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Punk woven from cotton candy. Patti Smith, Poland and poetic prose

Patti Smith's poetic prose *Woolgathering* (1992) was published in Poland in 2014, more than twenty years after its publication in the United States. The author of the essay, following the reception of this book among Polish readers, wants to shed light on the presence of Patti Smith as a writer, not just a singer, in Polish culture. She shows the important components, building the literary works of the American artist that have never been sufficiently recognized by Polish audience.

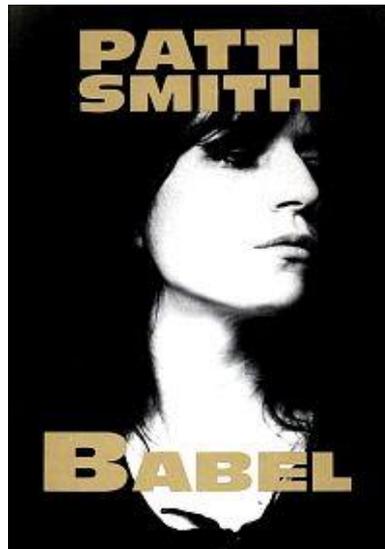
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Słowa kluczowe: Patti Smith, literatura amerykańska, recepcja literatury, muzyka rockowa, performans

Polish discussion with Patti Smith

Patti Smith, an American writer and visual artist, better known as singer and songwriter, regarded as a central figure in “the world of rock and roll” from 1975 to the present day has released eleven albums, but nowadays her music is not particularly well known in Poland, rarely may we hear her songs on the radio. This is, of course, a big simplification. In connection with the two concerts of the artist which took place in Poland within a short time (Warsaw – 2014, Katowice – 2015) and the publication of her two literary works (*Just Kids* – 2012, *Woolgathering* – 2014) in our country (Smith, 2012a; Smith, 2014) for example Radio Three promoted her figure and achievements (*Trójka* 2012; *Trójka* 2014; *Trójka* 2015). The interest of the listeners resulted in that Patti Smith's music is a surprisingly frequent guest on Radio Three now. Notwithstanding, popular radio stations as RMF FM or Zadio Zet seem to know only one hit of hers *Because the Night* from 1978, written by Bruce Springsteen and one can say that this song is the most famous – and thus the only one – “attainment” of Patti Smith commonly known among Poles. Her music is not “simple, easy and enjoyable”, however her every listener could easily mention at least a few titles that could become hits, but this never happened. As for literature, during the preparation to write this essay, I found only one young Polish writer who – perhaps – appreciates Smith also as an author of inspiring literary work. I mean the poet Xawery Stańczyk, who was nominated for the Nike Literary Award in 2014, “I prefer to discuss with Patti Smith than with [Zbigniew] Herbert and I do not feel that I lose something through this” – said the artist born in 1985 (Czechowska, 2014). The poetry and prose of the American artist is mostly available in her several books which are easily accessible in bookstores and antique shops. Some selections from

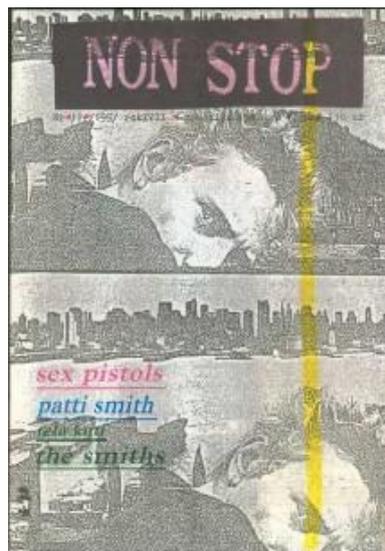
her writings that have not yet been collected are not readily available – for example poetic prefaces to books by other writers and artists, which were issued in a small number of copies, or have not been for a long time resumed, brief published remarks in association with conferences dedicated to various writers, the books and music reviews or the short essays from magazines or bulletins of all kinds. The hardest of Patti Smith's books to find are original, first editions, for example one of her volumes was limited to a hundred copies (Smith, 1972a), but anthologies allow to reach a large part of her work.



