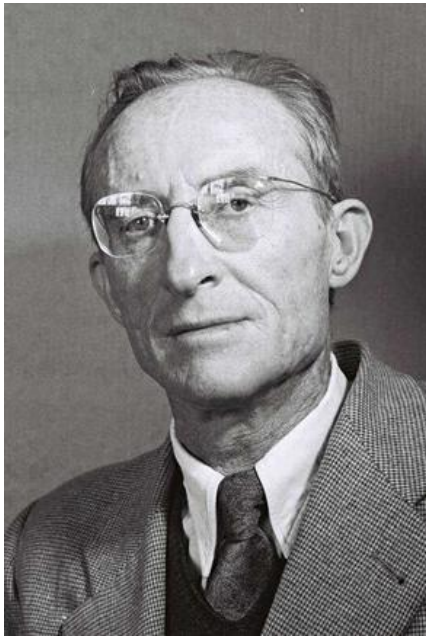


**Two Polish Poets translated by Leonard Kress
NTM 2016**



Jan Kochanowski (1530-1584) is considered the greatest poet of the Polish Renaissance. Kochanowski was deeply influenced by the poetic traditions of Italy and France and introduced them into Polish literature. His philosophical, erotic, and patriotic lyrics raised Polish literature out of its provincialism and brought it into the mainstream of the European Renaissance. His works include *Trifles* (1584), short poems on many subjects; *Treny (Laments, 1580)*, elegies upon the death of his daughter; an epic, *The Standard*; and a tragedy, *The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys* (1578). Of special note is his Polish version of the Psalms.

Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896 –1981) an Israeli writer and politician, was born into a well-known Hasidic family and raised in Lvov (Poland), then part of Austria-Hungary. He began writing poetry in Yiddish and Hebrew and was published by the time he was 20. In 1915 he was drafted into the army to fight in the First World War, but deserted in 1917. He later moved to Warsaw and Berlin, before immigrating to Palestine in 1924. In Israel, Greenberg worked as a journalist, active Zionist labor movement. Later he became more militant, and joined the Irgun. Greenberg was visiting Poland when the Second World War began in 1939, but managed to escape back to Israel. The rest of his family was killed in the Holocaust. Following Israeli independence, he was elected to the first Knesset in 1949. Greenberg was awarded the Israel Prize in 1957 for his contribution to Hebrew literature.



I chose the Kochanowski poems when I was in the middle of translating Adam Mickiewicz's 19th century, Romantic epic, PAN TADEUSZ, which contains numerous references and allusions to Kochanowski's work. I was also working on my own set of poems focusing on a woman mourning the death of her daughter. Kochanowski's elegies for his own daughter became a powerful influence. I came to the Greenberg poem through his connection to Poland and was deeply moved by his distinctly tragic-pastoral vision of the Polish countryside after the Holocaust. The poems from *Treny (Laments)* appeared in *Artful Doge* and *JMWW*. My translation of *Under the Teeth of Their Plow* (Greenberg) is unpublished.

—Leonard Kress, translator

Jan Kochanowski (1530 -1584)
Translated from Polish by Leonard Kress

TRENY #7 (Lament on the Death of his Daughter, Urszula)

Hangers draped with clothes you'll never wear;
they miss the warm touch of your body. Moths
will soon begin to feed upon that cloth;
what rhetoric will persuade me now to clear
your closet out? The iron sleeps beside
the starch, ribbons remain wrinkled and knotted
under the golden clasp...Flowers on your dress, potted
in the fabric of our grief, bloom since you died.

Useless flowered garments, they should be boxed
and given to the poor. I fear we've lost
too much in boxing you instead, this crate
shipped off to Hades, its cargo—my fate.
For I've just sealed this oak chest's heavy lid,
forever shutting away the dowry and the bride.

TRENY #5

Like a tiny olive tree
 in some vast orchard
Following the path
 of its mother upward
Not yet with branch or leaf
 barely a sprouted shoot
That some zealous gardener
 might clip to uproot
Prickly thorns
 or a dense patch of nettle—
Soon it will drop
 losing the struggle
Limp by the foot
 of its beloved mother.
And so my *Ula*
 my own sweet daughter

How did you get so tangled up
 in Persephone's anger and grief
That you fell at our feet
 like some pruned leaf?

TRENY #6

My Slavic Sappho, you stood to inherit
Not only *Czarnolas* with its great linden
But my craft as well as my lute...

But what am I saying—
Barely two, chatterbox by day
Singer of your own songs all night...

Songs I could never get enough of,
Songs for which I paid too dearly,
Songs like a village bride sings,

Kissing her mother before vows:

Oh mother farewell, I can no long help
Or in this house dwell, no longer sit

At your gracious table...
Take back your keys, for now I am able
To leave my beloved parents forever.

TRENY #14

If only the gate where Orpheus descended
to the underworld were left unattended,
like him I'd try to bring my beloved back.
If I could find that path and ford that river,
calming the ferryman's wrath, rushed along
with other pale shades, to my *Urszula*, lost
amid the cypress glades. And if, when I go,
I bring my lute and knock at the chamber

of the dread Pluto--perhaps my plaintive suit
might persuade him to let her go--too soon
a ghost, to halt at once this uncontested grief.
I know he won't relinquish her for good,
but perhaps a strong distaste for unripe fruit
might convince--it needs more time to ripen.

Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896 –1981)

Translated from Hebrew by Leonard Kress

UNDER THE TEETH OF THEIR PLOW

The snows have melted again, and once again
murderers are farmers, heading out to plow their fields,
fields of graves. And if by chance, turning over the soil
the plow's teeth snag, caught on a crop of corpses,
the farmer takes it all in stride--his smile
reveals his pride in his own handiwork.

Spring again. Bulbs and lilacs and chirruping
birds. Lazy cows at rest by flowing waters.
No more wandering Jews, beards and curls.
No more taverns, prayer-shawls and fringes.
No more tinkers or tailors or grocers.
No more workshops or sweatshops.
No more on the trains and trams, in market squares,
no more in synagogues. All under the teeth
of the plow--the farmer is blessed with abundance.

But springtime is nothing compared to summer,
swollen and plump and ripe to the core.
The wild roadside trees bloom like those
cultivated in the garden, pruned, espaliered,
their roots nourished, their fruit redder than ever--
now that the Jews are no more.

They had no bells with which to summon God.
Blessed are the churches and their high towers
that toll across the plains, telling the coming
of spring, of new light, new breath, new scent,
ringing out their praises, passing from town
to town, passing over orchard and meadow and grove,
until nothing is left unpassed, except the roofs of Jews.

Blessed are the bells on high, blessed the God
who blesses these farmers whose plows catch and snag
on Jews plowed under, on Jews buried in the pasture,

the forest, by the banks of still-flowing rivers
or in them. Or cast by the side of the road.
And praise the baby Jesus with all these bells.

About the translator:



Leonard Kress grew up in Philadelphia. He studied at Temple University, Columbia University, and the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland (Polish literature and folklore.) Kress has published seven poetry collections, most recently *Braids & Other Sestinas*, *Living in the Candy Store*, as well as a translation of the 19th century Polish Romantic epic, *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz. He teaches religion and philosophy at Owens College in Ohio.