



(Mis)translation as a Literary Success

(Błędny) przekład jako sukces literacki

Marta Skwara

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4082-332X>

UNIVERSITY OF SZCZECIN
marta.skwara@usz.edu.pl

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ABSTRACT | The paper is devoted to analysis of what could be called both a mistranslation and a literary success, and aims at shedding more light on the ambiguous issues in question. Main examples come from Polish literature in the English-speaking world, namely, Auden's version of Mickiewicz's "Romantyczność" and Bassnett and Kuhiwczak's rendition of Szymborska's "Dzieci epoki."

KEYWORDS | translation, mistranslation, Polish poetry, Adam Mickiewicz, Wisława Szymborska

Both of the concepts in the title — (mis)translation and literary success — are far from being clear and unambiguous. Every translation is an interpretation, thus it inevitably includes the possibility of (mis)interpretation. This can lead to various misreadings on the one hand, but also to potentially beneficial new readings on the other. Kathy Mezei formulated her complex reading-translating-interpreting experience as follows:

When I translate I read the text ... then I reread the text, and then I write in my language, my words: I write my reading and the reading has rewritten my writing.¹

The difference between a translation and a mistranslation is not an easy one to assess (particularly when poetry is concerned), just like any literary success is difficult to measure. Apart from evidence such as reception, we are left mostly with aesthetic criteria when assessing a literary success and, to some extent, also the successfulness of any translation. Obviously, aesthetic criteria are far from being clear-cut or impartial. Thus how can any discussion on such unclear but deeply intertwined matters be carried out? In order for my answer to this question to unveil, I will need to look into three matters. Firstly, I should like to analyze two examples of both mistranslation and undeniable literary success to point out possible criteria of both phenomena. Both preliminary cases could be called “adaptations,” yet they are not called (and not sold) as such, functioning instead as translations and being discussed as mistranslations. Secondly, I should like to proceed to a particular case of a (mis)translation and a literary success that may shed some more light on the issues in question. In the end, I will confront the case with another seemingly similar one, yet resulting in a different outcome.

My main examples will come from Polish literature in the English-speaking world mostly because this is the topic that I am currently working on and also because I feel that so far, both (mis)translations of Polish literature and their world success have not been studied widely enough or been adequately discussed.

1 Cf. S. Bassnett, 1993: *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford, UK—Cambridge, US, Blackwell, p. 156.

Introduction

What members of Polish literary culture know quite well but what may be a new piece of translation knowledge for foreigner readers, *Winnie-the Pooh* in Irena Tuwim's rendition has been a huge literary success in Poland ever since it was published (1938), although with time it was more and more frequently assessed as a mistranslation. However, the problematic qualification does not seem to have affected the book's literary success at all. Irena Tuwim's *Kubuś Puchatek* (with the male name itself being a highly improper substitute for the androgenic Winnie-the-Pooh) has not waned in popularity to this day. Despite a new "proper" translation issued in the late 1980s, it is still Tuwim's version which is most often reissued (six times only during the last decade, the most recent reissue being last year), and it is her version that serves as the basis for new intermedial adaptations of the original text. Tuwim's names of Milne's characters and some of her language solutions have been undertaken by all the Disney productions in Poland as well as by some commentators (e.g. Michał Rusinek) and even other translators, also translators of the sequels to the original of Milne's book (e.g. Wanda Chotomska). By contrast, the most proper translation of *Winnie the Pooh* — according to Jolanta Kozak's estimation² — Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska's *Fredzia Phi Phi* has been issued only twice (in 1986, and 1990) and there are no signs of it possibly becoming more successful with time.

To illustrate some of the differences between the two Polish versions, which are not always just differences between proper and improper translations, I chose my favorite passage, well-set in a memory of my childhood readings:

"Help, help!" cried Piglet, "a Heffalump, a Horrible Heffalump!" and he scampered off as hard as he could, still crying out, "Help, help, a Herrible Hoffalump! Hoff, Hoff a Hellible Horralump! Holl, Holl, a Hoffable Hellerump!"

And he didn't stop crying and scampering until he got to Christopher Robin's house.³

*Pomocy! Pomocy! — krzyczał Prosiaczek — Słoń, straszliwy Słoń! — i zaczął uciekać ile sił w nogach, wciąż krzycząc na całe gardło: — Pomocy! Pomocy! Słoniowy strach! Słoniocy! Słoniocy! Strachowy Pom!! Pomocny Strach! Słoniocy! I bez zatrzymania, wrzeszcząc wniebogłosy, przybiegł do Krzysia.*⁴

2 J. Kozak, 2009: *Przekład literacki jako metafora. Między logos a praxis*. Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 35.

