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# **Miron Białoszewski as Interpreted by Czesław Miłosz: Four Translations.**

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### Miron Białoszewski as Interpreted by Czesław Miłosz: Four Translations

Any translation, and especially any translation of poetry, is inextricably tied with interpretation. It involves the interpretation of all aspects of the text, from the apparently most trivial ones, such as its graphic conventions, to the complexities of the multi-valued semantics of the text. The ambiguity of expressions in a given language requires interpretive and translational operations within the linguistic system. The degree of organization of poetic discourse poses unique difficulties in translation, unseen in texts devoid of poetic function. Differences in the intonational and prosodic patterns of source and target language, which can be observed, among others, in the assessment of rhythmical formations based on the “natural” (dominant) rhythm of the language, can be the cause of problems in translation. Should the translation then involve the use of the same rhythmical units, which would mean going against the characteristics of the target language, or their statistical counterparts, thus submitting to the tyranny of phonetic usage? Another type of challenge in the translation of poetry is any attempt to introduce into the target language forms specific to a particular cultural or literary context. The most difficult case would be one that tests the consistency of the source language system, both in terms of its purely formal aspects and aesthetic function. It then becomes glaringly evident that translation must necessarily involve the creation of a “new” text, whose shadow in some ways obscures the source, being at the same time its counterpart. In less metaphorical terms it could be said that something always happens at the expense of something else. Those unavoidable choices prevent equipping the translated work with the complementarity of the original. Otherwise the translation would become a treatise of endless footnotes.

Miron Białoszewski’s poetry seems to have been written so as to be a translator’s worst nightmare. Considering the effort it requires to translate it “from Polish into

ours,” such perception is not surprising. Still, the task has been undertaken and by someone with “natural” skill at translating poetry.

Translations published in *Postwar Polish Poetry*<sup>1</sup> (first edition in 1965 and third edition, expanded, in 1983) include five of Białoszewski’s early works: “And Even, Even If They Take Away the Stove” (*Ach, gdyby, gdyby nawet piec zabrali*); “A Ballad of Going Down to the Store” (*Ballada o zejściu do sklepu*); “Garwolin a Town for Ever” (*Garwolin miastko na zawsze* – not discussed in this essay); “Self-Portrait as Felt” (*Autoportret odczuwany*); and “My Jacobean Fatigues: My Jacobs of Tiredness” (*Moje jakoby znużenia*).

At first glance, the poems (“And Even...” and *Ach gdyby...*) use different editing for the titles. The translation retains the English convention, while Polish editions follow Polish typography (with some anthologies capitalizing only the first word, and others rendering the whole title in capitals). Quotation marks disappear in translation, together with the ellipsis at the end of the title. The introduction of italics (present in the translation of all titles) does not compensate for the missing quotation marks. The mechanism of transaction can be observed in the way the two-verse structure of the original title is divided and in the transformation that the second verse undergoes as a result. The change in print size, accompanied by a graphical separation of the two lines, reduces the second line to a kind of commentary (in an effort to express the role of *Moja niewyczerpana oda do radości*). Paradoxically, this change does not involve any drastic change of tension between the two parts of the title. On the other hand, the translator decided not to further emphasize the quoted verse.

The first three pseudo-stanzas retain their character in translation, both in terms of layout, as well as organization of individual lines. Syntactic parallelisms are preserved: “Mam piec – Zabierają mi piec – Oddajcie mi piec” (*I have a stove – They take away my stove – Give me back my stove*), and the proximity of the translation to the original can be observed in the identical distribution of the components of the utterance (repeated syntactic arrangement). Especially noteworthy are only the additional spaces between the final word and the exclamation mark, and the spaces between individual exclamation marks. Such graphical fragmentation enhances the expressive force of exclamations. On the other hand, this layout may result from the editor’s preferences.

