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**Speaking About Translations:
Forewords, Commentaries, Manifestos.
(Walter Benjamin, Vladimir Nabokov, Stanisław Barańczak)**

“Polish Translation Studies,” Magda Heydel and Piotr de Bończa Bukowski state, “have passed from the early period of multidisciplinary, through a strong and influential interdisciplinary phase, to the stage where areas of transdisciplinary research emerge.”¹ They see the multidisciplinary stage in the period from about the 1930s, when Polish academic work on translation began with essays for instance by Bronisław Malinowski and Roman Ingarden, until the mid-1950s, when translation studies acquired a “linguistic framework.”² The interdisciplinary phase they locate in the 1960s, when structural linguistics gave impulse to a variety of disciplines and when literary studies and linguistics interacted. What Heydel and de Boncza Bukowski call “the transdisciplinary approach” implies a transcendence of the linguistic paradigm. It is formulated in various individual concepts of translation, such as for instance in the idea of a “translational series” (Edward Balcerzan), in a hermeneutic approach (Jerzy Ziomek), in the search for a “semantic dominant” in the original text (Stanisław Barańczak), and in the in the perception of the translator as the author’s *doppelgänger* (Anna Legeżyńska) as well as in the idea of the pseudo translation (Ewa Kraskowska).³ All these

¹ Piotr de Bończa Bukowski and Magda Heydel, “Toward a transdisciplinary research,” *Polish Translation Studies* 21(1), accessed October 20, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/17218970/Polish_Translation_studies_toward_a_transdisciplinary_research.

² de Bończa Bukowski and Magda Heydel, “Toward a transdisciplinary research,” 2.

³ See Katarzyna Szymańska, “Die polnische Theorie der literarischen Übersetzung und die internationale Perspektive der Translation Studies. Anmerkungen zur Posener Schule anlässlich der ersten Anthologie der polnischen Übersetzungstheorie,” *Welt der Slaven* 61 (2016): 399–412; here: 405.

concepts, Katarzyna Szymańska remarks, have the great potential to become part of international translation studies.⁴

What becomes obvious from this short history of (Polish) translation studies is the fact that it has developed from a general topic to an academic discipline in its own right. There have even been voices to proclaim translation studies to be *the* dominant discipline in the humanities in the age of globalisation. In her article *Reflections on Comparative Literature*, with which Susan Bassnett answers Gayatri Spivak's statement about the "death of comparative literature"⁵, Bassnett argues that translation can act as "a force for literary renewal and innovation":

whereas once translation was regarded as a marginal area within comparative literature, now it is acknowledged that translation has played a vital role in literary history and that great periods of literary innovation tend to be preceded by periods of intense translation activity.⁶

Parallel to the academic discourse that secured the status of translation theory as the academic discipline of translation studies, however, there has always been a second, literary, or poetic, or practical discourse concerned with translations and with the theory of translation. Writers, philosophers and translators themselves have always been commenting, describing, prescribing, or defending (their) translations or translation in general. Already Martin Luther, for example, had to defend his translation of the bible which he did in his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen, An Open Letter on Translating* from the year 1530.

My paper is concerned with this non-academic, often poetic discourse on translation. This discourse – I want to argue – is based on the fact that translation is not only a topic to be reflected on theoretically. It is also a practice where theory and practice are closely intertwined, which may be one of the reasons why translation theory was not easily integrated into academic discourse and its institutions. Another reason may be the long standing opinion that translation is secondary to, for instance, literature and the arts. Many writers are translators and the other way around; famous examples are Vladimir Nabokov, Umberto Eco, Czesław Miłosz, or Stanisław Barańczak. Often writers do not only translate (their own work or the work of other authors), but also write about translations,

⁴ Szymańska, "Die polnische Theorie der literarischen Übersetzung," 411.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁶ Susan Bassnett, "Reflections on Comparative Literature," *Comparative Critical Studies* 3(1–2) (2006): 3–11; here: 8.

often in a more essayistic than academic way. I will concentrate on these paratexts of translations, on forewords, commentaries, and essays about translation; or more concretely: on Walter Benjamin's foreword to his translation of Baudelaire, on Vladimir Nabokov's commentary on his own translation of Pushkin's *Yevgeni Onegin*, and on Stanisław Barańczak's Translational manifesto, his *Manifest translatologiczny*.

