

Ewa Kujawska-Lis

Clarification as the text killer : analysis of selected Polish translations of Edgar Allan Poe's "The fall of the house of usher"

Acta Neophilologica 12, 41-54

2010

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Ewa Kujawska-Lis

Katedra Filologii Angielskiej

Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie

CLARIFICATION AS THE TEXT KILLER. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POLISH TRANSLATIONS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER*

Key words: literary translation, clarification, indefinite, interpretation, Edgar Allan Poe

Clarification is one of the twelve textual phenomena enumerated by Antoine Berman as “deforming tendencies”¹. It “concerns the level of ‘clarity’ perceptible in words and their meanings” [Berman 1985, 2003: 289]. The scholar does not define this tendency precisely, but provides its descriptive evaluation: “Where the original has no problem moving in the *indefinite*, our literary language tends to impose the definite” [Berman 1985, 2003: 289]. This is often taken for granted both by translators and translation scholars themselves, who actually claim that “the translation should be a little clearer than the original” [Chapiro cited by Meschonnic, quoted by Berman 1985, 2003: 289]. It is an inherent part of the process of translation, which may stem from a number of factors: grammatical differences between languages, diversity of cultural backgrounds in which the texts are anchored, or dissimilar semantic fields of particular lexical items, to name just the most obvious ones. To illustrate what clarification may involve, Berman lists: the movement from polysemy to monosemy and paraphrastic, that is explicative, translation [Berman 1985, 2003: 290]. These solutions are often rooted in the objective impossibility of expressing some idea in a different language owing to a lack of grammatical or lexical means. However, translators also resort

¹ The other tendencies include: rationalization, expansion, ennoblement and popularization, qualitative impoverishment, quantitative impoverishment, the destruction of rhythms, the destruction of underlying networks of signification, the destruction of linguistic patterning, the destruction of vernacular networks or their exotization, the destruction of expressions and idioms, the effacement of the superimposition of language [Berman 1985, 2003: 288].

to clarification when they are perfectly able to render the original ‘indefinite’, and then the deformation of the original stems merely from their lexical choices.

This article seeks to exemplify in what way clarification may influence the mood and atmosphere of a literary work, impacting on its interpretation. It will be based on two Polish translations of one of the most famous short stories by American author Edgar Allan Poe *The Fall of the House of Usher*². Irrespective of its generic status, whether it is a ‘grotesque’, ‘arabesque’ story (as might be suggested by the title of the collection of stories in which it was included) or a story with Gothic elements³, it is definitely permeated with some degree of uncertainty, concerning the semantic and linguistic ‘indefinite’. Superficially: “The tale offers an anxiety-ridden narrator-protagonist, a haunted mansion tenanted by haunted siblings – who eventually come to ‘haunt’ the storyteller” [Fisher 2004: 88]. Yet its truly complex nature resulted in numerous disagreements amongst scholars as to its exact meaning [Sova 2007: 68] as well as generic status. It has been designated by Mabbott as one of “Poe’s earlier tales of wonder” owing to the fact that “wonders do seem to infiltrate what the narrator relates” [Fisher 2008: 77], as well as a “terror tale” with “subtle but firm psychological underpinnings” [Fisher 2008: 80]. The terrors, unrest and fears do not stem merely from the literal haunted mansion, but also from the depiction of the haunted mind. Since the story dramatizes the narrator’s physical and emotional instability, it “naturally makes for a tale of mystery and sensation” [Fisher 2008: 81]. Obviously then, the combination of the enumerated elements which can be found in this literary piece, implies the lack of specificity of narration. It is the story which perfectly exemplifies Poe’s belief that “there is no single meaning within a particular poem or tale” [quoted in Fisher 2008: 31].

Set in a remote part of a country, in a decaying and desolate mansion, the story is enveloped in an ever thickening atmosphere of uncertainty and mystery

² For the sake of clarity, all quotations from the original story will be marked by its author’s surname and an appropriate page number, whereas the translations by the initials of the respective translator, that is Bolesław Leśmian [BL] and Stanisław Wyrzykowski [SW] and the page number. Full bibliographical data is provided in the Bibliography section. All emphasis added in the quotations is mine. Poe’s story has been translated into Polish several times. This analysis is based on the first two renditions since in these two texts clarification is noticeable most extensively.

