

# Reviews

Ward, Jean; Fengler, Maria and Grzegorzewska, Maria (eds). *Striking the Chords of Spirit and Flesh in Polish Poetry: A Serendipity*. between.pomiędzy, 9. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk, 2016. 421 pp. Notes. Index. Zł33.60 (paperback).

THIS is an interesting if, as the title implies, somewhat eccentric collection of essays and poems linked — in some cases explicitly, in others rather tenuously — to the central theme of the co-existence, across the history of Polish poetry from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, of ‘the interwoven themes of flesh, word and spirit’ (p. 12). Inspired by the ‘Poetry: Word Made Flesh: Flesh Made Word’ conference held in 2013 in Gdańsk, the book reads very much like a conference proceedings, despite the fact that most of the essays included in the volume — for they are clearly self-standing essays rather than chapters — were actually commissioned specifically for this collection. While the resulting impression of managed randomness that the book creates may not in itself be a bad thing, a reader trying to look for common threads linking the individual essays together will only ever be able to make an occasional, though indeed serendipitous, connection here and there.

The sense of structural looseness that characterizes the volume is reinforced by the tentativeness of the identification of its target audience, and of the handling of the resulting issues of contextualization, translation, annotation, etc. Some of the essays — for example, Mirosława Hanusiewicz-Lavallee’s excellent comparative study of the literature of Polish Baroque and the tradition of English metaphysical poetry, or Dariusz Konrad Sikorski’s immensely informative piece on the poetry of Polish Jews, with a particular focus on the interwar period — are clearly addressed to Anglophone audiences, and make appropriate, well-judged concessions to readers unfamiliar with the Polish language and the historical, social and literary context of the texts under discussion. The situation is more complicated, perhaps inevitably given the historical significance and the philosophical complexity of the heritage of Polish Romanticism, with contributions focusing on the literature of the nineteenth century: both Szymon Hiżycki in his reading of Mickiewicz’s ‘Widzenie’, and Rolf Fieguth in his essay on Słowacki’s and Norwid’s political and historiosophical visions perceived in the context of other writings of the period, particularly Krasiński’s *Irydion*, make valiant attempts to contextualize their central arguments by providing extensive background commentary on Polish Romanticism, but their essays become, as a result, somewhat diffuse in terms of their focus and clarity of argument. There are no such difficulties when it comes to single-author studies focusing on a particular aspect of their work: thus, for example, the theme of the physical and spiritual dimensions of

death is subtly explored by Klaudia Łączyńska in her essay on Leśmian, and by Joanna Skolik in her study of Ewa Lipska. The critical section of the book ends with an interesting and thoroughly enjoyable contribution by Bill Johnston on translating the poems of Eugeniusz Tkacyszyn-Dycki — it may not fit in with the rest of the volume thematically, but as the editors explain in their introduction, its purpose is to provide a bridge to the final part of the book, a mini-anthology of English translations of some of the key poems discussed in the preceding sections.

It is precisely this mini-anthology that helps the reader realize what constitutes the main achievement of the book: it broadens the perspective from which Anglophone readers perceive Polish literature by bringing to their attention a range of new and unexpected dimensions of Polish poetry, some of which are unfamiliar even to well-educated but non-specialist Polish readers: how many people have actually ever heard about, let alone read, Maurycy Szymel or Maurycy Schlanger? The credit for this is due, in large measure, to the sterling work done by the translators, not just of the poems included in the mini-anthology, but also of the numerous quotations across the volume: led and supported by the volume's main editor, Jean Ward, they have done a spectacular job in translating some of the most lexically and stylistically idiosyncratic passages of Polish verse. The volume is on the whole carefully edited and helpfully annotated, with just a few minor inaccuracies: Poland regained independence after the defeat of the Central Powers rather than 'the Central State' (p. 103), the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not formally created, as a dual state, until 1569 (p. 135), and Stanisław Brzozowski's translation of Newman's *Grammar of Assent* could not have been published, in 1915, by Brzozowski himself (p. 220) given that he had died in 1911. But these are minor issues: ultimately, impressionistic, idiosyncratic, sometimes uneven, and occasionally brilliant as the book is, it remains a thoroughly sincere attempt to bring to the attention of a wider audience some hitherto neglected areas of Polish poetry — and it discovers a few gems in the process. A serendipity of essays indeed.

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Blakesley, Rosalind P. *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London, 2016. xiii + 365 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$75.00: £50.00.

IN recent decades Western scholarship on Russian painting has largely concentrated on a period spanning the 1870s to the 1950s, book-ended by the