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## Poetic translation and the system of literary culture

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# Articles

Edward Balcerzan

## Poetic Translation and the System of Literary Culture

Among the many expectations that the subject of this session\* arouses it seems to me that one is the most insistent: the expectation of a judgement of modern-day translation. We want to know whether our present-day art of translation can boast glories that do not fade when set beside the original, that bear comparison with the masterpieces of Polish translation achieved in past epochs. We want to know which schools of translation are in the ascendant, which modes of rendering foreign verse are irredeemably compromised. Irrespective of which part of this field one may choose to scrutinize—be it the habits of the individual translator, the subtleties of the translation process, the translator's ethical standards or the publisher's projects, and so on — in the end all the roads converge on a single point; that of the reconstruction of values. And this particular road is the most arduous. For the moment we attempt an honest assessment of the achievements of translation in the present day we encounter a host of weighty obstacles. They are all the more unpleasant for not having been brought to heel—and this is because they do not arise when one deals with original works.

The basic principle of evaluations of original works in the Polish language is the existence of a certain competence — both in the critic and in the literary community as a whole. If in practice distinctions are drawn between the capabilities of particular receivers, they are determined by subjective factors such as: taste,

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\* This is the text of a paper delivered at the 12th poetry festival in Łódź (in May 1978).

industry, routine or talent, but at the basic level of literary education the point of departure is one and the same. One has the same Polish language, the same cultural heritage. The shared rules that govern artistic communication in the present create the probability of all critical opinions coming together in a unitary value system that at least understands itself and can explain to itself its own internal dissensions. And if criticism of original works offers the public the sight of an arena of caprice which at times is a swarm with strange creatures and tends to breed hallucinations and delusions, it defines itself in the last instance as answerable to the public. Misprision, twisted notions and demagogic rhetoric may feature in it—agreed, but everyone as it were is able to perceive the misdeeds or mistakes of the reviewer and can hope that in the end justice will prevail. The reflections of critics are condemned to be provisional, and yet they are accepted: accepted on the basis of the probable correction of their misjudgements. This is the paradox of the reception of criticism. One does not believe the individual practitioner but trusts instead in the evolution of criticism. And if that fails, then one believes in the future, which will write the axiological truth about our poetry in its historical studies—of ourselves.

The situation is quite a different one when it comes to criticism of translations.

No standards crystallize here to identify competence, for there is no such thing as universal multilingualism. The original work is an open book to the public, but the work in translation is sealed up in its relation with the foreign original. Its value, consequently, remains mysterious and unclear. Admittedly, a person's activity as a translator can be evaluated by a narrow section of the literary community: those who know the original language or the literary tradition to which the original belongs may join battle over the value of the translation. All the same, their controversy will unfold in an area unamenable to the inspection of those critics and readers with no access to the foreign culture in question.

Seweryn Pollak has described two types of translations of Khlebnikov's poems: that of Anna Kamińska and that of Leon Śpiewak. He draws up a final balance of the debits and credits that accrue to these two schools of Khlebnikov translation. Jerzy

Ziomek pens an enthusiastic review of Zygmunt Kubiak's translation of Klemens Janicki. Robert Stiller polemicizes with Maciej Słomczyński over "Dżabbersmok", a translation of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky", and opposes to it his own translation and version of the title: "Żabrołaki". Finally, Edward Stachura is very positive in his recommendation of translations of Borges—by Edward Stachura! In each of the critical texts I have mentioned the main thing in dispute is value. And yet we can only fully enter the dispute if we confront Pollak's judgements with the Russian of the Cubist-cum-Futurist, if we place the judgements of Ziomek beside the Latin works of the Polish Renaissance poets. And so it goes on.

From the global perspective, the spheres of competence are infinitely smaller than the spheres of ignorance. Comparison of average (or above-average) multilingualism with the totality of the foreign literatures entering Polish culture in translated form compels us to acknowledge this disparity as the fundamental determinant of criticism of translations. One cannot imagine a single consciousness in which the history of all Polish translations from all foreign tongues would be displayed, with more or less the same points of reference. That is why we have no history of the literature translated into Polish. Instead of a synthesis what we have is an accumulation of separate contributions, which for all their brilliance and intelligence do not add up to a whole.