What will become obvious when we look at these texts is the fact that thinking about translation often means thinking about something else. Right from the outset, texts about translations had a bigger aim in view, a more important thought to express. Thus, Friedrich Schleiermacher in his *On the Different Methods of Translation* (1813) was mainly interested in the interaction between the own and the other, the domestic and the foreign. He pointed out that it is especially the foreign that is of great attraction in the translation, since the foreign will enrich the native culture, just as foreign plants enrich the native soil. The question of the relationship between the own and the other is, by the way, a question that has gained wide popularity in the contemporary age of globalisation where we are constantly confronted by the other or the foreign.⁷

The poetic paratexts around translations that I will look at use translation as a kind of springboard for thinking about poetics and pure language (Benjamin), about writing and telling stories (Nabokov), and about the copy and the original (Barańczak).

1. *The Foreword: Walter Benjamin*

In 2010 Tomasz Bilczewski wrote: "Thirty years have passed since the wide knowledge on translation began its march from the margins

⁷ See, for example, Antoine Berman's *La Traduction comme épreuve de l'étranger* from 1985 and Roman Lewicki's *Obcość w przekładzie i obcość w kulturze* (foreignness in translation and foreignness in culture) from 2002, to mention just two articles about the own and the other. Berman's article gained wide popularity in its English version as *Translation and the Trial of the Foreign* by Lawrence Venuti, while Lewicki's Polish text has remained unnoticed by the international translation community. Both texts deal with the foreign in translation, but while Lewicki is concerned mainly with the effect the foreign in translation will have on the reader, Berman develops an ethics of "negative analysis" to liberate the foreign and its energy against the translators' systematic attempts to suffocate or to hide this energy. Lewicki writes about the culture shock that will hit the reader in a translation that exhibits its foreignness or its second order status; Berman, on the other hand, understands translation as an ethical project and propagates the foreign. See Roman Lewicki, "Obcość w przekładzie a obcość w kulturze," in *Polska myśl przekładowa. Antologia*, ed. Piotr de Bończa Bukowski and Magda Heydel (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013), 313–322; Antoine Berman, "Antoine Berman, Translating and the Trials of the Foreign," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York/London: Routledge, 2004, 2nd ed.), 276–289.

of literary studies to its privileged field [...], to interdisciplinary cultural studies [...], a march that is continuing until today.”⁸

It was a long march, indeed, and one that has not necessarily been restricted to the academic field. In his anthology *The Translation Studies Reader* Lawrence Venuti begins his collection of “foundational statements” with Jerome’s *Letter to Pammachius* on translation and goes on via Nicolas Perrot D’Ablancourt, John Dryden, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Goethe, up to Friedrich Nietzsche. Here we have a Church Father (Jerome), a translator of the classics (D’Ablancourt), two writers (Dryden and Goethe), a multitasking philosopher-theologian-translator (Schleiermacher) and a writer-philosopher (Nietzsche). The interdisciplinarity as well as the hand in hand reflections of practitioners and theoreticians was thus inherent in the theory of translation right from the start. Only in the 20th century did linguists and semioticians begin to consider translation to be a scientific project which they treated in a prescriptive as well as in a descriptive way, such as e.g., Roman Jakobson in his famous essay *On linguistic aspects of translation* from 1959, or Jiří Levý in *The Art of Translation (Umění překladau)* from 1963. Venuti pays more attention to Western writers and theoreticians while from the Slavic theories only Jakobson’s essay is included in his anthology.

Translations are often accompanied by paratexts, hinting at the fact that a translation is not an original (which is made clear by the name of the translator on the cover or on the first page in the book) and trying to reduce the rest of unintelligibility of translations to a minimum (by fore- or afterwords as well as by footnotes). While footnotes are to be avoided, as we know from Vladimir Nabokov⁹ and from Umberto Eco, who calls footnotes to be the ultimate confession of the translator’s defeat in the face of the original,¹⁰ fore- and afterwords are quite common.

