
POLISH **POETRY**

JUSTYNA BARGIELSKA

MARIUSZ GRZEBALSKI

KLARA NOWAKOWSKA

EDWARD PASEWICZ

MARTA PODGÓRNIK

JACEK PODSIADŁO

MARCIN SENDECKI

ANDRZEJ SOSNOWSKI

MARCIN ŚWIETLICKI

EUGENIUSZ

TKACZYSZYN-DYCKI

These ten poets form a constellation of true personalities. They are joined by what sets them apart – an awareness of the nature of their talent, a boldness, and nonconformity.



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FOREWORD:

THE GOLDEN DECADE

The poets who debuted in the 1990s have reiterated that they are not a generation in the sense that critics and literary historians use this term. They were not bound by a profound experience of history, their poetry was not a response to a common challenge. The fall of communism and the change of the political system in 1989 opened a space for personalities and liberated languages. Poets felt freed from historical wrongs and duties, finally free and unexpectedly alone.

They appeared during a time that was difficult and fascinating for literature. On the one hand, symbolic values had begun to be fiercely pushed aside by material values, literature clearly began to be pushed to the margins of society's interest, the book market was flooded by "fluff" books, and the opinion spread that the Old Masters (Miłosz, Różewicz, Herbert, Szymborska) would not have anyone of the same caliber to replace them. On the other hand, we saw a dawning of enthusiasm in many communities which had not been known for cultural initiatives, new journals and publishing houses were created, the youngsters took the media by storm, and readers and critics showed growing interest in a literature that seemed symptomatic of the changing world.

It was not tendencies and trends that proved decisive here, however; it was individual talents. A range of debut books from early on in the decade swiftly rearranged the poetry scene. In around 1995 it became clear that Marcin Świetlicki, Andrzej Sosnowski, Eugeniusz Tkacyszyn-Dycki, Jacek Podsiadło, and Marcin Sendecki were more than merely promising debutantes – they were their own outstanding artists, poets who would long remain in readers' consciousness and decide the future of poetry. And thus it happened: today these poets are around fifty years old, very diverse, and often in a brilliant and even compelling way they have brought Polish poetry from the heroic period to our time of normalcy. This transition was made *nolens volens*, but quite effectively – it has meant that readers have had no shortage of splendid poems, and the poems, in spite of everything, have had their readers.

From the outset they had the sensation that a simple continuation of the tradition of Polish poetry, mainly the Romantic tradition, had become unfeasible – that the newness they had to offer would be as much aesthetic as existential. The world in a period of great turmoil clashed and blended with a language in a state of profound transformation; the poem was meant to register this new quality.

The radicality of this transformation is found in the work Andrzej Sosnowski, whose center holds a discrepancy between speech and reality, drawing energy from both one and the other, sentencing both sides to the same conclusion – death. We should note, however, that the agonies are remarkably effective, full of complex sounds as seductive as music.

The same goes for the work of Tkaczyszyn-Dycki: dense, obsessive, decorative, depressive – like a shroud thrown over his own childhood and youth, his loved ones who are deceased, yet ever-present in his memory, in a world populated by figures from books, ghosts of the Polish-Ukrainian past, and unidentified shadows.

Marcin Sendek is a lyrical minimalist distilling chaos and tumult into a heavy, dense drop of meaning – into a poem. He joins a consciousness of various traditions and a ruthless, insightful vivisection of today's experiences.

In this company, Marcin Świetlicki and Jacek Podsiadło are practically extravagant realists, describing everyday life with a poetics that adheres to time-tested conventions. Their masterful lyrical figures have become familiar to us – the “postmodern arch-poet” (Świetlicki) and the “poet-wanderer” (Podsiadło) have devised and developed ways of expressing the surrounding world, suggestively revealing the falsehoods of social institutions, compellingly detailing the “progress of darkness” (Świetlicki) and the odd, unsettling flash of life (Podsiadło).

The remaining poets presented here are somewhat younger. They made their debuts later, some at the beginning of the next century. They began by following the fresh paths of the new poetry, but quickly found their own routes. Mariusz Grzebalski writes poetry in an old-world, intimate sort of way, which is also strikingly timely in its approach to moral conundrums. Marta Podgórnik has taken the path of hard, “masculine feminism,” Klara Nowakowska orbits the experience of the intangible, spectral subject, Justyna Bargielska speaks in the muted language of (female, maternal, romantic) trauma, and Edward Pasewicz depicts life as a given which is rich in unexpected treasures – art, the flavors of everyday life, the mysterious commands of the body and eroticism.

These ten poets form a constellation of true personalities. They are joined by what sets them apart – an awareness of the nature of their talent, a boldness, and nonconformity.

Piotr Śliwiński

1.

JUSTYNA BARGIELSKA



Justyna Bargielska (1977) is a poet of appellations, fetishes, magic objects and extreme states of being; in a word, she is a fairy-tale writer. Her book-length debut, *Dating Sessions* (2003), – full as it was with coming-of-age symptoms and initiation motifs, the matchmaking of an unbaptized free spirit with a red-headed tart, and a little boy with gnawed fingernails with a weird reedy girl, invariably ended with a happily-ever-after, as the old fairy tales demand. But in the next volume (*China Shipping*, 2005) Bargielska's poems grew truly dense, joined with photomontages to make unrecognizable word-pictures (like the writing of a child, or perhaps Chinese characters). All you can do is get lost amid the reams of images, signs, icons, magical animals, spells, enigmatic proper names, and mysterious children (cursing in one instance, cursed in another, and sometimes outright cadaverous, yet also playing in the “cracks in the walls” of the tunnels the moonlight carves in the black sky), which is why her poems are an imaginary journey to “Abkhazia / the land of first letters,” in which a student of elementary studies, essentially ignorant of the ways of the world, has to recall at least a few basic things. For example: “Before / you get off, you ought to make sure / that there's a world out there.”

