

# Edward Balcerzan

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## A Few Preliminary Remarks

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# Articles

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## A Few Preliminary Remarks

On the whole there does not seem to be any great secret to translating. Quite the contrary, if we were to seek the elementary differences between original writing and translation of literary works in the popular opinion, the first proof of their difference would be that the beginning of an original work is always some intangible secret (or subtle paradox), while doing a translation is rational and subject to concrete description. We should not be surprised. In literature *sensu stricto* the text is an expression of the ineffable. Beyond the text, unfolds a vaguely outlined, problematically constituted reality—an accumulation of events from various spheres of public life or the private life of the creative artist. This Reality day by day slips into the past, and each of its successive incarnations deforms the memory of early states. Even the confessions of authors, even the most detailed ones under the sun, do not completely satisfy the relentless scholars of the mystery of creation. The aura of aroused irrationality surrounds both the prehistory of a work and the author's final decisions; that final moment when his energy exhausted, no new conceptions appear. „I have completed a poem, what does that mean?“, Tadeusz Róźwicz wonders in one of his essays in *Przygotowania do wieczoru autorskiego (Preparations for a Reading)*. How do you know that this is the final version of a poem and that one cannot or should not continue to work on it?

In the process of translation the reverse occurs, such detective emotions recede to the far periphery. (The secrets of translation to be sure elicit the literary public's curiosity, but this fascination

is of a completely different nature.) Undoubtedly, the questions of which we spoke above (from first impulses to analysis of the dying inspiration of the translator during the final editing of the finished manuscript) appear in this field, too. In both cases, the solution of the "secret", however, is known. Both the preaction stage and the final moment of the translation are defined by the model in the original language. In the beginning and in the end, the word remains. The translator's drama is played out within a clearly defined space; between text and text. The private spiritual life of the translator, with its random configurations of events and the strangeness of human existence have no role here comparably as important or intriguing (especially) as in the construction of original works. The translator's private spiritual life is not the object presented artistically; it is not the reason we reach for Shakespeare or Proust in Polish.

That sounds unfair: the translator's personality is most plainly apparent in the weaknesses of the translation. When we begin to know the mechanics of the mistakes and to draw unpleasant conclusions concerning their causes, the image of the translator is outlined more forcefully. Various negative "characteristics" of his character multiply in the reader's imagination—absentmindedness, nonchalance, exaggerated timidity in exceeding the boundaries of the taboo, or simple ignorance.

Bohdan Wydźga, the Polish translator of Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* of 1927, captivated by the Polish Tatra Highlands, introduced the word *gazda* (hillfarmer) into his translation. He called God the *Rajski Gazda* (the Heavenly Hillfarmer), and in a special commentary he regarded a justification of his manipulation essential. His surroundings had influenced him:

Let the circumstances of the *traduttore* explain his actions. When Baudelaire reminisces about the natural beauty of the Pyrenees, the translator, who was in Zakopane, yielded to the suggestion of the local color. Later, however, he did not want to or was unable to refashion and give up what had thrust itself upon him.

This instance only apparently resembles the common practice of the period of Young Poland, frequently applied to the masterpieces of world literature of *góralszczenie* (the fashion of using the mountain dialect and customs). Our translator does not claim that

the mountain dialect could express the ideas of the original most fully. His purpose is different and strictly personal. He attempted to smuggle an episode from his own biography into Baudelaire's world, but the accomplishment of this goal turns out to be too embarrassing. The main text of the translation does not permit him to communicate knowledge of his experience directly to the reader; his autograph is apparent only in the footnotes, outside of the framework of the work as such. Moreover, rescuing his private dilemma from oblivion requires him to admit that he has abused the rights of a translator. He asks for lenience:

I trust that at the Final Judgment the Heavenly Hillfarmer himself will forgive me this liberty with His title. It will be more difficult here on earth with the critics.

A happy coincidence or a series of bad accidents or the hilarious circumstances of an important discovery, at times even a prophetic vision together with the translator's efforts are described in histories of translations. Such accounts, however, play a peculiar function. They expose the translator's biography separated from the text of the translation where the biography is a transparent, invisible instrument, which is the most apt when it most adequately serves to reproduce someone else's literary achievement. Such a biography has a peculiar internal order. It strikes an observer primarily as a linguistic, literary fact. It is a cultural product. Readers of translations and translators themselves usually concentrate their thoughts in the field controlled by culture high above the capricious crevasses of life, in the light of the current knowledge of the rules of art and the norms of speech.

The translator's craft, as a subject for their musings, opens one of the longest paths to understanding the structure of verbal art before the reading public. Their craft loyal to the code of rational rules and suggestions, devoid of the lure of the magical, organizes the reading public's interest around itself (with varying success but with great stubbornness) appealing to the reader's intellectual needs. Edward Porębowicz called the moment when another's work is transformed into one's own, when a constellation of sounds and meanings now foreign, incomprehensible, pulsating with distant speech and exuding the life of a different world is reconstituted among the myths and beliefs of the native culture

wizardry. He was thinking of magic without spells. The wizardry here is the assimilation of a piece of someone else's biography (not experienced by the translator): the transformation of the incomprehensible into the comprehensible.

