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Translation and Emancipation

c r i t i c s :
Wte i wewte: Z tłumaczami o przekładach,
 edited by Adama Pluszka. Gdańsk 2016.

The interviews with seventeen translators collected by Adam Pluszka in *Wte i wewte* [Back and forth] provide the reader with illuminating insights into the process of translation. Each of these approximately 20-page conversations focuses on a different aspect of translation, as seen through the eyes of translators whose background and experience vary. Pluszka asks his interviewees about their personal attitudes to translation, translation problems, Polish language and culture, and the status of the translator. Each question triggers a conversation or a reflection that has not been widely addressed in mainstream Polish culture. While Pluszka's book may be discussed alongside *O sztuce tłumaczenia* [On the art of translation] (1955) edited by Michał Rusinek, which brings together literary translators' comments on their translations, the latter book is primarily a collection of technical and theoretical observations, and as such resembles *O nich tutaj* [About them, here] (2016) edited by Piotr Sommer.¹ Accord-

ing to Sommer, *O nich tutaj* is a collection of the most important essays written by translators on the subject of translation that have been published in *Literatura na Świecie* [World Literature] in the past 30 years. In this sense, Pluszko's *Wte i wewte* and Zofia Zalewska's *Przejęzyczenie: Rozmowy o przekładzie* [A slip of the tongue: Conversations on translation]² both constitute a novel take on translation, especially in the context of Polish writings on the subject. They provide a platform for a different, more anecdotal and conversational, discussion of translation. Apart from *bona fide* translation issues, Pluszko is also interested in more elusive questions, such as the attitudes of translators to their texts, the feelings that they experience during translation and the broadly understood social, economic, cultural, and technical aspects of their work. Pluszko explores the political context of published texts, the behind-the-scenes of the cooperation with publishers and editors, and the problems associated with

¹ *O nich tutaj: Książka o języku i przekładzie*, ed. P. Sommer, Warsaw 2016.

² Z. Zalewska, *Przejęzyczenie: Rozmowy o przekładzie*, Wołowiec 2015.

translating particularly interesting or embarrassing sentences and texts. Ultimately, however, what is most striking about *Wte i wewte* is not so much the nature of the topics discussed, but the fact that translation is treated as a part of mainstream culture.

Until recently, translation did not raise much interest outside the professional circles. Indeed, such an important cultural phenomenon has been unfairly underrepresented and confined to the margins of literary and communication studies. Today, books similar to the ones edited by Zofia Zalewska or Adam Pluszka seem to respond to a growing social or even cultural demand. What has changed in the reception of books devoted to translation? The average reader still tends to define the translated text as a paradox which replaces the original: although the translated text substantially differs from the original, it is signed with the name of the author. Recently, however, the presence of the translator in the act of translation has been openly acknowledged, as evidenced by various marketing campaigns or translation awards. Thanks to this, as readers, we are more and more willing to notice and appreciate the fact that translation, traditionally defined as an intimate relation between the source and the target text, is also influenced by a third party, namely the translator and their language, which distorts, problematizes, and animates the act of rendering a given text into a different language. Indeed, we are growing and learning as readers so that we can recognize the hidden problematic aspects of translation and ask questions about its course and circumstances. *Wte i wewte* thus plays a dual role. It both announces and formulates new critical theories on translation. It is aware of the changing role of the translator and addresses this issue from a number of different perspectives. *Wte i wewte* shows the failure of outdated notions of the translator as invisible and translation as reproductive, addressing the need for a better understanding of the phenom-

enon of translation in contemporary culture. At the same time, it also creates such a need by adopting a number of different perspectives, which counter the narrative of the invisible translator who produces a transparent translation. Each of the seventeen interviews is actually an attempt to find the language for speaking about translation. It is both an exciting and an exhausting process. The failure of thinking about translation as a purely technical act reveals the eternal enigma of translation. Elżbieta Tabakowska thus comments on the issue:

A brilliant translation is equal to the original, right? But how can you measure this supposed equality? It is impossible to compile a full list of the meanings of a given work of art. A work of art is not a box with a limited and clearly defined content. Rather, it is a magic box: every time we open it, we find something unexpected and new. I can do my best to penetrate all the nooks and crannies, but my reading, and therefore also my translation, will never exhaust the possibilities that the box offers. There will be other interpretations, new readings, and new translations. And that is wonderful (p. 144).

Tabakowska, an excellent translator and translation scholar, demonstrates that the notion of a perfect copy is an illusion. After all, the many meanings of the original text may remain hidden, and the translator needs to find a way to deal with this problem. What strategies does one use to create what we call translation and what we are prepared to recognize as translation? Indeed, all these issues raise the question of the translator's subjectivity. The most renowned translators and translator scholars, including Lawrence Venuti, Douglas Robinson, and Andrew Chesterman, and in Poland, among others, Jerzy Jarniewicz and Magda Heydel, openly address the question of the translator's subjectivity and *Wte i wewte* also joins the debate. This collection of interviews with various translators gives voice to the translator as a creative individual,

demonstrating that his or her mind, emotions, background, as well as cultural, social, and economic conditions determine the final version of each translated text and thus influence the state of national literature.

