



Tomasz Różycki Photo: Slav Zatoka

Tomasz Różycki rose to both critical and popular prominence as an important voice of his generation in Poland when his fifth book, *Twelve Stations*, won the Kościelski Prize in 2004. Playing off of Adam Mickiewicz's national epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, the book captured readers' fascination with its historical subject matter, mock epic form, and humor. Within a few years, *Twelve Stations* became required reading in schools and was adapted for stage and radio. Translations into many languages quickly followed. Różycki was first introduced to anglophone readers with Mira Rosenthal's translation of a selected poems, followed by his sonnet collection *Colonies*, which won the 2014 Northern California Book Award and was shortlisted for the International Griffin Poetry Prize and the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize. *Twelve Stations* was published in Bill Johnston's English translation in 2015 and won the Found in Translation Prize. Last year, Różycki appeared at the AWP conference to read and discuss his work with his translators and American poet Major Jackson.

Major Jackson: Ever since I was introduced to Tomasz Różycki's poetry almost ten years ago, I've marveled at the casualness of his intellect. It is wide yet local in its concerns, serious yet also possessing a wit and irony that sometimes rivals his countrywoman, Wisława Szymborska. But, most notably, I'm struck by the spirit of the poet as pilgrim, searching for authentic language to capture the feeling of both unity with his fellow countrymen and women but also a kind of alienation. I'm reminded of literature as a kind of estate, of which Różycki is in firm possession. He is truly a unique voice in contemporary world literature.

Having returned again to *Colonies*—I read it in manuscript form—one of the poems that struck me was “Scorched Maps” [available at pen.org]. I first read it during the time when the Russian-Ukraine conflict was just starting, and this time I found it even more to be a brilliant, allegorical poem of incantation and homage to not only ancestors but also that ever-specter of war and conflict and its effect. My first question is to Tomasz, and then the question will go to his translators as well. I sense, particularly with *Twelve Stations*, various kinds of conflicting constraints. There's the poet who speaks to the history or estate of literature but also one that's rooted in today. This has me wondering, how do you view your role and function as a contemporary poet?

Tomasz Różycki: It's a very complicated question. I don't feel myself as representative of—I don't know—the Polish spirit or Polish culture. Rather, as a poet I am a private speaker trying to explain or to talk about the history of my family, but in the context of a more universal history, of a national history. I don't like that kind of big, national narration, big cultural narration, so I am trying to do it from a very private perspective. I don't know what my role is in relation to other Polish poets. I am never considered as part of a group of Polish poets—they have a kind of classification by generation sometimes, or there is still what we call the Polish School of Poetry of Miłosz, Herbert, Szymborska, and Zagajewski. And then we have the rebels against this idea. I am probably, rather, on the side of this Polish School of Poetry, but it's for the critics to make this kind of selection. I feel lonely, but in a good way. [*Laughter*] Every poet has to be lonely. It's a good position not to be considered part of a kind of narrative.

Major Jackson: I think it's almost inevitable that readers—particularly American readers—are going to read you through the lens of Szymborska and Zagajewski and Miłosz and Herbert. Part of that has to do not just with their having lived and worked in America. Edward Hirsch talks about their influence here and why there's this affection for Polish poets—he is talking about Miłosz, but I think it sums up why there's this Polish poetry allure here in America. He says, “Miłosz taught the American poet and American poetry itself to consider historical categories, not the idea of history bowdlerized by Marxism, but something deeper and more complex, more sustaining. The feeling that mankind is memory, historical memory, and that our hope is historical.” And he goes on to talk about the metaphysical dimension of poetry, which I hear in your work, so I guess this is more for Bill and Mira, being Americans. Where do you situate Tomasz within that constellation of poets? We'll let the critics speak.

