



Julia Hartwig and Rosanna Warren

War and Poetry

October 12, 2006



Irena Grudzińska Gross: Julia Hartwig resides in Warsaw, Poland. She turned 85 a month ago, and her first volume of poetry was published 50 years ago, in 1956, so we are celebrating her two anniversaries this evening. She has been writing poetry all throughout these 50 years, and she has also been translating poetry into Polish, starting with French poets and then English. She has written two very important biographies of French poets, Apollinaire and Nerval, and several volumes of essays, travel notes and literary criticism for which she received several awards.

Rosanna Warren was born in Connecticut; she spent the early part of her life in Europe, and then studied at Yale University and Johns Hopkins University. She has published four volumes of her poetry, along with several other volumes of translations and anthologies. She is the recipient of numerous awards. She is Emma Ann MacLachlan Metcalf Professor of Humanities at Boston University, and has been a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Julia Hartwig: *Classmates*

The Latin teacher's voice seemed a bit sharper
When she addressed them
(never by the first name).

Miriam was always perfectly prepared,
Reginka weaker but correct.
They kept together
and together left the classroom before Religion.

The last time we met unexpectedly
at the end of Lubartowska Street,
on the border of a freshly created ghetto.
They stood there timidly as if something shameful happened to them.
(translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter)

Rosanna Warren: *Arrival*

(Poseidon, *Iliad* XIII)

That's how a god descends from a mountain peak
in Samothrace: startled attention stirs him, then
three strides vault him down to the plain as oak roots shake
and boulders lurch from the cliff face, vomiting down

its loosened jaw of scree: that's how a god descends,
the fourth stride thunders him into his harbor pool
at Aigai where, gold in the weedy depths, his palace bends
the sun beams: golden the armor he buckles, all

sun-hammered glint and gleam the bridles he fastens
on golden-maned horses, his whip a gold parabola in foam,
chariot a churning glare on a wave that glistens:
that's how a god arrives, how grief will come

any day, any ordinary hour, when all we see
is a peculiar, shivering brilliance in the air
like a premonition of migraine; and no one can see
later, how in such a flash, the dark came there.

IGG: I would like to start with war, since war is present in works of both Julia Hartwig and Rosanna Warren. Rosanna Warren's collection *Departure* has a great deal to do with warfare; some of it ancient warfare seen through Homer and Virgil, some of it modern warfare seen in the First and Second World Wars. There are also domestic wars there. And Julia Hartwig's many poems are about the scars of World War II.

Thinking about how the two of you have written about it, I began with a very clear idea of the difference between Polish poetry and American poetry. Of course Rosanna Warren is not the typical American poet, if such a person exists; her education is very European. My hope is, therefore, that Julia Hartwig will stand up for Polish poetry. Is there a big difference between the ways the two of you write about war? According to the textbooks, Polish poetry is embedded in history, while American poetry is a poetry of individuals, of capturing the moment. In his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville predicted that there would be a blossoming of poetry in the United States because people will be bringing poetry out of themselves rather than from culture, and they will be talking about themselves, and not about history or society. Is this difference real?

JH: Czesław Miłosz called modern poetry "Polish school." After some reflection I agree; there is special kind of thinking in poetry, in Polish poetry. History, of course, but there is also a relation to the world, the rejection of abstraction. I don't want to say this poetry is realistic, not at all, but if you go a little higher, you can even say there is a "mysticism of realism." Material things go into them, you look for something else, always something else; it always leads to the reality. And the Polish school appeared, of course, after World War II. There must be some reason for this. And I must underline that the Polish poets are very much related to the tradition of the old poetry. We have real relations with the poetry of the Renaissance with Jan Kochanowski, of the Baroque with Morsztyn, great Romanticism with Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Norwid. And you very often find young people, who, writing poems, will say, "I love Norwid because he knew how to say bad words against his nation."

