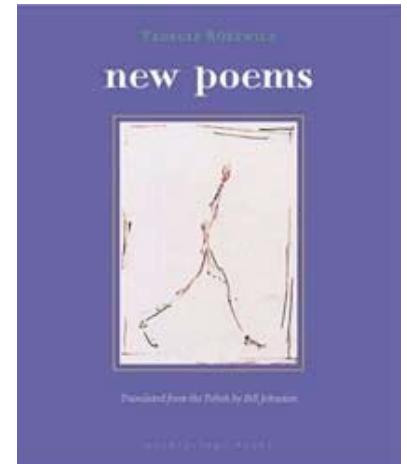


New Poems
Tadeusz Różewicz
Translated by Bill Johnston

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Reviewed by Christopher Doda



In North America, Polish poet and playwright Tadeusz Różewicz' work is not as well known as that of his contemporaries, Zbigniew Herbert and Nobel Prize-winners Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska, but in his homeland he is considered a lion in winter who still has some teeth. Różewicz' verse is straightforward, stark and unadorned, an aesthetic he purposely developed after World War Two when the horror he witnessed drove him to produce a poetry devoid of any frivolity. If William Carlos Williams had possessed a European sensibility, his work might have looked like this; a colloquial speaker who wrestles with a 1000 years of cultural weight. Nearing 90, Różewicz is still active and *New Poems* collects together the latest three books of this prolific poet's career, *the professor's knife*, *gray zone* and *exit*, along with some uncollected recent works, all published since 2001.

Given the poet's advanced years, it is not surprising that several poems deal with age. In "alarm clock," Różewicz laments that he must write elegies for those he has outlived, spending too much time with the dead for his liking. Still enamoured with vigour and vitality, he rebels against the culture of death: "let the dead bury their dead" because life "is a matter for the living." He expands on this theme in "The Gates of Death," sure enough, an elegy for an old friend. The gates into the afterlife "are not there" yet "at the same time they are/wide open to all" regardless of faith or lack thereof. Though the poem begins within the parameters of Christian theology, it concludes with a reference to the Greek myth of Eurydice. Here she is a Charon, a sparrow, a transporter of souls:

fortunate are those who die
in their sleep
their hand taken
by Eurydice
who is immortal
and weeps for she must
live on alone

In Różewicz' version, we all look back and leave her but her continuance in myth, her story told and retold, is a consolation and demonstrates that our cultural markers can outlive us as transient beings.

And as a poet, Różewicz is aware of his obligation to language and its role in the perpetuation of culture. In "why do I write," he asserts "sometimes 'life' conceals/That/which is greater than life," suggesting that the ideal is hidden in the mundane circumstances of our day-to-day existence

so you will not see it
ever
I know
and that is why
I write

because through poetic language a reader can fleetingly glimpse the wondrous ideal. The nature of the poetic subject is further investigated in "white isn't sad..." as poetic language brings the ideal into focus "oh so slowly/it becomes/whiter," more than it actually is, perhaps more than it can ever be.

Różewicz is simultaneously aware of both the dangers and limitations of language for a poet. It may be a bit of a self-serving position, but he notes that the fate of the poet and the fate of language are linked. When language is degraded, the poet loses place in a culture. Yet, when a poet gives up on language, he either falls silent or retreats into the abstract. In "labyrinths," Różewicz chastises early 20th century Polish poet Bolesław Leśmian, who

through excess and inattention
[...] became a poet and tumbled
into the labyrinth of God

he sought a way out in language
but language has no way out

Sundered from reality by his excesses in language, Leśmian fades into ineffectuality and despair until

he waits for the end of the world
the end of history
the end of the end

but the world refuses
to end

In a different poem, Różewicz similarly admonishes Rilke, who chose the linguistic construct of the angel's tower over the world "so I left him and went to seek/instruction from Brecht." Furthermore, he probes the boundaries of language itself in "speech conversation dialogue," a poem about the failure of language to civilize us as human beings. Though we "have the gift of speech/[that]distinguishes us from animals" and marks us as sentient creatures, for the most part we use it to say things like "get the fuck/out of the car" as "cab drivers beat up a lady/professor from a western university." The benefit of utterance alone is insufficient to overcome our inherently brutish nature.

Bill Johnston renders Różewicz' work into an easily readable English that captures the direct speech that the poet advocates. If there is a source of frustration with the book,

it is with the woefully inadequate explanatory notes at the end. Różewicz quotes passages from languages other than his own (German mostly, but also Japanese, Italian, Latin and Greek), yet no references or translations are provided and the notes contain only a basic surface gloss. For instance, a poem like “conversation with Herr Scardanelli” comes with a notation that this is a pseudonym for German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin but there are no translations or references to the quotations from his works that Różewicz uses in the poem. This is not a hindrance to (most of) the poems per se but is nonetheless grating to the intellectually curious.

That aside, *New Poems* is a fascinating read though perhaps not the best introduction to Różewicz’ work. This book represents the tail-end of a career that began in 1947 and shines with the accumulated wisdom of that amount of experience. Kudos to Johnston and Archipelago Books for producing this fine volume, a perfect companion to *They Came to See a Poet*, Różewicz’ selected poems, published by Anvil Press in 1991.



Christopher Doda is a poet and critic living in Toronto. His first collection of poems, *Among Ruins*, was released in 2001 by Mansfield Press and his second, *Aesthetics Lesson*, appeared in the autumn of 2007.