In the poetry book *Dwa fiaty* [Two Fiats] (2009), in turn, and in the micro-stories of *Obsoletki* [Stillbirths] (2010), the narrating subject's central experience is giving birth to children, both living and dead: “Yes, my world revolves around children. There is no forest so deep. And that goes for the stillbirths as well,” confesses the narrator of *Stillbirths*, speaking not only of the child she once lost, but also of the children who died before they were born, whose posthumous photographs she takes by request of the grieving parents. The “stillbirths” of the title are women who have lost their children and a “convenient literary form for those who prefer not to forget.” A form, i.e. a receptacle to store what is lost, what once was strikingly real, and now is strikingly absent. As such, it does not suffice to say that Bargielska's work is, by definition, a vessel for what is absent yet real (and thus, for the uncanny); it is also crammed with receptacles for storing what has perished. This is the function of a grave, a black

plastic bag, a shoebox, a jar, a hospital morgue with children's corpses, as well as a home, a frame, a nutshell, a photograph of a belly in a newspaper with the caption "archive," a woman's womb, or a woman as such. The narrator of these *Stillbirths* finds out from a histopathological examination that she spent a short time as a grave, while another "stillbirther" is informed that her ectopic pregnancy will "devour itself" within a few weeks ("Who invented this? asks the girl, and wonders if she is pregnant or starring in a horror film"). And yet in her following poetry books (*Bach for My Baby*, 2012; *Nudelman*, 2014) the body again becomes a "useful orifice" – a gateway to a new fairy tale, now an ambivalent existence filled with enormous hopes, yet devoid of even the faintest lover's illusions. According to the critics, Bargielska creates worlds that are filled with "ecstatic nostalgia for a lost sense of the uncanny," and thus is generous with motifs taken from children's books, legends and fairy tales, pitting us against things that are horrific and unfamiliar, though real. The marvelous fairy-tale world of Bargielska's poetry is a handbook for learning life's yearnings, which – though they might reveal themselves to be a dark forest – should invariably seduce, attract, and delight us. This forest is also the subject of her prose: *Małe lisy* [Little Foxes] (2013).

Karolina Felberg-Sendecka

SELECTED BOOKS:

DATING SESSIONS, KRAKÓW: ZIELONA SOWA, 2003

CHINA SHIPPING, KIELCE: KSEROKOPIA.ART.PL, 2005

DWA FIATY, POZNAŃ: WBPICAK, 2009

OBSOLETKI, WOŁOWIEC: CZARNE, 2010

BACH FOR MY BABY, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2012

ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OLD, WHITE MALE BODIES FOR THE CIVILISATIONS OF THE EAST, WEST, NORTH AND SOUTH

You could do it to me down the phone, daddy.
Poisons poison better when you can't see them.
I'm writing everything at once, as I've little time,
in a moment I'll be applauding your ashes.
What's supposed to make life easier merely shortens it.
You left me a whole city empty inside
and an empty inside city is what you left me
so I burst into tears like a child
and then it fell apart. Entire civilisations
support themselves on the royalties
from my patent for rain, but I still don't know
what you were thinking, who I was for you,
where you're going now, how the past fits in
or if I really belong to a species
which is meant to try and absorb in oxygen from the air.

Translated by Maria Jastrzębska
(„O znaczeniu starych, białych, męskich ciał dla
cywilizacji wschodu, zachodu, północy i południa”
from *Nudelman*, 2014)

2.

MARIUSZ GRZEBALSKI



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Mariusz Grzebalski (1969) left his hometown of Łódź in the latter half of the 1980s for Poznań in order to study philosophy at the Adam Mickiewicz University (he was also a Polish Literature student for four years). He works to this day in Poznań, though he lives outside of town, in Dąbrówka. These geographical names are significant (as are proper names in general). Grzebalski uses them in his poems: Łódź is the scene of his first experiences, Poznań is a large city which is hard to avoid, but harder still to inhabit. The suburban perspective is key here, giving the poet a marked distance from everything. The operative metaphor might be cosmopolitan life, with its visible face of things that are “famed and splendid” (the title of one of Grzebalski’s books and poems) and its flip side: poverty, ugliness, filth. We might read his poetry as fragmentary, written with no sociological or political theses on the social transformations in Poland after 1989. This is particularly true of the short-story collection, *Człowiek, który biegnie przez las* [The Man Who Runs through the Forest].

Relationships with others are of prime importance in Grzebalski’s poetry. Firstly, there is the theme of friendship, present since “Kolacji filozofów” [The Philosophers’ Supper], the poem that opens his debut volume. Friends from studies, other acquaintances, co-workers... they are often mentioned by name, their initials appear in the dedications, their portraits are reconstructed from memory or described in the heat of the moment. These poems about friends can also be elegiac recollections of the deceased (Grzebalski has aptly been called the “master of farewells”). His second major theme is eroticism (not always love) described from a male and heteroerotic perspective, while avoiding stereotypes both social (feminists would not find this a negative example) or literary (this is far from the weepy sentimentality of popular culture). Thirdly, and most emphatically in his recent volumes, he writes of the family, and children in particular. Grzebalski’s poetic homeland deserves our special attention; it is utterly unsentimental, letting him depict the intricate problems of existence. And fourthly, there are the people he meets by chance, passers-by, workers seen from a car window, a neighbor observed from a balcony, a homeless man, a parking lot attendant...

Each of his relationships is different, but each might be described as a “scar that grows over,” a scar from a loved one, a trace of an intense mutual experience, joy, sadness, love, death, or the accidental glance which is hard to forget, though we cannot always tell why. Our fellow creatures always turn out to be more or less distant in their autonomy, not fully understood, sometimes indifferent or simply hostile. Sensitivity or empathy toward another person means both closeness and alienation, though in varying degrees. Each of these relationships and meetings comes together to form a fragmented and personal tale of coming of age.

All this is important, but it is merely one of many aspects of the world portrayed in Mariusz Grzebalski’s poetry. For grasping such diverse modes of coexistence and subtly changing amplitudes of the emotions tied to them, Grzebalski uses a simple, spare, and true language. The aphoristic texts from his recent volumes are vivid examples here. Grzebalski’s works have a colloquial ring about them, while their constructions – the intonations of the sentences written in the lines and stanzas – are remarkably precise. The poet pulls off a tremendous feat, making his poems both communicative and challenging. The reader navigates the lyrical situation with ease, identifies with it empathically, and moments later, discovers that things are more complex, that the work is not so easy to understand and to feel – and the words that at first seemed so evident stage a resistance. A careful reading of these poems can also be like a talk with an old friend.

