Poetry has a very economical way of using language, good for nations that do not have a lot of peace and quiet. This may help explain the excellence of the poetic tradition in a country like Poland. The best known Polish poets—Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert—lived through the devastations of the Second World War and the travails of the cold war that followed. They mastered a way of transmitting their experience of history in a personal and very condensed way. That tradition continues beyond the generations that had a direct collision with war and violence. The consequences of the Second World War are still with us.

Tomasz Różycki is one such witness to the continuity of the past. More than half a century younger than the poets I mentioned, he was born in 1970, in the Polish city of Opole, which, before 1945, was named Oppeln and belonged to Germany. His family’s roots, though, were somewhere else. He wrote about this other place in his poem “Scorched Maps”:

I took a trip to Ukraine. It was June. I waded in the fields, all full of dust and pollen in the air. I searched, but those I loved had disappeared below the ground, deeper than decades of ants. I asked about them everywhere, but grass and leaves have been growing, bees swarming. So I lay down, face to the ground, and said this incantation—

you can come out, it’s over. And the ground, and moles and earthworms in it, shifted, shook, kingdoms of ants came crawling, bees began to fly from everywhere. I said come out, I spoke directly to the ground and felt the field grow vast and wild around my head.

(Translated by Mira Rosenthal)

In a commentary on this poem at the PEN 10 website, Różycki said, “The poem ‘Scorched Maps’ came out of a trip I took to Ukraine in 2004, when I was invited to a literary festival in Lwów. I took the opportunity to visit the places associated with the history of my family, who were resettled from that area after the Second World War because of the agreement between Stalin, Churchill, and...”
and Roosevelt, who won the war.” The “area” meant territories that before the war constituted one-third of the Polish state. After the war, the country, in keeping with Stalin’s wishes, was “moved” to the West: the eastern part was handed over to the Soviet Union, while in the farther west a territory was taken away from Germany and settled with Polish citizens. This is how Różycki’s family came to inhabit the city of Oppeln/Opole. Thus they were dislocated twice. Born in the eastern territories that Poland lost, they wound up in the formerly German western territories that Poland acquired. “My family,” he continues, “was one of those that experienced all of the terror and mourned each of the victims…. I went to Ukraine with all of this on my mind in an attempt to free myself from this terrible history.” He finds on the journey that the territory his family inhabited in Ukraine shows no trace of their centuries-long residence there, and, although he says “it is over,” his search for the quieting of history cannot be truly accomplished. The older he becomes, the closer the past.

The consciousness of the commonality of that fate—Różycki’s family was displaced along with millions of other people—was not therapeutic. And it was not only the distance from the place that was at the root of his estrangement but also the unassimilated aura of the place they inhabit now—the formerly German territory of Silesia. Here I would like to quote a fragment from Różycki’s mock heroic poem Twelve Stations (written in 2004, the year of his trip to Ukraine), which opens with an invocation to the city of his birth and life, Opole:

It was an oh-so-dark, oh-so-wild March, the kind there often are in this part of Europe, on the Odra River, in a prematurely discolored city by the name of Opole, or in German Oppeln. City of my affliction! Pathogen of black bile, unhappy tumor swelling in the soul—how I hate you, city! To leave you, go, quit you forever! You unrelenting nightmare, you soulless monster, you microbe without a face! Get thee behind me, evil spirit, smog of futile dreams, of forsaken plans and aspirations, curse of every morning, get thee gone forever!

The invocation goes on, describing the city, with a crescendo of mock praise and invective, to culminate with a parting wish:

city strewn with ash... beneath a rainbow of exhaust fumes rising every day, this living, living city. Oh how I wish I could say to you: “Farewell!”

(Translated by Bill Johnston)

The description of Opole, though a long diatribe, is also a very concrete portrait of the city. To a Polish ear, it has an additional dimension, a clear bow toward Poland’s best-known epic poem, Pan Tadeusz, written by the nineteenth-century national poet Adam Mickiewicz and studied in school by every Polish child. Twelve Stations is an extremely successful and tenderly ironic version of Pan Tadeusz, though this is only one of its many levels. The book was widely read; it was adapted to the theater and performed on the radio. The mastery of this mock epic was even recognized officially: in 2007, the Ministry of Education chose it as one of the topics for the all-Poland final high-school exam in literature. In a way, Różycki, not yet forty-years old at the time, joined the canon of high-school classics.

