

we suspect that the story would be painful to recount and Szymek is loath to speak ill of his brothers. Szymek's legs are maimed, but he works the family farm as best he can, although farming was never his aspiration. His current ambition, the plan to build a family tomb is stalled by lack of money and his own indecision about its design. This is a strangely quixotic venture for an otherwise pragmatic man—especially when he also reveals that his parents' remains are already decomposed, and he is doubtful that his brothers wish to be buried in the country. Szymek Pietruszka's life is thoroughly unremarkable with the exception of his love of life in all its forms, his awareness of the comic aspects of this world, his fragility and his resilience. For this he commands our attention and our admiration.

Szymek Pietruszka is unfailingly kind. Even when he is blunt and critical, he is kind. This quality might be a challenge for a man who inhabits a liminal site between two generations, two worlds, the Second Republic and the People's Republic. He can't invest himself in his parents' Catholicism with what he sees as its irrationalities and thou shalt nots; neither can he adhere to their dogged trust in authority and their place in the world. This is not to say that he has replaced their religion and stable identity with a new philosophy—one that is grander and more flexible, one that permits modern irony. No, he speaks of his mother's devotion to the Virgin with great tenderness and respect. He continues to get his eggs blessed on Holy Saturday. Likewise, he is not blind to the soulless lives of his brothers who have abandoned the country for office jobs, cars, and wives they won't introduce to the family. However, he will not disparage them or the invalid brother he supports. When Szymek's memory leads him to hurtful moments that he cannot reconcile he becomes mute, and his narrative frays.

Consistent with the novel's design of artlessness, Szymek does not interrupt his rush of memory to reflect on his anecdotes. However, without any grand philosophizing on the part of the narrator, the novel is clearly reflective. One of its pieties is the enduring power of the land. Only God is more important than land, Szymek observes with the quick, wry qualification that this is true only if you believe in God. Even when he is away from the land, lying in a hospital bed, his stories center on the land. However, one of the cruelties of the novel is that only those who are broken return to live and labor on the land. As we experience both the pieties and the cruelties of the novel, we are grateful to Wiesław Myśliwski and his Szymek for access to this intensely physical and profoundly human world. ▲

Firing the Canon

Essays Mainly on Poetry

By Adam Czerniawski. London: Salt Publishing, 2010. viii + 217 pages. Notes, Index of Names. ISBN 978-1-84471-483-4. Paper.

Katarzyna Cieplińska

Writing about the canons of modern poetry is a challenge, but writing about poetry and philosophy in a passionate way can be achieved by few authors. Adam Czerniawski, Polish poet and prose writer, dared to undertake the task in his newest collection of essays.

Firing the Canon is an adapted and expanded version of his book *Wyspy szczęśliwe* (2007). It is also a continuation of the discussion started in that Polish-language volume about the role of poetry in the modern world. As critic and scholar, Czerniawski uses reason to persuade the reader that the power of poetic expression is something worth pondering. Although he has lived in Great Britain since 1947, in the essays he writes about his strong ties to the Polish poetic tradition.

The illustration on the cover pictures cannons being fired. The guiding motif of the first chapter is the author's criticism of the canon of Western literature created by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994). Bloom included in his canon three contemporary Polish prose writers—Witold Gombrowicz, Stanisław Lem, and Bruno Schulz, and three poets—Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, and Adam Zagajewski, but he omitted all outstanding poets of previous epochs. Czerniawski criticizes the exclusion of Renaissance poets like Jan Kochanowski, Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński and Andrzej Morsztyn, especially that “in Bloom's Aristocratic Age there is room even for Campion and Wyatt, alongside Petrarch, Tasso and Camoens. . . . And if Bloom can pack practically the whole of English nineteenth-century poetry into his canon, why are Mickiewicz, Słowacki, and Norwid omitted?” (10). Therefore, Czerniawski accuses Bloom of insufficient knowledge and contrasts Bloom's pitiful arrogance with Al Alvarez's *Faber Book of Modern European Poetry* (1992). In the latter anthology, the selection of poems demonstrates that in Europe today Poland plays quite a role as the homeland of great poets. Finally, Czerniawski sets his own canon of European poetry

for the English-speaking reader, complete with the names of many Polish poets.