What is the solution? The course of our century has thrown up two trends, each proposing its own solution of the dilemmas depicted above.

Trend number one. Reflection on the art of translation drew conclusions from the particularity of its status and began to stress the features that distinguished it from knowledge of one's native literature: in the end it thus constituted itself a separate branch of humanistic study, a discipline with its own precise technical "apparatus" at its disposal, employing a specialist theoretical language, and answering only to its own demands. This accentuation of the professional element can be illustrated in Poland by successive studies by Olgierd Wojtasiewicz: from notions that remain relatively accessible to the humanist with a general education (his *Wstęp do teorii tłumaczenia—Introduction to the Theory of Translation*), to the increasingly esoteric papers of recent years, which require of the reader

a perfect knowledge of generative linguistics, semantic logic, and even mathematical logic. It is not the mode of exposition that is at issue here but the fundamental premise: translation theory, whether more or less hospitable to the reader, is essentially integrative. Its aim is to renew the—endangered—opportunity for every participant in literary life to come to an agreement on the subject of translation. It may be difficult to master the language of theory, but it is not impossible. Faced with the unattainability of complete multilingualism, let us rise above the ethnic frontiers of languages and compare our experiences by using universal codes! Such are the terms in which one. It fails to provide an answer to the fundamental question that

But the approach proposed by the theoreticians—theoreticians of the rank of Roman Ingarden, Jiří Levy, Isaak Rievzin, Roman Jakobson, and Alexander Ludskanov—is not after all the only valid one. It fails to provide an answer to the fundamental question that prompts our unease: how is one to evaluate the totality of translations within the framework of a single national literary culture? This is because the theories of the 20th century flee the normative and privilege epistemological interests instead. They list the peculiarities of the phenomenon and bestow equal attention on masterpieces and kitsch, on high art and low... And they fear the prescriptive as devils tremble in the face of the sign of the cross: they are well aware of the speed with which the prescriptions and discreet advice of their predecessors was discredited by the “life” of art itself. Of course there is one respect—the exception that proves the rule—in which modern translation theory exercises judgement. It is the case of machine translation. But literary interests have reaped scant profit from this. The tasks the translating machine is set to perform represent a clear reversal of the task of the poet-translator. Unified correct norms are valued in the computer world, whilst in poetry it is just the other way around: values are constituted through violations of grey, hackneyed correctness.

Trend number two. This is a criticism of translations that does not fear to judge, that sets off a dialogue with broad circles of readers. Whilst carefully assimilating theoretical concepts, it cherishes the memory of the age-old traditions of translation. A moderate avant-gardism is wedded to a prudent conservatism of language. Such criticism strives to preserve the sense of a sphere of compe-

tence. It wishes to discuss translations in such a way that the reader of the critical paper is not frightened off by his ignorance of the original language; at the same time it wants the reader to have the chance to verify the critic's opinion, even (let us stress) in cases in which the reader has no knowledge of the original language. Can this be achieved? Within certain bounds—yes it can.

There are such things as bilingual dictionaries. Hence the critic concentrates on the meanings of particular words (in the original and in the translation). The reader is able to confirm the lexical shortcomings of the translation, the verve of its triumphs—or at least he knows he is able to do so. And this yields the desired effect: a reading and an assessment that have credibility. Texts possess statistical features one can perceive with the naked eye, features one can measure. And so the critic hurls himself into totting up the number of lines, into measuring their length and revealing the places where they have been expanded or shortened. He reveals what the translator has left out and what he has added. The credibility effect is enhanced. There are types of order present in a work which can be depicted diagrammatically: orders of rhythm, intonation, instrumentation, which prompt one to hear the verse or perceive its graphic lay-out. It is hardly an accident that metrics—a subject that seldom evokes any great passions, especially in Poland—has played a significant role in the history of poetic translation. The attraction that a new verse-form exerts on the translator as he fulfils his task had already been realized by Piotr Kochanowski when, as he struggled with the *ottava rima* of Tasso, he wrote that “this metre, which is a most difficult one in our language and seems not to be to our taste, especially at a first reading” is nevertheless worth assimilating “in order to demonstrate that our tongue is no less rich than others.” Metrical inventiveness in the translator here acquires an unexpected patriotic motive. The form of the poem—in both theoretical and practical senses—is a source of passionate interest at the present time too, as is shown by the essays of Adam Ważyk, Artur Sandauer, and Jalu Kurek, which, what is more, present a variety of approaches to the subject. The metrical passions of the critic of a translation also, to my mind, possess an extra significance: that of competition. They enter the lists in the jousting match between the linguistic and the literary

