

Interview

This interview was carried out by James McCabe at Hawthornden Castle, Scotland, October 1997, and was subsequently revised by the interviewee prior to publication here.

Since you have been living in Britain for so long, and your English is obviously almost as fluent as that of a native speaker, how would you describe your capacity in Polish and English: do you forget Polish the more English you know? Or are there things you can only say in Polish and can't say in English?

There always are areas in both languages where you feel weak or strong, and these areas tend to vary and shift: when I am in England, English is the language that dominates, when I am in Poland I actually find it difficult to converse in English, I find it painful, irritating; all I want to do is talk Polish all the time. So over the years I believe my Polish has actually improved. I have been going back to Poland regularly to immerse myself in the language, and of course write in it. As a child I had this extraordinary belief that one is born with a complete mastery of one's native tongue. And when I first discovered that there were Polish-Polish dictionaries, as opposed to, say, Polish-English, I was puzzled. I soon learnt the painful truth.

Would you always reserve Polish for your own poetry?

Yes. Ultimately I suppose it's to do with my sense of identity. And that implies that I have a special relationship with a particular culture, a literary tradition, and the associated socio-political situation. I regarded certain Polish poets as models, others as ones to rebel against. It wasn't like that with English language poetry, even though I was particularly close to English, Irish and American poetry in my formative years. The creative urge was

always in Polish. Whenever I am asked your question in Poland, I now have a simple answer ready: "Yes, because it gives me great pleasure and satisfaction".

Could you define the influence of Norwid on your work?

Subjectively you think that certain poets are influencing you, that this is actually obvious to a reader. But I discovered over the years that whatever influences I felt, they weren't clear enough to be identified by commentators. As far as Norwid is concerned, I think it was partly that I admired the man, because he faced the predicament of exile, though mercifully I never had to endure neglect and poverty to the extent that he did, being misunderstood and pretty well ignored in his lifetime. He was a guide: if he managed it, then I ought to as well. I've been criticised for being difficult, hermetic, obscure, so I felt an additional affinity because Norwid was intellectually and artistically uncompromising. There was a thrill in unravelling his very spare complex poems. At moments like this, my mind goes back to those teenage years when I had my first encounters with poems like Browning's "My Last Duchess", Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting", Yeats's "Byzantium" and "The Long-Legged Fly", Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and a handful of Norwid's poems in a history of Polish literature published in New York during the war. I admire poetry which appeals to the intelligence as well as feelings.

Would you say that your work shares an affinity with Różewicz's? You have translated so much of his work.

Yes, I imagine that inevitably something has seeped through. Some of my poems have that kind of austerity and simplicity which might be attributed to my close reading of Różewicz—and perhaps no reading is closer than that which is demanded of a translator of poetry. Różewicz's radicalism affected a great many Polish poets, including Zbigniew Herbert, who however would have vehemently denied any indebtedness to a writer he thoroughly disapproved of. Curiously, in my case, the influence has also worked the other way as well. Not the least extraordinary fact about Różewicz and me is that we have such different backgrounds and different life-stories. If Marxist theorising were correct, he and I would never have forged a lasting close friendship

and mutual appreciation. Recently, my good friend and poet Bogdan Czapkowski told me that he couldn't have maintained a friendship with me since our student days in London, if he thought I was a lousy poet. This never occurred to me, but I think it's an obvious and profound truth: could you remain friends with someone you thought was an awful poet?

So, very good poets have lots of friends!

Good poets have lots of enemies! More enemies than friends: this can also be due to malice, vanity, or most likely jealousy and rivalry.

I was very interested in your various introductions to volumes of translations. I was struck by the fact that the kind of poetry written in Poland over the last half-century wasn't primarily based on aesthetic choice. It was primarily a moral operation, it depended on what you thought morally about a particular situation; an attitude that was markedly absent in other parts of Europe.

This approach has a longer history than the last fifty years. It's with the great nineteenth century Romantic poets, Mickiewicz and Slowacki, and a little later with Norwid, that you find a great deal being said about the state of Poland, a country which at that time had vanished from the political map of Europe. In a country without a political identity the word acquires an extraordinary importance and significance, and the fact that by the sheerest stroke of luck the Poles managed to produce a very great literature at that time, helped the country to maintain its sense of nationhood. So, by the time Poland regains its independence in 1918 these Romantics are revered even for their prophesying skills—the poet as bard! They believed against all odds that Poland would survive. Jan Lechoń, who was a very young poet in 1918 when Poland regained independence, famously wrote in an early poem: “When spring comes, I'd rather see spring than Poland”: in other words, enough of the high moral tone and politics. However, he himself went on to write poems which abound in moral and political statements and attitudes. The tragic history of Poland in our century again caused the moral and the political to dominate the aesthetic.

