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The Pattern-Book of Grief, Pity and Affection. Tadeusz Różewicz's *Mother Departs* and its English Translation

Abstract: Tadeusz Różewicz's *Mother Departs* is a late work of one of Poland's most important writers — a polyphonic elegy dedicated to his mother, who died in 1957. The article discusses the possible reasons of Różewicz's relative absence in the English-speaking world and proceeds to analyze the importance of *Mother Departs* in his oeuvre. This award-winning book, which testifies to the impossibility of overcoming the grieving of loss, is composed of a variety of textual fragments, including documentary material, such as diaries, notebooks and letters, as well as literary works by the poet's brother and the poet himself. Różewicz moves between the documentary and the lyrical, between the historical and the personal, between memory and grief, while merging the elegy for his mother with his own farewell, which stems from the sense of the poet's own imminent departure. The English translator of the work had to deal with such problems as the rendering of culture specific items and emotionally charged passages of grief and tenderness, often expressed in diminutives which have no equivalents in English.

Key words: Tadeusz Różewicz, untranslatability, contemporary Polish poetry, elegy, literary translation

This unusual, disturbing book is the effect of over forty years of mourning. And as such, it testifies to the impossibility of overcoming the grieving of loss. Its history seems to provide evidence that mourning does not end, or, to use Freud's more technical terms, that time does not always help "the ego to free its libido from the lost object" (Freud 252). Published in 1999, fifteen years before the poet's own death, *Mother Departs* is one of Tadeusz Różewicz's final works, though its central moment — the death of Stefania, the poet's mother — is set deep in the past, in 1957. When the book appeared, Różewicz was almost an octogenarian, who was summing up his life, reassessing his biography, and settling what remained

unsettled, summoning up the ghosts of his past and, in an indirect way, writing about his own imminent departure: “now I’m preparing to exit, into darkness” (3).

Mother Departs is of course not the first book by Różewicz published in Britain. The poet has been known to the English speaking audience since mid-sixties, though he has never achieved the same popularity as Zbigniew Herbert or Czesław Miłosz. Widely read and celebrated in Germany, he remained, strangely enough, a poet for the initiated few in Britain and America, despite many outstanding translations of his work, proving perhaps the limitations of intercultural transmission and revealing what Justin Quinn called “the imbalances between canons” as viewed from different national contexts (Quinn, 12). Largely absent from many critical surveys of modern poetry¹, Różewicz’s poetry drew the attention of a number of Anglophone critics with special interest in Eastern European writing, though even they would express their reservations in acknowledging the poet’s greatness. Dennis O’Driscoll, while admitting his admiration for Różewicz’s early poems, complains about the later work tending “towards the garrulous, unimaginative and, in fact, downright journalistic” and observes that Różewicz’s writing “fails to alchemise into poetry” (O’Driscoll, 27). Paul Coates in his comparative study of Herbert and Różewicz argues that “where Herbert’s work is all of a piece, that of Różewicz is highly uneven, (...) tainted by an atrophy of choice which issues alternately in cynical, sub-existentialist biologism, and sentimental socialist realist exaltation” (Coates 183–184). The problem Anglophone critics have with accepting Różewicz’s poetry, possibly with the exception of a few early poems, could not be attributed to the low quality of translations, nor to their scarcity. Every few years new translators tried their hands at rendering — mostly successfully — Różewicz into English, and yet the poet has not managed to join the Polish triad: Herbert, Miłosz, and (in later years) Szymborska, who in the eyes of the Anglophone world stood for modern Polish poetry.

The first larger presentation of his verse in English translation was in Miłosz’s highly influential anthology *Post-war Polish Poetry*, published in 1965 (republished by Penguin Books in 1970, and then, in expanded edition, in 1983), which included eleven poems rendered into English by Miłosz himself. The first collection of Różewicz’s verse was *Faces of Anxiety* translated by Adam Czerniawski, and published in 1969, followed by Czerniawski’s translations of Różewicz’s further poems, collected later in *Conversation with the Prince* (1981) and then in *They Came to See the Poet* (1991). Czerniawski, who also translated Różewicz’s