RW: I'm turning over in my mind this textbook idea that Polish poetry would be more anchored in an immediate experience of history and American poetry more anchored in the exploration of selfhood, and I can think of a way to play that argument, which would have some evidence to back it up. One could talk about the origins of North American literature in Puritan diaries and the disciplines of self-consciousness, theologically, coming out of Puritanism, and then the religious revivals of the 19th century. One could see New England transcendentalism and Emerson as an intense interest in the self, a kind of imperial self. Robert Frost is a poet of the self in nature, finding its coordinates in nature. But I hasten to make the counterargument because the United States is a young country, though aging rapidly, and it has a history with its darkness. One of our great darkneses is the Civil War, and I think one of our great poets, who is only slowly and recently being recognized as a great poet, is Herman Melville, who wrote one of the great books of American poetry, right after the Civil War. It was published in 1865, and it's called *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War*. It seems to me that one feels oneself a poet of a nation if thinking about one's nation can wound you. I adore French poetry and speak and write and dream in French, but France doesn't hurt me the way the United States hurts me.

As an illustration, I want to read a short, great American poem of historical awareness. Herman Melville's poem "Shiloh," written after the terrible battle in the Civil War in 1862, when 24,000 people died in two days, and he calls it a requiem. I just hope this complicates the picture.

Herman Melville: *Shiloh*

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
 The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
 The forest-field of Shiloh –
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain,

Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
 Around the church of Shiloh –
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
 And natural prayer
Of dying foemen mingled there –
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve –
 Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
 But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
 And all is hushed at Shiloh.

IGG: May I tentatively suggest that Poland has a different reaction to war, because, unlike the Civil War, the war Julia Hartwig is writing about was a war against an entire nation, and therefore there is here another type of solidarity and interpretation of experience. But what is very interesting to me is that Julia Hartwig does feel that she's part of the tradition, and she declares it. (to Julia Hartwig) In what way are you feeling that? And are you, when you are writing, really thinking, "I'm a Polish poet"; or is it that you are in a certain way automatically brought by language and by the things that you are reading every day into what you are doing?

JH: I don't feel that a poet is somebody different, bigger or more important, but I do think the poet is a speaker for other people. You can dislike what he writes, but he's trying to do it. And translating American and French poetry, I have something more in me than only Polish-ness. We have published with my husband [the poet Artur Międzyrzecki] an anthology of American poets. It's great poetry, really, and I learned a lot from it. It gave me such a freshness of sentiments and imagination. And I must say that I was very much surprised to learn that Rosanna translated the same French poets I did. French poetry has so many poets, and we have chosen the same names: Pierre Reverdy, Max Jacob and Blaise Cendrars. So this is sort of a sisterhood.

IGG (to RW): If you say that America can hurt you, and France does not, this is an extra-poetical feeling, isn't it?

RW: Well, it becomes a poetical feeling, because if you are a writer, you write out of inward conflict and angst, so it can certainly become a poetic question. But I think your larger question is about the feeling of being a part of a literary tradition. I feel I belong to plural traditions. One of them is perhaps the tradition of this young country of colonizers and immigrants from so many places all over the world. We have plural traditions of looking back out of our continent to foreign lands and wanting to identify with them. I am thinking, for instance, of T.S. Eliot making up his fantasy of a classical tradition in which he would insert himself and therefore alter it all by his presence, or Ezra Pound, the same generation, having the same sort of fantasy, though his fantasy, Pound's fantasy, included China. And a version of this is American collections of paintings and furniture and many houses of well-heeled American plutocrats from the late 19th century with a fake Corot in them, which is such a touching gesture of homage to the Old World. So maybe part of my tradition is the tradition of the fake Corot, or even the real Corot, where I go yearningly to France, and Italy and Greece, and I translate Apollinaire and Gérard de Nerval and Max Jacob, and I'm trying to find other voices, other shapes, other forms, and that's very American, this poignant desire for an enlarged and plural world. I think one can call that a kind of an American tradition, of not quite an expatriate, but the yearning for the foreign. But I also feel attached too, you might call it the William Carlos Williams strand - the homegrown. So, a short answer is plural traditions, and one of them would be represented by Frost and Williams and one by Eliot and Pound.

