The Poetics of Translation
According to Edward Balcerzan

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A few dates: it has been 50 years since *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego* (*The Poetics of Creative Translation*)[1] was first published. In this article, Edward Balcerzan, a young researcher of literary translation and a translator of poetry postulated that the poetics of translation should become the subject of rigorous literary study. Thirty years after its initial publication, this key text, translated into many other languages[2] and included in numerous anthologies,[3] was included in an expanded format in Balcerzan's book *Literatura z literatury (strategie tłumaczy)* (*Literature From Literature* [*translator's strategies*]); two decades have gone by since that time.

In addition to *The Poetics of Creative Translation*, the year 1968 also saw the publication of Edward Balcerzan's doctoral dissertation titled *Styl i poetyka twórczości dwujęzycznej Brunona Jasieńskiego* (*Style and Poetics in the Bilingual Writings of Bruno Jasieński*), while his lecture *La traduction, art d'interpréter*, presented in May at an international translation studies conference in Bratislava, which under the banner of "Translation as an Art" was to create the foundations for a Europe-wide discussion about the maturation of translation theories, was subsequently published at the beginning of the post-conference book, edited by James S.

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[1] Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego* [*The poetics of artistic translation*], Nurt 1968, no. 8, p. 23-26.

[2] *Поетика уметничког превода*, trans. B. Rajčić, „Градина" [Ниш] 1974, nr.3; *Die Poetik der künstlerischen Übersetzung*, [in:] G.R. Kaiser, *Vergleichende Literaturforschung in den sozialistischen Ländern 1963-1979*, Stuttgart 1980; *La poetica della traduzione artistica*, [in:] *Teorie della traduzione in Polonia*, ed. L. Costantino, Viterbo 2009; *The Poetics of Artistic Translation*, trans. S. Gauger, [in:] *Literature from Literature. Essays on Translation by Edward Balcerzan and Stanisław Barańczak*. K. Szymanska, M. Heydel (eds.), intr. K. Szymanska, transl. S. Gauger, A. Lloyd-Jones, D. Malcolm, K. Szymanska, Lausanne 2018.

[3] See. *Polska myśl przekładoznawcza. Antologia*, ed. P. de Bończa Bukowski, M. Heydel, Kraków 2013.

Holmes,[4] who shortly afterward created a pioneering map of the developing field of translation studies.

In 2010, the poetics of translation was included in a programme covering a specialisation in translation co-created by Edward Balcerzan, taught in the Polish Studies programme at Adam Mickiewicz University, and since that time has remained a foundational subject initiating young adepts into this field of knowledge and the arcana of theoretical thinking about translation.

The "Poetics of Translation" as a Field of Academic Research

"For many researchers the existence of a separate field of humanities research which could be called the poetics of translation is not without its problems. Custom requires we talk more about the general theory of the art of translation, or about the obligations associated with criticism concerning translations, and not about poetics", wrote Balcerzan in 1968. He reprinted this passage in 1998, confirming its ongoing relevance to today.[5]

For Balcerzan poetics is one of the fundamental categories in the field of literary studies:[6]

> [...] in terms of today's broader understanding, he first answers a general question: "in what way does a work of literature exist?", and then he offers us tools for the analysis and interpretation – description and explanation – of works, which allow us to discover literature in an ontological context which is specific to it, without allowing it to be reduced to other contexts (e.g. sociology, psychology, etc).[7]

So how does Balcerzan's poetics of translation relate to poetics thus understood? Here our starting point will be the ontology of each work:

> The poetics of creative translations ought to [...] ask a similar question: "in what way do literary works translated from other languages exist and function?". It furthermore needs to provide proof that even though a translation is a "normal" literary work, even though its is governed by the same rules concerning structure, even then it exists differently than works within the field of one's native literature. And it is only after we pin down the essence of this difference, having shown how this works "differently", that we can concern ourselves with our research tools, with our own system of concepts and terminologies.[8]

Both the way in which the explanation is delivered and the mention of "rules relating to structure" clearly locate this presentation within the field of structuralism (The question "in what ways do literary works exist?" is a quote followed by a link to *Zarys teorii literatury* (*Outline*

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[4] *The Nature of Translation. Essays on the Theory and Practice of Literary* Translation, edited by James S. Holmes, Mouton – The Hague – Paris 1970.

