

SOME NOTES ON POLISH TRANSLATIONS
OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS: PAST AND PRESENT

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In 1964 a new version of the Polish complete dramatic works of Shakespeare was published (Szekspir 1964). It was only a new version of the old, nineteenth-century complete works of Shakespeare, published at the initiative and under the auspices of the celebrated author of many historical novels, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. There were translations of three men in that edition: S. Koźmian, J. Paszkowski and L. Ulrich. It was the year 1875. Polish literature was at a moment of its development when nearly all the impulses of the great Romantic Age stopped to operate and Polish literary language, above all the poetic idiom was full of worn out Romantic clichés used by minor authors, and new trends were not yet in operation. The situation was epigonistic, the translators did not emerge from the regions of great literature, for better or for worse they were just enthusiasts of Shakespeare, each with a different background, intimate knowledge of English could be attributed only to Stanisław Koźmian. Some earlier translations of the 'triumvirate', further on in this paper referred to as 'the classics of Polish translations of Shakespeare' and 'classics' for short, had been published earlier. The real beginning of Polish translations of Shakespeare has to be placed in the eighteenth century, the first venture being probably the translation of passages of *Julius Caesar* into French by King Stanisław Augustus and in the same century some other translations by other hands of mere passages into Polish and *Hamlet* translated by Wojciech Bogusławski – 'the father of the Polish theatre' from the German Schroeder version (1797).

The impact of the 'classics' upon the reception of Shakespeare has always been tremendous. The 'classics' were re-issued several times and the above mentioned edition is the sixth one. There were many other translations of course, but the 'classics' with its huge volumes, rich illustrations by H.C. Selous and Kraszewski's blessing became a kind of the Polish 'standard Shakespeare'.

The editors of the new 1964 version, subsequently referred to as 'the Jubilee

edition', Stanisław Helsztyński, Róża Jabłkowska and Anna Staniewska knew how many mistakes the 'classics' had committed and in accordance with their declarations in an editorial note, tried hard to correct the text but also to preserve the archaizing of the 'classics'. It is time now to think of a new complete, annotated Shakespeare in Polish which will be based on the best twentieth-century translations with similar ruthless editorial corrections wherever translators either fail to understand Shakespeare properly, which is now more rare but still is the case from time to time, and wherever the style in the Polish language applied by the translators can be improved. This would be one version of a *Variorum Translatorum Editio*, just as the Polish Jubilee edition of 1964 actually in some ways is (e.g., *Macbeth*, translated by Paszkowski, corrected by an anonymous editor of the Gebethner and Wolff publishers in 1911-13 and by Anna Staniewska in 1964). Much better results could be obtained in the process of similar corrections applied to the work of still living present-day translators of Shakespeare (if they would agree to it), which would produce a Shakespeare in Polish reflecting the needs of the Polish reader and the Polish theatre of the end of the twentieth century, and to be sure, also the beginning of the twenty-first.

To illustrate the present-day proliferation of Shakespeare in Polish translation, it is necessary to add that the Jubilee edition together with its re-issues amounts to at least a print run of 100,000 copies. If you add the great number of translations of individual plays by individual authors and *The Complete Plays and Poems* published by Wydawnictwo Literackie in Kraków in Maciej Słomczyński's translation finished in 1985 and comprising c.14,000 copies each (Shakespeare 1978-1985) then sheer publication statistics would show that a great effort is still made to achieve a better Polish Shakespeare. The reading public is ready to buy Shakespeare's works in nearly unimaginable quantity of copies.

The aim of this essay is to make some observations on what goes on in the very sensitive sphere of Shakespeare translation in Poland now and how it compares with what was generally going on in the past. Translators of Shakespeare in Poland have always tried to do their best according to their best lights. It is rather that either their own lights or those of Shakespeare scholarship were too dim either in Poland only or in the wide world. Talents have always been uneven, but other things being equal, the idea that it is the general reader who has the final verdict on translation is perhaps a half-truth, unless we have in mind an ingenious misinterpretation of Shakespeare in TL, which means a beginning of the TL version a life of its own with little or no regard to SL. Some tendencies to 'polonize' or for that matter 'germanize' Shakespeare have always been and probably will be alive.

A dramatist of the rank of Shakespeare should always be primarily expected to remain Shakespeare in German, Polish or Russian and only for a change, as another poetic and dramatic venture with some other than reproductory objectives, can we have, as a product of literary luxury, a Shakespeare polonized, germanized etc.