Further on, the “exact” method of translation (word for word; precise transposition of graphic arrangement) is abandoned in favor of a more free approach. The line *They took it away* („Zabrali”), which expresses despair, grief and the acceptance of fate, is attached to the segment:

*What remains is*  
*a grey*  
*naked*  
*hole*

<sup>1</sup> Miłosz, Czesław. *Postwar Polish Poetry: An Anthology*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

The shift preserves the principle of “conservation of mass,” following the ellipsis of the final line of the original stanza („szara naga jama”), which concluded the stair-like progression of the sharp left margin.<sup>2</sup> It seems obvious that in this case that the period is transferred to the end of a stair-like division: “szara / naga / jama.” The final pseudo-stanza consistently omits one variation (or realization) of the cluster: “sza-ra-na-ga-ja-ma”, impossible to render in English, because of monosyllabic structure of words (apart from *naked*) in the cluster *greynakedhole*. In addition, the euphonic effect disappears, since the perfect vowel alliteration of the original has no equivalent, either on the level of vowels, or compensated by consonants. Thus, it is impossible to distort the sense of belonging of individual syllables to particular words, which, in Polish, evokes associations with the syllabic Japanese language. Of the two options: to remain faithful to the “letter” of the text or to retain its literary conceit, the translator chose the former, while removing the elements which would be non-functional in the translation. This is what happened to the indentation at the beginning of the line “szara.” Not even “szaranagajama” remains since, according to the translator, “such a whim” is essentially devoid of function and does not contribute to the translation. As for other minor differences in punctuation, it is worth mentioning the colon at the end of the line: “I to mi wystarczy.” which has been replaced with a semicolon in *And this is enough for me*; In the original the colon’s role was to break the necessary fragmentation of lines, to constitute a sort of “opening.” On the other hand, the semicolon separates the self-referential statement by the speaker (*And this is enough for me*;) from the subject of that statement.

The translation of “Ode” can be characterized as a dictionary realization, or one based on simple semantic equivalence. On the other hand, it could be accused of excessive conservatism and consequent elimination of non-functional elements. While there can be no objection to its correctness, the translation leaves the reader unsatisfied. It sacrifices too much, without offering a comparable poetic effect in return.

In contrast the poem “A Ballad of Going Down to the Store” is an example of translatability. Once again, the translation reveals a discrepancy in typographic conventions – the first word of the first verse is printed in capitals with no aspirations to create additional focus for arrangement. Apart from this, the translation remains close to the original. This can be attributed to the balladic quality of the text devoid of traps. The original itself invites an economical translation technique. Few departures from the standard language, such as the use of complementary forms of “zeszedłem” (bordering on incorrectness) have no counterpart in translated text. Other differences are limited to punctuation as required by English. The first line of the pseudo-stanza *I Entered ...* ends in an opening of sorts (“:”), while in the original it clearly functions as closure (“;”). The reason for such a procedure is revealed in the following line, where instead of a comma, which would promise continuation, a period appears, thus disrupting the sentence character of the whole pseudo-stanza.

<sup>2</sup> Sharp margin is used to introduce a change either in the object or the manner of perception. Cf. W. Sadowski, *Tekst graficzny Białoszewskiego*, Warsaw 1999. p. 46.

It is clear that the changes follow the economy of the text, only occasionally rearranging the emphases. The absence of punctuation in the last segment of the original is not retained: the comma after the first line not only separates the repetitions, but necessitates “taking a breath” between the lines. While *Ballada...* does not insist on clear end-of-line pauses, “A Ballad...” clearly indicates its delimitation units. These minor differences do not change the fact that the English text follows the Polish original, limiting the changes within the acceptable economy of expression. It should be emphasized, however, that here the translator would not be faced with choices so radical as in the case of “And Even ...”

