

**Tokimasa Sekiguchi**, *Eseje nie całkiem polskie* (Kraków: Universitas, 2016), 288 pp.

The Polish reader has received recently a rare gift in the form of Tokimasa Sekiguchi's book of essays entitled, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, *Essays not quite Polish* (*Eseje nie całkiem polskie*); the volume is a collection of the texts that the author has written and presented in diverse places around the world. Tokimasa Sekiguchi—the Polish literature scholar, translator and language teacher—demonstrates in his volume just how he negotiates the borders of the Polish-Japanese cultural exchanges, as well as the relationship's most central concerns.

The book is organized in three thematic constellations: one focused on a whole gamut of literary issues such as readings of single poems or their translations. This set of themes opens the volume and is followed by the single long chapter entitled "Azja nie istnieje" [Asia does not exist]; the volume completes the group of texts which comprise the author's various encounters over the years with Slavists and Polonists on the international stage; the ruminations over his translating the correspondence of Frederic Chopin which came out in 2009; reminiscences of his first visits in Poland and the obstacles Polish presented to him as a student at the beginning stage of learning the language; his formative encounter with Tadeusz Kantor's theater concludes *Eseje nie całkiem polskie*. At first glance, the topical scope reveals its richness giving an impression of an artful mosaic or a *tessera*, if you will; it is through a unique authorial point of view that the volume achieves its coherence as a singular meditation by someone who is at home with two—Polish and Japanese—cultures and does not dramatize any existential in-betweenness nor display anxiety of such a state.

The two perspectives on the world and two distant national cultures offered by the nuanced and critical mind nonetheless do not imply that dichotomy is a dominant tool in the aforementioned chapters. Just the opposite is true. Tokimasa Sekiguchi's optics is quite different for he foregrounds it in his persistent argument against such conceptual categories as Otherization and orientalization and negotiates his perspective so at certain moments it implies or even attains a global outlook. At one point Tokimasa Sekiguchi recalls—for the purpose of self-definition—the figure of Alice and her adventures on the other, enchanting side of the mirror. I find this comparison to be especially apt, for the author's cognitive position embraced in the book and for the negotiating tone of the voice he employs. His stitching of the edges of two different poetic and linguistic fabrics is particularly productive when he demonstrates to his readers the object lessons about the experiential beginning of the poetry by Zbigniew Herbert and Wisława Szymborska. Indeed, Sekiguchi confesses that his readings of Szymborska's original Polish poems naturally coalesce for him with other poems, among which prevail Japanese lyrics. This capacity to amalgamate his literary associations, which he calls in Polish "łączliwość" [connectivity], indicates to what extent a reader so richly endowed can (re)invent a poem's intertextuality and enrich the discourse. He demonstrates this openness of poetry to the outside contexts in his reading of Szymborska's poetry on nature. For example, her poem "Woda" [Water] not only foregrounds her usual rejection of anthropocentrism but also informs a worldview resonant of Buddhism, specifically, of its particular strain articulated by the Japanese Buddhist priest, philosopher and poet Dogen Zenji. This discovery, or to put it differently, an invention of interconnectivity, add a new dimension to her poetry: its special potential to surprise and defamiliarize the often overlooked and banal aspects of nature.

Another case in point is Sekiguchi's contextualization of Herbert's poem "Wóz" [A Car]. The context, of course, is Japanese. In this instance, Sekiguchi's reading turns out to be a journey to the Japanese past, to one of the *tanka* competitions in Japan and to the emperor Hirohito's *tanka* in particular. In doing so, Sekiguchi comes to believe that "Herbert dotarł do głębi *tanki* Hirohita" (p. 19), [Herbert reached the depth of Hirohito's *tanka*]. Not having an insight into both languages (and additionally taken nicely aback by the fact that Hirohito wrote poetry) I simply accept this claim as is. But Sekiguchi's answer to the final question why Herbert called the emperor's railroad train car just a car ["wóz" not "wagon"] is quite substantial and persuasive, as Sekiguchi analyzes this aspect through the lens of untranslatability of the original Japanese word which, being endowed with numerous meanings, cannot be rendered adequately even into Herbertian Polish. And this limit he quite rightly sets as absolute.

I see a connection between this argument and his understanding of the genre of *haiku*. First, he explains what *haiku* is *not* about; a necessary step since the genre so widely practiced is, apparently, misunderstood. *Haiku's* uniqueness—writes Sekiguchi—does not derive from, for example, its formal demands but rather from what constitutes *haiku's* core, that is, from its "pomiar świata" [a measure of the world]. *Haiku* thus is about a contemplative embrace of reality. Ultimately, in his ruminations about how one measures the world Sekiguchi reaches the limits of translatability and enters the sphere of a silent, non-discursive understanding of *haiku*.

The text "Azja nie istnieje" [Asia does not exist] represents the *tour de force* of the volume as it deals with the widespread stereotypes about Asia and Japan; in particular, the text targets the deeply entrenched way in which Asia is perceived by Poles as one totality, as an undifferentiated representation of diverse peoples and their cultures based on the totalized assumptions of superiority; for example, Japan's perception is based on the nation's presumed militant and violent history. The unchangeability of this perception ultimately leads to an ossified essentialism and in order to unravel this state Sekiguchi engages his knowledge of historical sources and a good dose of his own experiential knowledge as well as Edward Said's perspective forged in his *Orientalism*; the latter groundbreaking work seems to inform Sekiguchi's discussion of human geography on the Eurasian continent. One may ask, however, whether Eurasia is not just another totality that one, aware of its political implications, would rather circumvent.

To conclude this review with an observation just how the author's extraordinary language sensitivity and, especially, his written Polish language skills are proved on each page of the volume is not enough. Behind the volume there is hidden another of Sekiguchi's talents that is even more difficult to achieve—his elegant spoken Polish, which occasionally one can hear at international conferences that unite all the Polonists of the world.

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