IGG (to RW): When you hear Julia Hartwig, do you recognize this as Polish poetry?

RW: Yes and no. The first thing that Julia said about the rejection of abstraction and the finding, through the concrete, a kind of mysticism . . . I think this is a way to describe Emily Dickinson. And there are certainly plenty of other American poets of the 19th and the 20th centuries who are

meditating upon particular objects, particular landscapes, and through them finding some kind of epiphany. In that sense that description of Polish poetry didn't strike me as especially Polish, but it seems to me that perhaps the particular historical inflection that it received in Poland after World War II with a need to reject an easy lyricism, and to make a strong ethical stand that was at the same time very subtle and ironic, that seems to me distinctly Polish. When Czesław Miłosz began to translate and collect and make anthologies of Polish poetry in this country, it had enormous effect on American poets, and not only American poetry – I think it had a huge effect on Seamus Heaney, for instance.

Question (from audience): I, too, was surprised by the idea of the rejection of abstraction, and it didn't sound like my experience of Polish poetry, but then I realized that there is a generalized approach to the real as opposed to a specific approach to the real, which is a half step in the direction of archetype, almost. And it made me wonder whether an archetype is an abstraction or a complete embodiment of the real. That's one question. The other question is the word irony, and whether you would distinguish between tragic and trivial irony.

JH: Of course, it is impossible not to distinguish it. As for the first question, I really don't know how possible it is to know the reality, and how far we can go with this knowledge, and describe it. So this concept of reality is not so flat, and not so naive.

Question: Is there anything in Polish poetry that goes in the direction of William Carlos Williams?

JH: William Carlos Williams is somebody I absolutely adore. His poetry is so clear, so simple. Miłosz said, "You shouldn't make people sad with your poetry." Of course, his poetry is sometimes tragic, but it is never about his own sadness, but about the sad status of the human being, the sadness of the nation, which was occupied, which went through the war. His poetry is so clear, so simple, it's so good – I mean good for people. It is true.

RW (to JH): Do you think that the poetic reality in Williams is completely different from the kind of metaphysics or concreteness in Zbigniew Herbert? Herbert can write about an object but you feel that it's really a metaphysical object, a conundrum.

JH: I see a big difference because Williams never teaches people, and Herbert has this tendency to say, "Go, go, do it, don't do it." So, I must say, I adore Herbert, but this side I don't like very much.

Question: Could you be a little bit more precise and elaborate on the question of this interest in Polish literature by Americans?

RW: For instance, two marvelous and influential American poets were working with Miłosz, translating his poems – Robert Pinsky and Robert Hass – and this intimacy of working with Mr. Miłosz on the translations is just an example of the profound influence that came through the philological work of trying to get those poems into English. That is one micro-example of how a whole aesthetic, a whole sensibility, a whole vision of literature, and a moral vision of literature comes in and begins influencing younger American poets, because then it changes the way that, say, Pinsky and Hass are writing, and it changes the way people are reading them. And the presence of these anthologies – there were more than one – and the translation of a book like *My Century* by Aleksander Wat are a kind of testimony to an experience that many Americans, I think, knew about only vaguely. Somehow Polish poetry became important in the United States to American writers in a way that is enabling new poems to be written, more important than say Czech poetry or Romanian poetry, and I wonder why? There's marvelous Czech poetry, marvelous Romanian poetry, but maybe there were very charismatic Polish poets here, translating and making anthologies, or maybe it was something about the poetic tradition in Poland that is so extraordinarily rich that it had its own charisma.

IGG: It is very possible that, being a larger country, Poland has a greater mass, a critical mass of poetry. But I think there are many more poets that became internationally known because they were writing with some kind

of a common voice, even though they are such different poets, like Różewicz, Herbert, Miłosz. And Rosanna is right, a very important part of that influence came from the work of one very persistent translator and promoter, i.e., Czesław Miłosz.

JH: Yes, there is another side of translation – of American poetry into Polish. It was mostly Stanisław Barańczak who was translating numerous poets, including Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop. So, if there is some knowledge of American poetry in Poland, it is mostly due to Barańczak.