¹ For example, the two voluminous surveys *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (2013, edited by Peter Robinson) and *Modern Irish Poetry* (2012, edited by Fran Brearton), both published by Oxford University Press, though dealing with international dimensions of poetry, include no references to Różewicz. Clare Cavanagh does not devote to him a single sentence in her pertinent study *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics. Russia, Poland and the West* (2009, Yale University), nor does Magdalena Kay in her *In Gratitude for All the Gifts. Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe* (2012, University of Toronto Press).

dramas, became the poet's most dedicated advocate in Britain, a restless champion of his poetry, and his long-time friend. Apart from Miłosz and Czerniawski, Różewicz had also other translators, who included M. J. Krynski, R.A. Maguire, Victor Contosky, Geoffrey Thurley, Edward Czerwinski, and Richard Sokolowski. More recently, three important books have been published which testify to the ongoing interest of translators in rendering Różewicz's work into English. These are: *recycling* (2001) by Barbara Plebanek and Tony Howard (with an introduction and additional translation by Adam Czerniawski); Bill Johnston's *New Poems* (2007), which included Różewicz's work from the three collections of the first decade of the century; and Joanna Trzeciak's volume of selected poems, *Sobbing Superpower* (2011, with an introduction by Edward Hirsch). These translations proved to be a critical success: Trzeciak's was shortlisted for the Griffin Poetry Prize and won the Found in Translation Award, Johnston's was awarded with the former and shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Poetry Award.

The words with which Miłosz described Różewicz's poetry at the very outset of the poet's difficult career in the English-speaking world, seem to have fashioned the way in which Różewicz has been read there ever since. In a short note prefacing his translations, Miłosz wrote about Różewicz: "Since he hated art as an offence to human suffering, he invented his own type of anti-poem, stripped of devices such as metre, rhyme, and even, more often, of metaphors, and limited to the simplest words. (...) He is a nihilistic humanitarian, constantly searching for a way out of his negation which is mitigated only by pity; his tenderness bursts out only when he writes on little things of everyday life" (Miłosz 85). If one could argue with Miłosz's latter comment, his formula of "art as an offence to human suffering" hit the nail on the head and inspired numerous Anglophone critics to take up the theme. The problem returned most famously perhaps in Seamus Heaney's essays, written with the deeply felt presence of Miłosz and with a focus on Eastern European writing. Heaney examined the conditions in which poetry can "constitute a betrayal of suffering", or "an affront to life" (Heaney xii), though significantly he concentrated on Miłosz and Herbert and ignored Różewicz. John Osborne slightly modified Miłosz's idea when he claimed that Różewicz's poetry "distrusts its own fictiveness, teaches respect for the dead and uncovers the ethic in aesthetic" (Osborne, 108), whereas Tom Paulin observed that Różewicz, "a great anti-poet", together with Herbert and Holub, "reminds us that in Eastern Europe, the poet has a responsibility both to art and to society, and that this responsibility is single and indivisible" (Paulin, 17).

Różewicz's poetics of anti-poetry, produced in consequence of his second world war experiences, and especially of the unprecedented horrors of the Holocaust, as if in response to Theodore Adorno's doubt about the possibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, negates aesthetic canons, prioritizing ethics over aesthetics. Różewicz has often commented on his distrust of "poetry":

I felt a growing contempt for all aesthetic values. I felt that something had come to an end forever for me and for humanity. Too early I came to understand Mickiewicz's dictum that 'it is more difficult to spend a day well than to write a book'. So I tried to rebuild what seemed to me most important for life and for the life of poetry: ethics. (Różewicz 2004: 12)

To an English speaking reader this pronouncement, however provocative it may still seem, may recall words of a much older poet, who also questioned the sense of writing poetry after the historical cataclysm he himself had witnessed: Wilfred Owen, the first world war poet, who radically changed his poetic style having experienced the realities of war in the trenches of Flanders. In the introduction to his war poems he famously declared:

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is war, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poet must be truthful. (Owen, 98)

Here, as in the case of Różewicz, is the voice of the poet who questions the sense of writing poetry as (to quote Miłosz's phrase again) "offensive to human suffering". It is not by chance that both Owen and Miłosz in his comment on Różewicz speak of "pity". Pity underlies the modern poet's task: to warn, to bear witness, or to feel solidarity with those who suffer. It is pity which subjects him to moral, rather than aesthetic, imperatives. Różewicz followed this view of the poet's role not only in his war poetry, but also in his personal collection *Mother Departs*, dealing with a different kind of pity and pain.

