

A Woman According to the Poetic Conception of Jan Darowski

Kobieta w poetyckiej wizji Jana Darowskiego

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Abstract

Jan Darowski seldom mentioned the motif of women in his works. Despite the fact that his volume *Niespodziewane żywoty*, issued in Poets' and Painters' Press in 1990, was dedicated to his second wife, Basia, born Świderska, it includes no poems concerning females. To the poet, gender is a very important factor which differentiates social expectations related to playing specific parts. In the works of the London writer, there is the Polish mother; womanhood takes a shape of motherhood, taking care of home and family, being a perfect housewife.

Abstrakt

Jan Darowski rzadko poruszał motywy kobiet w swoich utworach. Jakkolwiek tom *Niespodziewane żywoty*, wydany w londyńskiej Oficynie Poetów i Malarzy w 1990 roku, zadedykował swojej drugiej żonie Basi, z domu Świderskiej, to nie pojawiają się w nim wiersze dotyczące płci żeńskiej. Płeć dla poety stanowi niezwykle ważny czynnik, który różnicuje oczekiwania społeczne związane z wypełnianiem określonych ról. W utworach londyńskiego pisarza pojawia się matka-Polka, kobiecość nabiera kształtu związanego z macierzyństwem, dbaniem o dom i rodzinę, byciem wzorową gospodynią.

A Woman According to the Poetic Conception of Jan Darowski

A poet esteemed by not only Polish literary critics, aware of his value. A maverick individual who never sought recognition, and according to many literature experts who emigrated, died as an underrated artist. Jan Darowski, poet, essayist, translator of Polish poetry into English and *vice versa*. Thanks to his translations of Polish poetry into English, Darowski was given the appellation of one of the best translators. He translated the poems of, among others, Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Różewicz, Miron Białoszewski and Wisława Szymborska. What is more, he co-edited the anthology of priestly poetry, *Słowa na pustyni* [*Words in the Desert*] for which he received thanks from the Metropolitan of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, in 1971. When quoting the poem by Jan Darowski, *Post mortem*, Czesław Miłosz aptly noticed: “There has been no so bitter and cruel poem written in Poland”, and then added: “domestic readers do not know either the name of Jan Darowski or many other names of poets writing abroad”¹. The author of *Drzewo sprzeczeki* and *Niespodziewane żywoty* did not want to take his writings out of the sock drawer. Adam Czerniawski, one of the main literary critics of the group of poets writing for “Kontynenty” magazine and chief editor of this magazine, received a letter from Darowski on 2 December 1992 that reads: “I don’t like to print my poems – it is like flashing in public to me”².

Jan Darowski made his debut in a rather conventional way in 1969 with the collection of poems entitled *Drzewo sprzeczeki*. The second volume of poetry, *Niespodziewane żywoty*, was not issued until 1990. The fact that Darowski was included in the group of the best and most interesting London poets when he emigrated in the 50s of the last century is worth mentioning here. In the writings by Darowski, one would easily notice autobiographism, divided loyalties, search for order in values and spiritual connection with other human being. He defines his literary works as follows:

Today, no one really think that a style is something you can work out. It is not writing fluency, just as eloquence is not knowledge. Even aptness is not exactly it. There are great stylists who are not and cannot be right. [...] and what determines our life, also determines our style [...] the literature must be taken seriously, as life; and a writer who wants to be something more than

¹ F. Śmieja, *Czekam na cud*, „Śląsk” 2008, no. 12, p. 38n. [own translation into English]

² From the home archives of Jan Darowski, special collections of the Library of the University of Rzeszów; “Fraza” 2011, no. 1, p. 289. [own translation into English]

a client of political commissar, must choose a life for the price of a word or words for the price of a life³.

Jan Darowski seldom mentioned the motif of women in his works. Despite the fact that his volume *Niespodziewane żywoty*, issued in Poets' and Painters' Press in 1990, was dedicated to his second wife, Basia, born Świd-erska, it includes no poems concerning females. Even if this subject is mentioned, this does not evoke any specific figures. Each work concerning the female subject dives deep into different recesses. In *Lektura*, Darowski buries himself into a female soul, starts an interesting discussion on hypnagogia; in *Ewa w kąpieli* he shocks readers with nudity; and other poems are often his return to the childhood, to his family home in Brzezie, sharing his memories of his mother with readers. He presents her as a guardian of hearth and home, simply as Hestia, creating an eulogy on her multitasking skills.

