

The Invention of Poetry

ADAM CZERNIAWSKI was born in Warsaw in 1934. Now lives in Wales. His publications in Polish include poetry, essays and short stories. His English publications include translations of poetry by Jan Kochanowski, Cyprian Norwid, Wisława Szymborska and Tadeusz Różewicz, his own memoir *Scenes from a disturbed childhood* and essays on poetry and philosophy.

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The Invention of Poetry

SELECTED POEMS

ADAM CZERNIAWSKI

Translated from the Polish by IAIN HIGGINS



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Man's transcendental nature is tied to his reaching into the future, the hope that not everything ends with his death, that the order he has created reaches further than his life. This order becomes seemingly like a myth, which gives meaning to life and death. For it does happen—and not all that rarely—that for that myth one sacrifices one own's life.

—Antoni Kępiński

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Introduction

Adam Czerniawski was born in Warsaw in December 1934. By September 1939, like many of his time and place, he was on the move, fleeing an occupied and partitioned country. By August 1947, he had arrived in England, having spent the intervening years attending Polish, French, English and American schools in Palestine and Lebanon. The war and his stay in the Middle East now over, Czerniawski did not return to his homeland, but settled with his family in England. There he continued his education, eventually taking degrees in both English literature and philosophy, and going on to earn a living in the 1970s and 80s by lecturing in the latter subject.

This English intellectual life did not entirely displace his Polish one, though. In the 1950s and 60s, for instance, while studying English literature and philosophy in London, Czerniawski was actively involved in Polish literary life, joining forces with a number of rebellious young poets who had arrived in England by routes as circuitous as his own. The group, known as *Kontynenty* [Continents], is discussed briefly in the concluding paragraphs of Czesław Miłosz's *History of Polish Literature*. In addition, he had by the 1960s set about the task of introducing English-speaking readers to modern Polish poetry, which, represented by authors like Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, Wisława Szymborska and Zbigniew Herbert, was increasingly coming to international prominence. Indeed, since that time Czerniawski has Englished many of the best and best-known Polish poets, collecting some of his work in his anthology *The Burning Forest* (1988), and he has practically become the English voice of Tadeusz Różewicz.

For some, such as John Osborne and Neal Ascherson, Czerniawski's intermediary labours on behalf of Różewicz have made him a sort of contemporary Chapman, the transplanter of a powerful and disturbing new force into the tidy cloister garden of British poetry. Whatever the truth of this view, no one can deny that post-war Polish poetry has made its vivifying presence felt throughout the English-speaking world, and that Czerniawski has long been one of its central mediators, especially in Britain. In the last two or three

decades, moreover, he has supplemented his work as a translator of modern Polish poetry by attempting to provide a critical context for his and others' translations, and has done so most recently in *The Mature Laurel* (1991), an important collection of essays and appreciations by British and Polish poets and critics, Al Alvarez, John Bayley and Tom Paulin amongst them.

Yet Czerniawski is not only a translator, anthologist, and critic of modern Polish poetry. He is also an autobiographer and, as already mentioned, a Polish poet in his own right. As the former he has published in English and Polish a deceptively simple memoir of his childhood journey from Poland to England. This memoir, *Scenes from a Disturbed Childhood* (1991), has been well received, notably by reviewers for *The London Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, and bids fair to bring Czerniawski the autobiographer the same sort of recognition he has come to receive as a translator. As a recognised Polish poet, however, who has published seven volumes of verse since his debut in 1956, Czerniawski is still virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, even in the country where he has lived for nearly half a century. If he is known at all, it is through a mere handful of poems, mostly in his own renderings, published in magazines like *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *The Rialto* and *The Poetry Review* and in his own anthology *The Burning Forest*. As a result those readers who already know Czerniawski as the unmistakable English voice of Różewicz have had almost no opportunity to hear his own distinctive and compelling poetic voice.

This volume offers that opportunity. It contains translations of poems written at every stage of Czerniawski's career, and attempts in addition to reveal the range of his styles, forms and concerns. Thus the reader will find here not only the long and the short of him—as in the concise “Oxford” (an almost sentimental statement of the poet's affection for a mythic England) and the extensive “Mirrors and Reflections” (a moving meditation on being in the world)—but also the more familiar middle ground, Czerniawski's preferred poetic dwelling-place, where the lyric readily admits other modes of writing without necessarily giving up its own character altogether. Here the reader will find poems as different from one another as “You and I” (an unsentimental celebration of childhood pleasure and friendship),

“Cape of False Hope” (a striking portrait of life in an imaginary European colony), “triangle” (a brief parable on order and cruelty), “*Teatro della guerra*” (a dark look at the homologies of war, theatre, and children’s games), and the remarkable prose poems from the cycle “Commentaries” (essays on such matters as memory and oblivion, the poet’s reading both early and late, and the nature of artistic perception), of which “Ashurbanipal and Others” and “Words” have already been favourably noticed by Martin Dodsworth and Tom Paulin.

