

Writing the Apocalypse

Voicing Silence Through Time

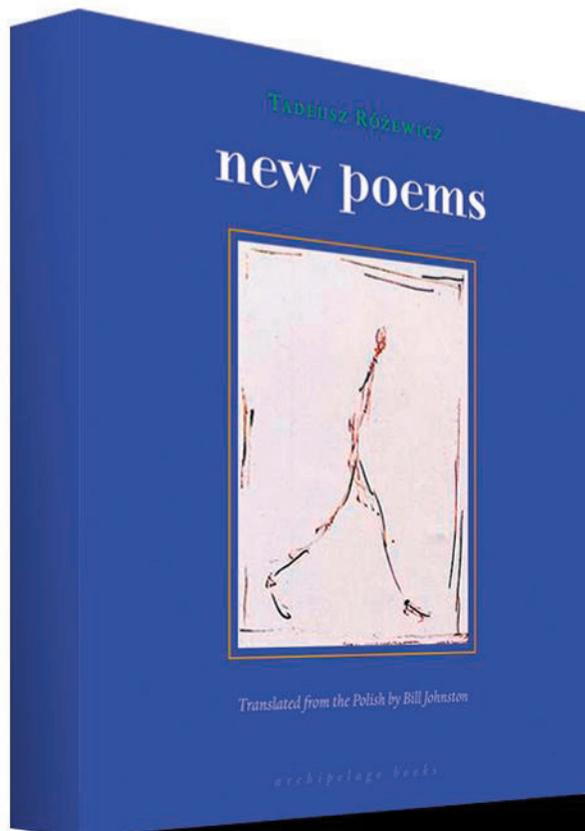
by Rainer J. Hanshe

Tadeusz Różewicz, *new poems*

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HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

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**a review of
*new poems***

Tadeusz Różewicz

Translated from the Polish by Bill Johnston

Archipelago Books, 2007

by Rainer J. Hanshe

“

. . . let us abolish the images, let us save immediate Desire
(desire without mediation).

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

“

We seek the poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,
Transfixing by being purely what it is,
A view of New Haven, say, through a certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
Nothing beyond reality.

—Wallace Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”

“

How can we write or think about disaster when by its very
nature it defies speech and compels silence—when, moreover,
it consumes thought and rips books apart? We cannot: but
writing is the patient response of this helplessness.

—Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

Tadeusz Różewicz is recognized by critics and writers in Poland as one of the most exemplary Polish poets of the 20th century and some claim in the world. He is said to be in the same league as Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Wisława Szymborska. His first volume of poetry, *Niepokój* [Anxiety] (a seemingly farsighted title, prefiguring the character of his future work), was published in 1947 and ten years later, *Poezje zebrane*, an edition of his collected poems was published in Krakow. In 1966 Poland awarded Różewicz the State Prize for Literature, Class I, bestowing upon him its highest distinction, while most recently, in 2000, he received the NIKE, the most eminent Polish literary award, for *Matka Odchodzi* [Mother Departs]. Szymborska confessed that she could not imagine what post-war Polish poetry would resemble without Różewicz’ work and, revealing the true enormity of his influence, that *everyone* owes “something to him, though not all of us are able to admit it.” Clearly, Różewicz has made a considerable impact upon Polish literature.

On the [Polish Culture website](#) Różewicz is portrayed as “a disturbing writer who resists definition, a poet of silence who rejects poetic trappings,” searching instead for modes of expression alert to the perils of writing in the twentieth and now twenty-first century. The first English translation of his work was made by Milosz and published in his 1965 volume, *Postwar Poetry*, and *Faces of Anxiety* (London, Rapp & Whiting, 1969), translated by Adam Czerniawski, was the first edition in English of Różewicz’ poems, but it was not widely available in America. Two other poetry books would follow in 1976, with Czerniawski translating a third in 1982, *Conversation with the Prince and Other Poems*. Lamentably though, all of these books are out of print and Różewicz, who is also a novelist as well as a playwright some critics consider equal to Beckett in his revolution of dramatic form, is not as well known in America as Milosz and Szymborska. In *new poems*, a collection published by [Archipelago Books](#) that combines the last three volumes of Różewicz’ poetry, *the professor’s knife*, *gray zone*, and *exit* (each not previously translated into English) as well as five “recent poems,” Różewicz’ disturbance is keyed to an exceedingly high degree, but that condition is inevitable, an indication of one who is acutely sensitive to the traumas of history. Yet, the most tragic figures are also truly comedic, and Różewicz is not incapable of Aristophanic exultations, though they are often tinged with woe.

