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“Barbaric Yawp” in Polish

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“Barbaric Yawp” in Polish*

Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” entered Polish culture long before the last section of “Song of Myself” was translated, which happened surprisingly late (1966). At first, it was vaguely alluded to in the literary criticism that denied any poetic value to Whitman’s “rough” or “uncivilized” lines (Skwara, 2004: 101-110); then it began to be referred to more clearly and favorably. Modernistic critics who appreciated Whitman’s challenge to the established literary conventions of the time would write about a “certain great breath of barbaric lyricism” (*jakieś wielkie tchnienie liryzmu barbarzyńskiego*, Winiarski 102), or about a “kind of pagan admiration for every impulse of the universe” (*rodzaj pogańskiego uwielbienia dla każdego impulsu wszechświata*, Nekanda-Trepka 106) as being characteristic of Whitman. However, the most interesting pre-translational reference can be found in the poetry of Julian Tuwim (1894-1953), one of the most influential figures in Polish modern poetry.

As a young poet Tuwim showed a lot of enthusiasm for Whitman, whom he called a “poet of pan-love” in his youthful essay (first given as a speech during meetings of young Polish poets and then published in 1917). The essay was based on Russian critic Kornei Chukovski’s opinions and, to a great extent, on his translations of Whitman poems. Nevertheless, Tuwim also voiced in-

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dependent opinions, among which his keen admiration for Whitman's open expressions of sexuality is the most personal. In the Polish poet's reading it is a heterosexuality that goes along very well with the tone of Tuwim's erotic juvenilia. The young poet's panegyric remarks on Whitman's daring departure from social and literary conventions are often supported by his translations and paraphrases of Whitman lines; also, many passages from "Song of Myself" appear in different forms throughout the essay. There is no literal translation of the "barbaric yawp" line—unlike the *Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son* line—but the expression, perhaps in a version in some other language (not Russian in this case, see the above essay), must have sunk into Tuwim's memory. While writing his literary manifesto almost at the same time—a poem "Poezja" (Poetry; 1917, published in 1918)—he defines poetry as a "leap," the "leap of a barbarian who felt God":

– <i>Poezja</i> – jest to, proszę panów, skok, <i>Skok barbarzyńcy, który poczuł Boga!</i>	— <i>Poetry</i> —this is, Gentlemen, a leap <i>The leap of a barbarian who felt God!</i>
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Then the young poet goes on defining poetry:

Jest to pierwotny, czipewajski krzyk I chutna miłość do rodzącej ziemi, Zadowolony barbarzyńcy ryk, Gdy ujrzał Ogień oczy zdumionymi. (Tuwim, 1986: 281)	This is a primeval, Chippewaian cry And lusty love for the life-giving earth A satisfied roar of a barbarian When he saw Fire with his astonished eyes.
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The expression *barbarzyńcy ryk* ("roar of a barbarian") clearly evokes Whitman's "barbaric yawp" and might even be read as the first Polish translation of the phrase. The "primeval" and "Chippewaian" cry from the line above directs the reader's imagination both to a natural and to a native American world, perhaps significant in the context of Tuwim's readings of Whitman and the imagination that he shared with other Europeans of the time. Exotic Indian life used to be associated with both rough closeness to uncivilized nature and with freedom from restraining cultural norms—of which the "barbaric yawp" might be a symbol. Such references (see Skwara, 2010: 206-209) allow us to

see that Whitman's "barbaric yawp" did not pass unnoticed in Polish culture, even if it was not "properly" translated.

Stanisław Helsztyński, in 1934, engaged the phrase in his foreword to the second Polish book-length selection of translations from Whitman, though it too falls short of a "proper translation." He offers a narrative of Whitman himself that is constructed out of translations and paraphrases of his poems. Among many quotations from "Song of Myself," we find these two:

On, Walt Whitman, kosmos, syn Manhattanu, bujny, dorodny, zmysłowy, pije, nasyca się, chłonie (...) Głos swój, swoje barbarzyńskie ujadanie, rzuca ponad dachy świata (...) (Helsztyński 11-16)

(“He, Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, exuberant, robust, sensual, [he] drinks, satiates himself, absorbs . . . His voice, his barbarian yapping [he] throws over the roofs of the world”).