The first work with a clear-cut figure of a woman is *Komputerotyk*. The poem's title refers to a computer as a device which to some extent compensates for real meetings of a young man with a woman. In this case, the software can be a woman substitute for the young man but it cannot take over all the functions, especially the most intimate ones. Interpersonal relations, sense of security, feelings play a very significant existential part and a human cannot have it with an algorithm. *Komputerotyk* is full of irony; the author scoffs at technology-rich human interactions and at the language or rather a failure to talk about feelings. There is no female character which could be named and described. It is hard to find a protagonist in this poem; "an average daughter of Eve" is a synecdoche. Here, we encounter a woman of vague personal details, difficult to be identified. Outside of the focus of poetic attention, there is any information concerning a time frame of the couple's relationship. The author focuses only on the intimate relation of partners, but he does not do it directly. In this case, the mysterious and untamed sacred things of womanhood blend with the profane things. The poet describes the relationship between the woman, man and computer gently, intimately and without going into details unnecessarily. The lovers search for the truth about themselves and the world, even for the price of stripping them of mystery, taboo, or any limitations. The language, Darowski uses, is quite bold and marked erotically: "it sounds like an instrument, it already has clearly reproductive organs"⁴. None of the poem's verse refers to any specific computer text. The portraits of characters are not sketched for readers. Neither do we know how the admirer names his loved one. A lack of the identity of

³ J. Darowski, *Styl i fałdy natchnienia*, "Kontynenty" 1962, no. 42, p. 16. [own translation into English]

⁴ J. Darowski, *Niespodziewane żywoty*, Londyn 1990, p. 24. [own translation into English]

the poem's author and the female addressee of his computer text is noticeable. Verbal experiences, sophisticated metaphors or unusual comparisons are shrouded in mystery. The poem's meaning is exclusively pessimistic. To express the philosophical message, Darowski totally ignored basic punctuation marks. He divided *Komputerotyłk* into five uneven verses with no sound consistency. Like an anthropologist-passionate, he ponders over the essence of love; however, it is hard for him to determine its truthfulness, sincerity of the feeling. Despite blunt expressions, the poem itself gives an impression of lightness of operating with words. There is no place for improvisation. The particular expressions are not some random components of the whole.

Maria Danilewicz Zielińska defined the works of Darowski as “[...] mature poetry bearing the mark of pessimism, dramatic choices and life complications. It is a record of the course of cruel history, searching for his own place in the unfriendly world in which a pen has become a weapon in a fight for his own identity, tradition and personal adherence”⁵. When analysing the biographical themes of Jan Darowski, a careful reader may often get an impression that his poetry has been gravely influenced by his attitude towards the literature. He cannot have a neutral approach to it.

The authenticity of experience was accompanied by an additional postulate of integrating it with words which were to express it. Darowski was very sensitive to the linguistic aspect of literature – from stylistic correctness, through aptness and originality of metaphors, textual integrity of poems to consistency of notation and spelling correctness⁶.

Another work with the motif of a woman is entitled *Twój uśmiech*. The title constitutes a hint concerning its contents. The poem employs the convention of descriptive lyrics. Mysteriousness of a smile kindles the imagination of readers. The lyrical I is a man enchanted by a woman's smile. The fact that we deal with a male perception of the world is confirmed by Polish personal verb endings: “zapisalem”, “obiecalem”. A smile constitutes a very meaningful facial expression, the reason to write a poem. Thus the intended use of metonymy: a smile is a woman, a smile includes the whole womanliness. What is more, it gives the author many positive memories, is evidence of enchantment, admiration for a woman. In the face of such experiences, the author reflects on the human lot and inevitable passing of time. The life

⁵ M. Kołodziej, *I czekam na cud. Glosa do biografii literackiej Jana Darowskiego*, [in:] *Trzeba się trzymać pięknych przyzwyczajęń*, edited by Z. Ożoga and J. Wolski, Rzeszów 2012, p. 15. [own translation into English]

⁶ R. Moczkołan, *Romans żaby z żyrandolem, czyli o krytyce Jana Darowskiego słów kilka*, [in:] *Trzeba się trzymać pięknych przyzwyczajęń...*, p. 292. . [own translation into English]

itself has never been a source of such joy for the lyrical I as this seemingly inconspicuous facial expression:

Ponieważ uśmiechnęłaś się do mnie
Jak nigdy życie⁷. [Since you have smiled to me as life has never before]