[5] Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, [in:] *Literatura z literatury (strategie tłumaczy)*, Katowice 1998, p. 17-31.

[6] See Ibid, *Literackość. Modele, gradacje, eksperymenty*, Toruń 2013, p. 307.

[7] Ibidem, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, [in:] *Literatura z literatury*, p. 17.

[8] Ibidem, op. cit.

of Literary Theory) published in 1967, an excellent structuralist handbook written by Michał Głowiński, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska and Janusz Sławiński, which shaped the thinking of several generations of Polish Studies researchers). And yet we should not be surprised that poetics, understood as a toolkit, yet also as a theory of literary texts, the first degree of literary theory, emerges out of specific methodological concepts. In addition, as we read Balcerzan's *The Poetics of Creative Translations* we may find it hard not to think back to Roman Jakobson's *Linguistics and Poetics*, a text known within the field of Polish theoretical discourse mostly thanks to Krystyna Pomorska's translation dating back to 1960. Jakobson also defines the range of topics covered by poetics (let us recall this includes the *differentia specifica* of literary arts in relation to other forms of art and literary expression), pointing towards its significance within the broader field of literary studies ("it is [...] predestined [...] to occupy the most prominent position"), criticising also the process of "replacing the description of internal qualities contained within literary works with subjective, censoring judgements". Let us note that a similar thing happens when critics of translation enter the field of poetics. According to Jakobson, the obligatory objectivism in research should in this case ensure poetics becomes illuminated through linguistic study ("poetics can be considered an integral part of linguistics"), which would enrich its toolkit[9].

The poetics of translation did not in fact find its place on the map of translation studies outlined by James S. Holmes in 1975, and yet it seems that this author was thinking in a context similar to Balcerzan. The first of two branches he identifies within "pure translation studies" – theoretical translation studies or translation theory – should be "using the results of descriptive translation studies, in combination with the information available from related fields and disciplines, to evolve principles, theories, and models which will serve to explain and predict what translating and translations are and will be."[10] And here ontological obligations within translation theories become serious, and yet they merely represent here a point of access: according to Holmes the direction of activities leads from the specific to the general, meanwhile for Balcerzan this works in the opposite direction: first specifics, and then the instruments. In what way can literary works translated from a foreign tongue exist differently than a work of native literature is something this research questions, answering thus:

> The original literary work, written "straight away" in a given language, is a singular form of expression, or if one prefers, a one-off form of expression. The nature of a single original work is encapsulated by its uniqueness. [...] When it comes to translations, however, the process is reversed. The translation of a foreign language work will always be one of many possible versions. The essential nature of translations is therefore their multitude of variations and repeatability. The same foreign language work can be the basis of a large series of translations in any given language.[11]

9 See. Roman Jakobson, *Poetyka w świetle językoznawstwa*, trans. K. Pomorska, [in:] *W poszukiwaniu istoty języka. Wybór pism*, vol. 2, ed. M. R. Mayenowa, Warszawa 1989, pp. 77 & 79. This text first appeared in Pamiętnik Literacki 1960 no. 51 (2).

10 James S. Holmes, *The Name And Nature Of Translation Studies* (1975), p. 73, https://archive.org/details/Holmes1972TheNameAndNatureOfTranslationStudies [accessed 14 08 2018].

11 Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, [in:] *Literatura z literatury*, pp. 17-18.

According to Balcerzan this *Differentia specifica* of the artistic process can be presented thus:

> [T]ranslation exists in a "translation series". This series is the fundamental way in which creative translations exist. This is the unique essence of its ontology.[12]

"Translation series" is a term coined by Edward Balcerzan, a term rather unknown within the field of English language translation studies, which tends to instead use the term "multiple translations", or else a "series of translations"[13]. The conceptualisation of the English phrase is slightly different however to the conceptualisation of "series", it would seem: even more able to strip individual translations of their individuality. Indeed, Balcerzan's "translation series" also points towards a whole collection of texts – a collection set in linear order and creating an essentially single text thread (though wrapped up in numerous mutual reference points: each chronologically subsequent element would enter into relations with its predecessor(s), and in the case of translations – above all with the primary text)[14].