Mira Rosenthal: Your question is particularly pertinent to the task of presenting literature in translation, because we tend to want a national narrative. We want to know: “What is the poetic tradition in Poland?” But think about it in reverse. Think about how diverse American poetry is right now. And maybe I'm going to go and pluck this poet out and translate her work into Polish and say: “This is American poetry!” On the one hand, it's false. It's a false narrative that we have constructed of Polish poetry in English translation. At the same time, I think that Tomasz's poetry works in English because of that. There's already an established interest in Polish literature—a certain kind of Polish literature—and I think Tomasz's sensibilities both fall in line with that and also push up against it in a nice way. The other factor in this, to me, is that a lot of the other poets of Tomasz's generation are writing a very different kind of poetry, influenced, actually, by the New York School of poets from America, so you have poets writing under the star of Frank O'Hara or John Ashbery. When you go to translate an O'Hara-esque poem into English, it sounds oddly dated. All these factors come into play when choosing work to bring into English. How well will this be received based on the distortion of Polish literature that we have in the States?

Bill Johnston: First of all, I should say that I'm not a very good American [*laughter; Johnston is from England*], so I may not be very well qualified to answer the question. I'm also, like Mira, very often asked questions like: What is it that is special about Polish literature? It's an impossible question. The only thing that unites Polish literature is the Polish language, and, of course, when you translate, you lose all of that. You have to kind of start afresh. One of the reasons that I'm drawn to Tomasz's poetry is that he has found a way to acknowledge historical experience—in the sense that history impinges on all our lives, whether we like it or not—not to make that the subject matter, but indeed also not to run away from it, in the way that the O'Harist poets sometimes do. I think if you're going to read his work in English, then you have to read it from where you happen to be and get

from it whatever you get. It's poetry, and so much of the meaning is in the language, the imagery. In the case of *Twelve Stations*, it's in the characters. It's in the narration. And all those things remind us that a national poet from a particular country is not just from that country; he's taking part in a much larger, broader activity and conversation. That's really the only way—for me, anyway—that I can suggest that non-Polish readers approach his work.

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Major Jackson: That's exactly what I was looking for! That conversation is there in Tomasz's work, and it's inevitable, particularly when alluding to the history. I guess it's a matter of approach, and that's what I've admired, that it approaches the historical legacy in an angled way. It's not speaking directly to a past conflict. When I listen to you read in Polish, Tomasz, there is also a certain kind of music that comes through, even if you're not familiar with the language. I think—and this is evident in *Colonies* and even in your new form in *The Book of Rotations*—you pay attention to the craft of poetry. I'm curious about what specifically in the art excites you when you write.

Tomasz Różycki: When I am writing poetry, it's about the music. I mean, I have this period when I am not able to write a poem. After the publication of a book, I wonder: "Who is the man who wrote this poem? Certainly not me." I am not able to write a sentence, a simple sentence, for many, many months. But I realized that I am waiting for a first sentence. The first sentence is a rhythmical model for me. After, I can produce a whole poem with this first line. And I can write a second one in the same rhythm, sometimes with rhyme. It's a bit like a little machine, which I put to work, and then it produces by itself line after line for the poems. That's why I have series of poems that all begin with the same sentence. It's like the same poem in many different versions.

Mira Rosenthal: Remembering that the original impulse comes from sound and not sense can be really helpful in translating, too. For me as a poet, I know that when I'm writing my own work, it's sound that drives sense and not the other way around. That can liberate you as a translator. I mean, you don't want to just go off and invent stuff that's not in there necessarily, but it's helpful to remember that sound is the most important thing.

Tomasz Różycki: Sound breeds the words. I have a very fluent idea of the sounds of the poem, but I am waiting for the words. When the sound has given me a word, if I don't like it, I can wait for another one. I can choose the right one. It's a certain kind of freedom and, at the same time, under control. I can keep control. That's why form for me is not a prison. It's rather a freedom.

Major Jackson: Bill, you're a trained linguist, and, Mira, you're a fine poet in your own right. I'm wondering what distinctive sensitivities you both bring to bear in translating Tomasz's poetry from those orientations as linguist and as poet.