The smile, the lyrical I has experienced, stirs up reflection and provokes him to tell what he was imagining. Thanks to this facial expression, he feels special as this was meant for him and nobody else. A smiling face, colourful image of a smile, takes a form of appreciation. The third verse emphasises that the woman smiles to him with authentic affection. The gestures he has experienced before have offended him with artificiality and impermanence. The lyrical I feels alienated and unable to bond with any other human; the only positive emotion is evoked with the woman's smile. The poem provides an impetus for reflection on human existence in the world and natural human behaviours. The readers are not just passive receivers of the work. This event was to be seeds for writing a love poem; however, the distracted lyrical I is unable to express his feelings. He cannot find the words to describe the looks of the woman; her "good eyes" are also the reason for his fascination and creative embarrassment. The woman in this poem is only a memory of the man. She says nothing, and this silence, paradoxically, emphasizes her existence. She occurs as the medium of the future, especially, with reference to the line with which the lyrical I ends the poem, delighting in "a glimmer of hope" for the future.

This reflective story shows impressions, feelings and desires that occur when one meets a smile, a stimulus which leaves a man dumbfounded, deaf to all other external stimuli and experiencing *expressis verbis* revelation. Darowski organizes the poetic narrative in indicative mood, consequently, intensifying the result of visualisation; still, he also gives an impression of the lyrical I's absence in the process of cognition.

The title of other work, *Lektura*, has no relation to a female gender. However, in this case, when Darowski says about a 'reading piece' he means a story about a woman who is close to him and whom he watches sleep. The reading piece in itself is pages of text creating a concise whole – they say about certain norms, history or simply make you unwind. The lyrical I of *Lektura* tries to connect with his loved one in almost eschatological rapture, simultaneously taking over her spiritual space. The man in love senses that the woman dream about birds, pearl fishery. He tries to understand her behaviours while asleep. Eye movements or slightly parted lips are very thought-provoking to the man. This is the reading piece about reading one's mind, experiencing love and all the intimate feelings.

⁷ J. Darowski, *Niespodziewane żywoty*, London 1990, p. 37.

The related situation and impressions constitute the object of relationship between the lyrical I and the woman. They show their intimacy, spiritual connection, transcendental bond. The expressions uttered by him are calm and whispered not to wake the loved one up. What is important here is the combination of two worlds – authentic and oineric one:

po powiekach poznaję,
że śnią ci się ptaki⁸. [your eyelids tell me you are dreaming about birds]

Polish expression “poznaję” indicates the presence of a tangible, sensory world full of experiences; on the other hand, “dream” stands for the unreal and seeming world. The combination of these two spheres also occurs in the next two verse lines:

Jak daleko jesteście od siebie
I jak blisko!⁹ [Oh, how far we are apart and yet how close!]

The “far” expression is of extrasensory significance; the lyrical I does not know whether the spiritual, inner connection between him and the woman is really distant. The word “close” shows a physical bond – the man is close to his loved one in the physical sphere.

The mentioned lines show the existence of two spaces; one seems to create a deep gap between dream and reality, the other joins the couple together and is very inconsiderable – limited to a room they are in. Experiencing one’s own humanity in relation to other human being and other reality, enables one to focus on impermanence and fragility of life. Therefore, here, we deal with experiencing love intensively. The lyrical I listens to steady breathing of his woman which is divided evenly like rungs of the ladder that could be used by angels to come down from heaven. In my opinion, the ladder is an equivalent of a human soul; the angels symbolize the mind of the world – they ascend with a soul and descend in compassion – here is the reference to the biblical Jacob’s ladder.

czytam z niej
Jednym okiem¹⁰. [I read her with my one eye]

This collocation contains the symbol of the Eye of Providence as the constant care provided by the omniscient and omnipotent God to a human being. The characteristic feature of *Lektura* is the function of sight and seeing turning into vision. The lyrical I supposes that his loved one dreams about birds. These are symbolic creatures representing the Lord’s messengers. Ac-

⁸ J. Darowski, *Niespodziewane żywoty*, London 1990, p. 57.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 37.

ording to *Sennik* [Dream-book] by Aleksandra Nowak, a bird represents “freedom, carefree life and unexpected news”¹¹. The poem does not provide any description of the birds; the lyrical I does not mention species or colour, therefore, it is impossible to determine the complete symbolism.

The language of Darowski’s poetry is different than the one I have been finding in other texts so far. It is characterized by great sensitiveness; however, the author himself can be sometimes ironic or even irreverent. This strategy leads him in a very specific direction – it enables Darowski to describe the contemporary world with a language of opposition. The author of *Drzewo sprzeczeki*, delivers some kind of statement concerning the existing reality and joins axioms with personal digressions in many of his works.