Marcin Jaworski

SELECTED BOOKS:

NEGATYW, OSTROŁĘKA: PRACOWNIA, 1994

DRUGIE DOTKNIĘCIE, LEGNICA: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2001

NIEPIOSENKI, WROCŁAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2009

KRONIKA ZAKŁÓCEŃ, WROCŁAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2010

WINNYCH OKOLICZNOŚCIACH, KRAKÓW: EMG, 2013

IT ENDS WITH NOTHING

The willow branches are cut, but sap still gurgles in the trunks
like the wings of birds whose return foretells something
I know but cannot name.

It's like pressing your face to the window
when you know what's behind it
but then your frightened hand pulls back
and just strokes the dewy glass.

Something is there. I speak like a child
and I'll never grow up, not while it is growing.
The bushes draw towards me, the mud smacks its lips,

the peat grows spongy and the gray grass spreads like the hair
of the deceased. The sky over the gravel road tarnishes
as we descend, gulping the wind and the laugh of a train.
It seems I have something, though I remain in these
[stiffening embraces.

Translated by Soren Gauger
(„Kończy się niczym” from *Słynne i świetne*, 2004)

3.

KLARA NOWAKOWSKA



Klara Nowakowska's (1978) work expresses a deep conviction of language's inadequacy *vis-à-vis* a dynamically changing and elusive world. The most important signals seem to be the tenuous expressibility of the "I" as it overlaps with a consciousness of a false apprehension of reality. In noting down the false leads, a new lead emerges; recording errors of understanding and slips of the tongue does not end in a sense of powerlessness. Though the protagonist initially seems trapped in a claustrophobic world, frozen in a lump of ice ("I am in an hourglass"), and her speech sounds like the prattle of an autistic child, these are only pretenses. They are only a point of departure, a stylistic foundation for a spiritual endeavor that aims to reveal the outlines of a certainty. She does not trust the ground beneath her feet, but she seeks it nonetheless. A word that often appears in the first phase of her work is "contour." Even her explorations into the frailty of language, hugging the vague line between waking and dreaming, provoke this desperate phrase: "Open the contours with language,/ delve down to speech." One ought to do this to avoid surrendering to the inertia, routine, and lifelessness that come with the ready-made (and thus hollow) formulae that mechanically frame segments of reality. Only poetry can counteract this, restoring our vision, mobilizing a series of our own, "incorrect" associations. This is how we might understand the "compounds" that appear in the title of her debut volume. In an autobiographical sense these are "Warsaw images," freeze-frames from her early youth in the city - with the important addendum that "the girl with the sharp/ profile (...) remains// outside of the frame."

She is more clearly visible in the poems that are evocative of life in Wrocław. These are "water poems" at first, fairly vague, seeking a foothold in the water that washes over all things, including love; later they become more vivid, concrete, even topographical, guiding our way into places and the lives of people who fill them, into a sort of involvement. The poet's soft voice integrates all the scattered sounds and colors of the local environments into a direct and suggestive narrative.

This poetry's "water mark" is impressed onto each and every sentence, though the forms are increasingly refined and complex. I would call this a "gesture of confusion." For what has now

emerged from the theater of the world? A tiny, seemingly lame scene that acquires grander significance and is interlaced with symbolism. But in this there is humility, a monkish asceticism, a doubt or unrest. A text's verdict on the world cannot satisfy our false deductions, claims, and delusions, to slightly misquote one of Nowakowska's works. The more responsible the hand that writes, the more care for the sincere use of the medium; poetry emerges as an exponentially growing chain of illusions, errors, or misrepresentations. Sometimes we are certain of only this, that we have nothing more than these distortions which say as best they can something important about humanity.

A philosophy of this sort forces us to contemplate a restrained form with gradually diminishing competences. The above-mentioned sense of responsibility engenders a laconic form of expression. Klara Nowakowska's poems are shrinking. As if she wanted to say: enough of "falsifying the world," or indeed, of "fooling herself." In light of these poems, both these things ("the world-as-such" and "myself") seem a matter of consensual agreement. One day, many years ago, the teenaged Klara decided to break with the straightforward binding contract. Her latest, mature poetry confirms that she has not faltered one step. She remains vigilant, suspicious, ironic, and contentious. Perhaps only her faith in the efficacy (or necessity) of a hasty "sketch of the contours" has waned.

Karol Maliszewski

SELECTED BOOKS:

ZROSTY, ŁÓDŹ: SPP, 1999

SKŁADNIA, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2004

ULICA SŁOWIAŃSKA, WROCLAW: FUNDACJA NA RZECZ

KULTURY I EDUKACJI IM. TYMOTEUZA KARPOWICZA, 2012

NISKA ROZDZIELCZOŚĆ, WROCLAW: FUNDACJA NA RZECZ

KULTURY I EDUKACJI IM. TYMOTEUZA KARPOWICZA, 2013

[A BURNED PLAIT]

A burned plait. The black thread
winds, not weaving where it should -

the riddled cloth is
neither veil nor voile,

it will come to nothing

(it comes
apart)

*Translated by Klara Nowakowska and Soren Gauger
(„Spalony zaczątek”)*

4.

EDWARD PASEWICZ



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Edward Pasewicz (1971) is among the most interesting and important Polish poets born in the 1970s. Saying that he is a poet is to sell him short. He writes poems, plays, music, prose, and essays. He is active at the Queer Culture Center in Krakow. Furthermore, he wrote Poland's first gay detective novel, *Śmierć w darkroomie* [Death in the Darkroom] (2007). We might call him a one-man band. Small wonder then that the only volume of his collected poems to date is called *Muzyka na instrumenty strunowe, perkusję i celestę* [Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta] (2010).

Pasewicz made his debut as a poet in 2002 with *Dolna Wilda* [Lower Wilda]. The book was awarded at the Jacek Bierezin Polish Poetry Competition – seen as the country's most important poetry prize for emerging authors. It is regarded by many critics to be the most important poetry debut of that decade.