critical approach to the text. If verbal analysis augments the authority of the linguist, metrics becomes the resort of specifically literary exegesis.

The criticism of translations produced in the 20th century has often been the work of the translators themselves (Kornei Chukovsky, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, Julian Tuwim, Czesław Miłosz). Acting, as I have said, under a compulsion to rescue the norms of a sphere of competence, it has introduced a multitude of valuable habits into the literary consciousness in general. The light it casts on the work differs from that cast by criticism of original poetry. It asserts the claims of the detail, of the structures that operate at the lowest levels of the work, of verbal colour, metrical form, and the role of the individual "grain" of the work. These tiny details can pass unnoticed in criticism of original works. But one cannot overlook them when criticizing translations—one cannot, for apart from them there is nothing, without them there is no chance of a credible judgement.

Let me illustrate how this critical idea functions by using a single concrete example. Let us take the "Popytka revnosti" of Marina Tsvetayeva. (Of the two Polish versions I know I have chosen the one that is most suitable to illustrate the method.)

The monologue of a woman rejected by her lover: both the original and the translation form a succession of dramatic questions, questions without replies, variations on the theme of the very first words of the text: "Kak zhivetsya s drugoyu – /Proshche?" The literal meaning is: "What is life like with another woman – /Somewhat simpler?" At first sight there are no glaring discrepancies between the Polish and the Russian versions.

Our reading has acquainted us with the scenario of a love intrigue in which a poor woman is thrown over for a rich woman. With Tsvetayeva it is the other way round: the man rejects riches and chooses poverty – in the psychological sense. The wealth of emotional life had been immense: regal and refined, it had as it were gathered into itself all the mythological magnificence of the history of the descent of man since Adam and Eve. The man—as Witkacy would have put it—was unable to bear this horrible tension and took refuge from complication in the cheap and simple-minded. Both the original and the translation depict the same conflict of values.

The original:

Kak zhivetsaya s prostoyu  
Zhenshchinoyu? Bez bozhestv?  
Gosudarynyu s prestola  
Svergshii (s ovohososhed).

The translation:

Jak żyje się z *tuzinkową*  
Kobietą? Bez uczuć wyższych?  
Gdy strąciłeś z tronu królową  
I sam spadłeś (ją rzuciwszy).

The original:

“Sudorog da pereboyev  
Khvatit! Dom sebe naimu.”  
Kak zhivetsaya s lyuboyu—  
Izbrannomu moyemu!

The translation:

“Wstrząsów i nieporozumień—  
Dosyć! Sam sobie życie wypełnię”.  
Jak żyje się z pierwszą z tłumu  
Tobie—wybranemu przeze mnie!

The translation would seem to reproduce the general outline of the thought of the original: the same conflict, the same order of motifs, the same euphoria and bitterness. But the critical method that pays attention to detail demands of us that we measure word against word, rhythm against rhythm, and tone against tone — and all in our good time. And such are the results. Rhythm: different in both of the poems. Tsvetayeva adheres to the canon of toned syllables, and uses trochees, both pure trochees and catalectic or hyper-catalectic ones. There are subtle variations in the rhythm. Strict regularity prevails as regards the form of the stanzas. This strictness communicates an essential fact: the art of speaking in metre bridle the emotions. The outrage expressed in the monologue is combined with a refined elegance of style. Only thus can the proud, rejected woman win a victory over simple-mindedness. Thus the rigour of the versification expresses the psychological strategy of the speaking subject. The greatest affective passion is manifest in the closing



strophes: the dam breaks, and regular quatrains are no longer able to rein in the tension. The sentence spills over the edge of the strophe. Enjambements between the stropes appear:

Rynochoyu noviznoyu  
 Sytyi li? K volshbam ostyv.  
 Kak zhivetsya vam s zemnoyu  
 Zhenshchinoyu bez shestyxh

— and the strophe ends, but that is not the end of the sentence “bez shestyxh chuvstv”: the word *chuvstv* jumps over to the following line. And in the translation? There is of course enjambement, but the rhythm — the *regularity* of the rhythm — has been destroyed. Not a trace remains of the trochaic pattern. Alliterations and etymological figures like “S poshlinoy bezsmertnoy poshlosti” have gone by the board. The Polish translator writes in his prose: “Z podatkiem od tego banał powodzi”. One might think one were reading an excerpt from a review, not an actual poem. The difficult, strained sound-patterns of the original, which resemble runic speech and can even pose problems of enunciation for Russians themselves—

Svoistvenneye i s'edobneye—  
 Sned'? Preyestsya — nie pieniaj...

constitute a many-layered artistic transmutation of everyday speech. All that remains in the translation is just that—the everyday. The sentences are clumping, are even too clumping for everyday speech. They belong to the same species as the exchanges in a cookery book:

Właściwsza, bardziej do smaku przypadła  
 Strawa? Gdy przeje się — nie obwiniaj...

This is neither poetic nor linguistically naturalistic.

The words that disappear: one ought also to ask after them. Tsvetayeva writes:

Kak zhivetsya vam s chuzhoyu  
 Zdeshneyu? Rebrom — lyuba?

*Rebro* is a rib. What rib can this be? Earlier Biblical motifs had appeared; the context suggests the solution: it is Adam's rib. Do you love her so much—is she so close to you—that it seems

God fashioned her for you from one of your ribs? What irony, what pain—biological pain. And here is the Polish translation:

Jak żyje ci się z tą nową,  
Tutejszą? Pasuje prosta?

No, that certainly “does not fit in with” (*nie pasuje*) the poetics of Tsvetayeva! This is how “the simple woman,” not the “regal” one, might formulate her questions.

Grammar: the original uses impersonal definitions of actions. How does one live, how does one get up, how does one sing? The deserter, the turncoat, the traitor— forfeits his personal traits, ceases to be a person, becoming a thing instead. The grammar depersonalizes him. The Polish translation is quite simple-hearted. How are you living, how do you pass your time, are you not fretting, don’t you see, do you rise and shine? No trace of humiliation, no sign of revenge. Nothing but pity and sentimental feeling. Where Tsvetayeva polemicizes with the melodramatic tradition, the translation propels the verse back into the arms of the melodramatic.

As one can see, the method applied above need not rest content once it has listed the details, although the details are its point of departure. Chukovsky reiterated on many occasions that a succession of quite marginal infringements is enough to destroy a style: a change in the meaning of a word here; an alteration in the rhyme pattern there; and elsewhere, a refiguring of the intonation—and a totally different world-view is the result. As a rule this world-view is a ready-made one, a prefabricated cliché from the native tradition. The same is true of poetic language. I have pointed out the disinclination in Tsvetayeva’s translator for instrumental experiment. This glaring failure to *hear* the verse is the besetting sin of our translators. Could this partly stem from our poets’ prevalent tendency to construct poetic statements in the mode of conceptual reflection, detracting from their phonetic expressivity? And yet translation ought to make good the shortcomings of Polish, to draw out its still untapped possibilities. After all, that is the reason why one imports: not just imports market goods, but products of verbal art too.

Criticism of translation is unable to shake itself free of the oldest controversy in the history of the translator’s art: that between adaptation, which entails oblivion of the alien, and the use of

equivalents for the original, whose foreignness is employed to introduce new elements into the domestic poetic system. History is moving towards the elimination of all forms of offhand adaptation and free-and-easy paraphrase of works in foreign tongues – all forms of distortion and transmutation of the style and poetics of the prototype. In the past our literature—and other literatures too—was fed a rich diet of paraphrase and adaptation. The foreign text was treated as a pretext to speak upon a theme of one's choice. Now only those departures from the original that are objectively necessary are tolerated: the preference is for an optimum of equivalence between texts: namely, for equivalents for its key structures, such as the conception of the subject, the lyrical situation, the hierarchy of values, the condition of the language, the relations between the words and the temporal and spatial parameters. The critic says: yes, I know transpositions are inevitable when it comes to reconstructing a text, but in a translation the man who speaks, the world that exists, and the type of artistry present must be the same—or as similar as is possible in the Polish language.