Walter Benjamin never even mentions the text he translated in his foreword to Charles Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiennes* from 1923, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers (The Task of the Translator)*. Right from the start

⁸ “Przeszło trzydzieści lat [...] gdy szeroko rozumiana wiedza o przekładzie rozpoczęła swój trwający do dzisiaj [...] marsz od marginesów literaturoznawstwa ku jego uprzywilejowanym obszarom [...] *spectrum* interdyscyplinarnych studiów nad kulturą” (All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.) Tomasz Bilczewski, *Komparatystyka i interpretacja. Nowoczesne badania porównawcze wobec translatoologii* (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), 107.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, “The Art of Translation,” in Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 315–321; here: 319.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *Quasi dasselbe mit anderen Worten. Über das Übersetzen*, trans. from Italian by Burkhart Kroeber (Munich: dtv, 2009), 111.

this foreword was treated as an essay in its own right and it has been published many times without the translation. What Benjamin is really concerned with in his foreword is poetic language, or rather “pure language”. The original as well as the translation, Benjamin states, are imperfect in regard to language; none of them is able to speak in “pure language”. The task of the translation lies in adding to the original’s potential to reach pure language:

To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolising into the symbolised itself, to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. In this pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything, but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished.¹¹

While the original aspires to pure language, it needs the other languages, i.e., the translations, to get closer to its ideal. Both the original and its translations are parts of an ideal whole. Benjamin captures this idea in the picture of a broken vessel:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.¹²

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 1. 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge/London: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1996, 5th ed. 2002), 253–263; here: 261. “Von diesem sie zu entbinden, das Symbolisierende zum Symbolisierten selbst zu machen, die reine Sprache in der Sprachbewegung zurück zu gewinnen, ist das gewaltige und einzige Vermögen der Übersetzung. In dieser reinen Sprache, die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt, sondern aus ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort das in allen Sprachen gemeinte ist, trifft endlich alle Mitteilung, aller Sinn und alle Intention auf eine Schicht, in der sie zu erlöschen bestimmt sind.” Walter Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” in *Das Problem des Übersetzens*, ed. Hans J. Störing (Darmstadt: WBG, 1969), 156–169; here: 167.

¹² Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 260. “Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht zu gleichen haben, so muß, anstatt den Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich anbinden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen.” Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” 165.

The original and its copies (translations) for Benjamin are part of a “greater language”, which is “pure language”, “[i]n translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air.”¹³

This is the short version of Benjamin’s very complicated essay that has been interpreted very often. Especially the deconstructionists enjoyed the “rivalising semantic powers” of the essay.¹⁴ Just as Benjamin used his own translation only as a starting point for developing his ideas on pure language based on an interplay between original and translation, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida use Benjamin’s essay in order to elaborate on their own favourite topics. Translatability became a test case for the breaking apart of the signifier and the signified. In his essay on Benjamin entitled *De tours de Babel*, Derrida links translation, among other matters, to his theory about the gift.¹⁵ For him Benjamin’s translator is the perfect figure of the impossible: if the gift is – according to Derrida – impossible, because the receiver must not recognise the gift since a gift recognised as a gift can no longer be a gift,¹⁶ the translator likewise personifies the impossible. As a person in debt – a debt that can never be settled – she or he is the personification of the impossible, i.e., of the gift. The task of the translator is to return something (the original) which she or he can never do. The only thing the translator can do is to guarantee the survival of the text, but she or he can never get rid of her or his debt, the debt of giving sense: “The translator is indebted.”¹⁷ I do not want to explain Derrida’s complicated interpretation of Benjamin’s complicated essay in depth, but I would like to point out that Derrida is not really interested in translation or even in Benjamin. His aim is to integrate Benjamin’s thinking into his own philosophy.