It is a major and significant book; sizeable, composed of fifty-eight poems. Yet we are not dealing with excess, but with a conscious program whose text demands a reader, and is fully composed with him or her in mind. In this sense, according to the critics, *Lower Wilda* is a volume that feels not so much mature as “ready” and waiting for a “second debut.” It also brings out something that had been obscured or hidden in Polish poetry. The significance of the volume is, in part, that for the first time Poland saw such a resounding voice of an Other – a homosexual, a poet, a man with desires, coming out from behind the curtains of the poem.

Pasewicz's protagonist – we shall hazard this phrase in terms of his poetry as a whole – is openly gay, and a Buddhist, who sometimes experiences “cracks,” “rifts,” “flinches,” and “bruises,” a man in search of a sensitive relationship with the world, in which the ties cease to bind. This is a stranger, an Other, a person with no place to call his own.

In his poetic work, Pasewicz has, from the outset, focused on observing, listening to, and discussing the world. His everyday reality is the bar, the courtyard, the doorway, the street, or literary life, yet this is no attempt at a new realism. Concrete details serve to “celebrate diversity,” to discover the artificiality of interpersonal relationships, feelings, and theatrical posturing, to juggle sincerity and invention, the role of the poet/poetry and

responsibility for one's fellow man. Sensitivity in these poems is warmth, feeling, and linguistic precision.

Since the very beginning, the musicality of the poem has been an important device for the poet – its leaps, its rhythmic tactics, its vulnerable trembling (in terms of style as well), or a certain lyricism of phrasing, which comes from pricking up his poetic ear. Thus we find allusions to musical forms (e.g. the rondo, cantata, opera) or to specific composers (e.g. Prokofiev, Mahler). Other important components of Pasewicz's poetry are instrumentation, composition, and repetition.

The formal diversity of the poem is also essential – from single-part poems with marked rhythms, to longer forms, such as the “musical” epic *th* (2005), the *Henry Berryman Pięśni* [Henry Berryman Songs] (2006) concept poem, or short free verse.

Critics have indicated three great themes of his poetry: politics (in the sense of ideology and orientation), sex/love, and religion/philosophy. Other recurring motifs include death, which appears right from the first volume, and literature itself.

The tautological literariness of literature is, on the one hand, Pasewicz's repertoire of devices, conventions, and trademarks (the poem as the plot of a story). On the other hand, it is a kind of defense against the world – the poet is conscious of the artificiality of the form, and the literary allusions, quotes, self-referentiality, and allusions to the literary community are a kind of game with other people's words. The poem does not promise a sense of intimacy, nor does it make the world a less alien place to live.

Karol Francuzik

SELECTED BOOKS:

DOLNA WILDA, ŁÓDŹ: TYGIEL KULURY, 2001

TH, KIELCE: KSEROKOPIA.ART.PL, 2005

PALACYK BERTOLTA BRECHTA, KRAKÓW: EMG, 2011

OCH, MITOCHONDRIA, KRAKÓW, EMG, 2015

LITTLE NIGHT BOAT

Two quick coffees on a shifty boat
no sun out yet, but it's starting.

The city in spite of everything is inside the skull,
if you took it out — it would sink whole.

Between your temples are the outskirts,
maybe even the lonely little houses in the middle of nowhere.

I have the city center and the shopping district, roundabouts
and all the tram loops, the station too.

We can exchange, with much fond regard —
tree for street, grass for rails, tram for greenwood.

I can allow you a landing at the city hall square
just keep saying anything, a lot and loud.

*Translated by Marit MacArthur and Marta Pilarska
("Nocna łódeczka" from Wiersze dla Róży Filipowicz, 2004)*

5.

MARTA PODGÓRNIK



The protagonist of Marta Podgórnik's (1979) poems is "the queen of poetry," who might only give the world "a suicide that is as effective as possible." The "queen" also provokes similar fantasies in the reader: she drifts about hotels and bars, drinks to excess, has stormy relationships with men and lauds "co-intoxication, not co-habitation." In the substrata of the world her poems create, we find urban and detective chronicles, and above all, a host of literary legends and cultural stereotypes of the modern poet (particularly the *poète maudit*). As a result, though Podgórnik was born in 1979, she seems like a figure from another epoch - her tradition is in the anti-bourgeois rebel poets, post-Romantic and post-Rimbaud. The poet navigates this male (even phallogocentric) tradition most convincingly, trying neither to boulderize it, nor to modernize it by force. On the contrary - in 2011's *Rezydencji surykatek* [Meercat Residence], the "queen of poetry" and her boyfriend ("the rock star") perpetually slouch through hotels, bars, railway stations, post offices, and culture centers, not having much to do with a contemporary world focused on innovation, new media, and constant updates. Sometimes this anachronistic couple feels most certain about the 1990s, the days of their youth. The poet ignores issues that are vital to other female writers of her generation, such as motherhood, feminism, ecology, posthumanism, corporate oppression, and capitalism. Political, ethical, and aesthetic projects that have a critical take on reality are less her domain than vivisection.

Podgórnik's poetry records the extremely intense experiences of her protagonist. Critics have said that this is how she sculpts a figure "who swiftly rationalizes her failures, observing them with sincere passion and masochistically 'stretching them out in time'." In carrying out this maximalist program, the protagonist obviously loses more than she gains, because even a kiss more strangles than delights her. The poet knows all too well that "the only thing that has value is what you are losing"; as such, her protagonist goads her lover: "so go and break // my heart [...] was it good for you? Good." The economy of love designed by Podgórnik is thus that profit comes from previous loss, and thus the loss must be great indeed if the undertaking is to pay off. "Balance Sheet," which sums up the series of pieces on the love between the "rock star" and the "disco queen" leaves us with

no illusions concerning the end results of an investment made on these terms: “the thing went bust.” Love did not endure, it burst, but it left behind Podgórnik’s language – sharp and self-reflexive to the degree that its every affect can be wound into a ball with no beginning or end. The language of this poetry does not differentiate between left and right, top and bottom, the source and what is radically remote from the original. Podgórnik weaves her poems from phantom burdens, dramatizes presence and absence, intensifying the omnipresent impression of the void, and endlessly reproducing figures of “queens of poetry.” Literally everyone is banking on their spectacular deaths, while they themselves “can’t complain. They’ve got enough for booze and a cab, and they share the couch with the typescripts of new novels and great epic poems.” They are indifferent to the “here and now,” because they have their own time – the eternal past. And with half of infinity on their side, they can sometimes let out “one of those sentences, / that you would want to take with you to the grave.”