You have written about a possibility of change now: what's going to happen to this high moral ground, the political agenda in Polish poetry. Where would you see that in say ten years' time?

Unlike the nineteenth-century Polish bards, I claim no prophesying powers! I no longer take the kind of interest in younger poets that I used to, but my general impression is that in the new climate they have turned away from politics. There is now talk of “privacy”, and a critic recently told me that she saw my poetry as anticipating that kind of change, because I have on the whole avoided a moral and political stance, not least because I was in fact reacting against that kind of assertiveness of the Romantics and their successors.

In what way would you see yourself as being a European rather than a Pole?

I see myself as both. Reviewing my poems, a Warsaw critic credited me with integrating in my poetry both Polish and broadly European cultural influences; with freeing myself from “many complexes of Polish poetry” and with “standing outside the émigré cultural life”, while being “deeply rooted in the Polish language”. I stand strongly on the ground that Poland is part of the Western culture and I particularly welcome Norman Davies’s recent scholarly work on the history of Europe. He forcibly reminds us that Poland and Czechoslovakia and Hungary were very much part of Western Europe, and only recent history made people forget the fact. I grew up during the Cold War which had a tremendous influence on my thinking. The very fact that Poland was excluded by it from Western Europe made me feel my Westernness even more strongly. Western culture is great and I am proud to be part of it.

You are a poet, author of seven volumes of poetry. As a genre poetry doesn’t pay, so how do you think a poet should earn his living and live his life in the modern world?

It’s a fundamental question which used to exercise me over many years, which must exercise every poet. It exercised Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister* like this:

[...] the poet is at once a teacher, a prophet, a friend of gods and men. Would you have him descend from his height to some paltry occupation? He who is fashioned like the bird to hover round the world, to nestle on the lofty

summits, to feed on buds and fruit, exchanging gaily one bough for another, *he* ought also to work at the plough like an ox; like a dog to train himself to the harness and draught; or perhaps, tied up in a chain, to guard a farmyard by his barking?

But I very early on came to the conclusion that one should aim at earning a living “in some paltry occupation” that has nothing to do with literature. My models were Kafka working in insurance, Eliot in a bank and Wallace Stevens, an executive of an insurance company who refused to quit even when he reached pension age. There is also the uncomfortable challenge posed by Rimbaud, who gives it all up in disgust in his early twenties to end up as an efficient and resourceful trader in God-forsaken Harar. After a spell in radio-journalism—which, I have to admit, taught me to write clear prose—I opted for the grey City of London office which I endured with increasing pain for seven years. But thereafter I also kept away from direct involvement in literature. Also as a Polish poet writing in exile I was well aware of how political pressures can corrupt writers: it is significant that under Stalin Herbert was one of the few Polish writers who did not belong to the Writers’ Union, with all the privileges that that entailed. If you were amenable, all sorts of goodies awaited you: a luxury flat in Warsaw, a passport, your books published in elegant large print-runs.

So you wouldn’t really advise a career in teaching literature?

I wouldn’t as a career, though some involvement with students of literature might be beneficial to both sides. The relationship between poets and academia must always be an uncomfortable one: too much mutual understanding spells trouble for the poet.

What exactly is the danger in that life?

Too much literature in your life and too little else. But the guiding test for every writer must be: will the job I’m doing adversely affect my commitment to writing or will it be beneficial? Yeats famously poses the dilemma of perfection of the art versus perfection of life. “Perfection” is a strong word, but I see no reason why a poet should not strive for goodness in both. Of course

No, though that doesn't mean that Różewicz shies away from that topic. He is a very sensual poet and his overtly erotic poetry—"Regio" is an example—is very powerful. But you have touched on a fundamental problem which haunts every translator of poetry. Over time words shift their resonance—in both the source and the target language—and you can never anticipate how the resonance of a word will change, how it will suddenly acquire a meaning, perhaps at odds with the original sense. And you don't even have to think of translations: consider how Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" is damaged by the way "gay" has been violated in recent years.

The following poems of yours I particularly liked: "Bavaria 1956", "Mythology", "The Ages Speak or What's New in History", "Babylon", "The City Yesterday and Today" and "At the End of the Twentieth Century". How close do you think Iain Higgins's translations are to their originals?

We agreed on a semantic faithfulness to the originals, but as a consequence he has at times lost the music and the cadences, and from time to time the deliberate ambiguities in the originals had to be abandoned in favour of a single meaning.