To be disturbed is to be agitated, to be in a state of turmoil; it is a sign of sensitivity, proof that one *feels*, that one’s nerves are receptive, for they shudder when overcome by horror, and that is to know the sublime. There is nothing altogether exceptional in this, it is natural one might protest, but man is no longer natural, far from it, and sensitivity of Różewicz’ order is rare in an era in which most humans have become anesthetized and are insensate to horror, if, at all, they are even cognizant of it. To be remotely aware of the horrors of the world is one matter, but to live with or be disturbed by them is yet another. What most of humanity prefers is the serenity and harmony of the beautiful. Few live with history as Różewicz does and even fewer tremble before it continuously. From *new poems*, it is apparent that history is a regular presence in his life, one which, like a specter, haunts his memory and prods him into thought, and this is the poetry of one engaged in rigorous thought. When writing of the traumas of history though, they are not merely ‘past events,’ but living currents experienced again and again, evidence of ‘history’ as an ever present presence in consciousness. Time’s borders, as is well known, are amorphous.

In one of the numerous untitled poems in the book, Różewicz declares that “we have to relive everything/from the beginning” (68) and concludes the poem questioning whether or not the past will ever end, the lack of an answer presupposing that it will not. The refusal to close the poem, even in the most marginal sense, such as with a period after its concluding word (in fact, not one of the poems in the book has any closing punctuation), indicates the persistent force of a past that will not and cannot end, not even through the event of death:



Mr. Turski in a strange
fragrant cloud
exotic and mysterious
for an elementary school
in a provincial town
between Czestochowa and Piotrkow Trybunalski
smiles
and takes his mystery
to the grave
when will the past
finally end (70)

Like Giacometti's fragile, wraithlike but essentially courageous *Walking Man* (the drawing which adorns the cover of *new poems*), Różewicz clearly wonders what it is we are walking towards and *how* we have been and *are* walking there, whatever that *there* is. The poet continues walking, but weighted by a climactic thought: *how does one live in/with a ceaselessly unfolding apocalypse?* How does one *write* the apocalypse?

Living in and with silence, Różewicz is concerned with what it means to speak and to write during such an epoch. "The work of Różewicz and many other European poets of his generation" noted eminent Hölderlin translator Michael Hamburger in *The Truth of Poetry*, "is the answer of those who agree with [Adorno's statement that] after Auschwitz poems can no longer be written." Różewicz, says Hamburger, has "made himself at home in the silence" that Adorno's statement prescribes. Like some of his contemporaries, his "anti-poetry does not contradict it" but is an altogether different kind of poetry—it is not that poems cannot be written, only certain *kinds* of poems. To be silent is not necessarily to refuse to write; as Lacoue-Labarthe noted, "poetry occurs where . . . language gives way." To be silent is to refuse to write *barbarically*, which, interpreting Adorno's statement, meant to Różewicz metaphorically and mythically.

After Auschwitz, traditional language had been rendered inoperable. One mode of silence was to refute traditional language, which was no longer meaningful, and create if possible new poetic discourses. For Adorno, as he elucidated some years later in another essay, that was still not permissible: "The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. Through aesthetic principles or stylization . . . the unimaginable ordeal still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of its horror, and with this, injustice is already done to the victims." The disquiet Adorno felt seemed to be not only with the possibility of experiencing aesthetic pleasure from such art, thereby committing an ignoble act and potentially reducing its horror; it was also with shaping it into

¹ In 1966, Adorno would alter his viewpoint, stating that “the enduring suffering has as much right to expression as does the tortured man to scream; therefore it may have been wrong that after Auschwitz poetry could no longer be written.” It was clear to him that the voices in the abyss must express their experiences and utter their truths, yet, his statement isn’t absolute, but qualified with that cautious “may.”

something that might be considered beautiful, thus giving rise to serenity and harmony instead of strife.