The roles of poetry and of a poet in society, as well as the relationship between poetry and ethics are the problems discussed by Czerniawski in the essay “Hamlet or Fortinbras?” The author recalls the times when the word “poet” was a magical word and poets “turned the bread-eaters into angels”—a quote from Juliusz Słowacki (21). According to Czerniawski, poetry should be contemplative and polyphonic, while the poet’s role is to use “non-prescriptive language” (23). A poem should be an autonomous form of art, free from moral and political interference.

In the second chapter of *Firing the Canon*, Czerniawski continues the discussion about translatability of poetry that he began in *Wyspy szczęśliwe*. The author believes that poetry is translatable but only translators who are not just philologists but poets themselves can successfully “recreate the spirit of the original” (49). The uncompromising tone of the essay “Translation of Poetry—Theory and Practice” contrasts with the tone of “Perils of Self-Translation,” a record of the author’s dilemmas around translation of his own poems. Seemingly, Czerniawski, as a bilingual poet and recognized translator of Polish poetry into English, should be an ideal translator of his own verse. Yet the roles of poet and translator can collide. As he confesses, the prospect of self-translation evokes resentment or embarrassment. Although the perspective of expanding the author’s readership is tempting, self-translation inevitably leads to writing in the second language, which involves the risk of disintegration or even a loss of literary identity. Czerniawski concludes that writing in an author’s native language is strongly connected with the nation’s poetic tradition (60).

The character of the third chapter, “Choosing a Favourite Poem or *De Amicitia*,” is also personal, as Czerniawski writes about his friendship with the late Bogdan Czaykowski and Tadeusz Różewicz. Czerniawski values his friendship with Czaykowski in particular. Poets usually compete with each other, but this was not the case in this particular relationship. The essay is not only a valuable record for future biographers of the author and his friends, but also a spectacular, though rather incidental, departure from the methodology popular in literary studies in the West: the analysis of a poem intervenes with autobiography, “a heresy so extreme that it wasn’t even noticed by the priests of New Criticism” (65). In the essay “St Anselm

and I: Ontology, Coincidence and the Fortunate Isles” that focuses on the ontological proof of God’s existence, the author admits that, following Descartes and Wittgenstein, he believes in “non-inferential knowledge guaranteed by the experiencing self” (89).

The fourth and most extensive chapter examines the rivalry between poetry and philosophy, which fight each other “for control of the same territory,” i.e., the area of linguistic expression. This section contains essays that are variations on the relationship between poetry and logic, and poetry and nonverbal forms of art, such as music or painting.

Despite a wide range of topics, the book is internally coherent, clearly composed, and written in a light style with traces of the author’s brilliant sense of humor. The book is Adam Czerniawski’s contribution to the struggle for recognition of Polish poetry in the West, freed from political immediacy and not limited to contemporary poets. As a poet and a philosopher, Czerniawski admits to being a disciple of Plato and and he unfolds his poetic creed in the essays. He contemplates reality and provokes in the reader the need for a philosophical perception of the world and of human nature. The author’s enthusiasm in engaging in this task is the most remarkable feature of this book. **Δ**

More Books

***Na stracenie*, by Janusz Krasieński.** Białystok: Versus 1992. 314 pages. ISBN 83-7045-026-1. Paper. In Polish.

The best novel to read to acquire an idea of what it was like for Polish Catholics to live in the 1940s, first under German barbarism and then under the Soviet. This third-person, occasionally stream-of-consciousness narrative, recounts the story of an eighteen-year-old survivor of Auschwitz and Dachau who returns to Poland after the liberation of Dachau by American troops. What else could he do and where else could he go? He was a high school student when he was arrested by the Germans and sent to Auschwitz where he was expected to die from exhaustion after working several months for the Reich. He thought he was returning to Poland; instead, he finds himself in a Soviet-run prison.

He wants to be a sailor and goes to Gdańsk to seek employment there amidst the devastation brought about by the Russian and German invaders. He is incautious enough to take some pictures of the port to share with friends. The pictures are found and he is declared to be a traitor and spy. Imprisonment and torture follow. The Golgotha of his interrogations is meticulously described as are the stories of his prison mates, among whom are the best sons of Poland such as Witold Pilecki and teenage AK members. But the most impressive of all is the description of the show trial. It