Indeed, he is a prolific as well as renowned poet. “Scorched Maps” was one of seventy-seven semi-sonnets that compose the volume Colonies (2006), his sixth poetic volume, after Vaterland (1997), Anima (1999), Country Cottage (2001), World and Anti-World (2003), and Twelve Stations (2004). Since then, another volume of his poems has appeared, The Book of Revolutions (2010). He has received several prestigious awards, and his poems have been translated into at least six languages. The Forgotten Keys (2007), his first volume in English will soon be followed by two other titles. In Twelve Stations, we have a narrative masterpiece, but
his other poetic volumes offer not so much stories as multi-faceted views of the movements of the narrator on some journey—metaphysical, metaphorical, and/or real. These are not disjointed verses but variations on a theme, always with sustained development and sequencing. There is something baroque in them, the baroque of Polish literature. They need to be read in a flow, one after another, because, as in a piece of music, they build on each other, moving toward a resolution impossible to reach.

Rózycki’s poems are very intimate, with a protagonist/narrator obsessed with the difficulties of writing—and the difficulties of finding a place in this universe. They are full of movement, but the destination to which they rush is not clear. His poetic world, though located in recognizable landscapes and situations, is also very hermetic; the narrator is lost in some other, metaphysical space reminiscent of intergalactic cold. “I have sent my body on a journey, it will die one day, and I will be far away from it,” he writes in “Nineteenth Song,” from World and Anti-World. We see the movements of his body, but where the “I” is speaking from we have to guess.

Twelve Stations proved Rózycki’s perfect ease with the Polish literary tradition. Unlike most Polish poets of his age, he does not shy away from using strong rhythm and, sporadically, rhyme. His latest volume in Polish—The Book of Revolutions—consists of eighty-eight poems, each composed of two eight-line parts. The attention thus shown to form is a constant in his work: in each volume, the poems are disciplined by a clear form and a continuity of subject and images; a constant narrative tension is maintained in these volumes, and the poems that compose them seem to be written in one breath. This is one of the ways in which Rózycki expresses loyalty to the past. I believe that this interest in form is a result of his relative freedom from influences of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with its rejection of a rib-cage of poetic structures. He belongs to another tradition: he is a college professor of French literature and a translator into Polish of, among others, Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud. That background intersects with his somewhat old-fashioned Polish poetic attention to form; yet that form is inhabited by a truly contemporary mind and vocabulary. And there is the already mentioned added ingredient at work: history. Here, I would like to offer another sample of his work, a poem from his first volume, Vaterland. I must mention that the river Odra (Oder) flows through Opole (Oppeln), and that the city of Lwów belongs now to the state of Ukraine and is called Lviv:

“Entropy”
This June, as sun douses the lawns by the Odra
and the bridges continue to crumble, I say,
we have no fatherland. It went missing
during transport,
or maybe the cavalry scattered it in their horses’ manes,
the poets twisted its name, and the typeface
in newspapers
shredded it. That is why each of us collected
what we could
under our eyelids, earth, sand, bricks,
whole flakes
of the sky, the scent of grass, and now no one knows
what to do with it all, how to close the eyes,
how to sleep
or to cry. It is June, and it is getting harder
to go on.
I am asking, why didn’t they burn down
Lwów, why
didn’t they turn it to ash, light smoke. Then no one
would have had to carry such weight
throughout
life and fall down a hundred times over,
even in dreams.

(Translated by Mira Rosenthal)*

Here, the personal pain of the poet, his entropic dissolution, is caused by the weight and burden of history, by the fact that,

although he is a Polish poet, his biography is stretched between Germany and Ukraine. It is history, he seems to be saying, that pushed me into a hostile world and left me there, stranded and afloat. In her introduction to The Forgotten Keys, Mira Rosenthal characterized his poetic attitude as “an intense hunger for return.” Return to where? We know now: it is a return to a place with almost no traces. But also to the city of Lwów, formerly Polish, now a Ukrainian city, which the poet would like to have burned.

