

## **Wioletta Greg: The Stranger and Her Escapes**

It is not easy to be a poet. Certainly not, when you live away from your country, or away from your language, in which you feel, see and analyse everything around you. Emigration isn't easy. And particularly not for poets, who live seizing the world into short verses. It is quite different with fiction; prose has its own rules, rights for reminiscences and descriptions. Perhaps, this is why Wioletta Greg decided to write prose even though for years she has been writing poetry, wonderful and intriguing verses, both serious and ironic, and deeply penetrating the laws of reality, exhibiting its diversity and idiosyncrasies. Perhaps, fenced with the foreign sounds, surrounded with new hums that needed to be learnt from the beginning, she decided to write longer sentences, create a plot, and tell stories.

As a prose writer, Wioletta first published short, autobiographical *Notebook from an Island* (*Notatnik z wyspy* 2012), the notes from Isle of Wight where she first lived after leaving Poland. Then, in 2014, she published *Guguly* (Unripe Fruits), powerful tale of a grown-up woman who takes us for a trip to a psyche of a little girl in a small village, a girl whom Greg once may have been. *Guguly*, now renamed to *Swallowing Mercury*, beautifully translated by Eliza Marciniak, and published by Portobello (2017), has now all chances to win hearts of many English-language readers.

*Swallowing Mercury* is a set of short recollections about being a child in the tiny place of southern Poland (yet, it can be any other European little village). These recalls, idyllic on surface, exhibit - in fact - cruel rules of this small place, rule of poverty, survival and feudal loyalty to tradition. You know how it is to be stunned by child's naïve yet accurate accounts of, let it be, death, illness or suffering, stating facts without searching for meaning or for any justification in the metaphysics, just describing the material manifestations of things and time. This is how Wioletta Greg sketches Hektary, the village from *Swallowing Mercury*: with a sharp interest in details, perspective of an insider, yet, someone constantly astonished by the mechanisms of daily and nightly, vital and mortal, visible and secreted aspects of the everydayness. Time is measured by events, the people around are pictured through their activity: "A few more months has passed. Ducklings hatched in the hallway.... My grandfather started to plane down ... rockers for my rocking horse. My grandmother made colourful cockerels from strips of aspen bast. The flies living between the window frames reawakened. When the christening shawl had faded and the periwinkle leaves had fallen onto the windowsill, a thin man with curly hair and a little moustache came into our house. After he saw me, he cried for a whole day, and he calmed down only when Poland started playing in the World Cup". Even the

humour, or irony, like this one, associating man's sensitivity with football, is natural, child-like elusive.

The whole story may feel like a mythologizing of a childhood; it may have pretence of nostalgic revisiting of a hometown, but actually the narrator is fully aware of the roughness of the reality of a small place and how violent it can be towards any individual, let alone vulnerable child. This is why, *Swallowing Mercury*, by creating the pseudo-nostalgic narrative, melancholic threads, exhibits the reasons for escaping, emigrating, running away. This is why, in this book, not in the plot, but somehow under the skin of the plot, we see the desire to abandon the place. When, to the end of the book (warning: a spoiler) the main character gives up on the planned escape to the town and she goes back to her village, we know: it is just a matter of time, not just yet.

#### **Playing with fiction and reality....**

Mixing the reality and fiction, gluing together real and fictive Wioletas, we know that the real Wioletta runs away soon: first to Częstochowa, for studying, writing, first jobs, loves, then to Isle of Wight and now, in London. And this escape gave Wioletta a necessary distance to see her small town and its mechanisms in the acuter glances: she looks bravely into the life of a family that easily may have been her own, and describes the gloom lives of (could be) her mother, granny, grandfather and father with the most compassionate, yet, honest way: how their provincial lives were intertwined with wars and ideologies, poverty and need to survive, each in their own way. We can even risk a new definition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the one when no one was spared, no one could hide away from big politics. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was no chance of a small, locked to the outside small homeland. Majority of people of the last century was condemned to taking part in wars, in poverty, homelessness, inhumane work, and solitude survival, in which individual's dreams, ambitions, plans meant nothing. And yes, Poland was in the middle of the turmoil of the last century and this is why Polish story can be exceptional but it can also be paradigmatic, bringing up a nutshell of tragedies of this age, which after all gave the basis of our present. Wioletta writes about it in a wonderfully subtle way: we have women survival struggle when men are arrested in the turmoil time of communism seen as a normal daily routine, we have a theme of disappeared Jews who revisit the once abandoned homes seen as a curious episode of one afternoon (similar picture appears more and more often in the third and fourth after-war generations' literature, for example in Olga Tokarczuk's *House of the Day, House of the Night*, 2000). Yet, Wioletta's characters are far from being stiff icons of the time, the writer gives a lot of personality to each of the protagonists, for example her father, perhaps the most significant person for little Wiola, is an escapist, least rooted in reality, an artist who fills the emptiness of his life by staffing animals, creating after-life (reminiscence of Bruno Schulz's mannequins). The clear, simple sentences of a child's perspective description of each of the characters highlights even more the absurdity of reality shaped by ideologies, and its intertwinement with religion and politics.