Bill Johnston: Boy, that's a really good question, a really hard one. My background is in linguistics at least as much as in literature. Linguistics is a very broad field, and a lot of it has to do with things like the phonological structure of words, how the sounds and rhythm of a phrase or a sentence work on one. In working on *Twelve Stations*, for example, I was extremely conscious of the rhythm. I think it's not necessarily a linguistics thing. It's something that all writers obviously think about, too, and poets. This particular poem is a big book because the lines are very long, and that lends a particular cadence to the whole thing. As well as being a poem, it's a narrative. A large part of the work here was figuring out how to make the language flow and bring the language in line with the story. One very concrete example of that, which Tomasz and I actually talked about, is that he's very careful about where he places the end of sentences. There are relatively few lines where the line and the sentence end at the same time. Those breaks that come in the middle of lines really help modulate the flow of the story and the flow of the language. I don't know whether it's because I'm a linguist or translator or what, but that was definitely something I was very conscious of as I was working on this particular poem.

Tomasz Różycki: I remember our conversation about the series of names of flowers and animals in the description of the garden, Babcia's garden. There were many—*zasrajki*, etc.—and Bill asked me, "What are these names? I can't find them in any dictionary." It took a long time for me to answer—I don't know how long—but, finally, I said, "Oh, actually, I invented all those names." [Laughter]

Bill Johnston: Which, I have to say, allowed me finally to open my wings as a creative writer to invent other names. *Zasrajki*, I think, became shitabeds, which actually don't exist in English, as far as I know. Yes, that was interesting.

Mira Rosenthal: It reminds me of translating one of the poems in *Colonies*. I was tearing my hair out, trying to understand and construct a reading of a poem, one of the few poems that I just really didn't understand. I finally wrote to Tomasz to ask what it was about. He wrote back: "I don't know." [Laughter] One of the interesting things for me in translating *Colonies* was that I was aware that Tomasz allows himself—or is allowed—to write in a way that I don't feel like I would be allowed to write as an American poet, because we're coming from different contexts. His poems can be very vague, in contrast to the dictum we have in the States of "show, don't tell." But that's part of the joy of having poetry from another tradition. We'll allow him to do certain things in English because it's in translation.

For me, translating has to do with figuring out my list of priorities, the order of priorities for any given poem or even a particular moment in a given poem. At this moment, I'm putting *sound* at the top. At this moment, I'm putting *sense*. At this moment, I'm putting *rhyme*. But number one up there is always: I want to write a good poem in English. I want to write something that can stand on its own as a poem in English. There's always that moment of putting the original aside, and I'm just writing and working in the English, trying to make it sing. But, then, I'm also keeping in mind what I know are the distinctive qualities of Tomasz's poetry that do not have anything to do with the way I write poetry—for example, his penchant for listing and run-on sentences—and wanting to keep that in there.

Major Jackson: Do you allow yourself certain kinds of freedoms within that list of priorities? I'm thinking of Robert Lowell's translations that he called imitations, which were very loose and lacked a certain kind of close-line rigor that you would expect of translations. What kind of freedoms do you allow yourself, given that list?

Mira Rosenthal: Not as loose as Lowell. Working in form has been very liberating for me as a translator, because I will stray more from the meaning, or ask Tomasz, "Can we say twelve instead of sixteen here?" I'll ask to change some things in the poem in order to achieve meter, and knowing I have his okay makes me feel a little bit better about it. But—you know—I take a lot of liberties. That comes out of the belief that, especially with poetry, there's no such thing as a definitive translation. It does not exist. My translation of a poem is going to look very different from Bill's translation, from someone else's translation. You're getting my Tomasz Różycki, my voicing of Tomasz's work. It's good to remember this when you're reading in translation: Oh, I'm also getting the translator as well.

Tomasz Różycki: I'd like to say something about this liberty of translation and the relation between the translator and the author, because I do some translation myself, from French. I remember the translation of *Twelve Stations* into French. He was an excellent translator, but he didn't speak with me much about the vocabulary, about anything really. He just did it by himself. In one section in the original Polish text, there is a reference to two characters who are Muppets from a show for kids. The name of one dragon is Pankracy, and the other one is Bonifacy. In the French translation, I saw the names Pankracy and Bonifacy, and there was a footnote with the information: As you well know, these names are from two popes of Christianity. [Laughter]

Major Jackson: Our audience may or may not know that *Twelve Stations* was a really huge literary phenomenon in Poland when it was published in 2004. It's now required reading among students there. Bill, you introduced it as a mock epic, and in your introduction, you talk about the model poem from the nineteenth century—Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*. Could you talk about that, and then, could you talk about its conception? I think it's a hilarious book. It's not your traditional epic. There is a journey, there is a quest, but it's one in which it's less about the destination and more about the journey. It's quite fun to read.