Uneasiness before the potential artistic rendering of the Holocaust was a grave concern for others such as philosophy professor Michael Wyschogrod. In a book on Elie Wiesel, echoing Adorno but speaking of art in its entirety, Wyschogrod proclaimed that since “art takes the sting out of suffering” to make fiction of the Holocaust must be forbidden—fiction pertaining to any aesthetic rendering whatsoever. But as an event forever beyond meaning and outside comprehension, no art could ever justify the Holocaust through imposing order and bestowing some potential meaning upon it. The apocalyptic event would always render such work absurd. Out of our helplessness though, we can patiently respond to it, knowing all the while that our response would always be forever limited, partial, fragmented. And it is only perhaps through the fragmentary that any work on the Holocaust could be made, only through the sublime, wherein there is a confrontation with that which surpasses our imagination and is beyond our control.

What Adorno and Wyschogrod were fearful of, and with grave necessity, was stripping an apocalyptic event of its horrific character through its transformation into the beautiful. Yet, despite the many modes of art, they either chose not to or refused to consider those, or *that* other mode—the ugly. With Adorno, this is especially peculiar, for in his *Aesthetic Theory*, the ugly is of crucial importance; in fact, it functions as a subversive force which can disrupt the tyranny of the classical mode. At the turn of the century, or perhaps even earlier with Van Gogh (whose paintings aren’t necessarily works of beauty), art’s concern was no longer with the rendering beautiful of things. Art shattered its bond to beauty, thus liberating itself from that mortifying constriction.¹ Instead of transfiguring a horrifying event into something beautiful, the artist could transfigure it into something ugly, or sublime, which would not at all be pleasing, but *cruel*. Such work would not be entertaining; it would retain its sting, if not sting and prick even more. In it, there would be no reconciliation, no serenity, no harmony. There would be stress, anxiety, and discord. When defining sublimity in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche appeared to be closely aligned with the Aristotelian conception of catharsis, or what he considered it to be. The sublime was the “*taming* of the horrible” via artistic means, which results in tragedy, and the comic was the “artistic *discharge* of the nausea of absurdity.” Yet, while Aristotle noted that tragedy brings about catharsis, Nietzsche seemed to imply that the taming happens *before* it even enters the poem. In this, there is a transformation of the overwhelming suffering or of the horror of the world—it is tamed and, in the renowned formulation, existence is justified through art. Despite the ceaseless reiteration of this assertion, Nietzsche would abandon the position quite early—existence no longer needed justification. It was justified in and of itself—that was tragic wisdom. From *Human, All Too Human* onward, the impulse to tame was criticized and in *Twilight of the Idols*, the Dionysian figure is portrayed as one capable of displaying courage before the “horror and terror of existence,” able to “affirm life even in its strangest and sternest problems.” The Aristotelian

conception of catharsis as Nietzsche understood it was surpassed, or overcome, and thus the need for serenity and redemption—horror was no longer to be tamed, *but revealed in all its intensity*. Strife would rule, not harmony. Tragic wisdom discloses that redemption is not only out of reach but undesirable. It is difficult wisdom to bear, but the sublime is as searing as lava and as hard and as lacerating as a diamond.

Art now has to demand of itself the greatest courage. Its concern is not with beauty, but truth, with the truths of the world, as much as we are able to know and express them. With the Holocaust, this test reaches the most strenuous and exigent pitch and the trial of the eternal return comes to its ultimate apogee. Far from taking the sting out of suffering, instead, art—tragic art—would *intensify* the sting, such as through ‘expressionistic’ paintings, like those of Otto Dix—even more so than Van Gogh, *hardly* beautiful painting—, or as in Artaud’s theater of cruelty, which sought not to pacify, comfort, or appease the spectator, but to startle, provoke, and *awaken*.² Artaud wanted to make the spectator live with suffering, not to be distant from it, contemplating the plague as if it could be an aesthetically pleasing event. It is art as *contagion*, *not* purification. One is to leave the theater of cruelty trembling, not in rapturous awe of beauty—one is to leave the theater infected, and to be infected is to live with horror. It is to know the sublime, and the sublime, not as defined by Kant, but Longinus and Nietzsche, is the aesthetic mode proper to plagues and apocalypses, for it immobilizes rationality and is as Longinus said a “power and irresistible violence [which] reigns supreme over every hearer.”

