

# Tread lightly with a firm step:

## the poems of Anna Maria Mickiewicz

The poetry of Anna Maria Mickiewicz was showcased at the Poetry Café in Covent Garden on 30 October 2013 at an event organised by the Poetry Society and Poets Anonymous. On 15 November, her poems featured in the three-day ARTeria event organised by Nowy Czas at the Polish Hearth Club (Ognisko Polskie) in Kensington. The Orlando-based City of Writers honoured her with their Poet of the Year award earlier in the year. Anna Maria Mickiewicz is in demand.

### Tom Wachtel

The first thing you notice about her poems is that they are succinct. In a few short lines, you have an image, a story, an atmosphere, a sense of place, a focus and a meaning. Each poem is a simple path to walk rather than a tortuous route to navigate. It is this simplicity that gives her poetry its power. The second thing you notice is that you always know where you are. Her poems are always localised. You know that you are in Oxford, or at Alexandra Palace, or in the air above Pompeii, or in Regent's Park.

#### Regent's Park

He proposed  
To invisible clouds  
In Regent's Park

And she  
Engulfed in sun-trimmed rose muslin  
Stepped through doors of glass  
One golden step  
Under the sky, now draped  
Across a steel clock  
At the vertices of Victorian towers  
One misty evening

The poem is set in Regent's Park, but it is not about Regent's Park. It is about a moment. Many of Anna's poems are about a moment linked to a physical or emotional setting. In fact, in some cases, the localisation itself is temporal rather than spatial. In the following poem, the date defines the place.

#### December the Thirteenth

Defiantly taut lips  
For how long?  
Steam drifts from forest ponds  
Towards a faraway home  
Smoke obscures the view  
A crumbling world order  
Cries out for help

The voice of "The Subversive" faltered and fell  
Its spirit-scented essence  
Evaporated  
Touched by the winds of history like an old wardrobe  
These yellowed sheets of paper under my fingertips  
Remind me of nothing  
All I feel  
is the harsh cold  
of meaning

Another empire topples, just like that  
Not even sheets of paper any more

Anna Maria Mickiewicz is Polish, and this is a date that every Pole will recognise instantly. If the date means nothing to you, you won't feel the full force of the poem; but the key is there, and Anna leaves you to find it and apply it.

Another thing you quickly discover about Anna's poems is their visual richness. You watch

the steam drift across the pond through the trees, you stand against the Victorian vertices, you look up to see the shimmering sky. You know that the paper is yellowed, that the rose muslin is glinting in the late afternoon sun. Colour and light recur in her works, painting an image as well as the mood of a moment or the emotion of an event. Her poems deal with momentous instants and tumultuous events, but also with simple everyday scenes perceived in a new light, adding depth and vitality to, for example, a simple suburban London street at dawn.

#### Camellias

Deep in thought, camellia streets  
Slumber...

Then wake resoundingly to the fragrance of memories  
Opening their blooms to snatch the first fleeting rays

They wait for Hellenic messengers  
For the aromatic waft of sapphire waves

Day in day out

In the glow of the rim of the London sky

While the locations Anna chooses are frequently familiar and often resonate with history or culture, others are apparently more mundane, or even nondescript. Seaford, for example. Seaford? Where is Seaford? What is Seaford? In this poem, Anna takes us on a journey; on several journeys, in fact. We take a day trip to Seaford on a train, travelling to the end of the world, and then we come home. Once home, we go on another journey, a journey in time and association, perpendicular to the train journey, this time coming home via Bloomsbury.

#### Summer in Seaford

The sun sheds its golden drops.  
The sea devours them instantly.  
The sky shimmers.

The day is snatched from another story.  
We're arriving, here at the end of the line.  
We convince ourselves that infinite space is an illusion...

We walk through the small English town.  
A tiny station, plaster falling unevenly off the wooden beams.  
Before us the Channel gleams threateningly.

In the distance a cliff plunges sharply into the sea.  
No chips, no ice cream, no candy floss.  
Dead jellyfish glitter on the pebbles.  
The day passes lazily by  
A ship silhouetted in grey against its face.

On the beach a couple unfold deckchairs  
Wrinkled skin  
They read the papers.  
They seem unreal  
Postimpressionist faces



For: Monika S. Jakubowska

All nonchalant

We're heading back.  
The cafés and restaurants are closed.  
Who lives here at the end of the world?

Looking through photographs of the scandalous Bloomsbury set,  
An old snapshot.  
A gaunt young woman and a man in deckchairs.  
They are reading the papers.

What if the woman on the beach was a cousin of Virginia Woolf's?  
Who was the man?  
A poet?  
Or one of her scandalous friends?

Multidimensionality is a concept often used loosely, but in Anna's case it is appropriate. Each simple line is a thread, and the threads are woven together, as noted by The City of Writers in their award citation, into a tapestry: *And when asked the question "Why Anna Maria Mickiewicz?" we give a metaphorical answer: in recognition for the tapestry* (<http://faleliterackie.com/the-2013-author-of-the-year-award,294.html>).

Yet hers is not a flat tapestry but a deeply textured one. Not only does she walk us through places and drift us through time, on different physical, cultural, historical and emotional planes, she does so in different languages. Her mother tongue is Polish, but she has lived in California and now London for many years, and also writes in English, sometimes based on a draft in Polish, sometimes not. When a poem starts life in Polish, I often collaborate on the English version. It is tempting to think of these as translations, and that is what they tend to be called to fit traditional schemata and taxonomies. They are more than translations, however, with a more complex provenance. They are cross-cultural cross-linguistic collaborations. Anna creates the soul of the

poem, its structure, tone, mood and form, in Polish. I propose an English body for it. Then we work together to produce the final living being. This dynamic process often moves the poem on from where it was in Polish, which is why it is not simply translation. If you translate the English back into Polish, you may not end up where you started from. Rendering Anna Maria Mickiewicz into English is not the same as rendering Adam Mickiewicz into English. Adam Mickiewicz has had no say in the matter since his death in 1855. Anna Maria Mickiewicz has a lot to say in the matter. I just provide an additional level of native expertise and linguistic options.

To end, a simple poem about a modern airport linked to a place with universally familiar historical associations, where tomato juice is linked to flowing lava and draws our attention to different scales of decline and destruction.

#### Pompeii today

The tomato juice has been withdrawn  
Luxurious airport bazaars  
Lie arid

Getting home was harder once  
But, airborne, my tomato juice arrived  
Warmed by that familiar sun

Desolation now  
Redlessness  
The distant volcanic tremor of the engines  
Alabaster floors glisten like glass  
Waiters absently wait  
For people  
Luggage  
Miles  
Flowing lava

In her work, Anna Maria Mickiewicz paints personal pictures of a moments in her life that we may recognise in ours, always delicately delineated yet sharply focused. She may tread lightly, but she has the firm step of one who knows about earthquakes.