Why is this?

It cannot be simply a matter of the pressure of some abstractly conceived notion of fidelity. There must be forces at work in the local literature—forces that are not to be sneezed at—helping to bring about this situation. The system of literary culture has doubtless created mechanisms—on the side of both sender and receiver—to promote the emergence of the truth about foreign literary doings, to compromise or rule out the pseudo-reconstructions that would falsify the image of another literature. Is it simply a matter of a hunger for truth and authenticity? Of a highly developed sensitivity to messages that lie beyond the control of the generality and thus are particularly liable to mystification? The translator as foreign correspondent, passing on information about another, far-removed cultural space, would be a person whose credentials one would inspect (for this is at least possible in a world whose forces are hidden from the individual, evolving in a manner he does not comprehend)? I would not even rule out that hypothesis. The successful career of the literature of fact, the cult of the document—those well-known and oft-discussed phenomena—remain closely linked with the value attached to translation.

I propose nevertheless to review the question in a perspective more closely related to literature and the qualities peculiar to it.

In many respects a poetic translation is like a quotation. The similarity permits one to explain the absolutely basic meaning of the translator's efforts. The circulation of the quotation and the functioning of the translation manifest one and the same semiotic mechanism: the mechanism of the polyphonic. Perhaps one ought to speak of the self-regulating mechanisms of a culture subject to polyphonic standards. It acts to counterbalance the process that melts original ideas into borrowed ones with another process that serves to distinguish between the native and the foreign. Let us note that both the quotation and the translation combine these two tendencies. They introduce foreign words into contemporary artistic parlance—at the same time remaining mindful of their foreign, archaic or non-Polish origin. Taken together, these two activities structure the polyphony of literary life, as well as that of related areas, such as music or film.

With regard to the quotation: the act that annexes a pre-existent text and bends it to the purposes of our poem, our critical paper, our film or our musical work is sharply contrasted with the act of revelation of its foreign authorship. This revelation does not always occur at the level of the text, as is the case with the literary epigraph (the epigraph from Jan Lechoń in Teodor Parnicki's *Tylko Beatrycze*, the epigraph "Śniła się zima" in Adam Ważyk's "Sen", and so on). It is often left to the receiver to discover the author. A theatre audience may fail to discern the filmic quotations in Adam Hanuszkiewicz's production of *Balladyna* (the figure of Goplana is modelled on the film comic strip figure of Barbarella). When watching a certain scene from Konrad Swinarski's production of *Wyzwolenie*, the spectator may miss the quotation from the version of *Kordian* presented in Opole years ago by Jerzy Grotowski (the monologue from the hospital bed). The point is, however, that according to the rules of this particular game discovery of the source of the quotation does not equal the unmasking of "plagiarism": quite the reverse—it is following up the line of interpretation wished for by both directors.

In a translation the rendition into Polish of a pre-existent structure—which is pressed into the service of our native literature—is

accompanied by a marking of this structure as secondary to its foreign-language prototype.

“Culture is collective memory,” Uspensky and Lotman declare. To make use of the foreign word\* is to renew the memory of the system and is justified in a series of ways from every point of view of social understanding. From the point of view of the author, the foreign word is the precondition of acceptance by the public; in this case “foreign” is tantamount at one and the same time to “nobody’s” and “common to receiver and sender.” In 1921 Karol Irzykowski wrote:

The precondition for any and every art—but not its essence—is that a distant echo travels down a set of grooves already inscribed in the soul, grooves that create the possibility of rapid connections of ideas — emotional short-circuits between distant points.