Bill Johnston: One of the points of reference for *Twelve Stations* is the book *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), which is considered the Polish national epic. It's also divided into twelve books, just as *Twelve Stations* is divided into twelve stations. *Pan Tadeusz* itself is not like a pure epic. It was an epic, but a very local one. Mickiewicz set it only twenty years before he wrote it. It's about the life of the gentry, actually in Lithuania, not even in Poland. He writes very lovingly about the way of life there, about hunting and mushroom picking, and includes a recipe for *bigos* (hunter's stew). It's very local, it's very intimate, whereas traditional epics are always set in the past, often in distant places, so it's a different kind of thing already. And there's a lot of humor and a lot of warmth, but at the same time, at a political level, there's a kind of earnestness. It was written at a point where Poland had recently been divided up among Russia, Prussia, and Austria and no longer existed on the maps, so there was a great sense of national trauma and humiliation. *Pan Tadeusz* was written partly as a way to try to heal those feelings.

For me, one of the reasons that Tomasz's poem struck such a chord in Poland is because he actually finds a way to write somewhat ironically about that very earnest Polish approach to history. If you hang around in Poland, you can meet a lot of people who are still very angry about World War II, about the Communist period, about all kinds of things. There's a very strong anti-Russian sentiment, for example, among many Poles, among certain sectors of Polish society. Tomasz acknowledges these, but he manages to also put them in a gently humorous light. I think a lot of people were very grateful for that. It's like they could see—not how ridiculous they were—but they could see their own mental obsessions in a slightly, let's say, healthier way. That's how I see it, anyway, besides the fact that it's a marvelous book, obviously. But I think also that at that level the book has resonated with people in a particular way, to slightly debunk the super seriousness with which many people in Poland tend to talk about the historical experiences that are recounted here.

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Tomasz Różycki: Yes, *Pan Tadeusz* was a reference for me, especially because of the movie adaptation. There was a movie in 2003, or thereabouts, by Andrzej Wajda entitled *Pan Tadeusz*, and almost every Polish schoolkid went to see it. It was a kind of obligation for them. So I thought, what are they feeling in the theater when they see the beginning of this *Pan Tadeusz*, with its very special line, which every Pole knows by heart? I mean: "Litwo! Ojczyzno moja!" It's like: "Lithuania, my homeland!" I thought, probably for Polish kids it's not very clear. Why Lithuanians? [*Laughter*] I was trying to write my own story of my own family. Mickiewicz tried to write about a family and a home, so I was trying to think: What about my home? Where is my home exactly? My home is in Opole in Silesia, a post-German city, but my whole family is from Ukraine, Poles from Ukraine who settled in Silesia after the war. It's so complicated to explain. It's so complicated that at some point it starts to be funny, so I tried to explain it in a funny way, this whole complicated Polish story.

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Bill Johnston is professor of comparative literature at Indiana University. He is one of the most prolific translators of Polish literature into English. His work has received the Found in Translation Award, the PEN Translation Prize, the Best Translated Book Award, the Transatlantyk Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and numerous other honors.

Editorial Note: For more, read *Four Poems*, by Tomasz Różycki ([../node/2752](#)).



A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, **Major Jackson** (<http://www.majorjackson.com/>) is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *The Absurd Man* (<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2020/spring/absurd-man-major-jackson>). (Norton, 2020). His edited volumes of poetry include *Renga for Obama* and *Best American Poetry 2019*. He teaches at Vanderbilt University.

Photo: Erin Patrice O'Brien



Mira Rosenthal is the author of *The Local World* and translator of two books by Polish poet Tomasz Różycki. Her work has received numerous awards, including an NEA Fellowship, a Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University, a PEN/Heim Translation Grant, and the Northern California Book Award. She is assistant professor of poetry writing at Cal Poly.

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