Karolina Felberg-Sendecka

SELECTED BOOKS:

PRÓBY NEGOCJACJI, ŁÓDŹ: 1996

DLUGI MAJ, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2004

PIĘĆ OPAKOWAŃ. 1993-2008,

WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2008

REZYDENCJA SURYKATEK,

BIURO LITERACKIE, WROCLAW: 2011

ZAWSZE, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2015

POSTCARD IN AN ENVELOPE

for D.E.

it's called the literary life, then needlessly translated
into real life. the translation's an exegesis -
a kind of recycling. means you can say "action!" without
[anxiety.

past gestures: she's carrying plastic cups of wine,
not thinking of three in a bed,
head still full of Art. she's on a train,

in tears, walking, taking taxis.
doing it in smart hotels, in ordinary hotels, in apartments,
on the floor, in thought, with others, on the telephone -

imaginary examples, since my gift's the microscope not opera
[glasses.

our colleagues are expert in translation.
there's the getting ready, there are the launch,
[the dedications and a postcard of Juliet.

there's stupid jealousy over a past we can't hold onto (or back),
there are shame and understanding, a getaway in the Owl
[Mountains,
the editors of a widely-read periodical, sudden estrangement

and the first Christmas a without a card. I lift my gaze,
the sky's empty, it doesn't fall. and this is the visible world,
the one where we can still be in touch.

Translated by Fiona Sampson
("Widokówka w Kopercie" from Dwa do jeden, 2006)

6.

JACEK PODSIADŁO

Jacek Podsiadło (1964) speaks many languages of literature fluently – he is a poet, prose writer, and translator. He wrote a guidebook to Vilnius for Pascal, a publishing house. For years he has been a regular columnist at *Tygodnik Powszechny*. He writes books for children – cleverly rhymed, witty, and touchingly wise. He is at home on the radio waves, in the unfolding dialogue, the colloquial ring of a spoken phrase which seems to have no end. But also in the quick breaths of notation, the pitter-patter of sentences, the shimmer of language. In a word, in living speech that pulses, resonates, sparks, where everything happens in the here and now. Podsiadło is true to himself in each of these speech forms. In each you can hear the unique timbre of his voice, his sharp wit, his elemental joy – it is truthful because it is cut with sudden anxiety, an ever-encroaching sadness, like a sore spot after a blow where the blood begins to well up. The bruises are eclipsed by a semisweet pain, reminding us we exist. Waking us from a breathless slumber. They cure us of our illusions, appearing in their stead. And they heal the longest in poems.

Podsiadło has a remarkable mastery of poetic language. It is a pliable, nimble, suggestive, and highly evocative language that holds enormous power. It strides confidently on the earth. But it can also perform skillful tightrope acrobatics. It can walk on water. Sometimes it vaults up into the air. Podsiadło does not shy from poetic devices – he plays with them, showing his talents. He is sophisticated, inventive, and extravagant. By the same token, his language is pure, focused on a subjective truth, and honest. This purity of tone might derive from the feeling that poetry can be a prayer or a confession – vain, yet invariably arriving at its goal, because a good poem absolves *itself* from sin.

This poet knows how to make literature. He knows that art is a mask. This is why he is so frequently subversively ironic. This is why he undermines his literary posturing with wit – he affords himself joy, he laughs in his poetry, he revels in it, almost like a child. But from behind the guardrail of the poem he also knows how to lash out – and how to hit the mark, without pulling his punches. All of this literature, this entire complex scaffolding, is a stage for matters we cannot remain indifferent toward. Here I have in mind, firstly, Jacek Podsiadło's approach to God – particularly with his odd, reversed presence, with the spasm of non-existence that reaches for the jugular. Secondly, the poet has scores to settle with poems – with their undying echo. In their echo chambers he also squares off with himself – with that strange person who appears in his poems and speaks in his voice, with that person sketched into the merest tremblings of existence, transformed into lines of verse. The final, and most important matter is love, of which Podsiadło writes on the verge of sentimentality, with a note of barely concealed pathos, which generally rings so true that it has not a shred of convention, not a touch of irony.

The world of these poems is chiefly acoustic. It is a world that derives from listening in, with a sensitive ear. Years ago, Podsiadło wrote: "I place my ear to the earth – it breathes." In this image we can see the figure of a poet's vocation. As if the poet's duty were not only to hear the moving of tongues, but also the breathing of the world. As if the poet were someone who kept vigil over a slumbering existence, checking that it hasn't died, that its lungs aren't filled with a morbid void.

Podsiadło's poetry keeps a watchful eye on existence – he grasps for it and shelters it. Through this gesture the world lodges in the eye of the poem – it appears there, summoned by its name. But the poet's gaze inevitably changes the network of symbols that form reality into a map. This is because poetry is cartography, and the poet is always on the road, drifting about

the map of the world and paying for his journey with a poem – with a sudden wave that carries words and the world entrusted to them. And even if there is no one listening, if no one has cocked an ear, one can – and must – repeat: Love has traveled this way.”

Paweł Próchniak

SELECTED BOOKS:

ODMOWA WSPÓLUDZIAŁU,

OPOLE: KOŁO NOWA KULTURA WOLNOŚĆ I POKÓJ, 1989

DOBRA ZIEMIA DLA MURARZY, WARSZAWA: TIKKUM, 1994

KRA, KRAKÓW: ZNAK, 2005

POD ŚWIATŁO, OPOLE: BEZ NAPIWKU, 2011

PRZEZ SEN,

LUBLIN: OŚRODEK BRAMA GRODZKA – TEATR NN, 2014

LIFE'S CASTAWAY

Nettles to excess and thistles
that pierce the floor of our tent with their thorns.
Somehow we've got used to a way of living
that's overcharged with thinking, rational, inflated.
I'm wallowing in greenery, closely examining
spider web sails rigged on mainmasts of yarrow
as the clangor of cranes creaks flawlessly,
instruments could be tuned by it,
but there are no instruments. There's a vast number
of things that aren't. On them we've propped the world.
Another bird cry and its echo, echo long and slow.
Then I listen to the silence, and I feel as if
the silence is listening to me.

*Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones
("Życiowy rozbitek" from *Przez sen*, 2014)*



MARCIN SENDECKI



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Marcin Sendcecki's (1967) debut volume, titled *Z wysokości* [From on High] (1992), was clearly influenced by the poetics of the New Wave. We see this in the correspondence of themes and motifs (a focus on language and a mistrust of its states and forms, the appreciation of existential specifics), similarities in style, and condemning "the hell of the easy route" (to borrow Stanisław Barańczak's phrase) by introducing a range of complications. Sendcecki's poetic technique, based on mental shortcuts, ellipses, and insinuations, bears resemblance to the sketch, the anecdote, indicates the excess of possibilities that both hinder communication and make it possible. The world in the increasingly concise poems of *Parcele* [Parcels] (1998) strikes us as static, but this is only a surface impression. The discontinuity of the lines, of the lyrical narratives, and the fragmentariness of the descriptions problematize cognition as an act conditioned by the individual predisposition. The rules that govern it are continually called into question.

The poet's two subsequent collections abound in intertextuality. In "Ostatni szlif" [The Final Polish] from *Szkoci Dół* [(2002)] we hear echoes of Marcin Świetlicki's *Zakończenie* [Conclusion]. In turn, in the end rhymes of the minimalist poem "Operatywka" [Briefing] from *Opisów przyrody* [Nature Descriptions] (2002) Sendcecki repeats words ("death," "fur") rhymed in the clauses of the second couplet of Barańczak's "Nigdy bym nie przypuścił" [I Would Never Have Thought]. Both these poems, "The Final Polish" and "Briefing," might well be seen as commentaries on metaphysical poetry or even programmatic meta-poetic statements.

Nor is there any shortage of intertextual strategies in *Trap* (2006), which kicks off a series of four volumes with short and ambiguous titles. The poems in this volume are complex and formally sophisticated (the "trap" is a form of music with dynamic tempo shifts, using samplers and synthesizers). The poet writes according to "molds": pastorals, sestinas, villanelles. The patron saints of these exercises are, once again, Barańczak and Andrzej Sosnowski, whose double sestina "Techno", inspired by Philip Sidney's "Ye Goat-herd Gods," Sendcecki uses to write his own double sestina with a related title: "Tango." Another (numeric) construction principle is declared in the

title of 22 (2009): it contains twenty-two poems, of which fourteen are sonnets, and eight are octrains; the sum of the lines of an octrain and a sonnet also makes twenty-two. Both genres were developed by Sendeki's models in Polish poetry: Mickiewicz (who in turn admired Petrarch) as the writer of the *Sonnets*, and Iwaszkiewicz as the author of the *Octrains*. It is no accident that the twenty-two pieces in Sendeki's work correspond to the same number of poems in Mickiewicz's *Odessa Sonnets*. The numerous Mickiewicz references in 22 also correspond to the traces of Romanticism (Mickiewicz, Słowacki) and sentimentality (Franciszek Karpiński) in the books that followed: *Pół* [One Half] (2010) and *Farsz* [Stuffing] (2011).

Przedmiar robót [Labor Survey] (2014) – literally, a document outlining what kind of work is to be done at a construction site, and how – can only evoke Peiper's imperative for building a work. Sendeki constructs his volume in two ways: giving it an autobiographical framework (dedicating it to his deceased father, an engineer) and choosing his literary patrons. They are, primarily, Karpiński and Miłosz. "Scat" is a travesty of the poems that open *A Treatise on Poetry*. Taking his cue from Miłosz, Sendeki writes of "family speech," which in the context of *Labor Survey* could mean something quite unlike its original context, though the author appeals to what Miłosz had in mind: the Polish language in poetry. The title's "scat," or jazz singing based on onomatopoeia, would seem to clash with the poetics of the work, which are refined, yet clear, comprehensible, like a treatise. *Labor...* does not conceal its ambitions to settle accounts with life, which is reflected in how it settles scores with literature. We ought to note a shift from the formal explorations of only a few years previous to existential specifics, also found in *Lamety* [Lamé] (2015).

Sendeki's poetry is more than a web of references and literary allusions; above all, the diversity of links and similarities that have been there since his debut will never be relegated to the scrap heap of his themes and forms. The poet embraces repetition – whether it be of his own words, his pet themes, or those of someone else, patiently resculpting them. This work develops through its innovative playfulness with tradition: it is capacious, diverse, and necessary.

Paweł Mackiewicz

SELECTED BOOKS:

PARCELE, WARSZAWA-KRAKÓW: BIBLIOTEKA 1998

OPISY PRZYRODY, LEGNICA: BIURO LITERACKIE 2002

22, POZNAŃ: WBPICAK, 2009

PRZEDMIAR ROBOT, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2014

LAMETY, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2015

THE MUSEUM OF BANNERS OF THE PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT

lives on off showing me its ruined doors:

someone clearly slipped up, the signal got stuck on the line,
but the dispatcher lit up a Camel and immediately
died of cancer and heart disease.

The rest is invariant,

just exhibit this, with a microphone to my lips
I wade in deep snow, then my amp breaks down.

Translated by William Martin
("Muzeum Sztandarów Ruchu Ludowego"
from Muzeum Sztandarów Ruchu Ludowego, 1998)

8.

ANDRZEJ SOSNOWSKI



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Jean-Paul Sartre once noted that in translations, even when you win, you lose. The same might well be said of the poems of Andrzej Sosnowski (1959) in the original (“Writing is already a translation into another language” - Marina Tsvetaeva), which explain the state of everything from which they emerge: the unsteady pulse and “unfavorable construction of the world.” This poetry offers the reader a “false shudder of emotion,” and with each subsequent reading the error appears to be fresh and enhanced, to develop. Sosnowski hits home by missing the target. His debut volume, *Życie na Korei* [Life in Korea], the wide resonance of this work, its emotional impact, already foretold the numerous quandaries he would set before his readers and the fluctuating interpretive frameworks he would construct.

Born in 1959 and originally a student of English language and literature, Sosnowski combines sensitivity with a sense of distance, and humor that flirts with irony. The inescapability of language as a creative force emerges from his unyielding poetic constructs. Language acts of “first raid” are a part of this poet’s personal repertoire of gestures.