The cover of *Babel* – a book by Patti Smith, published in 1978.

In 1974 Patti Smith recorded the album *Horses*, which draws its inspiration among others from literature of the Beat Generation and 60s garage punk. Her proto punk debut had a powerful effect on forming the music scene of New York, and in general for American and European music – her records quickly reached the Polish as well, which may seem surprising for some. Ada Lyons, member of the first Warsaw punk crew heard Patti Smith's records played in the student club Remont during DJ parties in 1978 (Marciniak, 2015, p. 9). "There was a vague awareness of both the punk contemporarily emerging out of England and the story and even prehistory of punk out of the United States. One seminal member of the first Warsaw punk crew that produced the bands Tilt and Kryzys (...) spoke English well (an unusual feat among Polish youth at the time, considering Russian was the only foreign language universally taught in school then) and was a big proponent of the music and attitude of Lou Reed" (Marciniak, 2015, p. 9), another artist, besides Patti Smith, who is commonly cited as the most noteworthy musician that would ultimately influence punk music. Only in the 70s the heroine of this text released a few books containing her poetry which was in the 80s and later translated into languages like German, French, Portuguese or Japanese (Smith, 1972b; Smith, 1972c; Smith, 1973a; Smith, 1977a; Smith, 1977b; Smith, 1978). Unfortunately, these publications were not readily available for Polish fans and I have no information whether any of its copies circulated around Poland then. Nonetheless it is worth mentioning that in the 80s Polish punk band Pidżama Porno recorded a new studio album *Styrofoam* which contained the rock song *Gloria*, written by Irish musician Van Morrison, but remade several times, among others by Patti Smith. Before Patti Smith became famous by the song *Gloria* (album *Horses*), in 1970 she wrote a poem called *Oath* opening with a line that became as famous as

the artist, when it appeared in her own text to the song: “Christ died for somebody’s sins but not mine.”¹ Polish poet and musician Marcin Świetlicki included in his poem *Van Morrison, Jim Morrison, Patti Smith and Jimi Hendrix scream* references to her text. His melorecitation of his own piece has been incorporated into the song *Gloria* by mentioned Pidżama Porno. For the first time Świetlicki’s poem appeared in rock magazine “Non Stop” in 1988 in column “Puk, puk” devoted to poetry rock, in that same place where we may find information about the lyrics and literary attempts of *Oath*’s author (Bratkowski, 1988; Grzegorzczak, 1988, p. 25).



Cover design: P. Młodożeniec, „Non Stop” 1988, No. 12, https://pracownia52.pl/www/?page_id=13

The song *Gloria*, which is the “archetype of rock”, identified with Patti Smith, was recorded by yet another rock band, T. Love, in 1994. In this decade the minor translations of prose and poetry of the American songwriter also appeared in Polish literary magazines (Smith, 1993, p. 39; Smith, 1995, p. 135-137; Smith, 1994a, p. 23-25). Unfortunately, her texts were not included in the anthology *Rock poets* – extremely valuable on the Polish publishing market (Zgaiński, 1990). Patti Smith’s literature was even then much less promoted than for example the lyrics and poetry by Jim Morrison. His poems not only very often appeared in the press, but most of all a lot of anthologies of his work and translations of poetry books have been made available to Polish readers (Morrison, 1991a; Morrison, 1997; Morrison, 1995; Morrison, 1991b; Morrison 1993; Morrison 1994).

¹ Patti Smith recites her poem *Oath*, recorded during poetry night in New York City, 1973: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37pevRAIV78>, access: 11.04.2016.