The Polish edition of *Mother Departs* has been designed by the poet himself (it should be remembered that Różewicz studied art history in Cracow). It has a black cover with an oval, framed photograph of the poet's mother and the lettering set in semi-silver type. The sepia photograph is cut so as to look like a funerary cameo image, usually placed on tombstones, although the original, printed inside the book, is a black-and-white rectangular photo showing the woman in her visiting dress. The art-work of the English paperback version of *Mother Departs* is significantly different: less direct, more metaphorical. The cover shows yellow and brown leaves falling, one of which includes a fragment of the photograph of the poet's mother. There are no echoes of funerary art, no traces of oppressive blackness. The message seems clear: mother departs as leaves depart, as seasons of the year depart, in a natural cycle of death and rebirth. The Polish edition, in contrast, promises no such consolation: its cover suggests finality.

The poet's mother as seen on the photograph is a young beautiful woman yet with a thoughtful, if not overtly melancholic look. Her mouth, unsymmetrical, is slightly turned down, and her big eyes are fixed on the camera, creating an irresistible impression that she is looking at us. The book opens with an appropriate motto: "Mother's eyes rest on me", printed below another photograph of Różewicz's mother, where she is older, but surprisingly brighter, warmer, and with a fainting smile. The

verb used in the motto, and the first sentence of the book, is significant: “to rest” (“spoczywać”), as in “rest in peace”, “requiescat in pace”. Mother’s open eyes, on both photographs, refute the concept of death as sleep: the woman’s eyes are open as if she were still alive and challenging the authority of death. She is like the deceased who does not want to leave the bereaved, but stays behind and looks at them.

The book is a collection of photos and voices. Apart from the two portraits of the poet’s mother, there are family photographs, retrieved from the pre-war period and the war years. The voices — of the mother and her three sons - come from various times and sources. The book includes fragments of Stefania’s diary, Różewicz’s poems from the fifties up till the eighties, the poet’s diary from 1957, fragments of his diary from 1982, a 1940 letter from his elder brother Janusz, killed by the Nazis, a memoir by his younger brother film-director Stanisław, and the poet’s prose. This mixture of voices and styles, of documents, diaries, letters, and poems, problematizes the elegiac nature of the work. The poet’s voice does not dominate here, at times it almost disappears. It is of course heard, but in a company of other voices, saving the book from the dangers of affectation and emotional exhibitionism. The book may bring to mind a family album, with a multitude of heterogeneous personal items. If Christopher Reid’s elegiac poem in memory of his wife Lucinda is called *A Scattering*, Różewicz’s book seems to be the opposite: it is a gathering, bringing together dispersed materials and juxtaposing different voices from the past, trying to compose some kind of totality out of these retrieved, seemingly incompatible fragments. It is as if the poet decided to pack up all his belongings, before they become dispersed by time and for ever lost. If death is often conceptualized as disintegration, the poet seems to try to overcome this process with his integrating, reassembling intention. Nevertheless, despite the poet’s attempts, the readers may have an impression of reading a work which is like Sappho’s lyrics or the epic of Gilgamesh: fragmentary, with blank areas, sudden stops, discontinuities, and inconclusiveness — precious shards in search of form, in pursuit of meaning. Mother departs and the whole disintegrates: “the world becomes poor and empty” (Freud, 246).

With its interplay of words and images, *Mother Departs* evidences the impossibility of expressing one’s grief: it becomes a pattern-book of the languages of mourning. The poet is left with a desire to find an adequate language in which he could speak about the loss and portray the lost love-object, but each of the languages proves insufficient. That is why the book, about the grieving of the long-lost mother, starts with a meta-literary accent: a reflection on the nature of poetry, which leads the poet to the acknowledgment of poetry’s shameful, indecent (or “offensive”, to quote Miłosz again) nature:

You know, Mummy, I can tell it only to you in my old age, and I can tell you now because I’m already older than you... I didn’t dare tell you when you were alive. I’m a Poet. It’s a word that frightened me, I never spoke it to Father... I didn’t know if it was decent to say something like that. (3)

In his war poems Różewicz acknowledged poetry's failure to speak for and in the name of those who perished. In *Mother Departs* Różewicz asks a similar question about the inappropriateness of poetry, about the uselessness of being a poet in the face of personal loss, and what it is accompanied by: grief.

