

uses the abstruse word “flechty”) is mistakenly rendered as “flesh”.

Similarly, in “Wisielec” / “The Hanged Man” the translator loses the dominant feature: the grotesquely ironic tension emerging from a clash between the light, lively pace of the verse and a macabre subject. While the Polish text reads “I klaszcze w takt stopy fryzjera / Bowiem hak mocno trzyma ciało / Ponad zdumionym łbem ratlera,” in English it is rendered as “And the barber’s feet tap in time quicker / For the hook has a firm grip on his body / Above the astonished head of his rat-terrier” (71). Christianson changes the metaphor “klaszcza stopy” (in the original: “feet clap”) by rendering it as “feet tap,” ignoring the mimetic aspect of “tapping.” If the “hanged man” is suspended above the ground, how could he tap his feet? Similarly, the English phrase “the hook has a firm grip on his body” does not convey all aspects of the Polish phrase “hak mocno trzyma ciało.” The last line is unnecessarily long and devoid of rhyme (“quicker” / “rat-terrier” is in no way equivalent to “fryzjera”/“ratlera”). It also lacks the bouncy rhythm characteristic of the original.

In spite of these possibly inevitable shortcomings, the book offers an English-speaking reader a glimpse of one of the most fascinating poets of postwar Poland, thus rounding out the image of Polish postwar poetry in English translation. This book on Andrzej Bursa, “a poet of rebellion and lyricism,” is most welcome. ▲

## A Thousand Peaceful Cities

**By Jerzy Pilch. Translated by David Frick.** Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, Open Letter Publishers, 2010. 144 pages. ISBN 978-1-934824-27-6. Paper. \$14.95.

### Sally Boss

**I**n the largely left-wing literary press in Poland, Pilch usually passes for a first-cabin author. He pens columns for the “progressive” weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* and occasionally publishes novels. He is a talented and acerbic writer. If a Polish version of *Saturday Night Live* or *Monty Python* existed, he might successfully write for these shows. Incidentally, both are popular in Poland.

We laugh at the *Saturday Night Live* satire of American politicians and American lifestyle, and we love the parody of Britishness in *Monty Python*. This hearty laughter is possible because another version of Americanism and Britishness is firmly embedded in

our minds as well, a version that makes Americans and Britishers proud. They know that they are viewed in the world with respect. This “proud” version is unsullied by a string of defeats that made the nationals of most countries in the world so angry in their powerlessness, from Tunisia to Tibet. The fiercely satirical and exaggerated presentations of American and British foibles provide a welcome relaxation to those who know the other image as well, and they do not undermine or destroy that other image. They focus on the specks of dust behind which loom Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, Shakespeare and the Magna Carta and, most importantly, the Nietzschean *Kraft*—victories in conquering the weaker continents and peoples.

The same is not true of Asia and Africa, Latin America or vast swathes of Europe. The countries there are perceived by the power-wielding circles as the “Versailles’ bastards” or equivalents thereof, even if such opinion is not directly expressed. The power-wielding circles have often perceived the losers as upstart entities with no proven right to exist. I am talking of deeply embedded taxonomies here, not of the official statements at UN meetings. Citizens of those less-fortunate countries have their deeply embedded intuitions about how they are perceived by the winners. They know that *their* Jeffersons and Shakespeares are universally unknown, therefore they react with nervousness to satirical presentations of their countries and peoples.

Enter Jerzy Pilch and his novels and feuilletons. He slashes mercilessly at the holy of holiest of his own nation. He ridicules its virtues and its shortcomings; he spares neither hero nor villain. But wait, quite a few villains remain intact, while Catholic pieties are subjected to chopping and squeezing. These pieties are among the few possessions his fellow Poles have. One would expect that a Polish-language writer would approach them gingerly. Pilch behaves like a bull in a china shop. Anything associated with the man in the street is fodder for his satirical appetite. He might defend himself by saying that he also criticizes communism in its Gomulkean variety—the action of his novel takes place in the 1950s when First Secretary of the Communist Party, Władysław Gomułka, was Moscow’s man in Warsaw. But to ridicule something that has long disintegrated requires no courage. Significantly, there are no allusions in Pilch’s novel to those who wield power today.

Pilch’s first-person narrative revolves around a drunkard in a small Polish town who decides to

assassinate First Secretary Gomułka. His drinking, philosophizing, and a trip to Warsaw with a friend and the friend's son (the narrator) provide the canvas on which Pilch paints grotesque pictures of small-town life and ridicules the strivings of the little people. The real problem, i.e., communism and its numbing effect on millions of these little people, fades away from view; what is left is the grotesque powerlessness of those who lost.

The ill-conceived conspiracy does not work out and, toward the end of the novel, the narrator dives into fantastic realism. All this is supposed to be funny, and it is, up to a point. My point materialized somewhere in the first one-third of the book—I read the remainder with yawns punctuating the pages. The novel seems designed to derail anger at communism into a feeling of inferiority among those who lived under communism. We are told that they are irredeemable trash even though their lives are circumscribed by communist laws and police. Communism is made light of in this novel, while the small foibles of individual people are presented as monumental. There is no redemption—no Magna Carta or Shakespeare, no Joan of Arc, no George Washington. No victories are allowed to balance the present state of virtual nonbeing. Pilch seems to say that except for a small elite, his fellow citizens are trash and so they should so remain. Communism served them right—too bad it fell.

I invite the reader to ponder the puzzle of Pilch's popularity. Why should a third-rate work of fiction receive so much attention as to attract an English translator? Pilch is a feasible candidate for a writer of sketches in *Saturday Night Live*, but as a presenter of Polish life he is a caricature. ▲

### Thank You Note

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## *Pan Tadeusz*

by

Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855)

Book Seven

The Council

*Argument:*

*The salutary advice of Bartholomew styled the Prussian. The martial views of Matthias Baptist. The political views of Mr. Buchman. Jankiel's conciliatory plea cut short by Pocketknife. Gerwazy's speech demonstrates the efficacy of parliamentary eloquence. Old Matthias's protestations. The sudden appearance of armed reinforcements breaks up the deliberations. Harrow! Hang Soplica!*

Translated by Christopher A. Zakrzewski

It was the turn of the delegate Bartholomew Dobrzynski (the one who regularly plied the waterways to Königsberg) to say his piece. His fellow clansmen jokingly styled him “The Prussian” because he loathed the Prussians and yet loved to talk about them. He was well on in years and had seen much of the world in his travels. An avid reader of the newspapers, and a canny politician besides, he was able to shed a good deal of light on the discussions.

“So, my brother Matthias, friend and father to us all,” he concluded, “their aid is not to be sneezed at. In wartime I should count on the French as on four aces in the hand. Valiant folk, the French! Not since Kosciuszko's day has the world seen a military genius of the caliber of Emperor Bonaparte.

“I remember when the French crossed the River Warta in the year of grace Eighteen hundred and six. I was biding abroad then, engaged in trading ventures in Gdansk. Having many kinsmen in the province of Poznan, I would ride down for a visit and hunt small game with Joseph Grabowski. (He is colonel of a regiment now, but at the time he was still living on his estate near Obiezierze.) Great Poland was still