It is not my objective to come up with any new proposals of a highly theoretical

kind. Being a literary historian I cannot venture any new observations on the strictly linguistic side of translation. But even if I am classed according to Dr Susan Bassnett's book on translation theory as belonging to the fourth division of *translation studies* (cf. Bassnett-McGuire 1980), I am still interested in the structure of the 'translation atom' rather than in augmenting the already existing theory of relativity of literary translation. At least this was so in my working approach to translation studies. This is still so because I am convinced that too little attention has been paid to the inner workings of translation, especially on the poetic side. Roman Jakobson said "that poetry by definition is untranslatable" (Jakobson 1966). Such a generalization, even if well grounded, will give no help to those who apparently try to achieve what according to it does not exist. It will give no help to millions of people who wait for the opportunity of reading Byron, Shakespeare and other classics although they do not know English. Will it help Translation Studies scholars? Only as far as the limits of literary translation have to be realized before they get down to brass tacks in their work.

Together with my wife Leonarda, I have developed a system of notation of translation analysis to which I partly returned when working on this paper (Zbierski 1956). Still among my unpublished materials there are hundreds of slips with notation concerning the Polish translation of the poetry of Robert Burns in which I tried to observe not only the interrelation of what I called here the atoms of translations, but to follow my metaphor, all the parts of it. That analytical work made me highly sceptical of too much theorizing. A theory is badly needed, but it ought to be based on extensive investigation, if possible by many persons, the aim of which it would be to see 'how it really ticks'. I would not say that a Translation Studies scholar ought to practice translation himself, but I believe that it helps. A combination of the competence of literary scholarship with a modicum of successful practice in literary translation may be regarded as a safe-guard against some more bizarre postulates of scholarship and some more mystifying observations of haughty practitioners who bombard in their interviews what they call in a derogative way 'philology'. A good translator, even a self-declared or real 'artist' practises 'philology' or 'modern philology' whether he wishes it or not. He can ignore it only at his own peril in his work on such authors as Shakespeare. Somebody said in Poland that Shakespeare is not enough unless we add Shakespeare Scholarship. If the translator himself is not a scholar, which is all right or even better, he ought to make use of the achievement of scholarship in its most recent and most succinct form. On the other hand, someone who has never translated a poem from the foreign language he knows best may be like a blind person talking about colours.

In translating Shakespeare into any language today there are quite different criteria from those of the nineteenth-century ones. Shakespeare Scholarship has made such progress that a translator without, let us say, at least a copy of the Arden Edition in front of him is bound to err in some of the most vital of Shakespeare's meanings. J.L. Styan discovered *The Shakespeare Revolution* (Styan 1977) in criticism which may be summed up in brief as a postulate to filter Shakespeare's works through their proper medium first, that is the theatre, and only then to

theorize about their meanings. A postulate which is difficult to follow in non-English speaking countries where Shakespeare is performed more rarely than in England or America and, a very important point, performed in translation. In non-English speaking countries then J.L. Styan's revolution is just an echo of something that happens in a world remote in the geographic and cultural sense, an echo not without reverberation. The first line of debate is what translation should be used in the theatre and even if the best is chosen, what we have is actually not the real Shakespeare but a reflection in a deforming mirror, a mirror not only of a different language but of a different culture. What we obtain may be conducive to a fresh look at Shakespeare even on the international level and we find such a new look in Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Normally a Shakespeare text translated into any language cannot be used for serious purposes of general scholarship. There is however another Shakespeare revolution which is much more important for the translator than the one noted by J.L. Styan. Caroline Spurgeon and Wolfgang Clemen (Clemen 1951) opened our eyes, each in a different way, to the fact, that in Shakespeare it is not only the deep significance, or to put it otherwise, the mere *sense* of what he tells us that is to be taken into consideration in our attempts to decode the Shakespeare enigma, but that we should treat on equal terms the 'surface meaning', the sign and not only what it signifies, the imagery itself and not only 'what it tells us'. The imagery as an expression of the most powerful poetic imagination of all time and the imagery as a function of the objectified meanings of his plays on the symbolic levels of all kind, including the semiotics of the theatre. Thus the present-day translator cannot solve his problems by a mere search for equivalents in TL to what he finds in SL, equivalents that is of abstract 'thought' of 'sense'. He is faced with the more formidable task of transplanting into TL from SL some 'foreign bodies' to which TL will mobilize some resistance even to the extent of total rejection, which is a translator's defeat. If images themselves are as important or nearly as important as what they express, then a translator cannot replace in Polish the Elizabethan idiom of 'carrying coals' *Romeo and Juliet*, I.i, into the handy Polish 'equivalent' of 'somebody blowing into our dish of groats'. The Polish 'classic' of the nineteenth-century Shakespeare Translation, Józef Paszkowski thought this well known Polish idiom to be an 'equivalent' here. He could have looked for other Polish idioms, some perhaps more 'equivalent', but probably no known idiom in Polish can possibly perform the two functions at the same time: 1) have something to do with 'carrying coals' or just with 'coals' and 2) have the meaning of 'submitting passively to indignity or insult'. Is it important that Shakespeare speaks about coals? Is it important that Shakespeare uses the word 'groats' only in the monetary sense and not in the cereal one? To the advocates of mere 'equivalence' it is unimportant, to all those who recognize the significance of the 'surface meaning' both on its personal ('furniture of the mind') and functional levels (iterative symbolism) it may prove vital. It depends largely on Shakespeare Scholarship for the answer. If it is functionally important in the translated plays to a similar extent as it is important say, in *Macbeth* in the case of clothes imagery, then rendering the surface meaning is an artistic necessity even in face of a very