The idea is not a new one. What makes one ponder, however, is the fact that recent times—whose most radical avant-garde has, after all, opposed the rules of dependence on a heritage—have succeeded neither in removing it from the cultural system nor in invalidating it once and for all. Where is the critic who has not sought to win public support for innovatory works by unearthing the precedents that as it were foreshadowed this very kind of innovation—an innovation that proves to have been long known to general experience? *Passé* literary productions are not the only ones to seek refuge in the nameless common ground of the tradition: works whose poetics are at the extreme of anti-traditionalism do so too. Let us take a look at a totally “extremist” avant-garde: at Dadaism and extra-rational poetry. Dadaism quoted the example of childhood games: they were its predecessors and “grooves already inscribed.” Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh, who launched the programme of extra-rational poetry, cited the example of the way men behave in situations of great emotional tension, mystical ecstasy and ritual magic. The defenders of Miron Białoszewski—in the period when Białoszewski was considered to be the begetter of an ugly

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\* The Polish *cudze słowo* can also refer to the term for “quotation” or “inverted commas.” This of course enhances the validity in Polish of the comparison between quotation and translation [translator’s note].

gibberish—likewise said: well, what of it? after all, you readers have also known your speech to be crippled when a privacy beyond control submerges it. Well, Białoszewski makes poetry of these verbal lurchings which are not his alone but yours too: a new beauty, and at the same time, a new ethics of praise of the everyday.

Nevertheless, the authority of the common speech that is no man's possession, and which may be distant in time or currently developing, is lacking in suggestiveness. For it is totally anonymous. Hence literary innovations refer at the same time to the foreign word that assumes the form of an entire foreign work, the specific achievement of an individual writer. The native achievement is inserted into the new text by means of various techniques of quotation, by the play of allusion, reminiscence and paraphrase. The achievement in a foreign language is adapted by means of the translator's techniques. The dramas and novels of Witkacy, the novels of Joyce, Bely's *St. Petersburg*, the "Wyprawy krzyżowe" of Białoszewski represent enormous accumulations of techniques of citation and translation of this kind. Dadaism—mentioned above—and its surrealist extension devised the rules of collage. One notes that the poetics of collage accord the quotation a privileged place. Alongside the ready-made products of an anonymous culture, quotations that disclose the authorship of the borrowed text can also feature in a collage. Similarly, extra-rational poetry, the secret tongue that appears to make a mockery of all compromise and to reach out beyond the borders of human culture—towards an onomatopoeia that imitates the language of landscapes, towards the languages of birds—cannot continue in the long run without making use of quotations. One of its final manifestoes is a peculiar anthology of the foreign innovations that anticipated the "zaum". Not only does Kruchonykh cite examples from situations in colloquial speech, he also refers to Hamsun (Ylayali, the name of an imaginary girl), quotes Sologub, Dostoevsky and Gogol, and declares that the strange names they have thought up for characters and places are akin to the words devised by extra-rational poetry.

If a quotation can provide an authority that furthers the acceptance of new ideas, the same can apply to a quotation from a foreign literature—presented in the form of a translation. A cons-

truction that other societies have tried and tested, a poetics approved by a foreign community, will interact with the development of the native poetry, stimulating invention, making us blush to be behind the times, providing encouragement whenever the domestic public rejects forms of speech or models of ethical behaviour that surprise it. The translation brings calm into the passions of negation, silences the conservatism of the backwater, promotes humanist education. How vitalizing were the impulses sent forth by the translations of Pablo Neruda or Garcia Lorca of the mid-nineteen-fifties, impulses that counteracted an atrophy of the imagination! Translations soon became an active part of the change of awareness: the word *thaw*, in fact, the metaphorical term for a stormy episode in our most recent cultural history, derives from a translation (the *Ottepel* by Ilya Ehrenburg). In 1956, 1957 and 1958 a series of new translations of Vladimir Mayakovsky were published. Successive volumes of his works appeared. This created a particular kind of literary configuration: the new Mayakovsky, who was only just beginning to address us with the full force of his voice, was contrasted with the "Mayakovsky-speak" of the "period of schematism." (As in the *Obrona Grenady* of Kazimierz Brandys.) There appeared a poem—a very short poem, in fact—which, read in isolation from the situation at that time, would be simply like a fable by Krasicki or La Fontaine. It was "A Verse about Differing Tastes":

Powiedział  
     koń,  
         spojrzawszy na wielbłąda:  
 „Jak śmiesznie  
     ten koń garbaty  
         wygląda!”  
 Zaś wielbłąd zawołał:  
     „To koń?... Kochany!...  
 Toż z ciebie  
     zwykły wielbłąd  
         nieuformowany”.  
 I tylko Bóg siwobrody  
     pamiętał,  
 że to  
     różnych gatunków  
         zwierzęta.