Within this diversity, of course, there are common elements. Czerniawski is above all a philosophical poet, concerned with the problems of perceiving, remembering, articulating, and so in effect creating the world. The world for him is more often culture and history than nature, as critics in Poland have observed, notably Krzysztof Karasek, who wrote in *The Mature Laurel* that “Adam Czerniawski is one of the most self-conscious lyricists in contemporary Polish poetry [. . .]. The subject of his poems is culture in the widest sense of the word [. . .].” Similarly, Konstanty Pieńkosz has noted that Czerniawski “can be counted among poets of culture [. . .] who have inherited the great European tradition.” This philosophical concern, moreover, is both aesthetic and ethical, and is usually expressed in compositions that are at once poetic and discursive, and shot through with a self-conscious nostalgia combined with a dry, often Borgesian wit. The result, as the poet and critic Bogdan Czaykowski has suggested, is poems characterised by a deliberate polyphonic dissonance that constantly threatens to dissolve the very principle that holds the artistic composition together on any given occasion (e.g., feeling, imagination, argument or form). By way of example, Czaykowski points to “From an Album”, “Knowledge by Description”, and “Desolation Sound”, but one could add a number of others: “Bavaria 1956”, “Sir David Ross Lectures on Aristotle’s *Politics*”, “Pentagram”, “Ashurbanipal and Others”, “Golden Age”, “Cleaning an Old Poem”, or “Knowledge and Experience”—the last five being in my view amongst Czerniawski’s best poems.

Indeed, there is nothing quite like these poems in English, although it is possible to gesture towards some analogies: the brilliantly opaque poems of John Ashbery, for instance, offer a partial

analogy of their probing and self-undoing manner, if not of the sensibility they conjure up, while the wittily erudite poems of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon offer a partial analogy of their heterogeneous cultural and historical matter, if not of their tone and formal qualities. For Czerniawski's poetics derives in part from a tradition little known outside Polish literature, the tradition established by Cyprian Norwid (1821–1883), who is a kind of combined Hopkins, Dickinson and Eliot-cum-Pound. In Norwid's view, "a perfect lyric should be like a plaster cast: those boundaries where forms miss each other and leave cracks ought to be preserved and not smoothed over with a knife." But where Norwid chose a sculptural analogy, strangely thinking of his own dynamic verse in spatial terms, Czerniawski would choose a musical one, thinking in terms of the temporal and the dramatic, as in Beethoven or Bartok, or even in some forms of jazz. Here the preserved cracks become dissonant notes deliberately exploited, and the plaster cast, the compositional whole that contains and attempts to govern them.

Like most Polish poets since World War II and unlike many of his exact contemporaries in the English-speaking world—Derek Walcott, Fleur Adcock, Tony Harrison, and Seamus Heaney, amongst others—Czerniawski rarely writes metrical verse or uses fixed forms. Where Harrison might heighten a fixed form and Heaney mute it, Czerniawski, if he uses it at all, will bend or break it: the irreverent sonnet "*dulce et decorum*," for instance (not included here as perhaps too bound by its original linguistic-cum-cultural context), lacks a rhyme scheme but not rhymes, and so draws attention to its indecorous formal incompleteness. Nor does Czerniawski usually attempt to compensate his readers for the lack of conventional formal pleasures with musical ones. As with fixed forms, so with the pleasing orchestration of sense and sound. On those few occasions when it occurs, it deliberately draws a kind of negative attention to itself, as in these lines from "Knowledge by Description":

the intoxicating scent of somnolent plants
strikes an accord of cows and clavichords.

Yet while Czerniawski's poems steadfastly refuse to offer certain

conventional formal and stylistic pleasures that many English-speaking readers still expect from verse—although for that matter they also refuse to provide the astringent pleasures of poems, like Różewicz’s, that are made according to an anti-poetic poetics—they do offer a variety of other pleasures, some of which are indeed aesthetic. I have after all suggested already that Czerniawski’s poems allow us to watch a wry philosophical and historical consciousness at work in a poetic mode, and this in itself is a considerable pleasure—the more so as Czerniawski’s poetic mode involves a constant testing of style and form. How many of the linguistic and formal pleasures of Czerniawski’s distinctive and probing Polish poems have come across in translation readers will have to judge for themselves.