The first of the quoted sentences is almost an exact translation of the opening line of the 24th section, the second one (in the original many other lines are inserted between the two cited here) is a paraphrase of the "barbaric yawp" line with some inventive alterations. By rendering the "yawp" with the Polish equivalent of a yap, Helsztyński makes the sound that Whitman's poetic persona utters unrestrained, wild and animalistic, which corresponds to the untranslatability pointed out by Whitman in the previous line ("I too am untranslatable . . ."). The Polish verb *ujadać* (to yap) denotes any sound-making activity which can be performed by animals (especially dogs), wild hordes (certainly by the hordes of barbarians) or any group of people, as well as by individuals who utter repetitive, unrestrained yelling and demanding sounds in which particular words can hardly be discriminated. *Ujadanie* does not seem a bad rendering of Whitman's yawp, especially since an *ujadanie* is always loud, persistent, and can be heard from a long distance.

In comparison to Helsztyński's rendering of the "yawp," the proper translations of the last section of "Song of Myself" existing in Polish show surprising unanimity, which may result from dependence on modern English-Polish dictionaries' most popular synonym for the word "yawp." In all three translations it becomes *wrzask* (yawp, scream), despite the fact that the translators and translations differ much from one another. The first translation was produced

by Ludmiła Marjańska, who, as a budding poet and translator, participated in compiling the first Polish post-war collection of Whitman poems; the second was created by Andrzej Szuba, a university lecturer of English, a poet, and the most prolific Polish Whitman translator (who may eventually produce the first complete Polish version of *Leaves of Grass*); the third was done by Krzysztof Boczkowski, a physician by profession and a translator by choice. All the translators appreciate—to a different extent though—Whitman’s poetry, emphasizing its liberating values. Still, when translating the line in question, Ludmiła Marjańska (1966), Andrzej Szuba (1992), and Krzysztof Boczkowski (2003) render it respectively as:

Głoszę mój wrzask barbarzyński ponad dachami świata. (Whitman, 1966: 63)
Niosę mój barbarzyński wrzask ponad dachami świata. (Whitman, 1992: 42)
Rozbrzmiewa mój barbarzyński wrzask ponad dachami świata. (Whitman, 2003: 65)

As we can easily observe, there are only two differences between the three translations: the position of the epithet (*wrzask barbarzyński* or *barbarzyński wrzask*), which does not matter much, and the form and meaning of the opening words, which is of some importance. Before discussing the latter, I must remark that Polish *wrzask* does not seem to be an unproblematic equivalent of the yawp (and references, in some dictionaries, to Whitman as an example of the usage of the word seem merely tautological). First and foremost, *wrzask* is a sound produced by people and only by people (an angry child, for example, or angry children, or one or more human beings demanding something or suffering severely from something), except perhaps for human-like animals (monkeys), or birds producing human-like sounds (parrots). *Wrzask* is not only wild and piercing but also uncontrollable since it always denotes intense, overwhelming emotions and states such as fear, pain, animal satisfaction, or shock (SJP, 3: 761).¹ While *ujadanie* may be deliberate, *wrzask* can hardly be, as it is above all uncontrollable. The same can be said about the other popular dictionary equivalent for the yawp: *krzyk* (scream). Moreover, its usage is more restricted

¹ Thus it suits the line in Herbert’s poem *Raport z obłożonego miasta* quite well—see the above essay (p. 321)—but does not go well with Whitman’s line, with which Herbert’s poem really has nothing in common.

to a sound made by an individual human being, and, only exceptionally, to a sound made by specific birds (for instance, sea-gulls) (SJP, 1: 1068-69). The third, very rare equivalent for the yawp (I found it only in one dictionary)—*jazgot*—is a strongly derogatory noun, used to denote a group irksome sound deprived of any meaning (SJP, 1: 829). Thus, it seems all the translators simply chose the least problematic dictionary equivalent, the two subsequent ones being perhaps influenced by the first one.

More problems arise when we look closer at the verbs opening the Polish lines. Since *wrzask* is wild and sharp, one can hardly imagine it being pronounced like a word of God; still, such a baffling solution was chosen by Ludmiła Marjańska. She employs the verb *głosić* (to proclaim, announce, preach), even if *głoszę* ([I] proclaim) should be followed by something sublime, which *wrzask barbarzyński* certainly is not. While Marjańska's choice goes against Polish phraseology without producing much of a new poetic effect, Szuba's choice, *Niosę* ([I] carry), opposes the logic of the Polish language. One cannot "carry" any sounds in Polish but one can raise them, an activity which is usually rendered by the similar verb: *wznosić* (to raise). It is difficult to say why Szuba chose the somewhat illogical *niosę* (repeated in every edition of his translation) instead of the much more suitable *wznoszę*. It seems that Krzysztof Boczkowski found the best solution for the problematic opening of the line. He changed the subject of the line (from "I sound my barbaric yawp" to "my barbaric yawp sounds"), which made it possible to express in Polish the resounding effect of the poet's "barbaric yawp." Such a choice seems both natural and suggestive to me—the voice which *rozbrzmiewa* (resounds) must resonate. And all of the above mentioned evocations and translations, each in its own way, confirm the power of evoking the resonance that Whitman's line possesses.

