

***The Word: Two Hundred Years of Polish Poetry* translated by Marcel Weyland (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2010)**

In his preface to this 478-page volume of translations of the work of Polish poets, Marcel Weyland writes that translation originated as a hobby and subsequently became an obsession for him. His selected poems have been translated from Polish into English under eleven thematic headings including, Poetry, Love, Death, War, Holocaust, Nature, God, Exile and Emigration. Individual poets are included under a range of headings. Weyland writes that his selection of poems was guided by three criteria. He prefers the short poem, which ‘can have the immediate impact of a gunshot’ (18). He has chosen poems that gave him pleasure in childhood, and those, which he best describes as iconic, with a preference for the traditional rhymed verse (19).

A short historical perspective follows this preface highlighting his view that ‘World War II proved disastrous for Polish poetry’ (23), in that many talented poets perished through war-related death and suicide, and it also created a rift between those poets who chose to stay ‘in the country and experienced both the war and the post-war communist regimes, and the significant émigré poets who went into exile in the West’ (23). He discusses numerous poets, including Zbigniew Herbert, who refused to compromise with the Soviet regime. Others, such as Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, who collaborated with the Communist regime, were frequently silenced. A comprehensive appendix about the authors is contained at the end of the book with additional notes about their personal and political background and fate. The material serves the interested student of Polish poetry well. No doubt only those fluent in both languages can evaluate the efficacy of the translations. Given the word limitations of book reviews I have chosen to delve into some of the poems that have moved me.

The opening section of this collection is entitled Poetry. One poem, *Seeds*, written by Tomasz Jastrun, perhaps shaped Weyland’s preference for short poems. Jastrun writes:

I do not like long poems
 A short poem is like a pebble
 it can be flung or
 be tossed like a ball
 or swallowed before bedtime
 ...
 longer poems are impracticable these days
 one must concentrate on them
 in the unceasing gabble of happenings

 the short verse is the symbol of our era
 the seed which waits its own appointed time (41)

This poem was written in 1950: one could debate whether Jastrun’s view is valid today. And just what constitutes a short poem is puzzling, as the collection consists of poems of various lengths. Of greater significance are the concluding lines of *Seeds*, which suggest that the poetic meaning or rather the interpretation of poetic meaning may take time to evolve for a

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reader, depending upon the historical era and individual personal circumstance and political ideology.

Those who lived through the war, holocaust, exile and emigration, the subject matter of a substantial number of poems included in this collection, will comprehend and relate to the poems in different ways. In the section on War, *Warsaw Carol*, written in 1939 by Stanisław Baliński pleads:

Mother, postpone the birth of Your Son,
some other time's best,
Let not the eyes of Creation look on
how we're oppressed.

Elsewhere Your Son should with all due gladness
be given birth,
not now, not here, not in this saddest
of towns on earth. (187)

In the section on Holocaust, Władysław Broniewski's poem *To The Jews Of Poland* voices his outrage:

From Polish township and village no cry of despair is sent ...
they fell as a troop in battle, the Warsaw Ghetto's brave fighters,
I dip my words in hot blood, my heart in tremendous lament
for you O Jews of Poland, I, Polish wanderer – writer. (259)

The last line of the first verse of the poem, dedicated to a Polish Jewish Socialist leader, Szmul Zygielbaum, who according to the notes, escaped to Britain as a member of the Polish Government in Exile in London, hints at the guilt felt by those in exile fighting to save their compatriots from annihilation in the homeland. Zygielbaum suicided in protest at the British Government's disregard of the plight of the Polish Jews (478). In his book titled *The Writer as Migrant* (perhaps more aptly titled as *The Writer in Exile*) Ha Jin, in the chapter on 'The Language of Betrayal', cites the case, amongst others, of Joseph Conrad's emigration from Poland. Ha Jin suggests that such writers/poets were spurned, seen to have betrayed their native country in pursuit of their creativity in the English language and deriving their income in a foreign country.¹ This collection lends itself to such debates, as in a later chapter Ha Jin refers to the ideal situation of the bilingual poet Czesław Miłosz who taught his native language at Berkley as well as writing in both Polish and English.

In his section on Death, Weyland includes a poem by Miłosz, *Sense*, that opens with a verse, perhaps a rejoinder to critics of writers in exile:

– When I die, I'll see the world's lining.
The other side, past bird, past mountain, and past sunset.
Inviting recognition of the true meaning.

¹ Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 37, 79.

What did not agree, shall then agree.
What was not understood shall be understood. (169)

Marcel Weyland is recognised for his services to the Polish community in Australia and internationally known for his contributions to Polish literature. Perhaps the hobby that became his obsession has overwhelmed this collection with the number of poems, poets and themes he has covered. The juxtaposition of poems with political nuances that challenge the reader to learn more about the history of Poland is somewhat incongruous alongside sections of Verses for Children, Ballads and Epigrams. Perhaps greater selectivity of poems, poets and themes would have resulted in a more accessible volume. Nevertheless *The Word* offers a rich resource for both the scholar and general reader of poetry.

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