

Expanding the Reach of Polish Literature

Bill Johnston has translated more than 20 works of Polish literature. His latest translation of new poems by Tadeusz Różewicz received the first ever “Found in Translation” award sponsored by cultural institutes in Krakow, London, and New York. The work was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Poetry Award for 2008.

Grzegorz Gauden, director of the Polish Book Institute in Kraków, and Monika

Fabijańska, director of the Polish Cultural Institute in New York, presented the award as part of the IU conference “New Directions, New Connections: Polish Studies in Cross-Disciplinary Context.”

“Translating poetry is a tricky task,” says Johnston. “Różewicz in particular is a big challenge. His poetry looks extremely simple, but it’s very carefully constructed, and also Polish grammar allows you to say much more in a single word than you can manage in English—for example, the tiny two-syllable word ‘uśpić’ means ‘to put to sleep,’ twice as many syllables and four times as many words in English. I had to work really hard to keep the language as laconic as it is in Polish.”



(From left) Monika Fabijańska, Bill Johnston, Patrick O'Meara, Antonia Lloyd-Jones, and Grzegorz Gauden at the Lilly Library after the presentation of the Found in Translation Award.

Of Note

philosopher's stone

*this poem
should be put to sleep*

*before it starts
to philosophize
before it starts*

*to cast about
for compliments*

*summoned to life
in a forgetful moment*

*attuned to words
to glances
it seeks deliverance
from the philosopher's
stone
passerby walk on
don't lift the stone*

*under it a tiny white poem
naked
is turning
to ash*

*By Tadeusz Różewicz
Translated by Bill Johnston*