3 A. A. Milne, 1973: *Winnie-the-Pooh*. With decorations by E. H. Shepard. London, Egmond UK Ltd., p. 60.

4 A. A. Milne, 2017: *Kubuś Puchatek*. I. Tuwim, trans., E. H. Shepard, ils. Warszawa, Nasza Księgarnia, p. 62. (my emphasis).

Ratunku, pomocy! — wrzasnął Prosiaczek, — Soń, Straszny Soń! — I wziął nogi za pas tak szybko, jak tylko mógł, wciąż wykrzykując: — Ratunku, Pomocy, Saszny Stroń! Strotunku, Stromocy, Paszny Stoń! Satunku, Somocy, Raszny Poń! — I krzyczał tak, i uciekał w popłochu, aż dotarł do domu Krzysztofa Robina.⁵

When it comes to names and plays on words, Tuwim's version seems both more understandable and more amusing since it is constructed out of Polish words and syllables that are logically and/or semantically connected. For instance, *Słoniowy Strach* not only refers to fear (*strach*) caused by an elephant (*słoń* in Polish) but also to fear as huge as an elephant itself (*słoniowy*). Since a child's word for "elephant" does not exist in Polish and it is not commonly in adult use as Heffalump is now in English (OED), it seems strange that Adamczyk-Garbowska introduced *Soń* into her translation. It only sounds like a childish pronunciation of Polish *słoń*, and has no reference to adult speech. Her removing two letters from Polish adjective denoting "terrible" — *saszny* instead of *straszny* — and putting additional letters ("tr") into already strange *soń* follows the original play on letters but produces no effect in Polish except for strangeness. The same can be said about *Raszny Poń!* for "Hoffable Hellerump," which may only introduce vague association with a horse in Polish (*koń*). By contrast, Tuwim's play on words sound naturally funny thanks to sound and meaning associations — *Strachowy Pom!! Pomocny Strach* play on *strach* and *pomoc* (help), while final *Słoniocy* is an amusing contamination of *słoń*, and a Polish cry for help: *pomocy!* Additionally, it sounds like a big elephant-like animal. Likewise, Adamczyk-Garbowska's decision to leave the "proper" form of the child character's name seems not a good solution. According to Polish literary tradition, children in stories for children appear under their childlike names, thus *Krzyś* (Chris) seems natural to the Polish reader, while *Krzysztof Robin* sounds not only strange but also highly improper, as if we called *Jaś* and *Małgosia* (Hanzel and Gretel) from the Grimm brothers' tales a Jan Schneider and a Małgorzata Stadler, for instance. Any rendition of names and of language plays greatly depends on the taste of the audience of the particular literary culture. To my mind, Irena Tuwim simply proved to have a better sense of language humor and a unique sense of the nuances in the Polish language and conventions of Polish children's literature which is usually more charming and funny than serious and puzzling. Thus despite naming her characters with Polish names, avoiding any references to British culture, removing some original motives and changing lyrical songs in the text, Tuwim's version has always been

5 A. A. Milne, 1990: *Fredzia Phi-Phi*. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, trans., A. L. Włoszczyński, ils. Lublin, Wydawn. Lubelskie, p. 60 (my emphasis).

highly appreciated by the Polish reading public. It has even been called “better” than the original (by such eminent readers as Stanisław Lem, a famous writer himself) and no assessments of its being an “improper” translation on many planes⁶ could change its popularity among readers of subsequent generations. With this initial example I wished to underline how much we all (as readers) depend on our own language and literary conventions as well as on our cultural memory, and to emphasize that it is these conventions that often prove to be the decisive factor in making a literary success.

Perhaps one more example, this time one more serious and adult, could be recollected here as an introduction to my main case. It comes from famous Polish renditions of Emily Dickinson’s poems done by Stanisław Barańczak, a poet himself. Elżbieta Tabakowska claims that in Barańczak’s translations, one of the most important features of Dickinson’s poetic language simply disappears. Her analysis proves the translator’s lack of attentiveness to conceptual metaphors characteristic of Dickinson, which often results in different versions of the same metaphor (for instance a container metaphor⁷) in Barańczak’s renditions. Therefore, the translations can be called inadequate as in the following example:

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| Rowing in Eden — Ah, the Sea! Might I but moor — Tonight — In Thee! ⁸ | Przez raj wiosłować — przez Morza Rozległość! Byle przybić — tej Nocy — do Brzegu Twojego! ⁹ |
|---|--|

Judged as improper from a cognitive point of view — prepositions *przez* (through) and *do* (to, towards) applied instead of the original “in” changed a container metaphor considerably¹⁰ — Barańczak’s translations could be also called improper due to elaborated additions. It can also be seen in the above-quoted example where *Morza rozległość* (the expanse of the sea) replaced “the Sea” and *Brzegu Twojego* (Your Shore) — “Thee.” Nevertheless, it was Barańczak’s translations that made a name for Emily Dickinson in Polish literary culture. Moreover, as I have also experienced in my teaching, specific readership circles appeared whose members rejected any other Polish renderings of Dickinson as “untrue and improper” (meaning: far from what they believed was Emily

6 J. Kozak, 2009: *Przekład literacki...*, pp. 31–34, 174–178.

7 A containment metaphor is an ontological metaphor in which some concept is represented as having an inside and outside, and capable of holding something else.