Mother Departs has been rendered into English by Barbara Bogoczek (also known as Basia Howard), the author of a number of other translations of Różewicz's work, both poetic and dramatic, made in cooperation with Tony Howard. The task of translating *Mother Departs* seems however to have been most challenging, if we take into account the many registers of Polish language and its plenitude of references to Polish realities, social, cultural and political, which to many English readers may be unintelligible. There are many ways in which translators deal with culture specific items. They may try to produce a text which would be accessible to the English reader by: (a) omitting foreign terms; (b) turning specific allusions to more general concepts (eg. "general Sikorski" vs "the general"); (c) adding explanatory items to the text (eg. "Kościuszko" vs "general Kosciuszko"); (d) replacing foreign terms by familiar ones ("pierogi" vs "dumplings"); and (e) explaining them in footnotes or in Translator's Notes. Any familiarizing or universalizing strategies, such as (a), (b), and (d), would prove unacceptable in the case of Różewicz's poetry, and especially in his *Mother Departs*, as the text is deeply set both in specific time and specific locality. The elegy on the departure of the poet's mother is also an elegy on the departure of the world of safety, reliability, acceptance, and meaning. The death of the mother is, as Różewicz's brother writes in the final sentence of the book, in words which are at once simplest, most direct and most moving, the disappearance of "whatever was dearest and most beautiful in our home" (136). Różewicz mourns his mother, but his lamentation is also the poet's grieving of the loss of home.

Mother's death, though it happened twelve years after the end of the war, is nevertheless associated with this greatest crisis that the modern world went through. The poet decided not to mention it in his book, but his mother, though christened as young girl, was born in a Jewish family — to the Różewiczes the Holocaust was not a tragedy that happened to "others", or to their "neighbours", it constituted a direct threat to Stefania and her family. The horror of those years marks nearly all of Różewicz's writing. But in his depictions of the post-war realities of Poland what dominates is also the sense of catastrophe and decline. Różewicz chronicles the gradual decay of the post-war world, expressing not only his grief, but also anger at the hypocrisy and cynicism of the Polish literary scene ("The literary pimp cliques are still in action", 96). In Różewicz's account, Mother's death is thus never mythologized, we never lose sight of its historical, political and social background. The poet does not try to universalize the experience, but anchors it in specific times. To this effect, I would argue, he uses photographs, whose look — the way the models are dressed and posed, the damages seen in the photos made by

the passing of time — does not allow readers, and translators, to move out of the physically felt historical context.

Equally important for the translator must have been the need to keep the local, Polish context. One of the longest fragments included in the book are excerpts from Stefania's journal in which she recounts her life in a small village of Szyńkielew in the tsar's time, before the outbreak of the first world war. It is a fascinating account, full of detailed, informative observations about the lore of the Polish peasants at the beginning of the 20th century. Stefania writes on the relationships between peasants and landowners, discusses the role of religion and the Church in the life of the rural community, gives examples of customs, rituals and persisting superstitions, pictures the life of village women, including their roles as mothers and wives. This turns the text almost into an anthropological document — any attempt to universalize or generalize the language of such a text, defined by disciplined specificity and by use of local terms, would be simply against its logic, an absurd practice. Bogoczek then keeps the local terms in their original forms. In consequence, we come across the specific (Russian and Polish) names of administrative units, such as *guberniya* or *poviat*. Numerous words referring to traditional Polish cuisine retain their native form, having no equivalents in other cultures: we find *polewka*, *zacierka*, *kapuśnica*, *szperka* — the translator decided to leave the words in their original Polish forms, without trying to adapt their spelling to English rules. The same method was applied to Polish terms denoting customs: *śmingus*, *gaik*, *oczepowiny*, *starost*. These terms necessarily remain unintelligible to English readers, though their most elementary meaning may be deduced from the context, but let me emphasize that many of these words have become obsolete also in Polish, and to younger readers may sound exotic. And quite rightly so, as the text describes the ghost-world that no longer exists, it has passed away together with the words that used to describe it. The feeling of its foreignness is part of its meaning.