Most of these translations were begun in the summer of 1991 during a fortnight’s stay at The British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, and I am grateful to the Centre and its then Director, the late Max (W.G.) Sebald, for their support and to Beryl Ranwell for various kindnesses. This stay, in addition to allowing me to give Czerniawski’s poems my undivided attention, gave me the opportunity to discuss both them and my rough translations with the poet himself, who was then Translator in Residence. Since that time I have worked at revising and polishing my original rough versions, often in response to Czerniawski’s suggestions, in between the tasks required of a teacher of Middle English Literature. I am much indebted to Bogdan Czaykowski for our many conversations on poetry and translation before and during this period. This is not the place to discuss my principles and practices as a translator, except to say that I have aimed throughout at something like equivalence in my renderings, hoping to be faithful to the Polish, but desiring English poems in the end. Furthermore, I have kept Czerniawski’s English context in mind when making choices in vocabulary (e.g., by translating *benzyna* as “petrol” rather than “gas,” and so on). I am especially grateful to Adam Czerniawski for his generosity, for our pleasant and leisurely discussions of his and others’ work, and for saving me from the odd howler or misparsed phrase. I have not always taken his advice (except on matters of Polish grammar), but I greatly appreciate the attention with which he has read and commented on my versions of himself.

The poems in this collection originally appeared in Czerniawski's bilingual *Selected Poems*, published in a limited edition by Harwood Academic Press in 2000. Some of them have been slightly revised for this edition and I have added two more translations: "The Invention of Poetry" and "*In memoriam* Max Sebald (1944–2001)".

I.H.

Author's Note

I am sure there must have been times when Iain Higgins was regretting he was not translating my poems into Sanskrit or Swahili, linguistic domains in which I have no competence to interfere. But I hope his regrets were sufficiently alleviated by the fact that I had saved him from a few howlers.

Although over the years I have occasionally translated a poem or two of mine—in response to a specific commission—I have always found the task supremely irksome and have submitted myself to it only when there was no one else available.

So Iain Higgins's readiness to take on this burden was especially welcome. Moreover, he had already shown considerable skill in translating Bogdan's Czaykowski's poetry and I knew that as a poet himself he possessed the kind of sensibility that translation of poetry demands. We were able to work together closely on the initial stages of the project at The British Centre for Literary Translation, so I join him in acknowledging our indebtedness to Max Sebald for making that co-operation possible.

Our original plan was to include all the other translations available: by Andrzej Busza, Bogdan Czaykowski, Jan Darowski, Irena Czerniawska-Edgcumbe and myself. In the event, Iain produced enough translations for a substantial collection, and I therefore thought it fair that it should be his book, that he should organise the presentation of the poems and compose an introduction.



Some of these translations have appeared in *Agenda*, *Bête Noire*, *Chicago Review*, *The Dark Horse*, *Descant*, *The Irish Review*, *London Magazine*, *Metre*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Orbis*, *Poetry Review*, *Rialto*, *The SHOp*, *Siglo* and *Thumbscrew*.

Max Sebald died in a car crash on 14th December, 2001. I owe a great deal to his generosity and friendship.

A.Cz.

MONMOUTH, JANUARY 2005

Part I

The Invention of Poetry

How many years ago was it? More than four thousand have passed since two women in the city of Ur in Sumer composed the earliest poetry known to us. Enheduana, the daughter of King Sargon, a priestess, and Ilumma, a court poetess. No! Il[. . .]umma, her name no longer fully legible. Long have I searched for these women. I unexpectedly found them in Ledig House in Omi. Where? Omi, a settlement amidst the forested hills of North America. In a modest library with a large English-Hungarian dictionary and a tiny Polish-English one; a random selection of contemporary belles-lettres in German and two collections of poetry: a slender volume of Robert Frost's poems in the original and the anthology *Die Erfindung der Poesie* [The Invention of Poetry] reaching from the two Sumerian women and Sappho to the mediaeval Welsh poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym.

Hymns to the gods of night and fertility, who having vainly been waiting for our offerings, have long since departed. The world of Enheduana and Il[. . .]umma, its vestiges barely preserved in stone and clay, recedes minute by minute, but of course I still hear their song clearly:

*I combed my dishevelled hair
So that it fell charmingly
Over my shoulders;
I placed a ring,
A golden ring on my finger
And hung pearls,
Pearls hung round my neck . . .
[.]
I will glance at him
I will walk through this field
Alone with him
I will cover him with desire . . .*

ADAM CZER[. . .]SKI

Pentagram

1. WORLD

The world began like this: I opened
my eyes in the morning; a square of light on the window,
a gutter, a roof-slate, a garden, a plane
passing low overhead, the date
is today's, in a picture frame
a century-old city.