8 E. Dickinson, 1990: *100 Wierszy* [bilingual edition], S. Barańczak, ed., trans. Kraków, Wydawnictwo Arka, p. 40 (my emphasis).

9 E. Dickinson, 1990: *100 Wierszy...*, p. 41 (my emphasis).

10 E. Tabakowska, 2001: *Językoznawstwo kognitywne a poetyka przekładu*. A. Pokoj-ska, trans. Kraków: TAIWPN Universitas, p. 154.

Dickinson's style, that was in fact Barańczak's style). The same phenomenon, but to a higher degree, concerned readership circles of Tuwim's *Kubuś Puchatek*, which developed over generations and to some extent blocked the reception of a new Polish rendering of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, as Kozak emphasized.¹¹ Admittedly, in these two cases, Venuti's idea of utopian readers' communities attained its vivid Polish exemplifications.

As the aforementioned examples demonstrate, a mistranslation does not prevent a translated work from becoming successful on a new literary market — on the contrary. At least as long as no real competition appears. Perhaps being a proper translation is not required for a literary success because, as Wystan Hugh Auden put it bluntly:

a translation is like a book in Braille for the blind. The translator, that is to say, has to assume that his readers cannot and probably never will be able to read the original.¹²

Auden-Mickiewicz

I quote Auden on purpose here since it is his English rendition of Adam Mickiewicz's groundbreaking ballad "Romantyczność" (1822) that makes my first example of a successful (mis)translation of a Polish poem. One could ask in what sense the rendition by a great poet of the English language is a (mis)translation, and why I believe it is a literary success. In the first instance let me simply use typical categories of mistranslation, which I borrow from Kozak, judging harshly Tuwim's above-quoted rendition. Thus in Auden's version, just as in Tuwim's, we find numerous additions to the original on the one hand (actually, there are five additional verses in Auden's rendition of Mickiewicz's ballad), and many omissions on the other (particularly Polish cultural realities disappear). Serious changes of the original phrases can also be easily found, confirming Auden's unfamiliarity with Polish (which is, after all, not such a surprising or rare a fact, such as in the case of Czesław Miłosz's translations of Chinese poetry, done without any knowledge of the Chinese language and Chinese literary conventions).

The comparison of the first stanza of the Auden's rendition and the original may well illustrate all the above-mentioned vices:

11 J. Kozak, *Przekład literacki...*, pp. 35—38.

12 W. H. Auden, 1970: *Translation*. In: *Man in Literature. Comparative World Studies in Translation*. R. O'Neal, H. M. McDonnell, J. E. Miller Jr., eds., Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, p. 10.

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| <p>Adam Mickiewicz, "The Romantic," transl. W. H. Auden</p> <p>"Silly girl, listen!" But she doesn't listen While the village roofs glisten, Bright in the sun. "Silly girl, what do you do there, As if there were someone to view there, A face to gaze on and greet there A live form warmly to meet there, When there is no one, none, do you hear!" But she doesn't hear.¹³</p> | <p>Adam Mickiewicz, "Romantyczność"</p> <p><i>Methinks, I see... Where?</i> — <i>In my mind's eyes.</i> Shakespeare <i>Zdaje mi się, że widzę... gdzie?</i> <i>Przed oczyma duszy mojej.</i></p> <p>Słuchaj, dziewczeczko! — Ona nie słucha — To dzień biały! to miasteczko! Przy tobie nie ma żywego ducha. Co tam wkoło siebie chwytasz? Kogo wołasz, z kim się witasz? — Ona nie słucha. —¹⁴</p> |
|---|---|

Already at the beginning of Auden's version, we find enough arguments for its being a mistranslation: three additional lines, inserted between the penultimate and the ultimate line of the original are the pure invention of the English-language poet. They elaborate on the behavior of the "silly girl," the expression which itself could be regarded as a problematic substitute for the original *dzieweczka* — lass/maiden — which was not defined with any attribute. Also Auden's structuring of verses, his change of verbless sentences into proper sentences in particular, make the English poem a properly narrated story devoid of original understatements. For instance, in both exclamatory expressions *To dzień biały! to miasteczko!* a predicate *jest* (is) is missing in the original. What should read: "A white day! A little town!" simply disappears from the translation, being replaced by more elaborate descriptive-narrative lines: "While the village roofs glisten,/ Bright in the sun." Moreover, Auden's stylistic repetition ("there" is repeated six times in ten lines, four times as the epiphora) can be seen as having nothing to do with the original, in which the reader finds only one repetition and, even then, it is a structural one where the body of the stanza is closed within the sentence *Ona nie słucha* (she doesn't listen). This is changed by the translator into two slightly but meaningfully different sentences: "But she

13 A. Mickiewicz, 1956: "The Romantic," W. H. Auden, trans. In: A. Mickiewicz, 1798—1855 *Selected Poems*. C. Millis (ed.), J. Lechoń (critical appreciation). New York, The Noonday Press, p. 68.