great linguistic difficulty. A chain of images in a play discovered to have a vital symbolic meaning has to be preserved in translation if not intact, then at least in some acceptable shape.

When we talk about the need of preserving, if possible, the imagery of Shakespeare in translation, what emerges as the most difficult practical problem for the translator is the preservation of both the imagery and the pun intact. It is obvious that to find a punning connection between the same words is a very difficult thing. For a translator from English into Polish there are additional difficulties: without specific linguistic data available one can venture a general statement that the Polish language in its phonological character provides fewer opportunities for the creation of puns. Every learner of English today must be fully aware of the need for precision in the pronunciation of English. Just a slight mispronunciation and you have quite a different meaning, sometimes causing a lot of embarrassment. Such dangers are very rare in Polish so there are fewer possibilities of voluntary and involuntary, comic and serious punning and this surely gives the Polish translators of Shakespeare quite a lot of headache. The first stage of success is to achieve some puns when there are plenty. The second stage of success is to render both the puns and their referential meanings if Shakespeare speaks about coal, then let us try to find in Polish or to invent a pun that will have the same socio-linguistic meaning as 'carrying coals' and will be about coals and not about 'hulled cereals' (eaten in Eastern Europe in various forms different from porridge).

A Polish translator of Shakespeare working at the end of the twentieth century has at his disposal, apart from his talent (an indispensable prerequisite in the art of literary translation) some advantages which a 'classical' translator of the middle of the nineteenth century did not have.

First of all he has at his disposal the precedents of a number of other translations. He can, if he wishes to, completely ignore the work of his predecessors, but such an attitude is unlikely. In terms of previous work in the field he would better heed precedents. Originality is not the main objective for such a translator. Of course, one would expect that he would like to leave his mark, and that he would like to differ from whatever has been done so far, but all those other translators had certainly strained their abilities, both linguistic and artistic to their utmost, and some of them could have attained near perfection at least from time to time, at least in some 'spots' of the text. One would then, at least in the abstract, assume the possibility of a 'variorum' approach to translation, that is to say in theory, because this is not a strategy taken by most translators.

If the experience of the predecessors is not taken in the positive sense, then it could be utilized in the negative one. A very critical attitude can involve and probably does involve learning by other people's mistakes, taking strategies and tactics different from those they have taken. So much for the use of the rich tradition of translating Shakespeare in Poland.

The second advantage is the present development of Shakespeare scholarship. Słomczyński may express his jeering attitude towards the pedantry of scholarship which he calls 'philology' in his interviews – that is his right as an artist, because

the task of a translator is artistic and not 'philological'. But the very facts that he took care to use as the basis of his artistic work the nearly perfect example of 'philology', the Arden Edition of Shakespeare's Plays (The New Arden that is), is not only a *gesture* towards 'philology', but an at least partly implemented strategy of taking 'philology' into consideration, surely not as an end but as means in his translation strategy and tactics. Thus to put it in a nutshell, the advantages of Shakespeare scholarship are in fact apparent in present-day translations in Poland.