And yet the intertextual radiance of the original work can flow in a number of directions, although not all of these will be extended and not each chronologically subsequent element in the series will be in contact with its predecessor – because not all translators read the translations published before they began their work, sometimes this is due to an objective inability to do so, difficulties in terms of access to relevant texts, or due to their own carelessness or indifference, or even at times, their fears they will involuntarily and subconsciously absorb someone else's solutions.

A specific translation, existing in – even if only a potential – series of translations, being thus "one of many possible expressions" is always a statement on a specific topic. It is dependent on its own foreign language precursor/template. Balcerzan perceives this dependence in terms of categories of obligation, adding to the text published in 1997's *Poetics of artistic translation*: "The essence of a translation series is not the destruction of meanings designed and built into the original, but a tension between that which expands those meanings and that which condenses them."[15] Series do of course establish themselves in terms of differences, and yet this does not mean that anything goes. In a 2013 text written by Balcerzan titled *Literackość* (*Literariness*) we find mention of the "apparently instructional" genesis of poetics: the poetics of translation, as well as how the poetics of the original should be used to extract a one-off normative poetics[16]. And then for it to be represented in translation. As early as 1968, inspired by the analysis presented by Rievsin and Rozencwajg, the researcher wrote that "Objectively speaking there exist [...] two kinds of translation acts. The first can be termed as a 'proper translation', the second – 'interpretation'. In the former case, there is

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[12]Ibidem, p. 18.

[13]Soren Gauger, translator *Poetyki przekładu artystycznego* into English, makes use of the term 'a series of translations', see. *Literature from Literature. Essays on Translation by Edward Balcerzan and Stanisław Barańczak*. K. Szymanska, M. Heydel (eds.), Lausanne 2018.

[14]Anna Legeżyńska covered this in the chapter *Struktura serii* in her book *Tłumacz i jego kompetencje autorskie. Na materiale powojennych tłumaczeń z A. Puszkina, W. Majakowskiego, I. Kryłowa, A. Błoka*, pub. 2 expanded, Warszawa 1999.

[15]Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, [in:] *Literatura z literatury*, p. 21.

[16]See. ibid, *Literackość*, pp. 163 &172.

a search for equivalent semantic and emotional symbol counterparts for the original among the symbols available in the target language"[17]. And yet when those equivalents are not available, then "we must go beyond language and literature – instead we must make reference to reality. Seeking solutions in our knowledge of reality is the very act of interpreting the original"[18]. Usually it is not possible to completely define the differences between these two approaches, and yet one of them tends to dominate in translations, hence we can talk about "proper translations" and "interpretations", not only as types of translation acts, but also as types of texts. Clearly the dependence in terms of the foreign language original is more clearly defined in the first type of translation, the "proper" kind – and the duty it fulfils turns out to be duty not only to the primary text, but also interestingly enough to its author: "Proper translations attempt to do justice to the author of the original, to speak in their voice. [...] The person performing the translation once again, in their own fashion, tells about the world relating to the original [...]"[19].

Competing tales about the world presented in the original can, according to Balcerzan, compete very intensively: "a war of substituted worlds" in reference to a series of translations of the same source foreign language text is a concept we know from his later book *Tłumaczenie jako „wojna światów" (Translation as a "war of the worlds")* (2009)[20].

Duties are duties, and yet if the tale of the "person performing the translation" about the world of the original is not unique enough, too mechanical, shackled, and as a result, failing to achieve the optimal norms, it begins to touch upon the danger of being a replica. This is a dangerous thing, and yet not in all cases singularly negative: "It would seem that a chance for copies is in the style", according to Blacerzan. "Replicating foreign stylistic arrangements, apparently out of line with the spirit of native literature, is often a revolutionary act. It becomes a 'discovery of style' (J. Etkind)"[21].

For those who do not know *Poeziya i perevod* by Efim Etkind (1963), the above contention can be interpreted in line with the theory of poly-systems introduced a little later by André Lefevere, who claimed that alternative poetics in terms of dominant trends in any given poly-system must come from without, through translation, in order to effect changes in the currently established canon[22].