14 A. Mickiewicz, 2004: "Romantyczność." In: A. Mickiewicz, *Ballady i romanse*. Cz. Miłosz, introduction. Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, p. 9.

doesn't listen/ But she doesn't hear." More arguments to support a mistranslation case could be added, such as the absence of substitutes for common Polish lexical phrases: *dzień biały* ("a white day," a hyperbole meaning "in the full light of the day"); *nie ma żywego ducha* ("there is not a living ghost," an oxymoron meaning "absolutely nobody is present").

With all this possible heavy translation criticism, we must admit that the stanza sounds fine in English, as does Auden's whole text. To Damian Weymann, the author of a thorough analysis of the translation, it sounds even better than Mickiewicz's original,¹⁵ which I myself find a bit exaggerated of an opinion. Most probably Auden worked according to his own convictions:

As a general rule, I believe that a translation should be a work of collaboration. The person responsible for the final version into English, let us say, must not only possess English as his mother-tongue; he must also be a master of it. Alive to its subtlest nuances... As his collaborator... he needs a person who knows some English, but whose mother tongue is the original.¹⁶

Whether Auden just worked on some existing translation, or used pieces of advice given by Poles living in Brooklyn where he himself lived, it is clear that he must have known the value and outstanding significance of the text for the Polish reading community as he decided to give it a strong poetic voice in English. That is to say, a voice which does not sound strange, obscure or outdated. His ballad is a modern narration, devoid of the understatement characteristic of the original. It restores time as well as cause-and-effect relationships (by connecting words such as: but, while, as if, when, there). Yet, just as in the original, his ballad poetically depicts a dramatic story of a young girl losing her mind due to the loss of her lover, which remains obscure and incomprehensible to those who cannot see "with their mind's eyes." Shakespeare's "mind" from the inscription to the ballad (missing in Auden's version) was conveyed by Mickiewicz as *dusza* (soul), which is not such an unusual reading. Emerson whom Mickiewicz translated into French and Polish would also use "mind" as "soul."¹⁷ Both expressions (mind's eyes and soul's eyes) convey the same need to see more than we can all see only with our eyes.

Due to lack of space I cannot follow every stanza translated (or remade) by Auden, but I should like to focus on the two last stanzas, adding more arguments to the opinion that the ballad sounds admirably in English.

15 D. Weyman, 2006: *W. H. Auden jako tłumacz 'Romantyczności' Mickiewicza*. „Res Publica Nowa” 19 (3), pp. 66–78.

16 W. H. Auden, 1970: *Translation*, p. 10.

17 M. Skwara, 1994: *Mickiewicz i Emerson — prelekcje paryskie*. „Pamiętnik Literacki” 85 (3), p. 109.

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| <p>“Yet the girl loves,” I reply diffidently And the people believe reverently: Faith and love are more discerning Than lenses or learning.</p> | <p>„Dziewczyna czuje, — odpowiadam skromnie — A gawiedź wierzy głęboko; Czucie i wiara silniej mówi do mnie Niż mędrca szkiełko i oko.</p> |
| <p>You know the dead truths, not the living, The world of things, not the world of loving. Where does any miracle start? Cold eye, look into your heart!” (my emphasis)¹⁸</p> | <p>Martwe znasz prawdy, nieznane dla ludu, Widzisz świat w proszku, w każdej gwiazd iskierce. Nie znasz prawd żywych, nie obaczysz cudu! Miej serce i patrzaj w serce!” (my emphasis)¹⁹</p> |

Due to the equal number of verses and a closer connection to the meanings of the original, one might find Auden’s ending of the poem as a more proper translation. Yet, the same free attitude towards the phrases of the original can be found in the two last stanzas — for instance two of Mickiewicz’s famous expressions *czucie i wiara* (feeling and faith) and *szkiełko i oko* (small glass [of any kind]²⁰ and eye) were changed considerably (into “faith and love” and “lenses and learning” respectively). Still the faithfulness to the meaning of the poem and the effort to find a new but equally vibrant and rhythmic voice for it becomes more important than lexical or phraseological authenticity. Auden even rhymes phrases which are not so easy to apply in English. He does so by changing the *abab* pattern into *aabb* so that the ballad’s natural rhythm of speech is preserved. As the genre stems from oral folk narrative traditions in both cultures, Auden was able to allude to natural English modes of expression. For instance, in the fourth stanza he used a syntactic parallelism (“I flee you now — I see you now”) which brought Mickiewicz’s text closer to the British tradition of a ballad. The emphasis placed on folk logic typical of Mickiewicz’s ballad can also be found in the British culture, for example, in Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven.” In many parts of Auden’s version, including the ending, the original voice of the people can be heard clearly and, just as in the original, it