A quick comparison of *Autoportret odczuwalny* with “Self-Portrait as Felt” reveals the lack of lines in consisting wholly of dashes. Such a grouping of typographic characters stresses not only a different writing convention (absence of text is not simply noticeable, but rather specifically indicated), but also the status of the line. The procedure to replace an empty verse with a marker of absence does not have the same function as leaving a space between lines. While an empty verse breaks the stanza apart, one “burdened” with typography locates itself clearly within its tissue. Miłosz’s decision to remove the line containing only dashes cannot be easily explained. The ellipsis found in the second pseudo-stanza serves to assemble the latter into one continuous whole. However, the omission present in the last pseudo-stanza (*Autoportret*) results in its division into two smaller units. At first glance, this may seem inconsistent. While the replaced units have the same graphical representation, the substitutions have opposite effects: a complete ellipsis vs. a line with removed typography. After all, the form of the text already allows (on the most superficial level) for both readings. To choose between them (as it happens in translation) is to extract the form (or some of its features) from the realm which generates (potential) meaning, by assigning to it a fixed conventionalized (present) meaning. Removal of the graphical elements is also an aesthetic statement: form is treated as a matter of secondary importance to the content, and thus can be modified in accordance with the accepted mode of interpretation.

It is worth taking a closer look at the two enjambments which were abandoned in the translation: “Zawsze jednak / pełza we mnie” (*Yet always is crawling in me*), and “Noszę sobą / jakieś swoje własne / miejsce” (*I bear by myself / a place of my own*). In the first enjambment the predicator is detached from an adverbial – the translation restores the relationship, while retaining the inversion within the syntactic structure with the subject postponed to the end of the sentence:

Zawsze jednak pełza we mnie	<i>Yet always is crawling in me full or not full</i>
pełne czy też niepełne, ale istnienie	<i>existence</i>

“Self-Portrait” removes (purges) elements that would emphasize the distance between the speaker and the content. By avoiding contrastive conjunctions, which only

“blur the vision”, the translation formulates statements in a more direct manner. A similar “cleansing” takes place as the second enjambment is deleted:

Noszę sobą	<i>I bear by myself</i>
<i>jakieś swoje własne</i>	<i>a place of my own</i>
<i>Miejsce</i>	

The accumulation of expressions highlighting “selfness” might seem as inept translation of: ““*jakieś swoje własne*”. What in Polish is an enumeration of “*swoje*” and “*własne*”, in English constitutes one collocation “my own”. “My own” is after all both “*własne*”, but also etymologically “*swoje własne*”. The reason for the deletion of the enjambment was thus a conscious decision to include the phrase a place of my own. This arrangement, by using the indefinite article *a*, expresses the perceptual elusiveness of place as space. The place, which in the original escapes all determination. In translated text there is no escape, as it is caught between indeterminacy (*a*) and definite belonging (*my own*). Therefore, moving *my own* to the next line would be completely meaningless. Polish syntactic pattern would make it impossible to express the meaning of “*jakieś*” through the article *a*. (one possible rendering would be: *my own / place*).

What is different in the two cases of missing enjambment to the faithfulness to word order in Polish (and its semantic implications). The omission of the first enjambment does not disrupt the syntax of the original pseudo-stanza. The second ellipsis, however, focuses, through transposition, on the most accurate representation of the transient nature of the word “*miejsce*” (acting in the role of an object). The above examples show that the interpretation adopted by the translator, while being a reduction (in terms of form), is not reductionist, as the changes can be explained both within the realm of the “new” text and in confrontation with the original.

“My Jacobean Fatigues: My Jacobs of Tiredness” (*Moje Jakuby znużenia*) is a poem which most visibly illustrates Miłosz’s translation practice as applied to Białoszewski’s texts. It is impossible not to address the extension of the title from one phrase: “*Moje Jakuby znużenia*” to two, apparently redundant versions – main: “My Jacobean Fatigues” (*My Jacobean trouble/problems*) and secondary (the translation of the proper title): “My Jacobs of Tiredness.” The omission of the poem’s dedication to Artur Sandauer is not surprising as it would not be understandable to English-speaking readers; however, the sort of compensatory multiplication of the title seems puzzling.