At the same time, in his interviews Pluszka addresses the difficulty of speaking about the experience of translation. On the one hand, the interviewees reflect on the process of translation, commenting on particularly difficult translation problems. Memories, anecdotes, and technical tips thus constitute an important part of the book. On the other hand, the metaphors, comparisons, and concepts used allow us to identify various discourses, philosophical ideas and theoretical systems, which the interviewed translators use in order to accurately describe the process of translation. The anecdotal is thus complemented by a more structured argument and a specific intellectual tradition behind it. At the intersection of the personal and the universal, or as Douglas Robinson³ would say, the idiographic and the ideographic, the interviewees attempt to answer the question of what translation actually is (be it an original, a mystery, a foreignness, or a difference). Whatever the answer may be, it is determined by the translator, their identity, and the manner in which they (and others) define their task. Let me refer at this point to three, in my opinion, particularly interesting, statements that appeared in *Wte i wewte*. In my understanding, the selected examples will also constitute certain critical categories. I would like to organize them from the least idiographic to the most ideographic, thus systematizing the spectrum of translators' attitudes. I would like to quote Maciej Świerkocki first:

In all honesty, I think that translating ... long books is pleasant and enjoyable for the translator, because, first of all, he has something to do for many

months and does not have to worry too much about looking for the next assignment. Secondly, he can take the plunge in to the text or rather immerse himself in the book, get lost in it and, as a result, forget about the real, and for the most part infantile and impolite, world. I definitely prefer fiction to reality (p. 22).

For Maciej Świerkocki, translation provides an escape from the real world and constitutes a source of pleasure. Both of these aspects have rarely been discussed in translation criticism. Świerkocki links translation to the fantastical and the creative. As the perspective changes, we no longer ask questions about the role which the translator's personality plays in the process of translation, but concentrate on the role of translation in the formation of the translator's identity. The enigma of translation is closely related to the enigma of the translator's life. My second example is a quote from an interview with Barbarą Kopec-Umiastowska:

It may happen that the text carries the translator; the energy of the original is such that the book translates itself. The better the book, the more often it happens, because then the added value, irreducible to the visible elements such as lexis, syntax and style, is greater. Language has an almost supernatural power over man and maybe it is better not to enter into it too much. We should not trust language completely, because it can lead us astray (p. 130).

Similarly to Maciej Świerkocki, Barbara Kopec-Umiastowska also comments on the elusive notion of taking pleasure in the process of translation. However, Barbara Kopec-Umiastowska seems to pay more attention to the "added value" and the "supernatural power" of language. Indeed, the role of language has already been emphasized by hermeneutics and linguistics. Still, Barbara Kopec-Umiastowska marries the two, so that the focus is on the amazing powers that language has over the translator in the act

³ D. Robinson, *The Translator's Turn*, Baltimore–London 1991.

of translation. This question is often addressed by Pluszka's interviewees, albeit in different forms. The enigma of translation is thus linked to the mysterious power of language. My third and final example is a quote from an interview with Dariusz Żukowski:

At a certain point in his autobiographical novel, Coetzee reflects on immortality, as this theme merges with the essence of work. He writes about the immortality of a worker who produced a concrete block. He envies him. After many years, you can still point to the permanent result of the worker's labour. It is paradoxical that people who do "useful" work are paid the least, while some stock market speculators and other financial crooks have fortunes. And what is the role of the translator in all this? Translators and other professionals who process symbolic language, especially human scientists, have come up with this grand unified theory that is supposed to justify their supposed importance and the freedom they are granted, including the fact that they are not evaluated on the basis of how useful they are. And translation is often discussed in terms of secret knowledge. In a sense, it is secret knowledge, especially if you take into account hermeneutics or even the mysticism of translation that since antiquity has attempted to find the answer, in the most general terms, to the question of linguistic equivalents and the essence of language (p. 98).

By referring to pragmatic and market categories, Dariusz Żukowski comments on the value of the translator's work in a new social reality. In his provocative statement, he distances himself from the notion of the enigma of translation, treating it as a discursive trick, a construct, used to artificially raise the prestige of the translator's work. It might seem that Żukowski seeks to erase the subjectivity of the translator. He encourages us to see the translator as a manual worker, who is no longer hidden behind the original, but found among thousands of any-