Similarly, Paul de Man uses Benjamin’s approach to translate his own line of thought in his *Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s Task of the Translator* when he focuses on the “disjunctions” between the hermeneutic and the poetic, between grammar and meaning, between the symbol and the symbolised,

¹³ Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 257. “In ihr [der Übersetzung] wächst das Original in einen gleichsam höheren und reineren Luftkreis der Sprache hinauf,” Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” 162.

¹⁴ Barbara Johnson’s definition of deconstructionist readings may well be applied to the deconstructionist readings of Benjamin’s essay. Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference. Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 5.

¹⁵ Another of his favourite topics addressed in *De tours de Babel* is the proper name: in translation the own (language or name) is confronted with the universal (language or name), see Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” in *Difference in translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207; here: 166–165.

¹⁶ See Derrida’s *La fausse monnaie* from 1991.

¹⁷ Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” 176.

between the trope and its tropological substitutions.¹⁸ The “errancy of language that never reaches the mark”¹⁹ very well fits into de Man’s own approach that centres on the disjunction of grammar and rhetoric, an approach that he developed in his book *Allegories of Reading* in 1979.

2. *The Commentary: Vladimir Nabokov*

If Benjamin’s foreword is one example of the “exploitation” of a translation where the translation itself moves into the background and is used as an inspiration for another text (in this case for Benjamin’s poetics of pure language and in turn for Derrida’s and de Man’s deconstructive readings of Benjamin), Vladimir Nabokov’s commentary on his translation of Pushkin’s masterwork *Yevgeni Onegin* is another one. Nabokov’s translation comprises four volumes, one of which is the translation proper while the other three volumes (1200 pages)²⁰ are made up of the commentary – the sheer volume of the commentary in relation to the translated text marks the translator’s meandering. Nabokov’s translation of *Yevgeni Onegin* plus commentary is in fact a literary masterpiece in its own right, a commentary novel similar to his novel *Pale Fire* from 1962, where the eponymous poem *Pale Fire* is just the pretence in order to tell a completely different story in the commentary which takes up much more space than the poem, of course. Jan Assman differentiates between a “continuing” and a “discontinuing” commentary: while the latter is a metatext that is clearly different from the canonical text and thus closes the text it is commenting on, the first form, the continuing commentary, writes itself into the text, “continuing” it and adding to it.²¹ In this case, Sylvia Sasse writes, the act of closure is always prevented by opening up the text in the commentary.²² This is exactly what happens in Vladimir Nabokov’s commentary on Pushkin’s *Yevgeni Onegin*: Pushkin’s

¹⁸ Paul de Man: “Conclusions. On Walter Benjamin’s ‘The task of the Translator,’” *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 10–35; here: 30.

¹⁹ De Man, “Conclusions,” 33.

²⁰ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 318.

²¹ Jan Assmann, “Text und Kommentar: Einführung,” in *Text und Kommentar*, ed. Jan Assmann and Burghard Gladigow (Munich: Fink, 1995), 9–33; here: 28.

²² Sylvia Sasse, *Texte in Aktion. Sprach- und Sprechakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus* (Munich: Fink, 2003), 322. Sasse summarises Assman’s binary definition of the continuous and the discontinuous commentary (320–321) in order to come to her own topic, the Medical Hermeneutics, 3rd generation Moscow conceptualists.

text is opened and becomes part of a much bigger text whose author is no longer Pushkin, but Vladimir Nabokov.

When the four volumes were published in 1965, the critic Edmund Wilson, who was a close friend of Nabokov, wrote about the translation: “It has produced a bald and awkward language which has nothing in common with Pushkin or with the usual writing of Nabokov.”²³ One irritation Wilson experiences is the abundance of unknown English words, so that he comes to the conclusion that it would be easier to read the Russian original: “It would be more to the point for the student to look up the Russian word than to have to have recourse to the OED for an English word he has never seen and which he will never have occasion to use.”²⁴