³ A detailed analysis of the affinities of this story with the Gothic convention, as well as a critical discussion of other scholars’ attitudes to it as ‘grotesque’ and ‘arabesque’, may be found in Studniarz [2003]. Fisher emphasizes that themes of Gothicism embracing “decaying architecture or bleak landscapes and the stereotypical plot of vicious pursuit of innocence for purpose of lust, money or power, often related with family identity involving physically or emotionally debilitated character, gender issues, sexuality, and perhaps [...] even racial issues” were recurrent in Poe’s fiction [Fisher 2008: 56], and some of them are clearly evident at work in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the setting being the most obvious one. In particular, this scholar points to such Gothic elements in the story as: “bewildering corridors, eerie chambers, a terrifying poem [...], a picture that is animated in its inanimation, a large serving out of supernaturalism or seeming supernaturalism, mystifying illness of a perishing frail one, distorted thought and sense, perceptions that disturb Usher and the narrator, live burial and the horrifying return of the interred, the deaths of both Ushers siblings, collapse of the mansion, and the lasting effects of these horrors upon the narrator” [Fisher 2004: 88–89].

both through its style of narration, scenery and events [Studniarz 2003: 162]. Its narrator arrives at the eponymous House to find his long-time friend, Roderick Usher, in a state of “nervous agitation” [Poe 52] accompanied by an acuteness of senses, while his sister, Madeline, is suffering from an unidentified illness, with various symptoms generally opposite to those of her brother’s: “A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character” [Poe 55]. One night, lady Madeline, believed to be dead, is entombed by the narrator and her brother, only to return, having overcome all the physical obstacles (screwed up coffin, iron door securely locked), and falls into her brother’s arms. The siblings die, whereas the narrator, panic-stricken, escapes from the house and witnesses its crumbling into the waters of the nearby tarn. The plot, simple as it may superficially seem, involves many uncertainties and contradictions⁴. The reader is not sure as to what actually happened. Initially he is led to believe that the lady actually died, but her reappearance destroys that notion (unless she was miraculously resurrected from her tomb). In more rational terms, it is plausible that lady Madeline fell into one of her cataleptic states, and thus was entombed, whether knowingly or not by her brother. According to Fisher, Madeline epitomizes a vampire: “she is a vampire figure adroitly refashioned by Poe to symbolize psycho-physical forces that relate her to Roderick, to the house and to the narrator” [Fisher 2008: 79]. As a vampire she exists in a state between life and death, in the story “she first appears remote and shadowy as she crosses Roderick’s apartment [...]; later, in her coffin, she looks almost alive” [Fisher 2008: 81].

Yet, given the extreme subjectivity of narration⁵, and the constant hints that the narrator is becoming influenced by the atmosphere of the premises and the behaviour of his host, one might be led to consider a different interpretation, where “the only reality presented in the story is the world of Usher’s delirious

⁴ Studniarz discusses these contradictions at length, pointing out that if Roderick knew his sister was not dead and only wanted to get rid of her, the placing of her within the premises was ineffective; moreover, all the precautions taken by him (securing the lid of the coffin and the iron door to the crypt) might suggest that he expected Madeline’s reappearance and yet, given his excessive sense of hearing, he exposed himself to the sounds of her struggle to return to the world of the living [Studniarz 2003: 163]. Also Fisher points to a contradiction between the heroine’s “debilitated appearance and her eventual feats of great physical strength” [Fisher 2008: 79]. The scholar goes on to ask numerous questions: “How could she escape from a sealed coffin? How could she open the door to her death chamber, a door so heavy and warped that even Roderick and the narrator could not move it without difficulty – albeit they may not be in prime physical condition? How can she then ascend from the sub-cellar to an upper floor to confront Roderick, which is another seemingly impossible feat for one so ill and weak, who has been left for dead?” [Fisher 2008: 79], which finally lead him to the conclusion that Madeline was a vampire.

⁵ It has been suggested that “the story is told from the point of view of the rational and objective narrator, who tries valiantly to ascribe logical causes for the seemingly supernatural occurrences that take place in the house. [...] but explaining through the use of logic becomes increasingly difficult as the story progresses and the narrator begins to doubt his own perceptions” [Sova 2007: 69]. However, the unstable condition of the narrator’s mind is established at the very beginning of the story and his narrative can hardly be objective as it focuses on his imposed interpretation of the events.

imagination, into which is drawn unwillingly also the narrator. [...] he adopts Usher's point of view, yields to his suggestive fantasies, shares his mad delusions, and his relation, told in retrospect, reflects his own insanity" [Studniarz 2003: 169]. Thus the story is a portrayal of the disintegration of the mind, where not only the siblings appear to be unstable, but "the narrator seems similarly debilitated" [Fisher 2008: 78]. Consistently with creating such a multiplicity of possible interpretations, the language of the story refrains from being very explicit and often operates within the 'indefinite'.