18 A. Mickiewicz, 1956: “The Romantic,” p. 69.

19 A. Mickiewicz, 2004: “Romantyczność,” p. 12.

20 „Szkiełko” became an obvious reference to Mickiewicz’s wording. Lechoń entitled one of his New York poems “Mędrca szkiełko,” which Gerry Kopolka translated as “The Glass of the Sage.” In his translation the poem begins with the following lines: “You will never see clouds so black in the skies, / Nor grass so green, looking with everyday eyes...” J. Lechoń, 2005: “The Glass of the Sage,” G. Kopolka, trans. In: *Evening on the Hudson. An Anthology of Jan Lechoń’s American Writings*. New York, The Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America, p. 25.

is strongly supported by the “I” of the poet. The poet’s contempt for the cold scholar’s mind is equally evident even if the scholar created by Auden is no longer seen as the original enlightenment scholar from Mickiewicz’s ballad. On top of that, one of the most famous literary quotations in Polish literature: *Miej serce i patrzaj w serce!* (“Have heart and look into your heart,” in Michał Mikoś’s translation) was rendered by Auden freely (“Cold eye, look into your heart!”). However, thanks to such a formulation, Auden recalls another poet’s voice. It was sir Philip Sidney to whom “his muse said”: “Look in thy heart, and write.” By making his version of Mickiewicz’s ballad more British, Auden did not make it less universal and the finesse he applies to make it sound natural in his mother-tongue strikes us even more when we compare his rendition to a more “proper” translation by Michał J. Mikoś:

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| <p>You know the dead truths, not the living, The world of things, not the world of loving. Where does any miracle start? Cold eye, look in your heart!”²¹</p> | <p>You know dead truths, unknown to others, See the world in a speck, each star’s sparking dart. You don’t know living truths, won’t see wonders! Have heart and look into your heart.”²²</p> |
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Once again it seems that the way a translated poem sounds in the target language is important to its new reading. Readers’ opinions on Auden’s rendition (like the above-quoted enthusiastic analysis by Weyman) and the translation’s circulation confirm its successfulness. Its being included in the anniversary volume of Mickiewicz’s poetry issued in New York in 1956 is particularly telling. The volume was edited by Clark Millis, an American poet, and introduced by Jan Lechoń, a Polish poet. Despite numerous additions, omissions, elaborations and considerable changes, which make it a mistranslation in the basic sense of the term, Auden’s “The Romantic” gave a powerful voice to Mickiewicz in the English language culture, which is both a personal success of the poet-translator, and a success of Polish literary culture which was able to attract such a devoted rewriting.

21 The original reads:

Martwe znasz prawdy, nieznanne dla ludu,
Widzisz świat w prozku, w każdej gwiazd iskierce.
Nie znasz prawd żywych, nie obaczysz cudu!
Miej serce i patrzaj w serce! (“Romantyczność,” p. 14)

22 A. Mickiewicz, 2002: “Romanticism,” M. J. Mikoś, trans. In: M. Mikoś, *Polish Romantic Literature. An Anthology*. Bloomington, Indiana, Slavica Publishers, p. 21.

Bassnett-Szyborska

My second example, however, indicates more complications (and illusions) due to a free or (mis)translation. Seemingly, the initial situation is the same: an English language poet and additionally, in this case, a translation specialist — Susan Bassnett — feels free to make an original Polish poem into an exceptional English version. The methods of work also seem the same. Bassnett, just like Auden, does not really know Polish, and she too describes her work as a collaboration. The Translators' Preface to *Ariadne's Thread, Polish Women Poets* reveals the base of that collaboration:

Piotr Kuhiwczak as a native Polish speaker was able to pinpoint nuance and patterns of foregrounding in the source poems that a non-native speaker might never have seen, whilst Susan Bassnett had been writing and publishing her own poetry for some years and therefore had a sense of what would and would not work in English as a poem.²³

Both collaborating authors shared a “common concern with the status of translation,” which they considered “a serious art, involving detailed knowledge of the source and target cultures.”²⁴ The authors principle was “creative unfaithfulness,” which they explained as follows: “although we attempted to convey the shape of each original poem along with its tone and mood, we agreed from the outset that certain qualities would be inevitably lost” (xiii). And the lost qualities included the sound pattern of Polish and rhyme, yet not the principles of syllabic structuring in Polish poetry.