mous contractors working for translation agencies. Indeed, Żukowski is more interested in the "invisible hand of the market" than the enigma of translation postulated by the hermeneutic tradition. In his opinion, the subjectivity of the translator has more to do with economic rather than linguistic exchange. The selected examples differ in terms of the underlying personal and theoretical approaches. Dariusz Żukowski seems to be particularly sensitive to this issue, emphasizing the role of discourse in constructing the social image of the translator. He points out that our view of the translator, especially when it comes to their social and professional image, is determined by the prevailing ideologies of translation. The prestige, nature, definition, and value of the translator's work are determined by social narratives. While such a diagnosis does not invalidate the question of subjectivity, it renders it more dramatic. "And what is the role of the translator in all this?" Żukowski asks, acknowledging the threat that the identity of the translator is facing and demanding that translation should be given social and institutional recognition. Żukowski thus openly addresses a very important question that is later commented on by other interviewees, albeit not in so much detail. Indeed, *Wte i wewte* voices concerns that appear in the era of transition and crisis. On the one hand, the crisis of the old translation discourse may give the translator the opportunity to gain independence, as their voices are finally heard and their social identities are finally recognized. On the other hand, such a crisis also poses a threat of the renewed objectification and alienation of the translator, this time through encroaching market forces. There is also a threat that translators and their work will find themselves suspended in a vacuum and the very phenomenon of translation, even though it plays such an important role in the contemporary world, will become more and more enigmatic, unstable, and questionable. As a result, the status of the translator shall change. In this context, *Wte*

i wewte may be described in terms of a testing ground where various translation theories clash and in terms of an open platform for discussion about the chances that the renewed definition of the role and status of the translator offers.

Indeed, one more voice of the eighteenth translator which appears in *Wte i wewte* in the form of a paratext should be acknowledged. In the face of crisis, Jerzy Jarniewicz, the author of the introduction to the book, a translator and a theoretician of translation, draws on the myth of Antigone in order to construct a new identity that would, on the one hand, allow translators to feel safer in this new somewhat hostile world and, on the other hand, give them agency and motivate them to action. In his short sketch entitled *Antygony wracają, albo o emancypacji przekładu literackiego* [Antigones return: On the emancipation of literary translation], Jarniewicz compares the ongoing emancipation of contemporary translators with the emancipation of women (as he argues, such a comparison is sanctioned by the role female translators played in world history and the history of translation). Thus, he rightly emphasizes the links between translation and feminist criticism. In the face of faltering phallogocentric culture, which makes a fetish out of the relation of similarity and obliterates the differences which are an inherent part of every translation, translation is like a woman who wants to move beyond the binary logic of thinking and develop its own positive identity:

... another aspect is important here, namely the view of translation as no longer innovative, but regenerative, passive, secondary, subordinate, and servile. These adjectives are also often used to create a discriminatory stereotype of femininity (p. 11).

The stakes are doubled, as is often the case with translation. On the one hand, translation is validated as a creative act that is anchored in a much broader context than just referencing

the original. On the other hand, the subjective presence of the translator in their creative work, the translator's right to be visible both in translation and in the social sphere, demands recognition and validation. Traditional translation criticism abided by an unwritten law that sentenced translators to social and creative self-destruction – the translator was meant to disappear, dematerialize in the text. Similarly, women were meant to take care of the family, which constituted the most important social unit, and at the same time not appear in the public sphere. Similarly to women in the patriarchy, translators and editors were meant to guarantee the existence of the system while remaining at its margin or even outside of it. Jarniewicz's comparison is thus seminal: the metaphor allows translators to reflect on their position in the world and arms them with productive concepts and references, outlining the possible course of future action:

Let's be clear: translators are contemporary Antigones. They are like the daughter of Oedipus, although, luckily for them, they do not share her tragic fate. They are expected to be faithful to the original and they are held accountable for this. They are expected to obey the law but not to craft legislation. However, nowadays translators are more and more responsible for law-making (p. 14).

Recognising and negotiating the conditions of one's presence and produced translations lies at the heart of creating the identity and subjectivity of the translator. Those who operate in the "translation zone"⁴ located at the intersections of languages and discourses are particularly well-suited to perform this work, but at the same time, faced with the hardships of the job, they are also exposed to simplistic and reductionist solutions, the consequences of which are borne not only by themselves but also by readers. It is

⁴ This term is originally used by Emily Apter in her book *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton 2006.

not an exaggeration to say that translators are responsible for the shape of the target culture and its relationship with other cultures. Today we know that this responsibility is not so much about remaining faithful to the original, but about identifying different instances that determine the process of translation and its outcome. This process also takes place at the basic level of minor translation decisions, applied translation strategies, and compromises, and in the act of discussing the definition and role of translation.

The advantage of the book is that the interviews with professionals conducted by Adam Pluszka are ultimately addressed to the non-specialist reader. Anecdotes, memories, digressions, and personal reflections animate the book. Most importantly, however, *Wte i wewte* popularizes translation and translation criticism by means of accessible, spontaneous, and diverse discourse. It is a great and absorbing read that shows the bright and dark sides of translation, rightly inspiring interest in the profession.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

KEYWORDS

f e m i n i s m

TRANSLATION

translation criticism

ABSTRACT:

In the present article I review *Wte i wewte: Z tłumaczami o przekładach* [Back and forth: Translators on translation] edited by Adam Pluszka. I refer to selected examples from the text to discuss the question of the translator's identity and desire in a broadly defined psychoanalytical framework. I examine the possible realizations of the translator's desire and emphasize the need for the translator's "emancipation," as argued by translators and translation critics alike.

translation discourse

psychoanalysis

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