Once again the translator manipulates the “look” of the text, abandoning the graphical play of some lines being shifted away from the left margin. The positioning in relation to the margin in the translated text is the same for all lines. The first pseudo-stanza consisting of six lines has a very symmetrical structure: the first and fourth line start from the left margin. Onsets of these short lines (in the case of the first, the onset is also the end of the line) not only have opposite meanings,

but the positioning of “Wyżej” and “Najniżej” allow for graphical representation of the spatial arrangement of represented world. The two poles are “incidentally” grammatically (semantically) related: “wyżej” (higher) and “najniżej” (lowest). The proximity of the two words is emphasized by their positioning; a vertical reading brings closer the two points, that of what is observed („wyżej”) and that of the observer („Najniżej – ja”). The translation focuses on highlighting the contrast by breaking the first pseudo-stanza into two smaller ones, and additionally abandoning the shift in positioning. The phonological and morphological similarity between the two words describing height also disappears as a consequence of different rules which govern gradation of adjectives in English (Higher and Lowest). Without the shifted adjectives, the translated poem appears somehow “slimmer” when compared to the original, but this impression is not validated semantically, unless secondarily, when juxtaposed with the original.

The alignment of the text to the left results in the loss of graphical arrangement which highlighted specific grammatical form, that of comparative and superlative adjective. The first set of adjectives is followed by another: “ale gorzej” and “gorzej.” The connection between them is disturbed (or enhanced) by a series of four consecutive negative sentences (also aligned).

With the system of alternating indentations the text ceases to be just a poem; it becomes a graphic text in which the visual aspect is no less important, but perhaps even more important, than the phenomena resulting from its the reading. Miłosz’s interpretation appears to be focused on reading, one performed against the need to watch rather than recite that is inscribed in the text. His translation is not limited to changing the medium (language), but it also interferes with the genre and identity of the work. The resulting simplification is clearly aimed at the presentation of the content (in the ordinary sense), while ignoring the semantic implications of graphic form.

On the level of language, the translation also surrenders the text’s semantic and syntactic polyvalence. “[H]ejnały kształtu zamieszkiwania dotyku” is expressed in two lines separated by a comma (just like the third element of the list). It should be noted, however, that in order to reflect the connection between “kształtu” and “zamieszkiwania”, the preposition of would have to be used, which would nullify the primary, enumerative, function of the list.

In the second half of the pseudo-stanza, the apparent pause (a comma could be inserted after “Najniżej – ja”) appears in translation as a period at the end of the line, thus creating a clear dividing line. This division does not stand out in the original; it seems that there is an organic connection between the speaking subject and reality. In the end it is out of the hero’s breast that the steps of reality emerge. The placement of the speaker’s determinations in front of the specific points of reference for the negation “Nie tylko nie jestem / którymś z testamentowych bohaterów”, and later “ale gorzej niż fładra (i.e. me, by default – T.Ł.) / przylepiona do dna na zdychanie”, confirms the lack of compatibility between the hero and his world. This effect disappears in the translation, in which, surprisingly, the graphic arrangement

acts as a semantic unifier for the text. The dramatic tone of the final appeal of the original: “Uderz mnie / konstrukcjo mojego świata!!” is lost as a result. The original’s mass of text may “strike” visually, but the translation has stripped the blow of all its power through unified graphic form. The potential energy of the original could release true power (and collapse the construction of the world). In comparison, Miłosz’s translation resembles a stuffed tiger in the museum, which frightens only in the moment we forget where we are. The only trace of the dissonance between the hero and his world that is graphically highlighted in the translation is the additional period in the first pseudo-stanza, but such representation of dissonance is probably not enough to justify the “cosmic” disaster. It is therefore somewhat by chance that the character in the translated text avoids the true force of the impact.

The examples analyzed above illustrate how even a correct translation can provide a different reading of the poet’s words. Some decisions made by the translator can be seen as more or less justified, but it seems clear that the translated text tries to follow the content of the original as closely as possible (in the ordinary sense), sacrificing experimentation for the sake of clarity. Although it could be expected that the experimental features of the original were reflected in the “new” text, the benefits of such an approach did not seem significant enough to the translator. Instead, he tried to carefully express that which in his interpretation is the essence of “białoszewski-ness”.

*Translation: Paweł Pyrka*