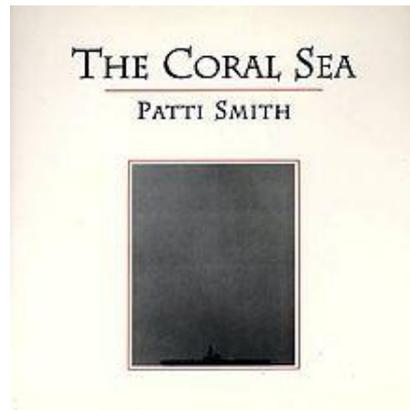
The mind of a child and childish literature

Two years ago Patti Smith's aforementioned poetic prose *Woolgathering* (1992) was published in Poland, more than twenty years after its publication in the United States. The premiering, limited edition of her book, a numbered collection, was distributed to a small group of people by Hanuman Books². How to describe this work, which stubbornly eludes categorization? *Woolgathering* is a miniature, lyrical and full of fantasy portrait of the artist, which was Patti Smith as a little girl and teenager, and moreover the author convinces us that this "little artist" lives in the centre of her creative activity's heart. *Woolgathering* resembles a prayer book, perhaps because it is a non chronological calendar of the rites-of-passage – every experience has a chance to become the only key that opens the door to the mysterious space of the mind (embracing the stone, staring at a street of cafes in New York, resting at the tomb of the French poet Rimbaud). Each of the memories contained in the book and separated from the rest serves as a spell, uttered by shaman-artist, who wants to move herself and the environment to another world, using at the same time a simple and effective formula. The differences between the opinions of Polish reviewers for this book cannot be illustrated with a simple division between "the reviewers-experts of literature" and "bloggers – lovers of literature", not only because sometimes such a division may be unfair, and not expressing the skills or education of people writing about literature, but mainly because among both the educated literary critics, and those giving opinions "after hours" are supporters and opponents of the promotion of writers such as Patti Smith – however, on the blogs we can find many very positive opinions (Długa, 2014; Sułkowska, 2014). For example Malwina Wapińska, journalist and literary critic, sees "unpretentious beauty" (Wapińska, 2014) in this passage from *Woolgathering*: "The mind of a child is like a kiss on the forehead — open and disinterested. It turns as the ballerina turns, atop a party cake with frosted tiers, poisonous and sweet" (Smith, 2012b, p. 13). Meanwhile, the poet and journalist Bartosz Sadulski, just on the example of this sentence claims that the author uses "gimmicky" tricks and "she pulls rabbits out of the hat of her childhood" (Sadulski, 2013), therefore the reader opens his mouth in a wry grin instead of being struck dumb. The specific poetic comparison, used by Smith, according to some critics creates a unique fairy-tale atmosphere, an amazing space where artful literature and infantilism collaborate (Robert, 2014; Jagielski, 2014; Pieczek, 2014), while others are repelled by its artificiality and obviousness³. Patti Smith's impulse to write the *Woolgathering* was melancholy mentioned by the artist at the very beginning of the book. Yet, according to Sadulski, if a writer wants only to regain the children's sensitivity and ability to rapture the world, then finally the reader participates in an experience as much fabulous and unique as universal and frivolous. "Does anyone really like *Woolgathering*? It does not matter. Because this topic is excellent for radio broadcasts, interspersed with music. And is an easy task for book reviewers, who once again will work out a free lesson entitled *godmother of punk rock*" – Małkowska writes, considering the descriptions of book made by other reviewers, who are enthusiastic about the book, as babble, annoying and embarrassing of the lovers of literature (Małkowska, 2014). Małkowska or Sadulski treat the skills of the author fiercely, without sentiment. "She should keep *Woolgathering* to herself as a therapeutic story in the bottom of her drawer" – sums up Sadulski (Sadulski, 2013). Patti Smith describes her impression of the woolgatherers she saw as a child in this way: "And the image of the woolgatherers in that sleepy field drew me to sleep as well. And I wandered

² In 1996 long-awaited book of poetry by Smith, expected from the 70s, also appeared (Smith, 1996).

