

## Wybór wierszy/ Selected Poems

By **Andrzej Bursa**. Translated by **Kevin Christianson and Halina Ablamowicz**. Kraków: Art-Park Publishers (artpark@poczta.onet.pl), 2008. 303 pages. Index of poems. ISBN 978-83-928008-1-1. Paper. Bilingual in English and Polish.

### Beata Tarnowska

**A**ndrzej Bursa (1932–1957), one of the poets of the “Współczesność” generation of Polish poetry, was acknowledged by his contemporaries as the most authentic of the poets who created their works in the atmosphere of physical and spiritual desolation brought about by war and Stalinist terror. His untimely death prevented him from leaving a large literary legacy, but his poems, though not numerous, exerted a significant influence on his contemporaries. This bilingual, attractively designed collection is the first attempt to launch Bursa’s opus in English. His poems previously appeared in the anthologies of Polish poetry by Celina Wieniewska (*Polish Writing Today*, Penguin 1967) and Adam Czerniawski (*The Burning Forest: An Anthology of Modern Polish Poetry*, Newcastle 1988). The publication of the volume under review coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of Bursa’s death. It includes a biographical note and an introduction by Kevin Christianson. The photographs reproduced in the volume display the poet while evoking the romantic atmosphere of Kraków where Bursa lived and worked.

The title of the introduction, “‘A madman is the person who saw’: Andrzej Bursa and the Voice of Witness,” which contains a line from the last poem in Bursa’s poetic sequence *A Lunatic Artwork*, implies that entanglement in politics is still the most crucial aspect of the reception of Polish poetry in the West. Therefore the formula of “poetry as a witness,” as well as “poetry of the oppressed” or “poetry of survival” established in Western literary criticism, imply that the main role of poetry is to give testimony. However, the focus on political commitment, being largely a consequence of the readers’ presumed expectations, is juxtaposed with presenting Bursa as “a rebel without a cause.” In order to present the poet to English-speaking readers in a more familiar context, Kevin Christianson compares him to, among others, “the angry young men” of Great Britain and the Beats of the United States (17). It is good that a political perspective does not fully

cover up the image of the poet: Bursa’s being at odds with the whole world is of Romantic origin and not solely political.

Bursa, who died at the age of twenty-five, is the author of two posthumously published volumes of poetry: *Wiersze* (Poems, 1958) and *Utwory wierszem i prozą* (Writings in verse and prose, 1969). The translators decided against arranging his poems chronologically but instead interspersed the earlier with the later ones. Such a scheme disrupts the reception of the poems somewhat in that it does not fully correspond to the process of transformation that Bursa’s poetry underwent: from the lyrical and sentimental poems in which he shows himself as the spiritual heir of such Romantics as Juliusz Słowacki and Mikhail Lermontov, employing traditional means such as rhyme and rhythm (“Fiński nóż” / “The Sheath Knife”; “Jesień” / “Autumn”; “Chory synek” / “Sick Son”); through a derisive and anti-lyrical verse, often of a dialogic character (“Języki obce” / “Foreign Languages”; “Rankiem w parku” / “Morning in the Park”; “Mój dzień” / “My Day”); to a new poetic tone, being a synthesis of the earlier quest (“Piosenka chorego na raka podlewającego pelargonie” / “Song of the Cancer Patient Watering Geraniums”). It is understandable that the poems employing a simple syntax and informal, sometimes even vulgar language are easier to translate than the intricate poems based on rhyme and rhythm. The translator has to make a decision whether to focus on formal features and reconstruct the rhyme but slightly transform the semantic layer, or to sacrifice rhyming and melody in order to render the essence of the poem more accurately. It seems to me that Bursa’s poems, especially the earlier ones, are difficult to translate. The semantic import of these poems, the elaborate web of rhymes and bouncy rhythms are not always evident in Kevin Christianson’s versions. For example, in “The Sheath Knife” Christianson tries to create the rhyme (“thick” / “stick”) only to give up his attempts a stanza later (220). Moreover, the translation occasionally tends to be too literal and overly descriptive (“Szmer obcy w krwi zatętnił” — “Strange murmurs throbbled in my blood”; “I między bajki wkładam” — “And I put it in the books of fairytales”), and sometimes overinterpreted and unnecessary (“Piętnastoletnich głupich ust / Uściski wśród brzoź mokrych” — “Of a teenage girl’s stupid mouth / Cuddles and kisses among wet lilacs”; “W kącikach flechtów wieczór już” — “Now in the corners of my flesh Night”). The intricate design of the knife—the whorl—(Bursa

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