### **The Foreigner/Cudzoziemka**

Three years ago, in 2014, Wioletta published *Finite Formulae and the Theories of Chance* (Arc Publications), this was the second English language collection of her poems (after *The Smena's Memory*, Off\_Press, 2011). *Finite...* is the first publications, in which Wioletta Grzegorzewska changes her surname, Grzegorzewska becomes Greg. This is a gesture of a foreigner (cudzoziemka), who – recognizing the peculiarity of her surname - tries to reshape it according to the phonetics of the new land. But surely, for many of us it is so much easy to remember Greg than Grzegorzewska. And perhaps it is easier to talk about the poetry where we have no problem to pronounce the author's name. And there is a lot to talk about. Poetry of Wioletta Greg is exceptional, we find here enigmatic summary of various family stories, poetic notes on events of XX century, folklore, emigration notes, aesthetics of bodily experience, amazing sensitivity towards lights, colours and taste. And it contains a constant notion of escaping, migration, like in the poem "Missing", in which the first escape appears to be onto the fruit tree:

Look for me in the attic, beneath the tarp  
and the lily leaves, at the bottom of the quarry.

I am perched on a cherry tree, swallowing unripen fruit,  
the tree whispering: I will hand you over to the starlings.

Greg's poetry is universal, it wants to describe the inside of fruit, the surface of tree's trunk, understand the stomach pain and the pain of existence in the small place, where the contingency of events is somehow painfully visible, like death.

### **Short bio...**

Wioletta had her debut in 1997 with a collection of poems *Controlled Imagination / Wyobrażenia kontrolowana*. From the beginning the style is clear: rather long verses, interests in stories, situations, plastic metaphors, tendency to build the paradox between soft metaphors and the crudity of the subject.

2003 brings another collections, *Parantele* (Kinships), and in 2008 *Inne Obroty / Alternate Turns*. 2011 brings *Ruchy Browna / Brownian Motions* and in London appears *Smena's Memory (Pamięć Smeny)*, the bilingual selections of poems. The latter collection is when Wioletta's escape into another language, for English-language readers, begins.

### **Inscriptions of Migration, or making your map while travelling**

Wioletta works are perfect for my investigation of women's writing, themes of melancholy, which are not to indulge in sadness, but in women's writing they are, I argue, just the beginning of social, political and ethical critiques of reality (in my book *Migrating Melancholic Bodies: Polish Contemporary Women's Writing*, 2015). Melancholic story is the beginning of being really pissed off. I believe that migration in contemporary European literature is a new category. It is no longer the political

division between East and West in Europe that demarcates the home literary production from the émigré one. What designates literature, as emigration/migration literature is rather the particular existential dimension of being separated from one's own language and culture, the experience of dislocation present during the creation of the text, and inscribed as such into the text. Therefore, it can be argued that rather than speaking about migration/emigration/émigré literature we should talk about e/migrating inscriptions or inscriptions of migration. The experience of migration understood in this way is a combination of the subject (author) position (often appearing in a melancholic mood), the position of the speaking subject (narrator/protagonist being abroad, though this is not always present), and the themes of the texts and their narrative strategies (for example, the sometimes politically determined choices of characters, places or themes). Inscriptions of migration can be seen as possible ways of interpreting the text and can be used as particular reading keys is present: glimpses (not necessarily the full spectrum) of the author's biography as well as the socio-political context in which the text was created, including gender aspects. My reading of contemporary Polish women's writing uses both understandings of inscriptions of migration in order to reveal the various messages offered by the representations of melancholic migrating bodies. One of those supposedly melancholic, nostalgic story, melancholy re-written by woman, is at the core of Wioletta Greg's *Swallowing Mercury*. This kind of melancholy, or rather this view of melancholy connected to multicultural, multilinguistic experience of migration, brings a richer overview of reality. Her escapes are certainly not merely signs of resignation, desperate need to change, they built up to a richer, fuller life's outlook, as my favourite Spanish poet Antonio Machado says, "Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar." Walker, there is no road, road is made by walking.