The lack of specificity in Poe's language concerns various elements of the text, but for the sake of this analysis it will be grouped around three major issues: the description of the premises, the references to Roderick and to lady Madeline. The presentation of the fictional space is to a large extent metaphorical and polysemous and the descriptions of physical phenomena often at the same time refer to the eponymous family and the mental condition of the narrator. Poe focuses on mood-invested space, where the terror is achieved by the delineation of space "with the atmospheric qualities of the unexpected, the inexplicable, the uncanny" [Hoffman 1979]. In the opening scene of the story, the narrator describes the landscape through which he rides as "a singularly dreary tract of country" [Poe 51]. As is emphasized by critics, this "provides a setting at once realistic and fantastic. This tract could exist anywhere, and here it becomes a splendid metaphor for the narrator-protagonist's own mind/self" [Fisher 2008: 78]. That employed adjective 'dreary' customarily refers to something causing "sadness or gloom" or is "dull and boring" [Webster's 1989: 434]. Thus the translator has a choice between two possibilities: either the surroundings are depressing or boring. It seems that in view of succeeding events and the entire atmosphere enshrouding the household and its occupants, as well as a metaphorical level concerning the mindset of the narrator, the former meaning should be predominant. The two Polish translations chose diverse solutions: 'ponura' [gloomy/grim/dreary] [BL 319] and 'zamarła' [lifeless] [SW 132]. It is evident that Wyrzykowski clarifies the meaning of the adjective and, by introducing a lexical item which bears semantic connections with the Polish verb 'umrzeć' [die], hints in the first sentence at the possibility of death that was unintended in the original. This foreshadowing-like approach is continued in the depiction of the building whose "bleak walls" [Poe 51] are turned into "żałobne mury" [SW 132], that is 'mournful walls', whose "vacant eye-like windows" [Poe 51] are "zgasłym podobne źrenicom" [SW 132], thus 'burnt out/ extinguished/dull/subdued pupils' but also 'dead pupils', while "the decayed trees" [Poe 51] within the range of vision are turned into "obumarłe drzewa" [SW 132], that is specifically 'dead trees'. Although it is emphasized by critics that "the vegetation around the house is dead" [Sova 2007: 69], this notion stems from the interpretation of the description rather than from its lexical level. In each case when Poe employs adjectives which predominately suggest the gloominess of the surroundings, the Polish text imposes vocabulary items which inevitably refer to death, thus what was perhaps only hinted at by the indefiniteness of the

original expressions dominates in the translation. The target reader from the very commencement of the narrative must be expecting some events leading to death so forcefully imposed through the physical environment, which obviously heavily influences the suspense created in the original which grows gradually.

If one considers the metaphorical level of the description, the influence of the clarification is even more devastating. The family residence is inextricably bound with the Usher family, as is established within the text itself⁶. Thus referring to it as 'mournful' immediately points to demise in the family. Further the mansion windows metaphorically stand for Roderick's eyes. Consequently, describing them by means of an item whose range of meanings includes 'dead', implies the death of the master of the House. This notion is later strengthened because Wyrzykowski terms Roderick 'the last of the Ushers' – "ostatniego z Usherów" [SW 139], whereas in the original he is merely "the master of the House of Usher" [Poe 56]. Finally, the vision of death pervading the premises is intensified by 'dead trunks of trees', which may be treated as metaphorically representing family members, consistent with the genealogical tree script. Thus the family is doomed to die out, just as the trees surrounding its mansion are similarly fated. Consequently, the accumulation of lexis connected with death as a result of clarification acts as a foreshadowing of the events which is much more explicit than in the original. The consistency with which Wyrzykowski applies lexical clarification indicates that it is used quite consciously, unfortunately contradicting the original level of vagueness intended in the text. It is definitely true that the atmosphere of death envelops the mansion and the family, yet this is only suggested rather than spelled out.

In respective examples Leśmian attempts to interpret the expressions by refraining from any specific references to death: "mury chłodem przesycone" [walls permeated with coldness] [BL 319], "okna, podobne do oczu, które patrząc nie widzą" [windows resembling eyes which cannot see although they look] [BL 319] and "spróchniałe drzewa" [rotten/decayed trees] [BL 319]. Obviously his choices also involve clarification, although within a completely different semantic field. In this translation it is not immediately possible to connect some of the expressions used for the Usher family. For instance, there is not much coldness in the behaviour of Roderick or in the house itself. What is emphasized about the atmosphere of the place, consistent with the adjective 'bleak', is its gloom: "I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" [Poe 53]. As the narrator remembers, Roderick "greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality [...] A glance, however, at his countenance, convinced me of

⁶ This relationship is formulated in the following manner: "it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher" – an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion" [Poe 52].

his perfect sincerity” [Poe 54]. The adjective used to describe the trees is generally limited in its usage to the physical world and can be hardly applied to human beings even metaphorically, whereas ‘decayed’ is often applicable to the social order and by implication can refer to the family structure. In this translation, then, clarification limits the metaphorical decoding of the text, yet does not influence the suspense.

