Głód* presents the world from the perspective of the I as a radically inhospitable place (*éthos*), and in *Jeż z żelaza* factual argumentation (*lógos*) resonates most strongly. The cleverly introduced and gradually reinforced image of the unlivable world prepares the ground for the much-needed change.

²³ Anna Świrszczyńska, *Jestem baba* [I am a woman] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), 13.

²⁴ Szopa, 15.

²⁵ Szopa, 16.

²⁶ Szopa, 15.

Budowałam barykadę

Suffering is also the language of Anna Świrszczyńska's poems devoted to the Warsaw Uprising in *Budowałam barykadę*. Hardly any glorious moments are documented in these poems. Instead, we are confronted with human misery. In Góra's afterword, Świrszczyńska's poems are contrasted with a different language, "which does not insult us with its factuality, it is the language of a wrongdoing that continues to exist and does not bring about change: tears will be wiped from our eyes, so that we can return to axes, cameras, and keyboards, making the world worth describing."²⁷ Thus, conversely, the language of *Budowałam barykadę* "insults us with its reality" and in its light, the wrong is unjustified: no one will wipe our tears, and we will not continue to live as before. Świrszczyńska speaks both of the "tragedy of the Warsaw Uprising" and the intoxicating intensity of this experience.²⁸

Góra includes ten poems from *Budowałam barykadę* in his selection. All of them share the same emotional tone; the failed uprising triggers disappointment and pain, a sense of being wronged by the decisions made by someone high in the ranks and also pride associated with being a nurse in the uprising – being the one who not only survived, taking with her only lice, but also actively helped others survive this terrible time.

The people who appear in these poems are defined by the roles they play in the community – the soldier, the barber, the jeweler's lover, the hairdresser, the maid, the caretaker, the stallholder, the pensioner, the chemist, the smuggler, the seamstress, the tram driver, the boy from the reform school, the hunchbacked sisters, the drunk hero, the general, the scout girl, the nurse, and the writer. As members of the uprising, they are no longer referred to with their proper names. The roles they play define their "usefulness" within this new community; a community whose goal is survival. After all, life could be reproduced during the uprising only if everyone worked for the sake of others in solidarity. The individual should realize their own deficiency. This was perversely proved by the last line of the poem *Żuje surowe żyto* [He chews raw rye], in which the sole isolated character – the writer – prepares to die.

Although *Budowałam barykadę* focuses on the observations of the nurse, only three out of the ten poems selected by Góra adopt such a perspective (*Dwie garbuski* [The hunchbacked girls], *Harcerka* [The scout], and *Czternastoletnia sanitariuszka myśli zasypiając* [The thoughts of a fourteen-year-old nurse as she falls asleep]). In two other poems, the lyrical I is a soldier (*Mówi żołnierz* [Soldier speaks], *Żołnierz mówi do generała* [Soldier speaks to the general]), and in the next two poems we find the collective lyrical subject. The poem that best illustrates the importance of solidarity in this community is entitled *Po pijanemu* [Drunk]. Its protagonist is shot dead while singing the Polish national anthem on a barricade. Four other people risk their lives to retrieve his body from under fire, only to later tell the mother of the deceased that he died a hero.

The cuts made by Góra emphasize the universality of care (and reproductive) work and its fundamental role in the community. During the uprising, the traditionally "female" roles were

²⁷Góra, 66.

²⁸Letter to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, quoted after: Anna Kowalska, "Przypomnienie. W dziesięciolecie śmierci Anny Świrszczyńskiej" [Reminder. On the tenth anniversary of Anna Świrszczyńska's death], *Twórczość* 11 (1994): 126.

performed by both men and women. The war was to men what patriarchy was to women (they were reduced to caregivers). In this context, Katarzyna Szopa speaks of “robbing women of their subjectivity, bodily experiences, and knowledge passed down from generation to generation; it destroys women’s genealogies, deepens women’s alienation in the public sphere, and uproots them from the local environment.”²⁹ People reduced to the roles they play in the community, whose bodily experiences are now subordinated to a common goal, are also robbed of their subjectivity. Generational knowledge or genealogy also lose their significance among the people fighting in the uprising. In such a context, it is not surprising that *Budowałam barykadę* was preceded by *Jestem baba* – after all, it was in this collection that Świrszczyńska most comprehensively critiqued reality and called for a revolution.

Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon

In 1978, Wydawnictwo Literackie published *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* [Happy as a dog’s tail]. According to Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, Świrszczyńska praises insignificance in this collection, emphasizing “freedom, independence, and distance to oneself.”³⁰ She celebrates animalistic, unconditional, and essential joy. Stapkiewicz finds in the collection “joy that is ordinary and at the same time profound, all-encompassing”³¹ and argues that screams resound in it alongside laughter and fun. Until now, screams were associated with danger, but in *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* we find “a scream that can be shouted out.”³² It is not surprising, then, that there are many “dog metaphors” in this collection. They refer to experiencing emotions to the fullest. The struggles with life take the form of joyful wrestling, grappling. One delights in this possibility.

The poems from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* are preceded by the poem *Moje wszy* [My lice] – the only poem which Góra selected from *Budowałam barykadę* in which a non-human species appears. Poverty brings humans and dogs together, as both are attacked by lice. It is thus not surprising that this poem announces the poems from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* that follow.

The first two represent the cycle *Bieg po zdrowie* [Pursuing health]. *Stoję na czworakach* [Standing on all fours], which appears right next to *Moje wszy*, brings to mind African incantations from *Czarne słowa*. Still, the last line progresses towards the yogic teachings of the East. In this poem, the source of vital forces is the connection with the Earth – it is slowly regained through exercise. Cultivating and celebrating one’s physicality – pursuing health – is possible as a result of rejecting the burden that Świrszczyńska diagnosed in *Jestem baba*.

The decision behind including *Miłość Antoniny* in the selection is thus explained – the ways of breaking patriarchal patterns described in it directly announce Świrszczyńska’s “dog-like” joy. After all, she perhaps felt best on all fours (and not, as Miłosz would have it, standing on her head). Exercising – and work, also the work of mourning, and thus of reconciling with the

²⁹Szopa, 16.

³⁰Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, *Ciało, kobiecość i śmiech w poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej* [Body, femininity and laughter in the poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 207.

³¹Stapkiewicz, 208.

³²Anna Świrszczyńska, *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* [Happy as a dog’s tail] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978), 7.

world – requires air and space, which Góra includes in his selection with the poem *Oddycham* [I breathe]. In this poem, we find another version of a room made up only of windows, which represents the poet, as well as a figure of vastness, saturation, and excess, which the interpreters of *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* have found so fascinating.

The selection of poems from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* resembles playing with a dog – a metamorphic spinning, as in a kaleidoscope: Świrszczyńska is on all fours, panting, snorting, and making joyful sounds; Świrszczyńska is angrily struggling with/in her body, and a moment later she joyfully accepts the inferiority of her species. When dogs play, they are not aggressive. They train and practice – and Świrszczyńska believed that the body should be trained, prepared for the trials that the future may bring. So that the delighted reader does not forget that she is reading revolutionary poetry, poetry born of discord which aims to transform crisis into change, the last poem from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* chosen by Góra is *Zabiję ciebie* [I will kill you] from the cycle *Walka na śmierć i życie* [A fight to the death].

Cierpienie i radość

Anna Świrszczyńska's last poetry collection – *Cierpienie i radość* [Suffering and joy] – was published posthumously, in 1985.³³ It included previously unpublished poems about her father and mother, admired by Czesław Miłosz, who said that "*Piórę koszulę* [I'm washing the shirt] is one of the great farewell poems of world literature."³⁴

Never have Świrszczyńska's poems revealed so many intimate details. In a sense, *Cierpienie i radość* is an autobiography: the collection opens with a series of poems about Świrszczyńska's parents and closes with poems about a friend, Świrszczyńska's last love interest. Interestingly, her last poem, *Jutro będą mnie krajać* [Tomorrow they will cut me up], does not appear in this collection. It was included in Miłosz's anthology, who, referring to the opening apostrophe, determined many subsequent interpretations of this poem:

I was not surprised by your last poem, written in the hospital before your operation, which summed up so well your constant readiness to accept both happiness and pain, if necessary. [...] this act, I think, embodies *amor fati*, that is submission to God's will and a feeling of gratitude.³⁵

Konrad Góra does not include *Jutro będą mnie krajać* in his collection. Likewise, he does not include other very personal poems within the narrative he creates. He only features four poems from the cycle *Wiersze o ojcu i matce* [Poems about father and mother], two from *Wiersze różne* [Miscellaneous poems], and one from *Wiersze jasne* [Bright poems].

Białe ślubne pantofle [The white wedding shoes] render Świrszczyńska part of a longer female family history, the significance of which for one's sense of self was emphasized by Katarzyna

³³Anna Świrszczyńska, *Cierpienie i radość* [Suffering and joy] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985).

³⁴Miłosz, 33.

³⁵Miłosz, 106.

Szopa – the resourcefulness and the willingness to sacrifice herself for the sake of others that characterize the protagonist of the poem, the lyrical I's mother, bring to mind generational wisdom. Wealth which is the result of reproductive work eludes descriptions based on the patriarchal-capitalist economy.

The poems about Świrszczyńska's father are the most personal poems in *Kona ostatni człowiek*. In *Uspokój się* [Calm down], the lyrical I's relationship with her father is mirrored in her relationship with her daughter: the firstborn's rough, reserved tenderness contrasts with her own emotional reaction. A similar contrast appears in *Film o ojcu* [Film about father], where the emotional lyrical I is criticized by art critics. The first poem takes place at home, in the domestic sphere; the second poem takes place at a cultured *salon*. In both cases, the lyrical I is criticized: both the daughter and the critics consider her too emotional – just as in the case of the literary world's reaction to *Jestem baba*. By including these two poems in the selection, Góra presents Świrszczyńska as an honest poet, one who openly speaks her mind. She exists in the world on her own terms, regardless of the consequences.

The next two poems, *Dwieście osiemdziesiąt stopni mrozu* [Minus two hundred and eighty degrees] and *Jestem potężna* [I am mighty], once again evoke images of excess, reminding us that less is more:

Kiedy jestem sama,
rozkwitają we mnie raje
wszystkich religii świata³⁶.

When I am alone,
the paradises of all the world's religions
bloom within me.

Świrszczyńska's materialistic metaphysics makes us believe in the possibility of paradise on earth:

It would be a world in which the practices of maintaining and reproducing social life are not enslaved by the modes of the patriarchal-capitalist economy that dispossesses so many of access to the means of subsistence; and where the richness of human life is not related to an economy of wealth that produces human misery.³⁶

It can be achieved if, first of all, we imagine the world anew. The goal is not a revolution but a gradual, persistent, transformation of ways of thinking through the cultivation of language and the use of poetic tools in the service of the best possible future that can be imagined at a given moment.

The last poem in *Kona ostatni człowiek* presents us with Świrszczyńska who is happy, busy, on all fours. It is the Nietzschean "bridge towards the *Übermensch*;" the best metamorphosis, the potential path to paradise.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³⁶Szopa, 26.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The article reconstructs the story of Anna Świrszczyńska as constructed in the selection of her poems *Kona ostatni człowiek* [The last man is dying] by the Wrocław poet Konrad Góra. The selection is personal in nature: the leftist ethos that unites both poets allows Góra to enter into a dialogue with Świrszczyńska's works, emphasizing those aspects of her writing that are particularly important to him. The story constructed by Góra is similar to the one conceived by Katarzyna Szopa in her book on Świrszczyńska published nine years later: the poet examines the injustice and suffering associated with women's reproductive work, which is often ignored or taken for granted regardless of the political system in force.

r e p r o d u c t i v e w o r k

Konrad Góra

F E M I N I S M

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