If I were to combine the solutions that I liked most, I would produce the line *Moje barbarzyńskie ujadanie rozbrzmiewa nad dachami świata*, in which the original initial "I"—alien to the logics of the Polish language, which avoids using "I" at all—is replaced by "my," while the following barbaric repetitive sound (*barbarzyńskie ujadanie*) proudly resonates (*rozbrzmiewa*) over the roofs of the world (*nad dachami świata*). Although *ujadanie* is not a perfect equivalent for Whitman's yawp—being far too long (4-syllable), mostly derogatory when applied to human beings, and merely vaguely onomatopoeic—it seems to me

a much better solution than *wrzask*, *krzyk* or *jazgot*, because it gives the whole phrase an interesting idiomatic tinge. *Skowyt*, the Polish equivalent of a “howl,” would not produce such an effect; one might also think that if Whitman had wanted to have a “howl” in his line, he would simply have used it. Since the Polish language is not rich in nouns denoting sounds which can be produced both by humans and animals, one does not have much of a choice when translating the yawp. On the other hand, inventing a new suitable noun—due to vast differences between the Polish and English languages, both in semantics and phonetics—does not seem to be an easy task. Having tried for some time now, I have come up with merely bizarre or hilarious words.

A different solution has crossed my mind, though: the problematic American noun (yawp) could be replaced by a Polish noun that denotes a big mouth in a modern slang language. What makes it a tempting solution is the fact that the noun in question happens to be *japa* (pronounced yaapaa), and together with a common verb: *rozdzierać* (to tear) forms a phrase which denotes opening one’s mouth wide while producing bold sounds. Then we would get the line: *Rozdzieram moją barbarzyńską japę nad dachami świata* (in back translation: “[I] open wide my barbaric mouth over the roofs of the world”). Such a solution would denote both shouting something in a daring manner, with one’s mouth wide open, and would preserve some of an animalistic effect, since a *japa* is not entirely human. Still, the final effect is mostly funny.

It could be natural, even if all too idealistic, to expect that someone who prepares a Polish version of the American movie *Dead Poets Society*, in which a literary quotation appears (especially as written on a blackboard by a teacher), will consult existing translations and perhaps create the best possible solution after having gained some knowledge of the subject. Unfortunately, movie translators must work fast and sacrifice creativity to efficiency, which was perhaps the reason for their producing a rather literal and awkward version of the “yawp.” In the Polish version of the movie it is simply translated as *dziki ryk* (wild roar) which is a possible but problematic and clumsy solution, especially when deprived of the proper epithet—for unknown reasons “barbaric” was replaced by “wild/fierce.” In a book version of the movie script, the translator chose an even simpler solution: the original “barbaric yawp” becomes a “barbarzyńskie jup” (Kleinbaum 71), whatever “jup” might mean in Polish apart from alluding

to a certain childish play on words; there is no such a word, and it can hardly be regarded as the phonic equivalent of the "yawp" since it must be read as *yooop* in Polish.

Although pop culture is often distant from literary culture, it nonetheless may make literature resonate even more. The Hollywood version of the "yawp" has probably reached more cultures than its literary version: there is, for instance, a Turkish version of *Dead Poets Society*.

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Summary

The text examines the Polish reception of Whitman's "barbaric yawp," beginning with pre-translational intertextual references made by the influential Polish poet Julian Tuwim ("Poezja," 1921). Subsequently, the version of the "barbaric yawp" line from the introduction to the selection of Whitman's poetry (1934) as well as three "proper" translations of the line done much later are analyzed. Problems which the "yawp" causes in the Polish language are discussed against the comprehensive cultural and linguistic background, including the Polish version of the film *Dead Poets Society*.

Key words: comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Polish literature

„Barbarzyńskie yawp” po polsku

Streszczenie

Autorka artykułu bada polską recepcję „barbaric yawp” Whitmana, począwszy od intertekstualnych odwołań Juliana Tuwima, dokonanych jeszcze przed polskim tłumaczeniem tego wyrażenia („Poezja”, 1921). Następnie analizie poddane zostaje tłumaczenie „barbaric yawp” zamieszczone we wstępie do wyboru poezji Whitmana (1934), a także trzy „właściwe” tłumaczenia, opublikowane znacznie później. Trudności, jakie niesie za sobą tłumaczenie „yawp” na język polski, zostają szczegółowo omówione w kontekście lingwistycznym i kulturowym, włączając w to także odwołania do polskiej wersji filmu *Stowarzyszenie Umarłych Poetów*.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie”, literatura polska