Yet the associations with ‘mourning’ are also not absent in Leśmian’s translation, though they involve different lexical items than in the case of Wyrzykowski’s text. If the latter associates this quality with the house itself, the former does so with the lake. Poe indeed does not contribute to easing the task of the translator. The ‘indefinite’ operates in the text on many levels, such as the application of polysemous adjectives whose interpretations are extremely difficult. For instance, he describes the tarn adjacent to the mansion as “black and lurid [...] that lay in unruffled luster” [Poe 51]. ‘Lurid’ has many meanings ranging from “lighted or shining with an unnatural, fiery glow”, through “glaringly vivid or sensational”, “gruesome; horrible, revolting”, “terrible in fiery intensity, fierce passion, or wild restraint” to “wan, pallid, or ghastly in hue” [Webster’s 1989: 854]. Similarly, ‘luster’ may refer to a number of states and objects, yet its primary semantic field embraces the quality of shining by reflecting light [Webster’s 1989: 854]. This placement of two lexical items which share the quality of ‘dim shining’ may suggest that Poe wanted to attribute this specific feature to the tarn, which is quite plausible in consideration of the fact that further in the story the tarn is qualified as “dim” [Poe 55], while at its end there is an implicit reference to the dim light emanating from it “But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapour, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion”, which may have had “their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn” [Poe 63]. The clarification of ‘lurid’ as “żałobny” [mournful] [BL 320] precludes any such interconnectedness. The choice of the translator may have been governed by the adjective ‘black’ which also describes the tarn and so initiates the mourning script, absent in the original.

The tarn itself is one of the key elements in providing a leitmotif for the story, that is the notion of doubling⁷. The house is reflected in its waters, yet initially it is only a physical reflection that is alluded to, which is quite natural. Obviously the atmosphere is gloomy, yet the narrator sees merely “the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows” [Poe 51], which can be rationally explained. The noun ‘images’ in itself does not imply any unnaturalness and is commonly used in such expressions as ‘mirror image’. It is the narrator who becomes “unnerved” and who needs to “grapple with the shadowy fancies” [Poe 51], which signifies that at the outset of the story, his mind, also, is unbalanced. Leśmian interprets the unmarked

⁷ The recurring motifs of doubling and mirroring are discussed in more detail by Studniarz [2003].

expression 'inverted images' within the disturbed frame of mind of the narrator: "odwrócone widma" [inverted specters/apparitions] [BL 320]. This tendency is further repeated: "uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool" [Poe 52] is clarified as "oczy odwrócone od widm stawu" [eyes turned from the specters/apparitions of the tarn] [BL 322]. Such a solution reinforces the before only implicitly hinted at mental condition of the narrator and is also contributive to the weakening of the suspense as the ghostly atmosphere is considerably strengthened. Wyrzykowski, on the contrary, provides equivalents which may be treated as literal in this context: "obrazy" [pictures/images] [SW 133] and "odbicie w wodzie" [reflection in the water] [SW 134]. Consequently, both translations clarify the opening of the story, though in different parts of the text (Wyrzykowski in the depiction of the house and trees, whereas Leśmian in the references to the images reflected by the tarn) in such a way that it much more forcefully cultivates the atmosphere of death and insanity than is actually achieved in the original.

Another group of lexical items which become much more explicit in the translations is connected with the lexis referring to Roderick Usher. Obviously, the reader realizes that he is a human being, yet the notion of his inhumanity is established through the application of expressions which work within the 'indefinite'. In the description of Roderick and the change that he underwent, the narrator at least on three occasions refrains from straightforwardly referring to him as a human being. First, he claims that: "It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood" [Poe 54]. Quite clearly Poe uses ellipsis in the expression 'human being'. Interestingly, often ellipsis is indeed used, yet it is the other part of the phrase that gets omitted: 'a human' stands for 'a human being'. Consequently, the author consciously draws the reader's attention to a more indefinite status of Roderick. 'A being' is obviously a person, but also refers to any living creature which is difficult to classify. This notion of uncertainty as to the status of Roderick is reinforced when the narrator uses a pronoun to refer to him: "I doubted to whom I spoke" [Poe 54], and finally when he finds it difficult to actually detect human traces in him: "I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity" [Poe 54]. The accumulation of such ways of speaking of Roderick results in an eerie feeling that there must be something missing in him; something of a typically human trace. Yet the reader is left with no answer as to what that might be. The atmosphere of utter mystery is definitely created. It is only when one interprets the story along the line of Roderick knowingly entombing his own sister alive that one may conclude that the indefinite status of the hero perhaps serves to hint at his extreme callousness.