Nabokov had been working on his “controversial translation of Pushkin’s masterpiece”²⁵ since the late 1940s, and as his biographer Brian Boyd reports he could not have foreseen that it would take up as much time as he needed for writing three novels (*Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Invitation to a Beheading*).²⁶ While in the 1940s Nabokov had published parts of *Yevgeni Onegin* in verse translation, the final result was not as in Russian “a novel in verse,” but a poem in prose, which was based on an “absolute literalism.”²⁷ Against Wilson’s devastating review – which caused the end of the “intense literary friendship” between Nabokov and Wilson²⁸ –, where Wilson attested a “lack of common sense”²⁹ in the translation as well as to the commentary, Brian Boyd sees Nabokov as the ultimate voice of the original Pushkin: “Nabokov pays Pushkin the compliment that his exact meaning matters [...] and that his music cannot be matched.”³⁰

Nabokov himself had already in 1941 published an essay on “The Art of Translation” in the journal *The New Republic* where he explained the “three grades of evil” that “can be discerned in the queer world of verbal transmigration.”³¹ Nabokov takes a very strict position in regard

²³ Edmund Wilson, “The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov,” *The New York Review* July 15th, 1965, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1965/07/15/the-strange-case-of-pushkin-and-nabokov/>.

²⁴ Wilson, “The Strange Case.”

²⁵ Boyd, “Vladimir Nabokov,” 318.

²⁶ Boyd, “Vladimir Nabokov,” 318.

²⁷ Boyd, “Vladimir Nabokov,” 322.

²⁸ Boyd, “Vladimir Nabokov,” 321.

²⁹ Wilson, “The Strange Case.”

³⁰ Boyd, “Vladimir Nabokov,” 327.

³¹ Nabokov, “The Art of Translation,” 315. (The text can also be found online in its first version where it has the subtitle “On the sins of translation and the great Russian short story,” accessed October 22, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/62610/the-art-translation>.)

to translation, seeing severe translation mistakes as “a crime to be punished by the stocks as plagiarists were in the shoebuckle days.”³² The three grades of evil include ignorance, the omission of parts of the original text and, as the worst crime of translation, the adaptation of the original to the readers of the translation, when “the masterpiece is planished [...] and vilely beautified in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public.”³³

After following various translation errors and categorising three (detestable) types of literary translators, Nabokov turns to a verse from Pushkin in order to show its untranslatability: “Ya pomnyu chudnoye mgnovenye,” which in Nabokov’s phonetic transcription looks like: “*Ya pom-new chud-no-yay mg-no-vain-yay.*”³⁴ The exact translation into English would be: “I remembered a wonderful moment,” but, as Nabokov remarks: “no stretch of the imagination can persuade an English reader that ‘I remembered a wonderful moment’ is the perfect beginning of a perfect poem.”³⁵ Nabokov here turns *against* the literal translation which is exactly the opposite of what he will later do in his own translation of *Yevgeni Onegin*. However, in his essay on translation he gives up trying to find a solution for the perfect translation: “I did translate it at last, but to give my version at this point might lead the reader to doubt that perfection be attainable by merely following a few perfect rules.”³⁶

Since the translation of the poem – or its first line – is not preserved,³⁷ one may suspect that this is one of Nabokov’s games with his readers and that there never was any translation, perfect or not. Brian Boyd’s statement about Nabokov’s realisation that Pushkin’s “music cannot be matched” might well have its origins in this fruitless attempt at translating the first verse of Pushkin’s most famous poem.

But what does Nabokov tell us in the commentary that he worked on for ten years from 1948 to 1958³⁸? Critics have “complained about the aimless heterogeneity of its information,” while Boyd sees it as “a serious,

³² Nabokov, “The Art of Translation,” 315.

³³ Nabokov, “The Art of Translation,” 315.

³⁴ Nabokov, “The Art of Translation,” 320.

³⁵ Nabokov, “The Art of Translation,” 320.

³⁶ Nabokov, “The Art of Translation,” 321.