Similar relations mean that it is now even more interesting to ask what at that time was a source of inspiration for Edward Balcerzan. The version of *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego* (*Poetics of creative translation*) published by the journal *Nurt* contains "Bibliographical indicators" – a record of what in 1968 Balcerzan considered important for the study of translation. This included the volume *O sztuce tłumaczenia* (*On the art of translation*), edited by Michał

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[17]Ibid, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, Nurt, p. 25.

[18]Ibidem.

[19]Ibidem.

[20]See ibid, *Tłumaczenie jako „wojna światów": w kręgu translatologii i komparatystyki*, Poznań 2009, pp. 187–211.

[21]Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, Nurt, p. 26.

[22]See. André Lefevere, *Beyond the Process. Literary Translation in Literature and Literary Theory*, [in:] *Translation Spectrum*, ed. Marylin Gaddis Rose, New York 1981.

Rusinek, *Wstęp do teorii tłumaczenia* (*Introduction to translation theory*) by Olgierd Wojta-siewicz, along with writings by Russian authors – especially those by Etkind, Rievzin and Rozencwajg, but also a Czech anthology of translation theory edited by J. Levý.

Of obvious importance is Korney Chukovsky, quoted in the text itself, although not mentioned in the bibliography, along with his *Princypy chodożestwiennogo pierewoda* (1918). Instructional. This is how Balcerzan writes about them in *Literackość*:

> Of the genesis of a book published in 1918 titled *Printsipy khudozhestvennyi perevoda*, representing within Russian letters – in many ways still very relevant – ordering of the poetics of translation, its author would many years later write: "We needed a theory of creative translation equipping translators with simple and clear guidelines, so that every translator – even a regular one – could perfect their craft. These guidelines could also be dimly grasped earlier, but they had not been formulated as yet" (K. Czukowskij, *Vysokoe iskustvo. O Printsipach khudozhestvennyi perevoda*, Moscow 1964, p. 4).[23]

It was not much different when it came to Balcerzan's poetics of translation.

Poetics of translation in the light of Translator Studies

In postulating the institutionalisation of the poetics of translation, Balcerzan also points towards its horizons and potential sub-types or branches: the poetics of the process of translation, the poetics of the translated text, and the poetics of the translator. On this topic, we find James S. Holmes in agreement, highlighting among other things, a descriptive research into translations focused on the process of translation [*process-oriented descriptive translation studies*] as well as on the product, and so, on the text [*product-oriented DTS*][24].

What is intriguing in the way Balcerzan frames his ideas is the human dimension – in spite of convictions about structuralist depersonalisation, especially in terms of the poetics of the translator. Poetics seen from such a perspective – translatological, and thus perhaps not so much the author's (or perhaps "translational"?) – is something rather new. Lawrence Venuti called for the recognition of the (invisible) translator, even though this also includes a few years later (1995) Anthony Pym (2009)[25] and Andrew Chesterman, who proclaimed the establishment of translator studies – (2009)[26]. In our part of Europe, in the 1960s research into authoring poetics were well established, and it is enough to mention Mikhail Bachtin's *Problemy poetyki Dostoyevskiego* (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*), published in Russia in 1963 ("and instantly made popular in Poland" according to Balcerzan. – I used a 'shared' copy, lent to me for a short while by Michał Głowiński from IBL PAN"[27]) or else the monograph titled *Poetyka Tuwima a polska tradycja literacka* (*Tuwim's poetics and Poland's literary tradition*) written by Michał Głowiński himself (1962). And yet research into "translatory"

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[23]Edward Balcerzan, *Literackość*, p. 163.

[24]See. James S. Holmes, *The Name And Nature Of Translation Studies*, pp. 72-73.

[25]See. Anthony Pym, *Humanizing Translation History*, Hermes 2009 no. 42.

[26]See. Andrew Chesterman, *The Name and Nature of Translator Studies*, Hermes 2009 no. 42.