RW: And Barańczak also has had an influence here, too, through his anthologies and translations and his organizing activity of Polish poetry being brought into English.

Question: This is a question for Rosanna about poetry of war, and not poetry of nations. I suppose you can say that the most traumatic war in the United States since the Civil War has been the Vietnam War, until now, I guess. It gave rise to a lot of very fine novels and short stories. What comes to your mind with respect to poetry on the Vietnam War?

RW: I don't think many of us who care about American poetry could honestly point to excellent poems that came out of the Vietnam War, nothing that I can remember that would equal Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" from World War II, for instance. I mean there were many feverish and virtuous poems that came out of the war, but not so many that I remember that could stand next to Andrew Marvell. I don't know why that is.

JH: It's a paradox that the big events, the biggest events in history, very rarely have their poetry written. I was very surprised reading "Can you write poems after Auschwitz?" Can you or can you not? You can't do it, because the words can't express it, you can't find the words for the terrible things that happened. But you also can, we've had many poems on the Holocaust in Poland, by Różewicz, Szymborska, Miłosz. It is the only way

that people can say, "I loved you, I miss you." This is why the poetry exists and should exist.

RW: So you're suggesting that, on the one hand, a historical cataclysm usually doesn't get directly into poetry, but that there is some oblique aftermath of absorption.

JH: It needs many years. After many years, we have the poetry on the Holocaust. Even I have written some and before I really couldn't; I didn't know how to do it.

Question: I wanted to say that I think one of the differences might be that the Americans could say anything they wanted to about the Vietnam War, so they were not speaking under an umbrella of oppression, while Polish poets were not even able to speak about the war openly. I'm thinking about Szyborska's poem "The End and the Beginning"; she's really talking about World War II, and saying that "after every war someone has to clean up." And that seems such a typically Polish way ... repression, response, censorship ...

RW: American poets have almost romanticized the repressive circumstances in which the Polish poets had to write after the war. I remember Joseph Brodsky rejecting this romanticism and saying, "You know, it's not a blessing to have to develop one's craft under such repression." On the other hand, it is certainly true that if one is living in a political regime, where you're not free to say what you think, it does affect one's strategies of expression.

Question: In Poland and in Europe we were faced with the absurdity and horrors of wars, and that, in a way, makes us see the reality through sublimation; we don't want to deal with it directly. I think that in the poetry of Szyborska, sometimes she cuts in very pointedly, but she manages to skim over it. Your [Rosanna's] poetry is very to the point, and standing out and facing the ugliness of things.

RW: The speaker was suggesting that the reality of wars in Europe induced writers to create poems that are more glossed over or oblique in their representation of violence, whereas, she was remarking that, for instance, my poems were more direct in their ugliness.

JH: I read your poetry, I like it very much - there is force in it. My poetry was always a little bit soft, like in music, so when I want to write about very heavy issues, I have always the problem how to express it. I am trying my best, of course, and I think I found my way. So everybody reacts in one way or another. More discrete or more violent. There are no two poets who are like each other.

IGG: I think that, yes, we came to a semi-conclusion, that Polish poetry is much more discreet about the violence of history, that it does not, in a certain way, name it or show it directly, but shows it in an oblique way, while Rosanna is freer to touch it directly. Although, I would like to point out, that she always does it in some kind of disguise. You never do it directly, these are antique wars, or this is an (imaginary) French poet, so it is a way of deflecting it, not facing it. Maybe this is the characteristic of poetry, that you really cannot look violence directly in the face.

RW: Well, I would say that poetry is a mode of composition, which is figurative. That it always has to turn from the literal into the figurative. And if that transformation hasn't occurred, I don't think it qualifies as poetry. Imagination - I want strongly to say - is a moral faculty, and without it we won't survive on this planet. And so the beautiful poem by Julia Hartwig about the cat "Maurice," and why we need love, is to awaken in us this fundamental instinct of vulnerability and care. Poetry is one way on Earth homo sapiens has found to awaken those instincts. The most dangerous people are the ones who have no imagination.