³ Otherwise the lyrics to one song included in the book have been translated in such a way that even the biggest fan of the performer may feel embarrassed by rhymes sounding amateurish and, worse, simply ridiculous. The lyrics to the song *Kimberley*, which was dedicated to the younger sister of Patti Smith, lost all of its strength in translation, resulting from the combination of a strong, uncompromising confession with charming tenderness.

among them, through thistle and thorn, with no task more exceptional than to rescue a fleeting thought, as a tuft of wool, from the comb of the wind” (Smith, 2012b, p. 12). Her memoirs are not only “pink” and light, as a cover of the Polish edition of this book may suggest. Of course, the woolgatherers are like artists, but the fragments of beings which she weaves, are at the same time beautiful and causing disturbing feelings. It is not true that opening Patti Smith’s book we deal with stories devoid of elements of sadness, helplessness, even horror and evil. Maybe because of the cover of the Polish edition of the book (pastel colors) the alertness of readers is a little sleepy and a gray, gloomy mood passes behind their backs?



The cover of *The Coral Sea* – a book by Patti Smith, published in 1996.

The magic of pretend poetry

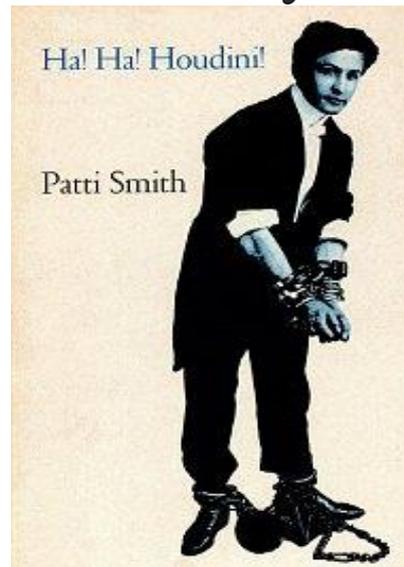
One would conclude, being under suggestion of the tone of most of the book’s Polish reviews that Patti Smith’s poetic prose can satisfy only readers who do not require too much, who are unable to criticize or are disgustingly sentimental. I agree with Małkowska that suspiciously many people from “the literary circle”, hearing the password: “Patti Smith” “fall into trembling and emphasis” (Małkowska, 2014), but on the other hand I appreciate the efforts of publishing house Czarne to offer us the chance to confront this book, though I firmly believe that the full appreciation of this work is dependant on the degree of “experience” of the achievements of the artist as a whole. *Woolgathering* is not a “literary revelation”, but according to me, is not only a treat for fans.

No doubt the stories which Patti Smith described in *Just Kids* (*Poniedziałkowe dzieci*), the biographical history of her closest friend Robert Mapplethorpe, met with a less severe assessment of the Polish critics than “fairy tales” included in *Woolgathering*. One could even say that the “Patti Smith trend” triumphed for awhile in the country on the Vistula River – for example Krzysztof Warlikowski placed the excerpts from *Just Kids* in the scenario of his spectacle *Kabaret warszawski* (*Warsaw*

cabaret)⁴. I think that the problem certainly does not lie in the fact that nobody among readers is interested in a motif of happy childhood contained in literature. It is difficult to agree with the statement that nobody can come out richer from a meeting with the story about someone's happy young years. Any summary of *Woolgathering* must approach banality, because it is extremely difficult to describe something that arises as a result of introducing the strong and firm phrases of the author to an extremely delicate subject which the writer tries to capture on paper. Anyone who has ever heard Patti Smith reciting a poem to music can imagine how this incredibly strong woman utters words like "dandelion, butterfly, petal, tear". I am sure that reading *Woolgathering* without the voice of the poet, somewhere "in the back of the head", almost spitting out the words, must deprive everyone of experiencing these emotions, which, in my opinion, attract permanently to the work of the artist.

