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## Review Essay

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Place, Desire, Existence: Trinity University Press's Writers World Series

### ***Mexican Writers on Writing***

*Margaret Sayers Peden, editor*

San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2007. 224 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 1595340343. \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN 1595340289.

### ***Irish Writers on Writing***

*Eavan Boland, editor*

San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2007. 324 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 1595340327. \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN 1595340297.

### ***Polish Writers on Writing***

*Adam Zagajewski, editor*

San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2007. 280 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 1595340335. \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN 1595340300.

Located in San Antonio, the recently revived Trinity University Press has a mission to produce meditative and stimulating books for readers who enjoy the matrix of culture and ideas. One area of focus is "books by writers on writing," described by the press as "work that peers into the creative process and, in the bargain, explains how we understand and portray our world." Among Trinity's recent publications are three books in the Writers World series edited by Ameri-

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can poet Edward Hirsch: *Mexican Writers on Writing* (Margaret Sayers Peden, editor); *Irish Writers on Writing* (Eavan Boland, editor); and *Polish Writers on Writing* (Adam Zagajewski, editor). The series collects essential selections about writing within the framework of the writers' countries of origin. In our age of emphasis on diversity in the classroom, to relocate the voice of the writer in this distinct context must produce significant results or risk being tossed in favor of a text that is more inclusive, more diverse; a presumed position of a national voice might suggest homogeneity, a move toward the very stereotypes that academics have spent ages trying to erase.

Happily, reading the series is a thoroughly broadening experience. The rhetorical strategies on the part of each book's editors embrace writing's twin necessities of tradition and originality while highlighting both the bonds inherent in nationalism and the distinctions among humans. Carlos Fuentes writes: "We know what it means to be Mexican. . . . Now the problem is to discover . . . difference: sexual difference, religious difference, political difference, moral differences, esthetic differences" (73). This appears in Peden's introduction to Fuentes' contribution, and it is a clarion call for the entire series. The Writers World series is valuable to all who care about the essence of writing, including why we write at all. The approaches are varied, the work is very good, and there is the added bonus of these well-wrought, informative introductions to each selection.

The Writers World series explores how much may be gained from locating writers in their historical and cultural contexts, for teachers, for students of writing, for readers, for writers. The books present a number of avenues for discussing the philosophies, struggles, pleasures of the discipline, and the impact of culture and history on the human experience explored through art. The texts could easily be appropriate for courses on creative writing, composition, and cultural studies. I can imagine a course such as "On National Voices," in which students explore the historical exchanges of ideas and styles that generate a foundation of a national and cultural imagination. Many conversations in these books sound as much of disagreement as of discovery. In her introduction to *Irish Writers on Writing*, Eavan Boland recalls George Moore's definition of a literary movement: "five or six people who live in the same town and hate each other cordially" (xv). Hatred among affability strikes a witty and marvelous introduction to the shared visions and divergent opinions involved in aesthetics. Adam Zagajewski's introduction to *Polish Writers on Writing* informs his readers of his focus on the effects of WWII, and his excellent selections present the matrix of art and survival.

Perhaps because Margaret Sayers Peden has extensive experience as a translator, her preface to *Mexican Writers on Writing* focuses on dissolving the barrier of language and the combined elements of endurance and loss in the history of Mexican letters, beginning with the survival of fragments of the oral tradition and the loss of “painted codices [that] were destroyed by the Catholic priests who were sent to Christianize the New World” (vii). A brisk background on the evolution of Mexican literature includes information about the literary mode of *modernismo*—the moment Mexican writers finally navigated the barrier to North America—and the post-WWII period event known as “The Boom,” when Mexican letters achieved international interest and recognition.

In a book of nearly 200 pages, Peden’s task is to illuminate Mexican history and art, as she puts it, “[from] the Conquest to Crack (a twentieth-century movement referring to the sound of ‘rupture’)” (xii). To that end, the book opens with the sixteenth-century fragment from Bartolomé de las Casas, “An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies,” and closes amid the twentieth century, with the multi-authored Crack “Manifesto,” and Jorge Volpi’s “Of Parasites, Mutations, and Plagues: Notes on the Art of the Novel.” Variety reigns. Rosario Castellanos’s playful and edifying excerpt from *Mujer que sabe Latin* (Woman Who Knows Latin) intersects her personal narrative with language and a literary life. Octavio Paz’s “Translation: The Literary and the Literal” illuminates the motive and pleasures of that important art. Carlos Fuentes’ “Decalogue for a Young Writer,” which should be mandatory reading for every writer in and out of writing programs, is followed by the protean, metaphysical “Corporeal Writing,” Noé Jitrick’s conversation with Margo Glanz. Juan Villoro’s “The Phases of the Moon” is, as Peden suggests, “tongue-in-cheek”: “In the 1970s, short stories were like parrots: they weren’t greatly sought after, but they could fit in anywhere.” Yet Villoro’s essay is equally beautiful, as it offers by example a lesson in how to fuse the self and the world in writing. *Mexican Writers on Writing* is bound within a national frame but humming with stylistic diversity.