³⁷ As Dieter E. Zimmer, Nabokov’s German translator of the essay, remarks in a footnote: Vladimir Nabokov, “Die Kunst des Übersetzens,” in: Vladimir Nabokov, *Vorlesungen über russische Literatur*, ed. Fredson Bowers and Dieter E. Zimmer, trans. Dieter E. Zimmer (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2013), 639–652; here: 652.

³⁸ Boyd, “Vladimir Nabokov,” 337.

impassioned work of scholarship.”³⁹ I would argue that the commentary is more than a paratext. Rather, it is a text in its own right, a work of fiction that is made up of seemingly superfluous information and that is turned into an aesthetic experiment of modernist writing. While the translation of Pushkin’s “novel in verse” is on the one hand an existential undertaking, it is on the other, as we have already seen in the case of Walter Benjamin, a springboard for a completely different adventure.

Let us take the first verse of the first chapter as an example: “My uncle has most honest principles / *Moy dyádyá sámichéstnih právil*; Grammatically, ‘my uncle [is a person] of most honest [honourable] rules’.”⁴⁰ The commentary for this verse takes up roughly one and a half pages and includes: Nabokov’s own feelings about the beginning (“This is not a very auspicious beginning from the translator’s point of view”),⁴¹ Pushkin’s situation as the major poet in his circle, Pushkin’s (imagined) remark to Tsar Alexander I (plus information on the Tsar’s reign) about writing *Yevgeni Onegin*, the intertextual dimension of this first verse (a poem by Krylov), information about the place where Pushkin had heard Krylov’s poem (in Aleksey Olenin’s house) and about the women he noticed when he was at this place (not Olenin’s daughter whom he courted later – just as Onegin fell in love with Tatiana when it was already too late –, but Olenin’s niece, Anna Kern, to whom he dedicated the poem “Ya pomnyu chudnoye mgnoveniye” [!]) and about the details of Krylov’s poem, where a donkey has “most honest principles,” just like Onegin’s uncle in Pushkin’s novel in verse. Nabokov’s commentary resembles the wanderings of a flaneur through the poet’s literary everyday that the formalists later called “literaturnyi byt,” where the flaneur is constantly distracted by different sights and associations, but finally manages to return to his original agenda, which in this case is the first verse of Pushkin’s poem.

3. *The Manifesto: Stanisław Barańczak*

Walter Benjamin as well as Vladimir Nabokov and Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man are all concerned with the topic of translation, but for all of them, without exception, translation functions as a starting point or a test case for their own poetic or theoretical meanderings. I will now

³⁹ Boyd, “Vladimir Nabokov,” 339.

⁴⁰ *Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse by Aleksandr Pushkin*, Translated from the Russian, with a Commentary, by Vladimir Nabokov. In four volumes. 2. Commentary on Preliminaries and Chapters One to Five (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 29.

⁴¹ *Eugene Onegin*, 29.

turn to a Polish poet and translator, Stanisław Barańczak, who wrote a translational manifesto using his own translations of English poems into Polish as a basis. Since in the theory of translation, practice and theory are closely connected, the manifesto – which is outspokenly prescriptive rather than descriptive – seems to be the perfect form.

Stanisław Barańczak was not only a translator, but also a poet and a literary scholar. He was one of the leading poets of the Polish “New Wave” (*Nowa fala*), a movement in Polish poetry in the second half of the 1960s; Barańczak was part of the Poznań group.⁴² In 1981 Barańczak emigrated to the United States and became a professor of Slavic Literatures at Harvard. His “translational manifesto” was published in the journal *Teksty Drugie* in 1990.

How, Barańczak asks, can we evaluate the quality of a translation? The greater aim behind this question is to provide a solid base for the criticism of translations with the help of his “small, but maximalist manifesto” – “mały, lecz maksymalistyczny manifest” of translation. This manifesto wants to determine the essence good of a translation, i.e., of a translation that is not worse than the original and better than the other translations of a specific text. It is a somatic experience, Barańczak argues, that tells us whether a translation is good or bad:

from semiotics we have to move to the somatic [...], physiology at least does not lie and you cannot falsify it – in successful cases it is a tremor that runs over our shoulders, a tear that appears in the eye, or an uncontrollable roar of laughter. Finally, why do we read poetry? We do this – and I repeat Witkacy here [...] – so that the unity in multiplicity forces us to tremble. [...] The translator of poetry does not only translate in order to rival and to outrun, in order to break the backbone of the original text’s linguistic and formal resistance, but also in order to feel the tremor of ecstasy in his own backbone.⁴³

⁴² About the Polish “Nowa fala” see, e.g., Małgorzata Spychała, “Nowa fala,” accessed Oct 22, 2016, <http://www.spychala.info/ar001/ms12.pdf>.