[The horse said, having looked at the camel: "how funny that hunchbacked horse looks!" The camel for its part cried: "That's a horse?... My dear man!... You're an ordinary misshapen camel." And only God the greybeard remembered these beasts were of different kinds.]

The fact that this fable had been written by Mayakovsky (and translated on the other hand by Anatol Stern) is the very thing that lends it its weight of significance. For here is Mayakovsky saying: No! to the monistic type of agitational poetry that had cited Mayakovsky as its exemplar. He is contemptuous of blindness and frames an apologia for the very pluralist ethics and aesthetics the time so strongly desired.

I do not wish to ascribe any demonic qualities to the role of the translation. What I am talking about is co-operation, companionship, aid. The translation tends to furnish the accompaniment to processes that are occurring in the native literature—to the main melodic line of original work. The translation that acts as a quotation is the optimal case, and dovetails with the directives of the original. (Had Stern employed the form of the apocryphal verse, he would have been imposing his own ideas upon Mayakovsky and his translation would have been a misunderstanding.) Adaptation is the fruit of reception: the reader always takes over the text, inserting it into the system of his own experience. An adaptation by the translator would be a "prepared piano" playing an accompaniment of false notes. The receiver would feel that his own place had been assumed for him, prematurely—he would feel cheated. That is why the search for artistic equivalents is the translator's reply to the real needs of his own culture.

Admittedly, there is an area in which the translator has a time-honoured right to adapt: when translating children's books. The imagination of the child is synchronic and one-dimensional. The child-addressee has no ear for the tensions between innovation and tradition, it does not keep abreast of the temporal and spatial ebb and flow of the foreign word.

And poetry written for adults? I would not say one ought to wage a blind, inquisitorial campaign against the notions of adaptation that crop up again and again nowadays in the art of poetic translation. If these are fully fledged conceptions, with an internal coherence and energy of their own, then they can occupy the zone that lies



*inbetween* original work and the work of the translator. They can create values of a tertiary nature. Admittedly, I do not perceive any particularly strong influx of such ideas (there have only been isolated attempts, such as those of Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz). But since, as I have already mentioned, adaptations in the 18th-century mode of intervention in the original text are proving so deep and aggressive in other cultural fields—in the arts of spectacle, of theatre and film—one cannot preclude the possibility that ultimately the vortex of adaptation will suck poetry under too. Nevertheless, this vortex ought not to drown the authentic art of translation. Meanwhile, within the art of translation frequent “leeway for adaptation” constitutes a hindrance. It increases the hazards of the arbitrary, which in turn merely add to the confusion in which the translation pretends to be a translation (though the pretence is an inconsistent one), pretends to be a quotation (though its reproduction of the prototype is a shady one). Blithe unconcern becomes the sin of many translations.

“Poka zemlya yeshcho vertitsya, poka yeshche yarak svet” Bulat Okudzhava sings in his beautiful ballad entitled *François Villon*. The measure of the words increases the clarity of the images. “Dopóki ziemia się jeszcze obraca” is an abstract and notional vision, cast in the form of a proverb, devoid of appeal to our sensual experience of grasping the world. „Dopóki światło jest jeszcze jaskrawe”: the words present a man who drinks in the sensuous beauty of nature, a beauty so intense as to cause one pain and to hurt the eyes. The Polish translator makes quite a good fist of the first half of the line. He writes: “Dopóki nam ziemia kręci się.” The second half of the line however is given the “treatment” of adaptation. The translation reads: “dopóki jest tak czy siak!” Quite. For whenever a poetic translation can go “either way” \* – it is neither fish nor flesh but merely a red herring.

Transl. by *Paul Coates*

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\* The literal meaning of *tak czy siak* [translator’s note].