Leśmian in his translation chooses to use clarifying expressions which destroy the uncanny feeling aroused in the original. He substitutes an unambiguous noun for the elliptical one: "tożsamość człowieka" [identity of the man/person/human] [BL 324]. This solution might have been forced on the translator due to the

lack in Polish of a compound noun that might be used in an elliptical form as in English. All the Polish expressions that are equivalent to ‘a human being’ are one word nouns. Yet, the translator might have used the noun ‘istota’ [being] which would ideally reflect the original lack of linguistic, and what follows, semantic specificity. Similarly, the pronoun referring to Roderick is also clarified by means of the same specific noun: “żem nie poznawał człowieka, z którym mówię” [I did not recognize the man with whom I spoke] [BL 324]. As a result there is nothing obscure about the hero. Obviously he is changed both physically and mentally in comparison with the narrator’s memories of him, but his humanity is definitely established. Finally, in the third example, the narrator, having regarded the change in the appearance of his friend, states: “nie mogłem [...] znaleźć w tej dziwnej gmatwaninie arabeskowej nic pokrewnego zwykłej istocie ludzkiej” [I could not find in this strange Arabesque entanglement anything akin to an ordinary human being] [BL 324–325]. Again the indefinite ‘humanity’ which may be variously interpreted is narrowed to a specific meaning. Also, further on in the text the same tendency to substitute a specific noun for a pronoun is evident. When discussing the influence of the surrounding environment on his family and himself, Roderick comments that it was “the sentience of all vegetable things [...] which made him what I now saw him” [Poe 61]. In the Polish translation, once more it is the humanity of Roderick that is emphasized as the noun ‘person’ is used: “uczynił żeń człowieka takiego, jakiego mam obecnie przed oczami” [made him a person which I now have before my eyes] [BL 332].

Consequently, instead of a mysterious, non-specific being, the Polish reader is confronted unmistakably with a human being, yet one who is also associated with a dead man. Leśmian in his translation underlines the connection of Roderick with a corpse through the choice of vocabulary used in the description of the hero’s appearance. His large, liquid eye (Poe 54) is turned into ‘highly open’ and ‘misty’ – “wysoko rozwarłe” and “omglone” [BL 324], which creates associations with eyes opened as a result of a sudden surprise or a shock at the moment of death. The original adjectives are not marked in such a way.

That clarification was excessively applied in Leśmian’s translation and could be avoided entirely is proved by the choices of the other translator. In respective examples Wyrzykowski eschews any explicit appellation that would immediately term Roderick a human. In the relevant sentences he uses: the noun ‘being’ – “W tej wybladłej istocie” [in this pale being] [SW 136], the pronoun ‘whom’ – “jąłem powątpiewać do kogo mówię” [I started to doubt to whom I spoke] [SW 137], the noun ‘humanity’ – “którego arabeskowości żadną miarą nie można było pogodzić z myślą o zwykłym człowieczeństwie” [in whose arabesque-like [appearance] could by no means be negotiated with a notion of humanity] [SW 137], and the pronoun ‘this’ – “z niego samego zaś uczyniło to, czym był i jest obecnie” [made of him this what [he] was and what [he] is now] [SW 143]. Additionally, the pronoun ‘he’ is only implied. Thus in each case the translator achieves the same level of vagueness as in the original. The conclusion

is inescapable: it is often a purely subjective decision by a translator to clarify the text and it may result from the lack of understanding of the atmosphere the original text is attempting to convey.

The third group of notions in the story, which become evidently deformed by clarification, is connected with expressions alluding to lady Madeline and, specifically, her death. Poe balances the vocabulary referring to death explicitly and implicitly, thus leaving some room for the possibility of a rational explanation of her reappearance from the entombment. Fisher actually terms Poe's diction regarding Madeline as "delightfully ambiguous, and for good artistic purpose" [Fisher 2008: 79]. The scholar mentions the expression "the evidently approaching dissolution" [Poe 55], yet this combination of ambiguity and clarity is even more perceptible once Madeline is apparently dead. Thus, first Roderick informs the narrator that "the lady Madeline was no more" [Poe 61]. Obviously, the implied meaning is that she died; still, no such explicit information is provided. The translators deal with this expression in diverse ways. Leśmian translates almost literally "lady Magdalena już istnieć przestała" [lady Madeline already ceased to exist/to be] [BL 332]. It must be admitted that the sentence sounds very awkward in Polish; yet, it is as indefinite as the original one. Wyrzykowski, on the other hand, clarifies it and so Roderick informs his friend specifically "about lady Madeline's death" – "o zgonie lady Madeline" [SW 144]. If the reader accepts the interpretation "that Lady Madeline had not really died, but merely fallen into one of her cataleptic states" and that the actions of her brother were "a desperate and rash attempt to get rid of the sister" [Studniarz 2003: 162–163], then Roderick who utters the words such as 'death' must be seen as extremely calculating and trying to convince the narrator that his sister died. Uttering the vague expression 'she was no more', he may be more likely seen as a madman unable to evaluate the situation properly.