⁴³ Stanisław Barańczak, “Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest translologiczny albo: Tłumaczenie się z tego, że tłumaczy się wiersze również w celu wytłumaczenia innym tłumaczom, iż dla większości tłumaczeń wierszy nie ma wytłumaczenia,” *Teksty Drugie* 3 (1990): 7–66; here: 11. (“[O]d semiotyki musimy przejść do somatyki [...], fizjologia przynajmniej nie kłamie i nie da się sfalszować — to, w szczególności udanych wypadkach, dreszcz, który nam przebiega po plecach, łza, która się zakręci w oku, albo nieopanowany wybuch śmiechu. Ostatecznie, po co czytamy wiersz? Po to — że powtórzę za Witkacym [...] — aby jego jedność w wielości przyprawiała nas o dreszcz [...] Tłumacz poezji tłumaczy zatem nie tylko po to, aby dorównać i przewyższyć, aby oryginalnemu tekstowi złamać kręgosłup jego językowego i formalnego oporu, lecz również po to, aby poczuć dreszcz ekstazy w kręgosłupie własnym”).

Being a translator himself, Barańczak shows how he re-enacts the “tremor” that the reader experiences reading or listening to the original, for the reader of the translation, choosing his own translations of *Echo in a Church*, a 17th century poem by Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and Elizabeth Bishop’s poem *Exchanging hats* from 1979. Other than Benjamin or Nabokov, Barańczak here discloses the secret of his trade: he shows how he diligently moves from one possible translation to the next, until he finds an acceptable form. What he wants – needs – to preserve is the form of the original poem: “the order of the ‘form’ cannot be attacked, the ‘content’ has to yield”.⁴⁴ Barańczak’s approach to translation is the exact opposite of Nabokov’s. While Barańczak tries to attain a physiological reaction similar to the one that is evoked by the original, Nabokov’s *Yevgeni Onegin* is characterised by its extreme literalness and does not, if we believe Wilson, evoke anything but anger. For Barańczak the “music of the verse” has to be preserved, not necessarily its words.

While manifestos are usually short, militant texts which convey their message in a precise form, Barańczak’s manifesto is a long report of the translator’s work and the reader has to diligently read all 59 pages of the text in order to find the manifesto’s demands. For Barańczak, as already mentioned, the task of the translation is to re-create the somatic experience of the original, which means that form (the music of the poem) is of uttermost importance while the actual words can be replaced. In the middle of his manifesto – between his examples of translations of English poems into Polish ones – he inserts the no-goes for literary translations (or “zakazy”, prohibitions, as he calls them): first, poetry must never be translated into prose, and second, good poetry must never be translated into bad poetry because nobody needs bad poetry.⁴⁵

In his manifesto, Barańczak “fights” for several things: for a solid base for the criticism of translation and for translation itself. A translation – he argues – is a work in its own right, independent of its “truth” in regard to the original.; the translation has to be “a poetic work which is outstanding in an autonomous sense.”⁴⁶ What has to be preserved, however, is the “semantic dominant” (*dominanta semantyczna*).⁴⁷ Barańczak here

⁴⁴ Barańczak, “Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest,” 15 (“nakazy ‘formy’ są nieustępliwe, ustąpić musi ‘treść’”).

⁴⁵ Barańczak, “Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest,” 32–33.

⁴⁶ Barańczak, “Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest,” 34 (“uznajemy przykład za utwór poetycki w autonomicznym sensie wybitny”).