The translator does not use footnotes, which would explain the meaning of these words, nor does she supply the text with Translator's Notes (in contrast to Trzeciak and Johnston). Sometimes she may add an explanation, inserting it directly into the text, immediately after the "exotic" Polish term: "*starost*, his wedding planner" (18), or "*śmingus*, the traditional custom of drenching people with water" (17). When the name of Tadeusz Kościuszko is mentioned, Bogoczek adds his rank and writes: "general Tadeusz Kościuszko" (33), and when Różewicz mentions "Tygodnik Powszechny" weekly, she adds one word of crucial explanation: "the Catholic Tygodnik Powszechny" (91). Sometimes she would apply the same strategy to add extra information to what otherwise will be a meaningless phrase to an English reader, as in "cross days (when there were penitential processions)". Her comments of this kind are rare, and very economical, as if she were afraid of turning the text into an encyclopedia: *Mother Departs* is first and foremost a poetic work, and not a document.

Apart from culture specific items, the translator of *Mother Departs* had to deal with another systematic difficulty in rendering Różewicz's text into English. *Mother Departs* is an elegiac poem, although most of it is composed of found texts, in which there is no place for emotion, there are also surprisingly direct lyrical passages, in which the son expresses his love to the departed mother. On the one hand, we find short, reporting sentences, such as the notes in the poet's calendar, which may shock by their matter-of-factness. "Mother is alive", writes Różewicz in his diary, and a few days later, repeats the phrase with equal neutrality of tone: "Mother is still alive", and then eventually the note changes: "Mother died". Four days later we come across an astonishing passage in the poet's diary written in an entirely different voice:

Mummy my love, you're by my side. I shall be talking to you, I'll work thinking of you. Of your faint kind smile on a terribly gaunt yellow face — when you slipped away. My Good Beloved Old Lady, it's hard to breathe. But I am writing this like a letter to you. You were my trepidation, fear, joy, and breath I'm kissing your parched hands and swollen legs, dearest, your eyes — your blue hands as you died. I'm kissing your agonized body, which I gave back to our great mother — the earth. (106)

Polish language is rich in diminutives which not only connote the smallness of the object in question, but also signify the speaker's emotional attitude to it. Diminutives in Polish can be used not only with nouns, but also with adjectives and adverbs, and can be compared. English, on the other hand, is almost devoid of diminutives, apart from a few nouns which take diminutive suffixes. This lack of a corresponding system of marking the speaker's emotional attachment is one of the difficulties the translator translating from Polish into English has to face. In Różewicz's work diminutives are often used, most importantly perhaps in the way in which he addresses his mother. "Matka", "mama", which he uses alternatively, have their English equivalents used by the translator, who even adds one more item to the list, thanks to which the various shades of emotional engagement could be recorded: "mother", "mum", "mummy". The interplay between the more formal and more affective forms of address marks the very first paragraph of the work:

Now, as I write these words, my mother's eyes rest on me. The eyes, mindful and tender, are silently asking, "what's troubling you, my darling...? With a smile I reply, 'nothing... everything's fine Mummy, really, ' but tell me, ' Mother says, ' what's the matter?' I turn my head away, look through the window... (3)

The opening words of the work differentiate between "Mother" ("Matka") used in the poet's narration, and "Mummy" ("Mamo") used in the poet's dialogue with his mother. But there is another diminutive used in Polish, which does not have its English equivalent. It is "synku", the word with which mother addresses the boy. There is an English diminutive of "son", "sonny", but the form is old-fashioned and means something more general than one's son: it is used when speaking to any young boy. It is also either patronizing, or humorous, and as such would not be appropriate in the context of this highly emotional passage. The translator

decided to render the Polish affectionate noun as “my darling” — retaining the emotional warmth of “synku”, but losing its meaning of filial relationship. The alternatives, such as “my little son”, in which “little” means not only “small”, but also “dear”, would not correspond to the emotional weight of the Polish original. Arguably, what the translator was after here was a natural phrase, the one most likely used by Mother while speaking to her son in English.