In the translators' preface, the reader finds a more detailed description of the practical side of the collaboration and the “creative unfaithfulness”:

Piotr would produce an initial close version, whilst Susan would produce an initial crude approximation of the tone and content of the Polish text using only her very rough acquaintance with the Polish language. Then we put both these versions together, and revised our separate readings. Time and again we found that Susan had discovered the fundamental structure and mood of the poem, even though there were gaps in her overall understanding. (xiv)

23 S. Bassnett, P. Kuhiwczak (ed., transl.), 1988: *Ariadne's Thread, Polish Women Poets*. London, Boston: Forest Books/Unesco, 1988, p. xiii.

24 The art that is “looked down on by so-called original writers and practised by people who have often not been sufficiently well-qualified to tackle the job in hand” (S. Bassnett, P. Kuhiwczak, 1988: *Ariadne's Thread...*).

The next stage “involved Susan’s reworking of Piotr’s revised literal version.” While Piotr “had taken pains to put this version into what he felt was good English, and at times he had altered word order, even altered the order of lines in the interest of what he felt was linguistic fluidity,” Susan

changed these lines and restored the original Polish order, in the interest of what she felt was the proper foregrounding of poetic devices. So whilst Piotr carefully transformed the language into familiar structures and patterns, Susan then carefully defamiliarized it. (xiv).

Not only the slightly naïve, self-centred and self-congratulating tone of the preface strikes me as odd²⁵ but also Bassnett’s defamiliarizing efforts. They seem to be going against Auden’s efforts, which also means against possibilities of a literary success: why would a new reader want to read a “defamiliarized” text? In examining the outcomes of such an attitude, I will focus on Bassnett and Kuhiwczak’s translation of Wisława Szymborska’s poem “Dzieci epoki” (Children of this age, 1986) which is considered to be one of the best representatives of Szymborska’s seemingly apolitical attitudes as well as her light and ironic style. The adjective “political” is repeated twelve times in a thirty-five-line poem, with examples being alternately somber and frivolous. Let us look at the poem’s beginning in the original and in the translation:

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| Wisława Szymborska, “Dzieci epoki” | Wisława Szymborska, “Children of this Age,” transl. S. Bassnett & P. Kuhiwczak |
| Jesteśmy dziećmi epoki, epoka jest polityczna. | We are the children of this age, this age is political. |
| Wszystkie twoje, nasze, wasze dzienne sprawy, nocne sprawy to są sprawy polityczne. | All your, his, our day and night-time affairs are political affairs. |
| Chcesz czy nie chcesz, twoje geny mają przyszłość polityczną, skóra odcień polityczny, oczy aspekt polityczny. | Whether you like it or not your genes have a political future the colour of your skin is political your eyes have a political dimension. |

25 “The conclusion that we came to through the lengthy process of translating the poems this way, is that the particular qualities of language that made those poems work in Polish somehow struggled into English, despite the huge differences in syntactical and semantic order between the two languages. In short, that their poeticity, if we can use such a term, crossed the boundary of language. If this is indeed the case, we see it as an immensely positive sign of great hope for the future; politicians may stockpile nuclear weapons, but the voice of the poet speaks out to us all” (S. Bassnett, P. Kuhiwczak, 1988: *Ariadne’s Thread...*, p. xiv).

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| <p>O czym mówisz, ma rezonans, o czym milczysz, ma wymowę tak czy owak polityczną.</p> <p>Nawet idąc borem lasem stawiasz kroki polityczne na podłożu politycznym.²⁶</p> | <p>Whatever you say has its echo whatever you keep quiet about is political regardless²⁷.</p> |
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In this case too arguments for mistranslation can be easily found, beginning with the shape and number of stanzas, through a serious omission (the fifth stanza does not exist in the translation at all) to a loss of cultural connotations: an allusion to a well-known religious evening prayer song entitled in Polish “Wszystkie nasze dzienne sprawy” (All Our Daytime Matters) was turned into the areligious phrase devoid of any cultural connotations: “day and night-time affairs.” What do we get in return?

According to Edward Rogerson, this translation by Bassnett and Kuhiwczak, a manifestation of the “creative unfaithfulness of the translators,”²⁸ should be read with some criticism. The poem, originally divided into nine irregular stanzas, each dwelling on a different thought in a different logical construction, was structured differently in the translation which consists of eight stanzas. Moreover, some lines were simply omitted, while others telescoped together, losing their connection with the cultural tradition. It seems odd to Rogerson that an allusion to a popular Polish marching song disappeared completely, especially since it was not too difficult to translate: *Nawet idąc borem lasem / Stawiasz kroki polityczne / Na podłożu politycznym* (Even wandering through forests and woods / you take political steps / on a political basis,” trans. by Rogerson²⁹). On the whole, he finds Bassnett and Kuhiwczak’s translation very unfriendly, both to the tone of this particular poem and to its delicate structural balance.