Further, however, the narrator recalls the explanation provided by Roderick as to his wish to put the body for a fortnight into a vault in the mansion, and then he uses very specific lexis, all of which fall within the semantic field of 'death': "her corpse", "final interment" and "malady of the deceased" [Poe 61]. This would imply that now the narrator intends to create the impression that the woman did die. Both translations follow this level of specificity and provide literal equivalents of the key expressions: "zwłoki" [corpse], "pogrzeb" [funeral] and "zmarła" [deceased] [BL 332–333, SW 144]. However, once the narrator and Roderick step down to the vault to arrange "the temporary entombment" [Poe 61], the level of clarity in the vocabulary decreases. It is "the body" [Poe 61] which was put into the coffin rather than a corpse and then it is referred to by means of the pronoun 'it': "we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it" [Poe 61]. Further, once their "mournful burden" [Poe 62] was deposited, the two men decided to look inside the unscrewed coffin. At this point, the avoidance of any specific vocabulary connected with death is most clearly perceptible, since they "looked upon the face of the tenant" [Poe 62]. The mastery of the writer in

creating suspense is evident. Obviously, metaphorically ‘tenant’ may be used in this context and refer to anybody or rather any body placed within the coffin. Yet, the noun ‘tenant’ creates immediate associations with an occupant or inhabitant who actually dwells or lives in a given place. Hence, the certainty as to the actual condition of lady Madeline is suspended. The narrator again uses the word “deceased” immediately afterwards, when he provides Roderick’s explanation of the striking physical similarity between himself and his sister [Poe 62], yet the seeds of doubt have been sewn.

These doubts are even further reinforced when the narrator discusses his impressions upon seeing Madeline: “The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death” [Poe 62]. The disease, which is characterized not only by such symptoms as: the rigidity of the body, the lack of responsiveness and remaining in the same position when moved, but also the slowing down of bodily functions, including breathing, is clearly emphasized. Since a cataleptic fit may be mistakenly taken for demise, it evokes the notion of being buried alive, which is a motif utilized in literature. Moreover, the blush on the woman’s face strengthens such a notion, as death is linked with paleness and cadaverousness. Again the narrator modifies his utterance by adding ‘in death’, as if trying to impress such an interpretation of Madeline’s condition. Yet, unmistakably, through lexical items which lack specificity with regard to the notion of death, a possibility of two dissimilar interpretations of the events is created.

Both translations fail to achieve such a duplicity pertaining to the scene in the crypt. In both cases this stems from excessive clarification. In Leśmian’s translation, initially the level of the indefinite is retained as he provides a one-to-one equivalent of ‘the body’: “zawarliśmy ciało w trumnie” [we put the body in the coffin] [BL 333]. Yet any impression that it might have been the body of a living person is immediately afterwards utterly destroyed as the pronoun ‘it’ becomes clarified as ‘corpse’: “Podziemie, w którym złożyliśmy zwłoki” [the basement/vault in which we placed the corpse] [BL 333]. In this case the use of the pronoun in the Polish text, which would refer to the previously used noun ‘body’ would have allowed it to achieve the ambiguity required. Yet the most striking case of clarification is translating ‘the face of the tenant’ as ‘the face of the corpse’: “zajrzeliśmy w twarz trupa” [BL 333]. The metaphor adding to the feeling of uncertainty is substituted with an unambiguous expression, which does not leave much room for doubts. The use of alliteration actually reinforces its meaning drawing the reader’s attention to this phrase. It must be stressed that in this particular case the metaphorical expression applied by Poe is exceptionally difficult to translate as literal equivalents of the noun ‘tenant’ are so strongly marked as referring to a person occupying some dwelling, that in fact the achieved phrase might sound ridiculous or incomprehensible. Yet a different form of

clarification might just do the trick. Clarifying 'the face of the tenant' as 'the face of lady Madeline' might add to the ambiguity of the scene.