Had to be one thing or the other.

Precisely—and poems suffer when they lose their polyphony, their counterpoint. But all translation necessitates some form of compromise, and my texts are probably not among the easiest to render. Overall, Higgins has done a wonderful job.

In your essay "Writing and Translating during the Cold War" you say that the Reds have ruined your life by keeping you away from Poland all this time. You still hold by that?

Even at the time I wrote this I saw it as partially true. I owe a great deal to Stalin and Hitler: at a terrible price I have had the chance to see the world. But over the decades I have felt this sense of deprivation. Firstly, having my childhood ruined, my inability to enjoy the freedoms of pre-war Poland, and also post-war: not only was I in exile in London, but because of the communists' policies, especially during the fifties and sixties, cut off from cultural life in Poland. And when I tried to publish in Poland, I was immediately pounced on by the émigrés.

So you weren't published in Poland during that time?

I did try and I did succeed up to a point. But it was a minor intervention at a great distance.

I came across this Kontynenty [Continents] group active in London in the sixties. What philosophy did these people hold by? They didn't go along with the conservative émigré line of having no truck with Poland.

There were about a dozen of us, and we actually represented quite a spectrum of opinion. The dynamic ones were the ones who were saying we must create bridges, and there were one or two who were very cautious and even hostile. We had passionate internal debates. One of our group actually went back to Poland and we saw him immediately rising to prominence. The authorities were very pleased to acquire a talented, articulate young émigré.

Have you ever considered going back to live in Poland?

Yes, many times at different stages of my life; I have of course been going back often on visits for a few weeks at a time. Under communism I wasn't sure I could stand the pressures. It's easy, and I've done it myself, to criticise those who made their arrangements with the system either because they were tempted by the good life or were afraid, or both. It was only in 1989, after the fall of communism, that I felt it was a country in which I could stay longer. Next year I was about to embark on a longer visit as writer-in-residence in Warsaw, when Drue Heinz enticed me back to Hawthornden.

You think there are similarities between the Polish and the Irish experiences. But the majority of Irish writers don't write in the Irish language and that's the big difference. Isn't it? Here there is concern about the vulnerability of Gaelic as a living language. Some poets in Ireland would not think it viable to write poetry in such a minority language. When does a language cease to be a creative medium?

I can only answer the question evasively by saying that I rejoice in the fact that as a Pole I don't have to face this problem: there are enough Poles around, the culture is strong and I have no sense that I'm part of a linguistic domain that has to be artificially supported. What's more, I have behind me five centuries of viable poetry written in Polish, whereas the modern Irish poet writing in

Gaelic, looking back to Swift and forward to Yeats, Heaney and Mahon—not to mention Joyce, O’Casey, Beckett and Synge—sees a formidable procession of excellent Irish writers contributing to the already very distinguished literature in the English language. I shudder at what my predicament would have been if Kochanowski had confined himself to Latin, and Różewicz composed in German: the Prussians in the nineteenth century and the Nazis more recently set about eradicating Polish as a language of culture, in just the way the British were eradicating Gaelic.

I’ve just said that I have been lucky not to have had to face the “Irish problem”. That may be true of my attitude now after some four decades of writing poetry in Polish and increasingly sharing in the country’s cultural consciousness. But it wasn’t like that for me around 1949 when I first felt the impulse to write poetry. I was then attending an English grammar school in a somnolent town-ship, where my only contact with living Polish culture was an oldies’ cultural weekly published in London, when at the height of Stalinism Poland was totally cut off by the Iron Curtain, when outside the home the language was English. My decision then (can we talk of a decision?) to become a Polish poet was surely much more quixotic than a decision today by an Irish poet to write in Gaelic.

My total isolation was markedly diminished when soon in London I came across a dozen or so young Poles with similar aspirations to mine and we formed the *Kontynenty* that you asked me about earlier. The tradition of Polish exilic writings goes back to the first half of the nineteenth century, but these writers were all mature individuals when they went into exile. Whereas the youngest amongst us, me included, were babies and infants when we were uprooted. Our case is unique in the history of Polish literature, and I suspect is likely to remain unique, and is probably unique in relation to other cultural transplants. Consider for instance the contrary cases of Michael Hamburger, Michael Hofmann and George Szirtes, three English poets, who arrived here at an age when I was leaving Poland in 1941. There is scope for a study of the psychological, emotional and pragmatic reasons why in this age of mass migrations some writers stick with their native tongue, some write bilingually, some move over to integrate into the adopted culture. Hitler and Stalin, both great admirers and supporters of the arts, are primarily responsible for this phenomenon.