Would burning this city erase it from memory? Quite the contrary, considering Różycki’s immersion in Polish poetic tradition. The weight of an impossible return to the unburned city, of the very personal yearning for the historical past has been a characteristic of Polish poetry since the Romantic period.

Polish poets suffer from a kind of “bovarism”: like Madame Bovary, they are convinced that life is elsewhere. The difference (perhaps not that great) between Madame Bovary and these poets is that this elsewhere, equally inaccessible, is in the past, not in a neighboring French provincial town. And for the Polish poet that past is embodied in an image of a lost city.

This is not a uniquely Polish phenomenon, of course. One could say that modern East European poetry is in considerable part an expression of longing for past time, lost places, former life, the dead ones. The vulnerability of human creation is reflected in poems of the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski, the Czech Miroslav Holub, the Lithuanian Tomas Venclova, the Hungarian Agnes Nemes Nagy, and the Romanian Nina Cassian. One of the main metaphors of that vulnerability is the fate of the city. But when Czesław Miłosz wrote after the war, “Verona is no more./I crumbled its brickdust in my fingers. That is what remains/of the great love of native cities,” he did not mean it metaphorically. Verona, though not his native city, stood for pulverized Warsaw.

Cities can be destroyed, cities can be taken away. The memory of a city or territory that is not longer “ours” can have political overtones, sometimes directly linked to projects of re-

While Herbert grew up in Lvov and Zagajewski was born there (but wrote about it as Jerusalem and visited it only recently), Różycki’s claim to that city was that his parents-to-be also had left as a result of the same historical cataclysm that chased away the families of the other poets. Judging by what he wrote in “Scorched Maps,” it was not from the city itself that his family came. Indeed, Lvov did not need to be an individual experience. It was and is part of a poetic vocabulary. The same reverence for a lost city was expressed by Milosz, though in his case “the city without a name” was Wilno (Vilnius, Vilna), now the capital of Lithuania. Zagajewski, in his poem, refers very clearly to a poetic tradition of writing about lost cities; the final “pure peach” is a direct allusion to Milosz’s poem about Vilnius. It is not the poet that is displaced, it is the entire country, its borders moved to the West, its eastern part cut off and ethnically cleansed in the postwar settlement, so that its former inhabitants (and their descendants) have to create new histories.

The lost city does not mean only a geographic separation. It encompasses the loss of a dear past, an important tradition, authentic life. Różycki’s communing with his dead ancestors in “Scorched Maps,” recovering and acknowledging them, is a search for the reasons of his estrangement, perhaps for his true self, if such a self is to be found. In many of his other poems, he seems to be journeying not in search of something, but to escape. Perhaps he is escaping from Oppeln, from historically induced alienation, from being thrown into a place he cannot grow into. But he does not envisage any return. His poetic voice does not advocate any political objective. The impossibility of return coexists with the impossibility of remaining.

Yet it would be unjust to locate the poetry of Tomasz Różycki exclusively in this crevice between the present and the past. His voice searches for words that would capture the world—capture it now, today, this very moment, our world, so uncertain about its future, and so deeply bogged down in its past. His escape is an escape from history, though reluctant, because it would leave Polish poetry behind. This is where Różycki has his real roots, in a tradition he repels and embraces in every poem.

In 1948, three years after the end of Second World War, Czesław Milosz wrote a strange, ecstatic poem, “To Tadeusz Różewicz, Poet.” “Blessed is the nation,” Milosz said, “that has a poet/and in its travails does not march in silence.” In this way the older poet (Milosz was born in 1911) was reacting to the publication of poems by Różewicz (b. 1921). I was reminded of this greeting after reading, for the first time, the poems of Różycki, three generations younger than Różewicz—both last names, perhaps too poetically, come from “róza,” rose. The only modification I would make to the welcome offered by Czesław Milosz is this—that the greeting today should be more personal than national in tone. Though Różycki was embraced by the Polish Ministry of Education, his tone, it seems to me, is too centrifugal to accompany a unified nation. But perhaps a bit of dispersion and shaking is what the nation now needs.


*Adam Zagajewski, “To Go to Lvov,” in Without End, New and Selected Poems, tr. Clare Cavanagh. FSG, 2002, p. 79