Eavan Boland assembles her contribution differently, but with no less significant results. The pieces in *Irish Writers on Writing* are for the most part brief, but also abundant (compared to 20 entries in Peden’s 199 pages, Boland’s 304 pages include 75 entries). Paraphrasing Yeats, Boland informs the reader that this anthology is “a book of fire and shorthand” (xi). Since Ireland “lost one language and received another,” the emergence of the literati of the people is full of “stresses, resistances, and counterclaims” (xiv, xi). Therefore, these entries converse with each other and comment, sometimes wryly, on the past

in an ongoing argument about what is at stake. Such intensity gives the anthology its informative, lively shape. Yeats and Lady Gregory open the collection, but their tone is punctured a bit by George Moore's skewering of his visit with Yeats at Coole and by Daniel Corkery, who opposed the Irish literary revival and the likes of Yeats. Corkery's excerpt illuminates the argument of national and cultural context, the distinction between uniformity and the local voice. Corkery's validation of the Irish imagination's survival among peasants and his small study of Robert Burns's two classes of voice (Lowland Ploughman and the would-be literary man) would be excellent to activate a discussion vis-à-vis elitism and aesthetics. *Irish Writers on Writing's* grand conversation incorporates excerpts of essays, short stories, poems, and literary criticism. There is so much to study in these brief fiery pieces, including the impressive balance of Boland's rhetorical strategy: while the writers are thoroughly invested in the national imagination, there are those wary of the detrimental effects of such as stereotype, as in Gerald Dawe's "Anecdote over a Jar." To read this collection is to acquire an increasing understanding of the variety inherent in the formation of a national artistic identity.

These anthologies articulate how the writing of a particular place is bound up with the desire for existence, that literature reflects this by its mere being, and that writing is vital in a most literal sense. Perhaps because editor Adam Zagajewski locates the majority of his choices in *Polish Writers on Writing* in "the intellectual dilemma occasioned by the tragedy of World War II" (x), the book's collective truth-seeking essentiality has significant psychic weight. Twenty-five artists contribute its approximately 250 pages; Zagajewski is the only editor of the three to include multiple entries by some contributors. Philosophical explorations by Boleslaw Lesmian open the book, his sense of interior (Zagajewski notes Bergson as one of Lesmian's influences) operative in "Letter to Zeno": "Only a flower 'sung from within' lives in us and summons up the flower outside of us. Only a man 'sung from within' is what we care about in art" (7). Conversations between artists are here, too: just one example is Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz's selection (which includes chapter 3 from "The Decline of Art") followed shortly thereafter by Bruno Schultz's reaction, "Essay for S. I. Witkiewicz," with its intense consideration of image.

Zagajewski has assembled a text of gravitas and intelligence by writers who attempt survival and consider art under the most sobering of circumstances. In one case in point, Schultz was murdered in the Drohobycz ghetto by the SS, and, stranded in Argentina because the war broke out, Gombrowicz, Zagajewski writes, lived for twenty years in Buenos Aires "on the brink of mis-

ery.”(82). How moving it is to encounter the life and humor in the correspondence between Schultz and Gombrowicz, and then illuminating to read their philosophy. A later, prescient Gombrowicz entry in diary form struggles with the Adorno statement— a statement not yet having been declared—about the impossibility of art after Auschwitz. He considers how the suffering of the Polish condition must be distilled to create a true writer. “[W]e are representatives of a *brutalized culture*, that is, a culture that is close to life,” he writes. “[I]t would be pitiful if our prestige were based exclusively on the bruised quarter of our body. . . . [P]hilosophy, literature, and art must also serve people who have not had their teeth knocked out, their eyes blackened, or their jaws broken.” Gombrowicz admires how Czeslaw Milosz “adjusts his wildness to the demands of Western delicacy” (86). Milosz’s selection follows shortly thereafter, of course, and many others, including Anna Kamienska’s compelling diary entries and a selection from Zbigniew Herbert that includes a marvelous interview.

Collections that consider one’s responsibilities as human and writer in the larger world are essential to thinking artists. It is apt here to quote Cicero: “Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child.” Students of writing, in or out of an academic context, who engage these dimensional texts of history, aesthetics, and vitality to cultivate their own work will enjoy the Writers World series and find their ideas about writing and life maturing intellectually and creatively.

### **Amy Newman**

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