Though these works may be miniscule, this does not negate their universal scope. The allusions and quotations, particularly from American and German-language poets, make the film term “found footage” appropriate to many of Sosnowski’s works. The poet uses existing texts as a kind of raw material. His poems impertinently gather up voices in the manner of spiritual séances, summoning up the ghosts of ancestors. But they are also filled with Sosnowski’s trademark phrases and motifs. The poet advocates difference, blending these traces of other works with a kind of static interference; he creates a landscape of reversal, one that unfolds, and he deterritorializes and complicates how words move.

In his poetry, brightness does not shine from the dark, and the darkness does not consume the light; the darkness runs rampant around the brightness, unconquerable, as in “Szerokość poetycka zero” [Poetic Latitude Zero]: “At the end of the light is a tunnel.” This poetry composed of interferences, a utopian project of sorts, demands we ask if the reader is dealing with a poem or the likeness of a poem – the works appear to be poems *toutes proportions gardée*. Here the rainbow ends at ground-level,

the light at a tunnel, the poem swallows the poet, Jonah – the fish and the sea, what is forgotten becomes the future, and not the past, the poet reads the reader, and no response comes to the question. Sosnowski’s subversive poetry seems to be a mirror where we cannot see ourselves, but we can see the truth behind our situations. Orpheus/Sosnowski sometimes switches his gears in reverse – partly in the sense that he anaesthetizes his poetic instincts, lays them aside; but he always returns to them. Following an exercise in the classical style, the poem accelerates and collapses into itself.

Poetry and love are his central themes; love can be like a poem that “loses its memory as it walks round the corner.” Both make advances on the world then pull away from it, both hold the potential for salvation: “I have no letter, or even the first three letters / of a surname,” declares the subject in “Grimoire.” And if we read this voice as belonging to the poet himself, we hear the cry of S.O.S.-nowski. An act of (verbal) “first raid” turns into an act of first aid.

Elizabeth Bishop, a poet he enjoys reading, devoted an ironic text to the art of losing. “One Art” ends with lines that might well have served as more “found footage” for the Polish poet: “the art of losing’s not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.” In Sosnowski’s *Tempo życia* [The Pace of Living], we read: “Write / in Polish. Nothing.” Here we find an imperative that suggests writing under compulsion, a kind of writing where the words do not “spill forth.” The world in Bishop’s poetry and in all of Sosnowski’s volumes begins multiple times, and likewise, has many endings, which are even more intense. The poet leaves home and does not come back. He meanders to hit the mark. He cries for help and writes a poem.

Joanna Roszak

SELECTED BOOKS:

ŻYCIE NA KOREI, WARSZAWA: PRZEDŚWIT, 1992

SEZON NA HELU,

LUBLIN: STOWARZYSZENIE LITERACKIE “KRESY”, 1994

ZOOM, KRAKÓW: ZIELONA SOWA, 2000

TAXI, LEGNICA: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2003

GDZIE KONIEC TĘCZY NIE DOTYKA ZIEMI,

WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2005

PO TĘCZY, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2007

TROPE FOR TROPE

Halfway there and the flames engulfed us
the prompter will be on cue in a minute.
We flowed, no we didn't, we fled and now
upright now head down you go like water through a mill-gate
out of breath and out of your depth that should give them
something to dream of. As plain as the words in a song

'just like a woman'. But this
high-gloss, semi-technicolour
shoestring of days, pages torn from a diary
glowing like eclectic postmarks
in the album - was it for this, dear basilisk, we lit our powder
[train?

The detonator I fear is in our possession.

The fact that we are within range is even more worrying.
There's the flare of a match. The cackle of hyenas and the light
blowing up in our faces. *Wham!* The audience
curls up into a ball, while the hero
drives away into the weird glare
glancing back over his shoulder at the clinker of empire.

The aureole reappears in the eyes of his fiancée.

Meanwhile, we are quite patently elsewhere, fluorescent fish
in a derelict aquarium. When did you start hearing things
like the refrain underlying that famous lullaby
or did you work out in advance that background noises
won't get a look in? Even when sleeping you leave a trail
and only a part of it can be read
when it doesn't look a bit like what it isn't, which is blood.

Translated by Rod Mengham
(“Trop w trop” from *Stancje*, 1997)

9.

MARCIN ŚWIETLICKI



Marcin Świetlicki (1961) is one of the most important poets of the last few decades – perhaps the most important. His book-length debut, *Zimne kraje* [Cold Countries], published by the *BruLion* underground magazine, immediately brought him acclaim from critics and older writers (including Wisława Szymborska), and incredible popularity among younger readers. Świetlicki’s voice heralded a new epoch in Polish poetry after a fairly dry spell for literature, where many poets were busy condemning the communist regime in verse or rehashing cultural discourses. Świetlicki, on the other hand, was ostentatiously personal and private, and his strident first-person narrator (easily identifiable with the author) spoke of the daily life of an outsider in the world of Krakow’s bars and streets, of childhood, loves, friendships, and of events that were often minor, yet significant to the author. The immediacy of the narrative – and the fact that the poet appeared to testify to their authenticity through his life – had a powerful impact indeed. Świetlicki’s mass popularity was supported by the fact that he soon began singing his works with the rock band Świetliki [The Fireflies], with whom he released a few major albums and performs to this day. This made Świetlicki probably the last of the Polish poets whose works (or fragments thereof) have entered the colloquial language. His “I’m in an unintrudable mood” can be heard from the mouths of people who have never read a single line of his poems.

The power of Świetlicki’s poems has caused countless others to emulate him, trying to replicate and capitalize on his style. The results are often rather poor, for underneath their simple surfaces, Świetlicki’s poems are complex and steeped in the finest traditions of Polish poetry. On the one hand, he maintains a constant dialogue with the motifs of the Polish bard of Romanticism, Adam Mickiewicz, and on the other, he enjoys language games reminiscent of the great twentieth-century innovator of poetry Miron Białoszewski, creating a truly explosive combination. It is also noteworthy that Świetlicki, a known enthusiast of the “noir detective novel,” has also been successful as a prose writer, creating a trilogy of highly unique mystery novels, featuring the memorable character of the melancholy Master. (We hardly need add that both in his poetry and in his

prose Świetlicki has a strong voice, that his work is instantly recognizable).