In Darowski’s works, it is hard to notice the motif usually present in the trend of the contemporary poetry dealing with the subject of women, namely, associating the womanhood with admiration, adoration and spiritual dissatisfaction. The poet keeps his feet firmly on the ground and does not engage in unnecessary controversies. He dives deep into himself, analyses his own spirit and starts a dialogue with inanimate things.

The lyrical works of the author is characterised by strong individualism. Linguistic poetry is the closest to him and it places him halfway between the emigration literary experience and longing for genuinely Polish cultural and language writing.

Unfortunately, I wrote my first poem in English and I was writing in English for the next five years. I didn’t print anything as I wanted to “come out” ready. Then there came a crisis or I just realised that I was born the whole 22 years too late for England. And I returned to the roots of Polish language. I was doing quite badly and, to be honest, I was introduced to Polish for the second time in my life – when I was starting a family; I was forced to use Polish language, starting with its most basic elements¹².

Darowski’s poems are deprived of punctuation marks. Thanks to it, the readers have got more room for manoeuvre related to reading a poem, its interpretation as well as getting to know the outline of the ethical and philosophical thought or psychological nature of the poet from Brzezine. According to Justyna Chłap-Nowakowa: “reading Darowski’s works is not always aesthetic pleasure. It can be rough and brutal, full of inner tensions, stripped of any coyness. But this is just a form, mask or rather a shield behind which you can find a person of great sensitivity”¹³.

¹¹ A. Nowak, *Sennik. Księga snów*, Warsaw 2003, p. 343.

¹² *Cena wolności? Dyskusja o języku*, “Kontynenty – Nowy Merkuriusz” 1960, no. 13, p. 7. [own translation into English]

¹³ J. Chłap-Nowakowa, *Z emigracyjnej perspektywy. Polska, polskość i obczyzna w twórczości Jana Darowskiego*, [in:] *Trzeba się trzymać pięknych przyzwyczajzeń. Twórczość*

The author of *Niespodziewane żywoty* was torn between two cultures and two languages. He was in a dilemma related to the choice of language of his poetry.

Our strange relations with the British society mainly consist in being strange to one another. We may speak English well, but that does not have to mean they can understand us and vice versa. [...] To function in the British society we had to say goodbye to a Polish backyard, close our ears to its hubbub, hold intentionally and systematically all the atavisms coming from it in, at least till putting down roots in the new society. Or I should have returned to Poland once and for all, absolutely and with no reservations and start over¹⁴.

Unfortunately, the poet did not manage to return to his homeland. However, his works often refer to the memories of his home town; the author did not remain indifferent to significant political events in Poland, and extremely often reminisced about the portrait of his mother. In his poem, *Nie mów, że ja!* the lyrical I puts numerous questions to his mother. These are childhood memories. Darowski was an unruly child but having a really strong bond with his mother; she was taking part in his childhood conversations, she was the one with whom he bantered

Kto wyjadł miód ze słoika?
Miś chyba –
Sama mamó mówiłaś,
Że misie miód jedzą¹⁵. [Who has eaten all the honey from the jar? It must have been a bear – mom, you said it yourself – bears eat honey]

The poet even remembers the moment he opened a canary's cage. If this memory appeared in Darowski's deliberations, one may assume the canary escaped from its cage. There are also memories from his school years when he used a father's razor to sharpen a pencil and when he broke the elderberry bush' branch. In the last verse, the following thought crosses the lyrical I's mind:

I nie parz tak
Raz na księżyc, raz na mnie

Jana Darowskiego, edited by Z. Ożóg, J. Wolski, Rzeszów 2012, p. 71. [own translation into English]

¹⁴ As cited in: F. Śmieja, *Czekam na cud*, [in:] idem, *Zbliżenia i kontakty raz jeszcze*, Katowice 2007, p. 170.

¹⁵ J. Darowski, *Niespodziewane żywoty*, Londyn 1990, p. 59. [own translation into English]

Ja go nie nadgryzłem¹⁶. [And don't shift your eyes from the Moon to me like that. I wasn't the one who bit it]

He recalls his childhood; he remembers his mother raising him, teaching him how to act. It is not so much retrospection which is brought to the fore here but it is rather a new temporal space, a kind of anamnesis. What is more, the lyrical I asks many questions and some of them seem to be rhetorical. The only syntactic determinant of the poem is a verse line which enables one to release the words free and offer a liberal interpretation. Similar internalization takes place in *Negatyw* poem. Here, the lyrical I once again mentions his mother although, admittedly, it is only fragmentary this time. Darowski recalls his childhood and late mother. She was the one who forbade him to return to his homeland which is the fact he greatly deplores. The image of the woman appears in the second strophe of a poem. The mother is shown as a worried, caring woman who guards the hearth and home.