In Wyrzykowski's translation clarification is evident from the beginning of the utterance, as he translates 'the body' as 'the corpse': "Złożywszy zwłoki do trumny" [having placed the corpse in the coffin] [SW 144]. Although he further uses the pronoun 'it' to refer to the established antecedent in two consecutive sentences, the forcefulness of the opening expression cannot be obliterated. Unsurprisingly, the narrator and Roderick desired to look at 'the face of the dead/deceased': "przyjrzeć się obliczu zmarłej" [SW 145], which word is further repeated in the paragraph as an equivalent of the deceased. This translator consistently uses three lexical items: "zgon" [death], "zwłoki" [corpse] and "zmarła" [dead/deceased] from the moment Roderick informs the narrator about the condition of his sister till she is locked in the vault and they return to the upper floors of the mansion. Consequently, the notion that she actually died is impressed upon the reader. This results in a greater surprise when lady Madeline then appears at the door of the narrator's room. Potentially, it might be treated as an advantage because the reader is totally taken by surprise, since in this translation from the beginning of the story various forms of clarifications consistently introduce the notion of death. So the reappearance of the heroine comes as a shock. Yet that is not the intention in the original, where the suspense is increasing gradually, but at the same time the reader is subtly prepared for what is to come through the ambivalence of the scene in the vault. Moreover, the consistent use of vocabulary referring explicitly to lady Madeline's death also makes the narrator acquire more deceptive qualities in comparison with the original. If one interprets the original narrator as one who was so much under the influence of the atmosphere of the place and the character of his friend that he himself was becoming deluded, in the Polish translation he seems to be intent on convincing the reader that the woman was actually dead as if trying to justify his deed.

Clarification then to a large extent may influence the range of interpretative possibilities in the case of such a complex work as Poe's story. Not only may it ruin suspense, but also modify the stance of the narrator, equipping him with extra qualities. It may also influence the consistency of the fictional world. Lady Madeline is placed within the coffin and locked in a vault, alluded to as "the donjon" [Poe 62], to emphasize the difficulty of forcing oneself free from it. Leśmian clarifies this noun as 'tomb', since he uses the word "grobowiec" [BL 335], whereas Wyrzykowski resigns from the underlying meaning of stronghold encoded in it and provides an equivalent referring simply to the underground vault – "podziemie" [SW 146]. Both solutions are acceptable although they do compromise in part the meaning of the original expression. Yet at the moment of his most extreme despair, Roderick shouts: "We have put her living in the tomb!" [Poe 66], where obviously the noun stands for entombment in the vault. Unfortunately Leśmian clarifies this expression by using a hyponym: "Pogrzebaliśmy ją żywcem w mogile!" [We have put her alive in the grave!]

[BL 340]. It might seem a proper equivalent but for the fact that the Polish noun 'mogiła' specifically means a grave in the ground, either a pit dug out to place the body in, or a mound of ground piled over the grave. Thus it is an earthen grave, which can hardly be used within the context of this story. Wyrzykowski's text is also not free from such errors. In his letter to the narrator, Roderick describes himself as having an "acute bodily illness" [Poe 52]. This emphasizes the severity and intensity of the condition. It may foreshadow that the illness may not last long due to its quick progress. In the case of Roderick, it may also imply the acuteness of the senses from which he actually suffers. All of the time that the narrator spends with Roderick, his host is physically active, even hyperactive at times. Yet in the Polish translation it is claimed that his problem is "obłożna choroba ciała" [SW 133], that is 'a prostrating illness'. In other words, the adjective used specifically refers to an illness which results in making the person bedridden. Obviously, there is no indication whatsoever that Roderick is confined to bed. Since the description contradicts the reality, the conclusion might be that Roderick lied in his letter, which obviously is not true in the original.

As the foregoing analysis has attempted to indicate, clarification, although applied so copiously by translators, who often believe that they are justified in using it because of the difficulties inherent in translation, may be a deadly tool if implemented without a careful exegesis of the text. Excessive clarification involving using more specific lexical items than those employed in the original may influence all the levels of the work. It may contribute to destroying its atmosphere and distorting its fictional reality both by making it internally inconsistent and modifying the features of the characters and the narrator. Obviously, this translating technique is unavoidable when the systemic differences between languages are involved. This may be exemplified by the need to specify gender in languages which conjugate verbs. For instance, if in English the story is narrated in the first person and the past tense is consistently used, the reader may be baffled as to the gender of the speaker, as is the case with *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It is only assumed initially that the narrator is male, and made obvious only when he uses such expressions as "boyhood" or "as boys" [Poe 52]. In Polish such a situation is impossible, as the ending of the verb will immediately specify whether the narrator is male or female, and so from the start the reader knows that the narrator of the story is male. Such cases are independent of the translator. Yet, it seems that often clarification involves a choice of vocabulary when the translator purposely substitutes a more definite word than the one which appeared in the original, although an equivalent of a similar level of indeterminacy might actually be used. Such a solution will always bear some consequences for a literary work.