The whole translation also goes against the declared “creative unfaithfulness” which was supposed to abandon the reproduction of sound and rhyme patterns and preserve the poem’s underlying structures, tone and mood.³⁰

26 W. Szymborska, 2017: *Wiersze wybrane*. Wybór i układ Autorki. Kraków, Wydawnictwo a5, p. 266.

27 S. Bassnett, P. Kuhiwczak, 1988: *Ariadne’s Thread...*, p. 45.

28 E. Rogerson, 1991: *Anti-Romanticism: Distance*. In: *The Mature Laurel. Essays on Modern Polish Poetry*. Edited by Adam Czerniawski. Dufour, Seren Books, p. 218.

29 E. Rogerson, 1991: *Anti-Romanticism...*, p. 218.

30 “Although we attempted to convey the shape of each original poem along with its tone and mood, we agreed from the outset that certain qualities would be inevitably lost.” These qualities include: “the sound pattern of Polish too far removed from those of English to be imitated or reproduced,” so the authors agreed to dispense with rhyme or to try to hunt for words with similar consonant clusters.” On the other hand, they found syllabic structuring possible to be reproduced in “some approximately similar

In fact, something else happened in the translation of Szymborska's poem. While the original poem's "verse structure relates less to linguistic patterns than to the development of verse patterns of thought":

The unwieldy verse of the English translation obscures the clarity of Szymborska's thought which, although eclectic and apparently disjointed, always maintains its own consistent logical drive.³¹

In effect "defamiliarisation" — "Ms Bassnett's way of persuading the reader that reading and interpreting foreign poetry ought to be made as difficult as possible"³² — becomes a hindrance. On the one hand, Szymborska — deprived of all the Polish cultural connotations — does sound more universal in English. But on the other, her poem becomes much more pedestrian and superfluously strange.

An obvious difference between the status of Susan (a translation studies star) and Piotr (an average university teacher) is felt in the outcome of their collaboration in which Susan seemed to have had an upper hand. Yet most probably Auden did the same, more or less taking over the whole translation and making it into his text. So where does the decisive difference lie? Perhaps, to put it bluntly, what we can forgive Auden, a great poet and a translation layman, we cannot forgive Bassnett, a great translation professional and a poet? Joking aside, it seems that Auden did much for Mickiewicz, out of love for poetry, while Bassnett did much for her theory which, being programmatically practiced, was supposed to support itself. Her literary success with Szymborska has been a self-proclaimed one,³³ while Auden's success with Mickiewicz has been proclaimed by readers, beginning with Millis and Lechoń. In the end, it is never the mistranslated words, phrases or lines that make the real difference but the way these words, phrases and lines reverberate in a new literary culture. Let us compare two renditions of the ending of Szymborska's poem:

way in English" as well as "repetition as a structural device" so they "endeavoured to create such patterns in their translation" (S. Bassnett, P. Kuhiwczak, 1988: *Ariadne's Thread...*, p. xiv).

31 E. Rogerson, 1991: *Anti-Romanticism...*, p. 219.

32 E. Rogerson, 1991: *Anti-Romanticism...*, p. 219.

33 I have not met any positive reception evidence by a bi-cultural reader; the translation, however, functions on a didactic level as an example of "transcreation" (Brunel University London, <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/cbass/arts-humanities/research/entertext/issues/entertext-11.3/part2>. Accessed 10.04. 2019).

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| <p>W. Szymborska, "Children of the Age," transl. S. Barańczak & C. Cavanagh</p> <p>To acquire a political meaning you don't even have to be human. Raw material will do, or protein food, or crude oil, or a conference table, whose shape was quarreled over for months: should we arbitrate life and death at a round table or a square one.</p> <p>Meanwhile people perished, animals died, houses burned, and the fields ran wild just as in times immemorial and less political.³⁴</p> | <p>W. Szymborska, "Children of this Age," transl. S. Bassnett & P. Kuhiwczak</p> <p>You need not even be a human being to acquire political importance. It is enough just to be oil fodder or recyclable material or a conference table, the shape of which can be on an agenda for months. All this time people have been dying animals have been starving houses have been burning fields have been turning fallow just as in far off distant less political ages.³⁵</p> |
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Apparently, in both translations the bilingual reader finds various changes and shifts of meanings. However, while Barańczak and Cavanagh try to follow the natural and slightly ironical tone of Szymborska's poetic diction, Bassnett and Kuhiwczak make her style unnecessarily formal, additionally burdening it with tiring repetitions of long grammatical constructions ("... have been dying / have been starving / have been burning / have been turning fallow"). Moreover, once again three original stanzas using three different verses and thought

34 S. Barańczak, C. Cavanagh (eds., trans.), 1991: *Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule. Spoiling Cannibals' Fun*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 76—77. The original reads:

Nie musisz nawet być istotą ludzką,
by zyskać na znaczeniu politycznym.
Wystarczy, żebyś był ropą naftową,
paszą treściwą czy surowcem wtórnym.