The author repeatedly mentioned Polish language's inferiority in relation to English. The mother tongue is not accurate enough and too rhetorical to him. In arrogant anti-intellectualism of Polish language, he sees a lack of a possibility of development, inability to express discursive opinions and, eventually, he blames the under-developed Polish language for a lack of the highly developed philosophical thought. This arbitrary criticism resembles *The Great Improvisation* of Konrad although this was a significant benchmark in relation to writing in Polish. Darowski points out a lack of accuracy in the language, its imperfection. He reflects on the semantic capacity of words, relation between a name and a referent. He deplores the crisis of the language: "[...] we are standing here / ruined by linguistic inflation¹⁷".

One can broadly discuss Darowski's approach to the language; being stretched between the past and the present proves certain loss of statements' authenticity and specification which finally leads to desemanticization that is moving the words away from their original meanings.

Being emigrants – Darowski added in 1963 – we live in different countries, foreign towns and villages. Here we make a living by working in mines, plants, workshops and on farms. Therefore, one should write poems in the same language he speaks; I mean dialecticians, slightly deformed influence of foreign words and a lack of contact with Polish grammar and spelling¹⁸.

¹⁶ J. Darowski, *Niespodziewane żywoty*, Londyn 1990, p. 59. [own translation into English]

¹⁷ J. Sikora, *Tylko słowa. O poezji Jana Darowskiego*, „Fraza” 1997, nr 15, 63. [own translation into English]

¹⁸ J. Niesnacki, *O poezję emigracyjną*, „Kontynenty” 1963, nr 58/59, s. 17. [own translation into English]

Despite these suggestions, the writer was aware of the fact that putting his roots in a foreign country, different place and different language is not possible in full. What is more, he often mentioned living in England as only having “strange” relations with British people. The mentioned “strange relations”¹⁹ cannot be close relations. It is also the model of informal linguistic intimacy into which Darowski did not manage to settle for good.

The name of the biblical woman – Eve appears in yet another poem. The lyrical I in *Ewa w kąpieli* does not have its gender determined; however, it addresses Eve in its first words but in plural form. This shows it addresses not a specific person but the totality of female gender. Ladies in the poem are presented as frivolous creatures with no obligations. They are busy with “sitting on towels” and “studying their nails”. The women bathe in public, accompanied by men who can observe their behaviour. Thanks to the second strophe we know that they are not bathing in the sea or a secluded place. It seems that the lyrical I nurses a grudge against the ladies for impurity and “bathing in men’s eyes”. The subject of the poem focuses on human matters and his existence as well as the meaning of life in the frivolous world. This is, to some extent, a poetical process of contemplative diving deep into someone else’s existence when after several attempts, one finally has managed to get out of his own. The lyrical I calls this moment a “dirty” one which is a clear reference to dirty thoughts of the men watching the bath. The women who search for the truth about themselves for the price of being stripped of any taboo and decency, show their naked bodies. They do it with passion like it is a challenge to them. It provokes questions concerning identity, mysteriousness of womanhood, the essence of limitations, inner dilemmas and, simultaneously, frivolous shocking with womanliness. Here, we deal with the body which can be defined as a human struggle with the unsolved puzzle of life.

Despite Jan Darowski, in his works, did not devoted much attention to women, each poem dedicated to them represents a specific model of poetic creation, and each lyrical I performs a significant function. To the poet, gender is a very important factor which differentiates social expectations related to playing specific parts. In the works of the London writer, there is the Polish mother; womanhood takes a shape of motherhood, taking care of home and family, being a perfect housewife. Darowski also appreciated his wife who also appears in several poems. He thought his illness brought them closer together. In his lyrical declarations, Darowski reveals the mystery of womanhood, touches the sphere of body and spirit; a woman is a determinant of certain norms and principles to him – from the metaphysical perspective, she is shown as an inconceivable *numinosum*.

¹⁹ The original text includes word “obcować” [commune, have a relation] which is similar to word “obcy” [strange, foreign] – translator’s note.