In the case of *The Fall of the House of Usher* this deforming tendency is clearly seen at work. Both Polish texts do not introduce the gradual progress of the atmosphere of uncertainty. Both immediately introduce references to death, which is even evident in the Polish title through the employment of the noun

“zagłada” [extermination/annihilation/extinction] that creates associations with the fate of human beings rather than simply with the collapse of the building, as the original title may imply. Polish readers expect from the start some kind of doom, whereas initially the source reader may be led to believe that the fall will only involve the destruction of the mansion. Only when the relationship of equivalence between the house and the family is established, does the ambiguity of the title become evident. This overwhelming atmosphere of doom and death is present in both translations, whereas the original is characterized by the mystery, the lack of specificity and ambiguity. This is achieved by the oblique manner of narration, where some notions are only implicitly hinted at. This is best exemplified by the description of the Usher family: “I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain” [Poe 52]. The incestuous type of relationship is only vaguely insinuated. At this point, both translations retain the same level of implicitness. Interestingly, if incest is alluded to, it considers the family as such, and not Roderick and Madeline in particular. As Fisher emphasizes, the text itself nowhere supports the notion that the siblings were actually involved in a sexual intercourse [Fisher 2008: 80]. In fact, the text is free from sexually laden vocabulary. Yet, in both Polish texts, though in dissimilar parts, the adjective “zбочony” [perverted] is attached to the hero. Roderick’s “disordered fancy” [Poe 60], when he makes links between the influence of the mansion and its surrounding upon the family and himself is termed by Leśmian as “zбочona wyobraźnia” [perverted imagination] [BL 331]. Wyrzykowski introduces the same notion, when the narrator makes a general comment concerning mental disorders, which is of course to be applied to the condition of his friend. Thus, the insertion: “(for the history of mental disorder is full of similar anomalies)” [Poe 64] is translated as “(gdyż dzieje zбочeń umysłowych roją się od podobnych sprzeczności)” [for the history of mental perversions abound in similar contradictions] [SW 148]. Consequently, the reader is left with no choice but to treat Roderick as a pervert, which links with the description of the family’s genealogical tree. In this way, clarification, understood here as a subjective choice of vocabulary, perverts the original text, thus contradicting Poe’s conviction, following Aristotelian doctrine, that unity of effect was crucial to genuine plot “in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole” [quoted in Fisher 2008: 107].

Bibliography

- Berman, A. (1985, 2003). *Translation and the Trials of the Foreign*. In: *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. L. Venuti. London and New York, Routledge, 284–297.
- Fisher, B.F. (2004). *Poe and the Gothic Tradition*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. K.J. Hayes. Cambridge, CUP, 72–91.
- Fisher, B.F. (2008). *The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Alan Poe*, Cambridge, CUP.
- Hoffmann, G. (1979). *Space and Symbol in the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*. Transl. E.G. Lord. In: *Poe Studies*, June 1979, vol. XII, no. 1, [online] <<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/index.htm>>, retrieved on February 14, 2009.
- Poe, E.A. (1976). *Zagłada domu Usherów*. Transl. B. Leśmian. In: E.A. Poe. *Opowieści niesamowite*. Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 319–341.
- Poe, E.A. (1986). *Zagłada domu Usherów*. Transl. S. Wyrzykowski. In: *Edgar Alan Poe. Opowiadania*. Warszawa, Czytelnik, 132–151.
- Poe, E.A. (1994). *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In: *Edgar Alan Poe. The Complete Illustrated Stories and Poems*. London, Chancellor Press, 51–66.
- Sova, D.B. (2007). *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York, Facts on File.
- Studniarz, S. (2003). *The Ghotic Convention in “The Fall of the House of Usher”*. In: *Conventions and Texts*. Ed. A. Zgorzelski. Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 160–173.
- Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (1989). New York, Gramercy Books.

Summary

Clarification as the Text Killer. Analysis of Selected Polish Translations of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Clarification is one of the textual phenomena enumerated by Antoine Berman as deforming tendencies in translation. It is best observable when the target text turns what was ambiguous in the original into more specific. This need to clarify the original often stems from systemic differences between languages. However, on numerous occasions the movement from the original ‘indefinite’ into the definite in the translation results from a subjective decision taken by the translator, who in fact has proper linguistic means at his disposal to retain the original level of indeterminacy. In the case of a literary work such a tendency may influence all its levels, especially the interpretative possibilities, as seen in two Polish translations of E.A. Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, by Bolesław Leśmian and Stanisław Wyrzykowski. By discussing descriptions of the fictional space and the references to the Usher siblings, this article indicates to what extent clarifying lexical choices impact on the atmosphere of the work, consistency of the fictional world, suspense and the stance of the narrator.