Albo i stołem obrad, o którego kształt
spierano się miesiącami
przy jakim pertraktować o życiu i śmierci,
okrągłym czy kwadratowym.

Tymczasem ginęli ludzie,
zdychały zwierzęta,
płonęły domy
i dziczały pola
jak w epokach zamierzchłych
i mniej politycznych. (W. Szymborska, *Wiersze...*, pp. 266—267).

35 S. Bassnett, P. Kuhiwczak, 1988: *Ariadne's Thread...*, p. 45.

patterns were combined into one long stanza, heavy with long formal lines, but surprisingly deprived of the heaviness of meaning — people have not been dying in Szymborska's poem, since dying is a natural fact, they “have been perishing” (*ginęli*).

In the end, it is not the various changes of the original, present in both the above-quoted renditions of Szymborska's poem, which really matter to English-language readers, but the way the new phrases and stanzas come across to them. The more the translated poem goes along with a target language and its literary conventions, the more likely it is to win new readers. Defamiliarization as a theoretical concept may seem right and justified, yet it makes it difficult to produce a text attractive to readers, especially when it goes across literary esthetics. To conclude: a (mis)translation can make a literary success, even if not a fully deserved one when confronted with the obviously different original, a (mis)poetry cannot succeed, even if put together with all due respect to the differences of the original.

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Marta Skwara

(Mis)translation as a Literary Success

SUMMARY | Both of the concepts — mistranslation and literary success — are far from being clear and unambiguous, which leads to various limitations on the one hand, but also to potentially beneficial new readings on the other. Moreover, the difference between a translation and a mistranslation is not an easy one to assess (particularly when poetry is concerned) just like any literary success is difficult to measure. Apart from evidence such as reception, we are left mostly with aesthetic criteria when assessing a literary success and, to some extent, also the successfulness of any translation. In order to discuss such unclear but deeply intertwined issues, I look into three matters. Firstly, I draw attention to two undeniable examples of both mistranslation and literary success to point out possible (and impossible) criteria of both phenomena. Secondly, I proceed to a particular case of a (mis)translation and literary success (Auden's version of Mickiewicz's "Romantyczność"), to shed some more light on the issues in question. In the end, I confront the case with another seemingly similar one (Bassnett & Kuhiwczak's rendition of Szyborska's "Dzieci epoki"), yet resulting in a different outcome. At the end I point out where, in my opinion, lies a difference in assessing a particular (mis)translation and its literary success.

KEYWORDS | translation, mistranslation, Polish poetry, Adam Mickiewicz, Wisława Szymborska

Marta Skwara

(Błędny) przekład jako sukces literacki

STRESZCZENIE | Oba pojęcia — błędny przekład i sukces literacki — dalekie są od klarowności i jednoznaczności, co z jednej strony prowadzi do rozmaitych ograniczeń, ale i do potencjalnie odkrywczych nowych odczytań z drugiej. Co więcej, różnica między przekładem a błędnym przekładem nie jest łatwa do ustalenia (zwłaszcza w przypadku poezji), podobnie jak trudne jest wymierzenie sukcesu literackiego. Oprócz świadectw recepcji pozostają nam przede wszystkim kryteria estetyczne w ocenie zarówno sukcesu literackiego, jak i — do pewnego stopnia — udatności przekładu. Aby przedyskutować te nieostre, ale połączone z sobą pojęcia, sięgam do trzech przypadków. Najpierw skupiam się na dwóch niewątpliwych przykładach błędnego przekładu i sukcesu literackiego, aby wskazać możliwe (i niemożliwe) kryteria oceny obu zjawisk. Następnie przechodzę do konkretnego przypadku (błędnego tłumaczenia i sukcesu literackiego (*Romantyczność* Mickiewicza w wersji Audena), aby nieco inaczej naświetlić omawiane zagadnienia. Wreszcie konfrontuję szczegółowo analizowany przekład z innym, pozornie podobnym (*Dzieci epoki* Szymborskiej w przekładzie Bassnett i Kuhlczaka), ale dającym odmienny efekt końcowy. W zakończeniu wskazuję, na czym może polegać różnica w ocenie błędności lub poprawności przekładu i jego sukcesu czytelniczego.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE | przekład, błędny przekład, poezja polska, Adam Mickiewicz, Wisława Szymborska

MARTA SKWARA | Professor at the Literature and New Media Department, the University of Szczecin; Head of the Comparative and Translation Studies Unit, a member of the executive board of the Polish Comparative Literature Association and the editor-in-chief of the *Rocznik Komparatystyczny/ Comparative Yearbook*. She is the author of eight comparative monographs (two co-authored) and over ninety articles devoted to comparative literature and cultural translation studies, particularly to European and transatlantic romanticism and modernism.