The third advantage concerned with a totally personal decision taken by the translator in his strategy is a marked resignation from using any risky form of archaizing. One of the weakest points of most nineteenth-century translators in Poland, not only the 'classics', was an unsuccessful attempt at studding the nineteenth-century form of Polish with elements of supposed archaisms which were to impose upon the reader a linguistic consciousness of Shakespeare as a sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century writer. It is impossible to explain fully why this particular attempt failed, but without much risk one could say, that neither the translators nor the majority of the readers really knew at that time what kind of language should be used. There was only one writer whose poetic language could be utilized as a pattern for attaining such a complex artistic objective. It was only Piotr Kochanowski's magisterial translation of Tasso's *Gerosolima liberata* (Kraków 1618) that could provide a pattern of superb baroque Polish, without accretions of Latin-influenced unnaturalness in syntax or macaronic elements (present particularly in Polish seventeenth-century prose). The great Polish poet of the early nineteenth century, Juliusz Słowacki, was able to enrich his own poetic language by the organic utilization of this only Polish truly 'Shakespearean' poet. But it would need a talent of his dimension to achieve this in translating Shakespeare later on. Such talents in the sphere of poetry were impossible to find at a time when Polish Romanticism and the idiom of poetry were at an epigonistic stage of decline and by people whose talents in the sphere of poetic language were markedly limited. To say that a nearly genuine use of archaic language forms in serious artistic translation of literature is unattainable would certainly be too much. The Polish leading translator of French literature, Tadeusz Boy Țeleński achieved this in his translation of Brantôme's *Vies des dames illustres* into Polish by means of a brilliant imitation of the language and style of the Polish sixteenth-century translation of Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* (*Dworzanin polski*, 1566) which was actually an adaptation of Cortegiano's book, a paraphrase of its Italian original written at the behest of King Sigismund Augustus.

One has, however, to be cautious even in a case of a successful translation of that sort in terms of its value for theatre performance. What is good for book-lovers may fail to appeal to theatre-goers.

As a result, one of the three classical translators of Shakespeare, used what he considered to be archaic and what actually was only cumbersome, bizarre and idiosyncratic or sometimes downright vulgar, trite, provincial, and last but not least, false. Słowczyński gave up archaizing as far as the substance of his Polish goes, but fortunately, he avoids what one might term present-day poetic idiom in Poland.

Such a strategy would bring about disastrous results. It does bring disastrous results in case of some other translators. Shakespeare's imagery cannot be avant-garde. Słowczyński's linguistic strategy is then striving towards using rather a clear form of Polish of the end of the twentieth century, but with a certain tinge of traditional Polish poetic idiom. Some people think this produces something smooth and too sweet, but the author of the present essay does not quite share that view. Słowczyński tries to render in Polish not only the meaning of Shakespeare established by modern scholarship, but to impose upon the substance of present-day Polish a feel of the poetry of Shakespeare, its music and, above all, its *imagery*.

Some people complain that his translations are too 'strong' in terms of Shakespeare's bawdry. The 'classical' translators (mainly Paszkowski) assumed that it is unacceptable to translate the rough four-letter words used by Shakespeare into similar four-letter words in Polish. They thought it deplorable that Shakespeare should use them and they tried to bowdlerize Shakespeare in a number of ways, one of the most common being the use of euphemisms. More drastic are omissions. Now as then, educators in Poland are shocked by Shakespeare's bawdry. Productions of such plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* never too frequent in the Polish theatre (after all there has been so much native repertoire since the beginning of this century), are made obligatory by masters of Polish in secondary schools and some theatres do not care to satisfy the bowdlerizing attitudes of some pedagogues. This in a Catholic country is a strong factor. Theatre directors are sometimes blamed for what is the sole responsibility of Gentle Will.

Słowczyński (Shakespeare 1978-1985) is like a daring director: he, a successful translator of Joyce's *Ulysses*, is used to all sorts of bawdry in language and imagery and in implication. Nevertheless anyone examining these translations is entitled to ask a question of philological rather than moralistic character: was it necessary to use the word 'whore' in its strong and most unspeakable Polish version? The argument is that the word in English is much more 'speakable' than in present-day Polish in which it has decidedly vulgar connotations.

Those who would defend this rough usage in translation would have an easy argument that the Polish poet, Jan Kochanowski, the corresponding top figure in Polish Renaissance poetry, did not avoid 'rough' words of that sort (although his bawdry was not as rich as that of Shakespeare). Neither is present-day Polish too fastidious for that. The editors of the 1964 Jubilee Edition, among numerous corrections of the translations of the 'classics', Paszkowski in particular, were also involved in large scale de-bowdlerizing procedures.