[27]Edward Balcerzan, *Pochwała poezji. Z pamięci, z lektury*, Mikołów 2013, p. 67; the Polish translation of Bachtin's work was produced by Natalia Modzelewska a few years later in 1970.

poetics was still in its nascent stage; the book by Wacław Borowy *Boy jako tłumacz* (*Boy as a translator*, 1922) was not reprinted for a long time to come. Meanwhile Balcerzan in 1968 sketched out his proposal for research procedures, placing the translator in the centre of his focus – not only the obvious issue of the translator's poetics, but also the poetics of the process of translation:

> The fundamental category within poetics is the category of the subject of a given statement. [...W]orks which are translated are most often "split in two": a certain part of the work comes, in some way directly, from the author of the original, and a certain other part – from the translator. The poetics of creative translation has to therefore be interested in a type of translator "behaviour" with regards to the author, where it clearly comes not to what the person translating might have been thinking, but that how their decision is preserved in the text.[28]

Here Holmes reasons quite differently – his descriptive research oriented on the translation process was to focus on what "precisely happens in the 'small black box' of the translator's 'mind' at the time they create a new more or less adequate text in a different language". Holmes proposed that this field should be called *translation psychology* or else *psycho-translation studies*.[29] For clearly understandable reasons, structuralist research on translations could not develop in this direction.

In order that the story told by the "author of the translation" about the world of the original not be a simple copy, authors can themselves perform certain transformations, the typology of which Balcerzan refers to by making reference to W. Kopitlov. This includes reduction, meaning a shortening of a section by cutting out certain elements or else stripping the stylistic structure of certain characteristics; inversion, meaning the changing of word order, phrasal combinations or more advanced sequencings; substitution, which involves a swapping of elements; or else amplification, meaning adding new elements to the text, often default, latent in the ellipsis. The more freely a translator makes use of these devices, the more their translation will head in the direction of interpretation, and not proper translation. The motivation for such actions can differ; the most interesting of these seems to be the one which emerges from entering into a polemic with the author of the original text. Balcerzan writes about "polemical translations" – created in order to question the value of the original; and also "latent translations" – more of his unique terminologies. "Latent translations" are signed (or rather: overwritten) with the translator's own name, the name of the author of the original being omitted. And yet this is not plagiarism – latent translations are according to Balcerzan "reconstructing in the target language certain fragments of the original, providing them with a new function and new meaning. It is not in fact an act of plagiarism seeing as it inherently recognises the connections between itself and the source text. The reader must recognise this latent aspect of the translation – only in this way can they recognise its polemical motivation"[30]. According to Balcerzan "latent translations" have much in common with that

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[28]Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, Nurt, p. 26.
[29]James S. Holmes, *The Name And Nature Of Translation Studies*, pp. 72, 73.
[30]Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, [in:] *Literatura z literatury*, p. 31.

which Tadeusz Pióro recently defined as a strategy of "poetic covers"[31], especially present in Polish poetry of recent years[32].

Let us finally note that Balcerzan's pioneering article is titled *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego* (*The Poetics of Creative Translations*). "Creative" rather than "poetic", even though much of the material quoted comes from the world of poetry. Not "literary" either, even though journeys towards inter-semiotic translations – broader than just literary genres – is not very much present in this article. "Creative" because it really is – and this seems to be a signature aspect in the writings by Edward Balcerzan – it refers to that which is most important: "the mysteries of artistic processes"[33]

translated by Mark Kazmierski

[31]See. Tadeusz Pióro, *Czas to biurokracja, którą tworzą wszyscy*, [in:] *Lekcja żywego języka. O poezji Andrzeja Sosnowskiego*, ed. G. Jankowicz. Kraków 2003, p. 107.

[32]I have dealt with this topic elsewhere, see. Ewa Rajewska, *Kariera coveru*, [in] *Kultura w stanie przekładu. Translatologia – komparatystyka – transkulturowość*, ed. W. Bolecki, E. Kraskowska, Warszawa 2012.

[33]Edward Balcerzan, *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego*, [in:] *Literatura z literatury*, p. 22.

KEYWORDS

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Abstract:

The article draws attention to a largely forgotten text by Edward Balcerzan titled *Poetyka przekładu artystycznego* published in 1968. Ideas presented by this Poznan-based translations expert and poetry translator echo the ideas presented some years later by James S. Holmes in his highly esteemed text *The Name And Nature Of Translation Studies* (1975). We should pay particular attention to the human aspect of his research methodologies, especially a branch of translations studies postulated by him 50 years ago: translator poetics. Another important term coined by Balcerzan is the concept of a "translation series".

POETICS

c r e a t i v e   t r a n s l a t i o n s

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