Różewicz didn’t utilize Artaud’s principles in his poetic discourse but, like Giacometti and Beckett, developed a spare and whittled but equally potent mode of expression. In it, he recognizes the most inexplicable horrors and remains, continuing to laud life. It is an art of the sublime. To him, the image is a detour that disrupts the immediacy of sensation, which the metaphor, acting as a mediating device, does not permit to appear in its ‘unambiguous entirety.’ Instead, it protracts “the reader’s encounter with the true meaning of a poetic work.” It is direct intimacy that is at stake and Różewicz refuses to let that contiguous communion between him or the poem and the reader be protracted let alone disrupted. As an encounter with an-other, Różewicz wants in his words to be close enough to turn towards the other who embraces his work; also, for that other to be close enough to embrace, internalize and, *possibly*, be changed by him, even if that depersonalization is temporary, a mere instance of obliteration and incorporation. The poetic encounter is a silent encounter with things and with others. It is, as Celan proclaimed, a gift to those who are mindful of it.

In order for the ‘unambiguous entirety’ of his poems to appear unimpeded, Różewicz forged a poetic discourse out of the detritus of speech, eschewing metaphor, dispensing with originality, and writing in what is considered the most literal, direct manner. It is poetry that, as haiku, is terse and pithy yet remains imaginative. In the poem “the professor’s knife” this terse, seemingly flat style is evident, but it conceals a formal complexity that is not as simple as

² Adorno would probably extol Grotowski’s *Akropolis*, surely the most tragic aesthetic confrontation with the Holocaust, and find Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* reprehensible. One is a work of truth, the other, of beauty, if that.

³ The Christian and Marxist ennobling of the peasant, proletariat, or the humble is an utter naïveté that demands to be criticized and rebuked. Far from pure, honest, trustworthy, etc., the aforementioned are as capable as all humans of the grossest impurities, the most deceptive lies, and the most frightening atrocities.

it appears:



the rails run
parallel
the trains
fly past
like black birds
they end their flight
in a fiery oven
from which no
song rises
into the empty sky
the train ends
its journey
turns into
a monument

across fields meadows woods
across mountains valleys
it races ever more quietly
the stone train
stands
over the abyss

if it is ever brought to life by cries
of hatred
from racists nationalists
fundamentalists
it will crash like an avalanche
onto humanity
not onto “humanity”!

onto people (8)

The use of *enjambment* here is dexterous, as well as his *caesuras* and what word and blocks of words make up a line, evidence of a highly skilled poet who isn't simply writing direct and literal poems that employ the ordinary language of a peasant.³ While *enjambment* is quite common in free verse and not necessarily that complex, it is often executed without careful thought, the degree of stress in each line therefore lacking tension, reducing the apprehension and anxiety which *enjambment* can produce. Różewicz' knowledge, understanding, and use of language is however far more complex, nuanced, and deliberate, as is evident from his distinguishing between humanity, “humanity”, and people, or in “so what if it's a dream”, a poem from

exit wherein he longs of saving something from the apocalypse, though he knows what an impossibility that is:



I write on water

from a few phrases
a few poems
I build an ark

to save something
from the flood
that takes us by surprise
wipes us off the face
of the earth
when full of joy
we turn our faces
to the god of the sun
and to that God
who

“does not play dice”
we know Nothing
of cracks in the innards
of old mother earth
we raise towers
of sand
we build
on the verge
of life and death

...

I write on water
I write on sand
from a handful of salvaged words
from a few simple phrases
like the prose of carpenters
from a few naked poems
I build an ark
to save something
from the flood
that takes us by surprise
in broad daylight
or in the middle of the night
and wipes us from the face of the earth

I build my ark

a drunken boat
a little paper vessel
under red
black sails

so what if it's a dream (241)