Polish has a special “children’s variant” which is used when talking to a child, with a slightly different grammar and different lexicon. For example, the first person singular often replaces the second person, and diminutives occur more frequently than usually. The fragment “...twenty years later” in *Mother Departs* starts with the poet speaking to his elderly mother using the children’s Polish. The use of this particular register is meaningful: the roles have switched, it is the son now who feeds his mother, the mother in her age has become her son’s child: “She is a sick little child” the poet writes (102).

— tak przecież to ty synku

To ja Mamę proszę Cię jedz czerwony barszczyk może przelkniesz jeszcze kilka łyżeczek —
Usta zamknięte a czerwony pożywny barszczyk wycieka bokiem plami brodę wycieram buzię
Zmalałą buzię chusteczką i znów podnoszę łyżeczkę do jej zamkniętych ust. (110)

The fragment has been translated into English as follows:

— yes of course son it’s you

Mum it’s me please have the borscht swallow a few more spoonfuls —
mouth closed and red nutritious borscht drips sideways stains the chin I wipe her face dimin-
ished face with a hanky and bring the spoon up again to her closed mouth. (111)

The affectionate, diminutive “synku” (i.e. “my dear / little son”) disappears here, what is left is the neutral “son”. One could argue that the other two diminutives may be considered as lexicalized items, which have lost their “childish” connotations: “łyżeczka” or “chusteczka” signify different objects than “łyżka” and “chusta”, and do not carry any sense of affection. But the diminutive used in the name of the soup (“barszczyk”) signals that the diction is formatted for a child, similarly as in the word “buzia”, rendered here by its neutral form “face”, whereas in Polish it connotes childlike lexicalization: language either addressed to a child or used by a child. All these diminutives contribute to the overall emotional warmth of the passage, which due to structural differences between the two languages disappears in the English translation.

Diminutives emerge in various places of the poet’s “Gliwice diary”, almost always in connection with the mother. The poet says, for example: “Matka jak ptaszek” (103); the English translation — she is “like a bird” (102) — is semantically accurate, although again with the loss of the diminutive in “bird”, we lose both the emotional tone of the remark and the accuracy of the comparison which juxtaposes a shrunken human being and a tiny, fragile bird. When in the moving passage, written after the mother’s funeral, the poet says that he kisses her hands,

he uses the diminutive form of the noun, “Całuję Twoje rączki” (107), evoking tenderness that cannot be communicated in the English neutral form. The poet often calls his mother “moja staruszko” — another affectionate, diminutive term, carrying emotional meanings, which the English phrase “my old lady” does not convey. These are all unavoidable losses due to structural differences between Polish and English.

The concise, simple diction of Różewicz’s poems may be misleading. His translators often commented on the difficulties of translating this seemingly straightforward poet. Joanna Trzeciak confesses: “Różewicz’s poetry offers myriad challenges to the translator. His poetry after Auschwitz, wherein values, ideals, and even language had to be reinvented, is an anti-poetry: minimalist, powerful and raw. His innovation was to reject every linguistic element that separated poetry from the naked truth. To convey, in the words of Adam Zagajewski, Różewicz’s ‘supernatural simplicity’ has not been simple” (Trzeciak, 21). Adam Czerniawski argues that what the translator needs to do is to resist the temptation to “poeticize Różewicz’s diction”, but “he must not be misled by its simplicity. Różewicz’s poems are very carefully constructed and their balance is easily upset by awkward pedestrian syntax and language which creates an impression of vulgarity” (Czerniawski, 28).

More generally, Jean Boase-Beier, the editor of the series *Arc Visible Poets* in which Różewicz’s poems appeared, defined the aims of the series, by saying that translators involved in the project “assume that the reader of poetry is by definition someone who wants to experience the strange, the unusual, the new, the foreign, someone who delights in the stretching and distortion of language which makes any poetry, translated or not, alive and distinctive” (Różewicz 2001: 7). Bogoczek’s translation of *Mother Departs* is a work of an attentive reader of Różewicz’s writing, who recognizes the significance of the poet’s stylistic and lexical choices, and knows how to retain the variety of disjunctive voices in his anti-poetic work. In her translation Bogoczek does not try to eliminate the distance between the two cultures, between the past and the present day, between the personal and the public, but affirms what is “strange, unusual, new, and foreign”, knowing that foreignness and unfamiliarity, just like loss and deprivation, are parts of the Polish poet’s inner grammar.

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