Like in the poems and lyrics of Patti Smith, including those from the "rebel 70s", *Woolgathering* is full of simple symbolism and motion, subtle sense of humor, love of detail and elements of psalms and invocations. To tell the truth, many lyrics of this musician are written in a completely archaic, "old-fashioned" and "decorative style" and many among them are confessions of nostalgia and resemble the wishes, which are to restore the moments from the past. We will not find in *Woolgathering* the colloquial language, which Patti Smith sometimes used in her first literary attempts and lyrics, but only need to read the texts from her *Horses* to see that in most of them is present the attempt to decode the common daydream, childhood imagination, or familiar and cultural background. It is interesting that though in her poems from 1970-1979 we may find more "sex and violence" than in later works, there are also the poems almost like hymns on peacefulness. In one of them the poet writes: "to be safe from all bodily harm/ to know love without exception/ to be a saint in any form" (Smith, 1994b, p. 3). She frequently writes and sings about thing as banal as looking for God and Christian context, strongly present in *Woolgathering*, is an important part of all her art. Although in the 70s she sang that Jesus did not die for her sins, the essence of traditional devotional poetry was present in her texts even then. "Raise the sky./ We got to fly over the land, over the sea./ Fate unwinds and if we die, souls arise./ God, do not seize me please, till victory" (Smith, 2006, p. 95) – for example these lyrics from "rebel" Patti Smith's record *Easter* (1978) could easily be incorporated into *Woolgathering* and no one would be struck by a sudden change of style. *Waiting underground* – the tale of contemporary Polish writer of absurdist short stories, of Natasza Goerke, carries the title taken from one of Patti Smith's songs from *Peace and Noise*, an album by the artist, released in 1997. The heroine of *Waiting underground*, seeking a name for herself, which would determine her fate, experiences a unique metamorphosis – a plump, rosy-cheeked and suspiciously polite Mysia Pysio (Little Mouse) one day declares: "From today I am Patti Smith" (Gorke 2002, p. 81), and shortly thereafter writes her first rebel poem about darkness. Polish critics expected that the prose by Patti Smith will be just at least a bit like the heroine of *Waiting underground*, whose – in the process of metamorphosis – "curls and soul were soiled by the black devil" (Gorke 2002, p. 81). One cannot hide that if somebody knows about Patti Smith only that her performances in the 70s "were sexual bruising with the spasms of Jagger and the off-key of Dylan" (Ballen, 1977) certainly feels somewhat cheated, opening *Woolgathering*. I think, however, that there is no reason to panic about what happened with the characteristic style of the "daughter of the atomic bomb and Rimbaud".

⁴ Although poet Marcin Sendcecki summed this book in such a way: "But punk is not dead? But it seems that it has died. Only kitsch is eternal" (Sendcecki, 2012).



The cover of *Ha! Ha! Houdini* – a book by Patti Smith, published in 1977.

“I keep trying to figure out what it means/to be american” – Patti Smith claims in the poem *Notebook*. “When I look in myself/ I see arabia, venus, nineteenth century/french but I can’t recognize what/makes me american” (Kaufman, 1999, p. 88). John Lydon (Johnny Rotten from Sex Pistols), an English singer, songwriter and musician, according to journalist Jenny Turner, could tell the author of *Woolgathering* exactly what it means. Being American means being a “pretended poet” – Rotten one stated in a television documentary about the origin of punk (Turner, 1996). I do not know whether this rethinking will seem convincing to anyone, but the fact remains that all texts by Patti Smith balance on the thin line between spots of brilliance and spots of mediocrity and the artist has built a unique kingdom on this ambiguous position. Communing with her book is for me a kind of participation in a concert of the artist in the style of *a capella* and I am an absolute advocate of not ignoring the beauty of this type of “deficient literature”. My pleasure from reading *Woolgathering* comes from the fact that although Patti Smith is sometimes a “banal poet”, primarily she is a remarkable performer – maybe in the process of reading, imagining the sound of her voice pulls every banality from her literature? The question: Is it magic, or just the conviction of her fans, who are no longer able to separate her art into literature and music, will never be clearly resolved.

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