While Różewicz may find rhetoric distasteful, there is no zero degree in writing. It doesn't exist; it is a linguistic illusion. "There is no such thing," Nietzsche proclaimed, "as an unrheterical 'naturalness' of language to which one could appeal: language itself is the result of spoken rhetorical arts." The "prose of carpenters" isn't as simple as Różewicz purports. "Language," Nietzsche realized, "is rhetoric, for it can only convey a *doxa* and never episteme." Hemingway is as stylized, if not more so, than Lautréamont. Sontag knew this too when she stated that zero degree writing is "as selective and artificial as any traditional style of writing." The idea that a style-less, transparent mode of writing may exist "is one of the most tenacious fantasies of modern culture." While the poems may be free of masks and costumes, while they may be impartial, bare expressions of Różewicz' experiences and more direct than Rilke and Pound, in their own right they remain complex, are multi-layered, and are at times elliptical. Like Beckett though, Różewicz pares language to its simplest proportion. In this distillation, there is a demythologization not only of man and culture but of language itself, and that is hardly simple. Through that refinement, and it is a refinement, Różewicz approaches his readers as intimately as possible, reaching out to touch and encounter them as he encounters the world. In "the last conversation" the question of whether or not life has meaning because we must die is answered, and this is one of our ultimate encounters with the world:

“

instead of answering
my question
you put a finger to your lips
said Jerzy

does it mean
that you won't
that you can't answer

it's my reply
to your question
"what meaning does life possess
if I have to die?"

placing a finger on my lips

I answered you in my thoughts
“life possesses meaning only because
we have to die”

eternal life
life without end
is existence without meaning
light without shadow
echo without sound (144)

⁴ Jill Schoolman of Archipelago Books informed me that she actually sent a copy of Różewicz’ new poems to Poet’s House—it will then be the first Różewicz book they own. The impetus to acquire it however was not their own.

In *new poems*, history is active through memory and imagination, and Różewicz’ crossings with friends who have died or were murdered, as well as a host of political, religious, and literary figures, are always personal encounters wherein he relates how he lives with them, how they have become part of his consciousness. There are encounters with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, with God, Boehme, Jesus, and Pascal, with demagogues like Mussolini and Hitler, and artists such as Pasolini and Kafka. In “farewell to Raskolnikov” Różewicz encounters the infamous outsider in a café. After confessing that he “wanted to become a Napoleon . . . but only killed a louse,” Różewicz wryly observes that on the table before them there is “a glass of cloudy tea” and “a squashed/stale napoleon” from which “greenish cream” oozes “from the pastry/like dried pus” (246). The encounter provokes in Różewicz a feeling of kinship, though not with Raskolnikov’s murderous instincts but “that strange uncommon/feeling” which he reveals to be “the excitement” of seeing one’s “name in print!” (247) Yet, Różewicz is not concerned merely with famous personages or with fame; no character, subject, or thing is without interest to him. He makes no moral valuations; the ‘base’ is as worthy of being written of as the ‘noble’—what is important here is experience, what he experiences everyday, of how the world comes alive to him through his senses. Whatever those experiences may be, even if seemingly mundane, it is vital material and worth transforming into poetry.

Różewicz’ *new poems* is a dark and lively book that speaks as if the poet were sitting before one. It is a testament not only to the intimate tone of Różewicz’ poetic discourses, but to Bill Johnston’s consummate translation, which gives sensuous life to Różewicz’ voice. The only misfortune is that, considering Różewicz’ relative obscurity, the book lacks an introduction. Since all but one of the translations, and they are few, of Różewicz’ poetry are out of print, it would have been of enormous benefit to the reader unfamiliar with his work to have an introduction. For that, the avid reader can seek out Adam Czerniawski’s now out of print translation of *Conversation with the Prince and Other Poems*. Otherwise, this is a book whose publication should be celebrated and which will hopefully rectify the relative obscurity of Różewicz here in America (the [Poet’s House](#) directory, which boasts a collection of over 20K poetry books, has not one of Różewicz’ books,⁴ though two of Herbert and five of Szyborska); his work deserves far wider readership and with

this translation, he should in particular be embraced by poets and his work more prominently enter the canon. Once again, Archipelago has made an attractive volume one not only wants to read, but savor with one's eyes and hands. Giacometti's drawing *The Walking Man* could not be more fitting a cover: bare, fragmentary but sensual and determined, it is an image of one in whom the past continues to live as a present reality, and to whom the present and the future continue to beckon, always awaiting the next day, always ready to greet the sun as the moon looms in the distance, absent but present, a specter whose light comes from afar. There is a darkness which often engulfs the world, but the light remains, and without tragedy, there can be no *incipit comoedia*. . .



he waits for the end of the world
the end of history
the end of the end
but the world refuses
to end ("labyrinths")

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