I conjured up an apple-tree, a weasel, the moon,
I conjured up the sea, a winged man drowning,
smoke is rising from the ashes of Babylon,
somewhere horses are snorting;
the sun is now falling on a plate of fruit,
I touch the scent of red.

A damp wind tugs at the blinds; I dream
a world; in it anything is possible:
someone will describe the fall of Troy,
someone will bite into an apple, paint
the last judgment, split atoms.

The dream perhaps on the steep bank
of a silted-up river: I close
my eyes; this is how a cracked skull
sketches the ruin of a conjured world.

II 1966

2. BRIDGE

In memoriam R.S. (1932-1973)

An object either real or imaginary:
I don't know whether words called up the picture
or did it happen the other way round. Perhaps
the arc of jagged brick above the water
could also be grasped
in a composition for flute, harp, baritone and bass.
It's enough to draw an oval:
someone will associate it with the illusion of a bridge
reflected in a river of foul-smelling rushes.
But perhaps this will do: any product of a semi-circle squared,
or the helmsman's view while drowning at dawn.

3. FISH

he shaped a poem like a fish
the fish is a symbol of saints
lives deep in the sea's obscurities
resists the forceful weight of atmospheres
its presence augurs mysteries
it fell into the nets of humankind
lies cold on the wet slab
each of its lines is immaculately rhythmical
the scales of its metaphors shimmer in the sun
the membraned eye lives in the imagination
and when only its skeleton remains
the white negative of a symmetrical pine
the words will endure forever illegible

1966

4. TRIANGLE

a circle is perfection
even when armed with cogs
just as a square is
a self-sufficient totality
but a triangle is real
a change in the relation of angles
to the ratio of adjacent sides
cannot destroy
its character
there are no crooked circles
and we lack defective squares
but the triangle
will always assume the shape
of a pythagoras a woman a boxwood
we should be grateful
for a human version of the cruel harmony
of circles and squares

5. BABYLON

Akosi Mambwele, son of the sultry tropics,
is excavating in Babylon;
he shows me carved tablets, smashed pots,
galactic measurements, elevations of hanging gardens,
tells me to admire the rectangular blocks of flats,
car parks, sanitary facilities, the cleverly devised
motorway junctions, lodgings for priests,
harlots and archers. Akosi is my friend
I know he doesn't lie; the facts weigh
on my chest. On our way back
I sketch a plan of my own anti-Babylon:
the streets are a maze of barricades, the dead
sprawl on the pavements, people live
underground, hairy bats
that stare like cows wield power.
When myths crack, the imagination
draws figments of new cartograms.

Teatro della Guerra

Yes, the war is over now, the battle done.
For years there were manoeuvres and peace
conferences; spies were exposed, clever strategies
devised; plans constantly modified
for the economy to survive on a wartime
footing.

Both sides threatened total destruction,
the ceasefire had seemingly lasted for ages,
citizens paid for long
holidays,
armaments had the character
of charades.

Wooden artillery stands in the wings,
every moment the flash of sparklers,
the moan of the wounded and dying;
some play dead, others at being alive,
imitate speech, gesticulate,
tear off masks, put on masks,
until the curtain falls on them too;
apparently they saw hellish scenes
in darkneses shrouded in sulphurous sweat;
some applaud, others tap their feet,
whistle, and now *exeunt omnes*:
the killed, the wounded, the burnt, the unconscious.

The theatre is an imitation, a metaphor of life,
impossible gestures, exaggerated voices,
the wounded recover, the dead are resurrected,
and yet an angel of real death
snuggles up to them, a wingless angel,

the angel of living death, of the living panorama
of a revolving stage.

They fought in the forests, they fought in the passes,
in quarries and suburbs
the angel of death officiated solicitously
and often.

Now the smouldering ruins
are filled with the remnants of bodies and matériel.
In masks and overalls, medics
archeologists and priests
safely eager and content traverse rubble,
stubble fields, former moors,
to fix the parameters of opening dances, of jumpers'
performances;
they shell being from nonbeing, and during the intervals eat
decontaminated meat sandwiches, play cards,
read newspapers, chat and curse.

But in fact washed at night by the silver moon
they silently and secretly
search the junk for their happy times.

War games, opening gambits,
the young begin with ball-games,
with hide-and-seek, hopscotch and Scrabble.

X 1985