More than one of the theories of speech and thought of the 20th century contends that the perception of every verbal text mobilizes mechanisms analogous to the mechanism of translation. (The Polish speaker will agree with this assertion readily, for *tłumaczyć* 'translate' is the same as *przedkładać* 'translate' and *objasniać* 'explain'. Norwid drew an interesting conception from the homonymic structure of the term and wrote that in his time the Byronic *Childe-Harold* should have been translated using a critical commentary.) The meaning of the verbal communication makes its presence felt and takes root in the listener's consciousness through the constant decoding. The communication can only enter the individual language system only by generating autoparaphrases in his personal language, by projecting other variant formulations of the given thought that are closest to the habits of the individual's method of expressing himself. (A teacher makes certain a pupil has understood the point by having the pupil repeat not from memory but in his own words. Those "his own words" result from intralinguistic decoding: a translation from Polish into Polish in various aspects—from adult language into a child's language, from the rhetoric of a textbook into that of a test.) Translation as the comprehension of a text, the understanding of a text as a translation, shifts the process of communication between people into the realm of autocommunication within an individual. Another's statement is decoded with the same exactness with which we are able to decode our own statements.

These observations can be applied to the work of professional translators of belles lettres and paraliterary forms. Translators are, as Tomasz Burek said provocatively, explainers of the masterpieces of foreign literatures. Speaking of a theoretical typology of the roles within the framework of literary life, practice only too frequently reduces to the burying of foreign works in the darkness of misunderstanding (an equally interesting case of special importance to the process of literary history, when the literatures of two different languages cease to understand one another).

In the hierarchy of the obligations of the art of translation the most essential ones are hermeneutic.

They are also the most essential ones for describing the peculiar genre of works in literary history composed of the various annotations, glosses, aphorisms, introductions, afterwords, reviews, and tracts of writers and critics involved in the development of the art of translation. At the root of this genre, at the base of the motivations provoking the translator to speak of the problems involved in translation lies the eternal question aimed not at the reader but „higher” at the abstract „Truth” of the history of art, What is the justification for translating literature? What is it: a collection of substitute texts, a crutch for those who do not know the foreign language or an authentic field of literary communication?

Significantly, these doubts appeared forcefully during the very earliest stages of the development of awareness of translations. In Poland, they appeared in documents of the 16th and 17th centuries. As is usual in the case of fundamentals (and it is difficult to imagine something more fundamental), in relation to the “to be or not to be” of the art of translation thoroughly contradictory opinions abound. An anonymous translator of the 16th century sees an immediate goal in his work. Whoever knows the language of the original will prefer the original. Another, Łukasz Górnicki, also refers his readers that know Italian to the original of his *The Courtier*, but not only to become acquainted with the original but also so they could attempt to translate it better. According to Górnicki, knowledge of the original does not preclude reading the translation. The latter can inspire acquaintance with the original foreign text, and the non-Polish text can spark a new translation. A third, Jan Januszowski, calls for bilingual books, containing the Latin original and a Polish translation. The reader is to compare the translator work with the original. This third version proposes treating translation as an independent, self-contained value that occurs along with the original, not instead of it.

Each language act becomes a value worth respecting because it cannot be mechanically reduced to any other. This applies to the primary as well as to the derivative language acts. The more

powerfully crystallized the autonomy of the original is, the more solidly fortified the autonomy of the translator's achievement becomes. These achievements are compared, as if in a competition for the best results, with the particular interpretations of the readers. The thoughts of the 16th-century anonymous translator, the meditations of the Polish *Courtier*, Januszowski's editorial decisions are not a free collection of arbitrary convictions but an arrangement of interconnected sentences determined by an (intuitional) sense of the relationship between the translated transformation and a thoughtful reading. Sebastian Petrycy's thoughts arise within the frame of analogous dilemmas. He writes that for someone who knows Latin his effort might seem wasted, but the flavor of foreign teachings "can easily be tasted in one's own language". From identical views of the sense of translation, as closer than the original creations to the readers, contrary (even contradictory) evaluations of translation flow.

Indeed the debate did not die out in the pioneer period. It appears in the following epochs variously associated with other things. Its dialectic seems inexhaustible. While the proponents of the inherent defectiveness of translations have added triumphs in the very technique of discrimination, in irony, in vivid satire, parody, their opponents have been adding substantive arguments. It is increasingly difficult to maintain only negative descriptions of translators' work (as feeding on the linguistic failures in society's education). The commonplace that "a translation cannot replace the original" is understood to mean that a translation not only cannot but does not intend to replace the original (its substitute function is secondary and facultative). Translation participate in literary communication in a special way. Not embarrassing gaps in people's linguistic knowledge but the constant presence of habits of perception and the ability to perform intralingual translations (assimilation and explanation of the intricacies of foreign speech) justify the existence of the craft of translation. Translating works from foreign languages then is an equally valid form of participating in the metamorphosis of literary structures as reading, literary criticism, textual criticism, paraphrasing them in pastiches, parodies, travesties or other stylizations, including paintings, stagings, films, etc. The correctness of this assertion is apparent in the experiences of bilingual commu-

nities where translations from the two basic languages mastered by the majority (Ukrainian and Russian in the Ukraine, Slovak and Czech in Slovakia) have not only not disappeared but feed one of the most powerful forces shaping the styles and national literary conventions.

Transl. by *Jan Patrick Lee*