The number of translators and translations of Shakespeare's plays in Poland is impressive. The very idea that Shakespeare should be translated by so many hands may in itself be not only an expression of Shakespeare's popularity in Poland, but also to some extent of a feeling of fundamental difficulties of translating Shakespeare into Polish in an artistically and linguistically adequate way. As speakers of Polish language we are aware of its possibilities. Contrary to some people's opinion, without undue feeling of national pride, we regard our language as very expressive, capable of precision, of rendering many finer shades of meaning and above all

a remarkable syntactical freedom (unknown to English). But one must remember that apart from the fact that Polish is far from being puristic in terms of loan-words, those loan-words have been totally absorbed into the language causing a partly illusory and a partly true impression of a language uniformly Slavic in character. This means that the problem of translating Shakespeare into Polish must be different from that of translating his work into German or French, languages which after all have much nearer 'family connections' with English. I have found e.g., that the *hapax legomenon* of Shakespeare's 'escote' can only be hypothetically explained by Old French (Zbierski 1957:97).

This example may seem unfair but after all what is fair in examples? One of the greatest difficulty of translating Shakespeare into Polish is perhaps the fact that, owing to its Slavic uniformity, Polish is not as rich as English in connotative synonyms. Words of Romance origin are present in Polish in quite a number but they are often regarded in the language as 'foreign words' unlike Old French, Norman French and a lot later French vocabulary in English which simply provides a set of synonyms. There is often a choice between the Germanic and romance vocabulary (nothing like that is possible in Polish). It is true that in some plays Shakespeare does not make much use letter, but it is enough to have a closer look at such plays as *Love's Labour's Lost* to see how much his more elegant style depends on it.

Another difficulty in translating Shakespeare into Polish is the different 'music' of the two languages. On the whole most English speaking Poles would admit that Polish possesses many more fricatives than English, particularly Shakespeare's English as scanned by great English players.

Still another difficulty is that scanning of the English type is nearly impossible in the Polish translations of Shakespeare. This is so because the original Shakespeare is accentual-syllabic and nearly all Polish translations of Shakespeare are syllabic. The original English unrhymed iambic pentameter becomes thus an unrhymed syllabic hendecasyllabic verse. Thus the Polish blankverse may sound *too* blank. In English the accentual-syllabic system of versification predominates (although some scholars rather confusingly call it syllabic) and in Polish the syllabic system is the established national form and the accentual-syllabic system, i.e., one with regular scanning is used in traditional songs and also by *minor* poets of the nineteenth century and by the great ones in decline. The accentual system, first introduced by Jan Kasprówicz in the early twentieth century, is regarded as an English influence. It has been used by a number of poets since, but it is a mark of moderate avant-gardism which makes it unlikely as a verse form in Shakespeare translation.

Thus Shakespeare becomes far less rhythmical in Polish and that can only be helped by occasional attempts at making the syllabic verse a bit more rhythmical or putting in bits of accentual-syllabic lines in crucial rhymed spots of the text. Then it is trochaic and not iambic anyway.

I can finish this part of my essay with words of profesor Władysław Tarnawski, one of the translators and a distinguished scholar:

Exemplary translation of Shakespeare remains a need of our literature. Whoever achieves that goal cannot expect the laurels of Schlegel. His work will only with difficulty and gradually so attain its citizenship rights in theatres and libraries. We are accustomed – fortunately owing to the richness of our own literature – to look down on the work of translators. With all this, someone who would feel he would be able to cope with it and to undertake that noble task, should do so (Tarnawski 1914:222).

In this statement there is a lot that is still valid, like 'looking down on the work of translators', although some people in Poland were to attain some laurel's if not Schlegel's, and there is an illusion: the final Polish Shakespeare or the *real* classic of Polish translations will perhaps never be attained. The historical moment for a Polish Schlegel has irretrievably passed and to the noble effort to cope with the 'sea of trouble' in translating Shakespeare, there is no end.

Since this paper was delivered at the British Comparative Literature Association Congress in 1985 at Warwick University, a new and very important figure appeared on the horizon. The well established Polish poet, translator of the English metaphysical poets, and scholar, Stanisław Barańczak started translating Shakespeare, play after play. His strategies as translator are strikingly different from those of Maciej Słomczyński, so much so that they will have to be treated in a sequel to this essay.

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