Always subversive, maintaining an ironic distance from the “new bourgeoisie,” as well as the academies, media, and radicals (left- or right-wing) of all sorts, caustic toward all kinds of authority, Świetlicki has remained an important point of reference for years. He is cherished (or attacked) for supposedly being anachronistic or burnt-out, yet he keeps returning with more books, and the motif of “reactivation” or “resurrection” has become one of his great themes, which, like death, love, and alcohol, winds through many of his works.

Marcin Świetlicki is now a classic figure in contemporary poetry, one who has kept the vitality, sensitivity, and rebellious vigor of the man who debuted many years ago. Anyone who cares to understand the course of Polish literature of the past few decades must read Marcin Świetlicki’s poetry. These works might be adored or rejected, but they cannot be ignored.

Marcin Sendeki

SELECTED BOOKS:

ZIMNE KRAJE, KRAKÓW-WARSZAWA: “BRULION”, 1992

PIEŚNI PROFANA, WOŁOWIEC: CZARNE, 1998

CZYNNY DO ODWOLANIA, WOŁOWIEC: CZARNE, 2001

WIERSZE, KRAKÓW: EMG, 2011 (COLLECTED POEMS)

DELTA DIETLA, KRAKÓW: EMG, 2015

APOCRYPHA

Baby Jesus was an insufferable child.
From the start you could tell he didn't really belong here.
Herds of old ladies would prattle over him,
performing the superstitious rites of the time.

This child had an abnormal memory,
he knew the exact order of the constellations,
and he would use this knowledge for his own
tiresome and incomprehensible plans.

Stick in hand, he'd fall in with a group of his peers
intending to organize a revolution,
or else he'd transform those awful old ladies
into birds and mosses.

Often his parents would take him aside
and look at him in distress,
then he'd sharply raise a finger
and they'd hurry back to their duties.

Now he hangs on walls, flanked by flowers,
and over the pillows of schoolgirls,
he's been guzzled dry by those old ladies,
and men wearing dresses use him.

But this, it turns out, doesn't bother him much.
He sits on the edge, striking one stick against another.
One star falls, the next
rises.

Translated by William Martin
(“Apokryf” from *Zimne kraje*, 1992)

10.

**EUGENIUSZ
TKACZYSZYN-DYCKI**



The poetry of Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki (1962) is single story inscribed through numerous poem cycles, joined by elements of real and imaginary biography. The roots of this poetic narrative are in the Baroque tradition, from which the Warsaw poet borrowed a whole range of stylistic devices (unusual syntax, paradoxes, parallelisms, anachronisms, contrasts, borrowings from Ukrainian), as well as his characteristic tone and themes (the impermanence of forms of existence, the varying structure of reality, sinful sensuality, ever-decaying physicality, death). The temporary conclusions of this narrative are immersed in the present and its crises of custom and identity (mental illness, homosexuality, fluid identity, cultural exclusion, the tension between nations inhabiting the same territory). The plot line (we can speak in terms of plot here, because Dycki's various poems recount a family saga – both individual and collective) combines facets from literary history (apart from the above-mentioned Baroque, we have motifs from the poetry of Polish Romanticism and “Young Poland”) and from everyday experience. This multicolored mosaic of poetry coheres through a specificity of tone, the incantation of the voice.

Another interesting context for this work is Sarmatian culture, which Dycki uses in a remarkably inspiring manner. The modern figures that appear in his poems are given Sarmatian origins, giving them a kind of cultural legitimacy. The poet's point is not to locate these figures in a particular tradition, to immobilize them, but to be forever blending the old and the new, blurring the boundary between truth and invention, between the real and imaginary. Przemysław Czapliński suggests that the Sarmatian style in Polish contemporary literature is always a sign of an intermediary otherness. In Dycki's poetry the process is intensified: there is no difference between the same and the other, between real and created biography. We cannot determine the dividing line between them, as the protagonist of Dycki's poems lives in all these states at once.

The Warsaw poet uses tried-and-true poetic forms in each of his volumes, he exploits them to make the reader understand that the poem's task is not to change the means of expression, and thus cause changes in reality, but rather to commemorate. Poetry commemorates by forever repeating names – those of the

living and the dead, as well as the names of things that surround us. The poem is a special kind of prosthesis for our memory: it does not immortalize everything that has transpired (it is not a recording machine), it preserves the signs, symbols, shorthand, traces, and after-effects that give the past its misty aura.

Dycki says that a poet is not called upon to counteract the world's disintegration and the onset of darkness (this task is beyond him), but to limit the destructive forces by creating a ghostly form of life, combinations of various cultural traditions, various figures of experience, and often contrasting models of communication. In one poem, he writes the following: "in my office house I write poems / ladies and gentlemen, I bend over the invented piece / of paper, as if over my own self, and I get a rush / of passion I flick on the flashing light time // and again (...)."

Grzegorz Jankowicz

SELECTED BOOKS:

LIBER MORTUORUM,

LUBLIN: STOWARZYSZENIE LITERACKIE "KRESY", 1997

*PRZEWODNIK DLA BEZDOMNYCH NIEZALEŻNIE OD MIEJSCA
ZAMIESZKANIA,* LEGNICA: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2000

DZIEJE RODZIN POLSKICH,

WARSZAWA: WYDAWNICTWO SIC!, 2005

PIOSENKA O ZALEŻNOŚCIACH I UZALEŻNIENIACH,

WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE, 2008

KOCHANKA NORWIDA, WROCLAW: BIURO LITERACKIE 2014

VII.

AD BENEVOLUM LECTOREM

I.

do not read my book
if you wish to forget yourself
devote yourself to debauchery rather
than the inhaling of stinking poems

devote yourself to debauchery if you really
are trying to cling to a piece of the world
in which there is nothing but poems
that stink because they draw you in

to the dark image in which you truly
will find nothing aside from my book
if you wish to forget yourself a task that
I cannot help you with be disposed to read poetry

of any kind at all

Translated by Bill Johnston
(“Ad Benevolum Lectorem” from *Peregrynarz*, 1992)

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