⁴⁷ Barańczak, “Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest,” 36.

uses a structuralist terminology typical for Central and East European translation theory.⁴⁸

In another essay, *The Confusion of Tongues*, Stanisław Barańczak approaches the question of translation from a more practical and autobiographical angle: The emigrant, he writes, is literally “lost in translation” when he encounters the other language and the other culture. Discussing housing problems in the United States and in Socialist Poland with an American, Barańczak suddenly realises “that what I [Barańczak] have been saying, perfectly logical as it would have been in Polish, made no sense in English,” he writes.⁴⁹ The Polish writer confronted with the other abroad feels a “fissure between word and thing.”⁵⁰

In 2016 the Polish poet and translator Piotr Sommer published a collection of essays on translations (or *szkice*, as Sommer writes)⁵¹ which had been printed in the journal *Literatura na Świecie* between 1984 and 2014. *Literatura na Świecie* is a journal for “literature of the world” where one of the central topics is translation criticism, which is regularly published alongside essays on literary topics and texts. Since 1972 the journal has given prizes for the translations of poetry and prose.⁵² This collection of essays is only one publication in the ongoing wave of books on translation. Its extraordinariness, however, lies in the fact

⁴⁸ Central and Eastern European translation theory came into existence in the context of the Prague School. Thus, it has a linguistic-structuralistic base (Roman Jakobson, Jiří Levý), while Western theory at the beginning of the 1970s and 80s distinguished itself through a highly descriptive approach. The Leipzig School under the tutelage of Albrecht Neubert was characterised by its pragmatism; it investigated the function of translation in the context of institutions and power relations. There was, however, an exchange between Western ideas and East Central European ones; Czech linguistic theories on translation or the Slovak Nitra school were early either translated into English or German or were being published in these languages. The Polish tradition, however, developed in relative isolation, unnoticed by Western theories, mainly because of the fact that they were neither translated nor written in any other language but Polish. See Katarzyna Szymańska, “Die polnische Theorie der literarischen Übersetzung,” 403; about Western European translation studies (and the Leipzig school) in comparison to the North American one see Edwin Genkler, “Translation Studies on Both Sides of the Atlantic,” in *Sprach(en)kontakt – Mehrsprachigkeit – Translation. Innsbrucker Ringvorlesungen zur Translationswissenschaft V*, ed. Lew N. Zybatow (Frankfurt a.M./Berlin/Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 41–52.

⁴⁹ Stanisław Barańczak, “The Confusion of Tongues,” in Stanisław Barańczak, *Breathing Under Water and Other East European Essays* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 221–227; here: 221.

⁵⁰ Barańczak, “The Confusion of Tongues,” 225.

⁵¹ Piotr Sommer, “To jest wstęp,” *O nich tutaj (książka o języku i przekładzie)*, ed. Piotr Sommer, (Kraków/Warszawa: Instytut Książki, 2016), 5–11; here: 5.

⁵² About “Literatura na Świecie,” accessed October 24, 2016, <http://www.literaturanawswiecie.art.pl/historia.htm>.

that the publications use the essayistic form; they are literary rather than academic, thus continuing the tradition of non-academic writing on translation that we have observed in the case of Walter Benjamin, Vladimir Nabokov, or Stanisław Barańczak. A direct continuation of Barańczak can be found in the essay *A little typology of mistakes* (*Mała typologia wady*) by the poet, translator, critic and scholar Andrzej Kopacki. First, the “little” (“*mała*”) refers to Barańczak’s “*mały manifest*”, the “little manifest”. Second, just as Barańczak formulates several rules for the translation of poetry, Kopacki enumerates five rules for translation, and third, Kopacki, just like Barańczak, is concerned with the criticism of translation.

Kopacki’s five rules are: 1) translation is a performative work; 2) every interpretation is the result of a hermeneutic act, which means that the translator must be a good hermeneut; 3) the translation must be criticised in the space between the original and the translation, in “the zone of difference” (“*w strefie różnicy*”);⁵³ 4) the critic has to judge how a translation deals with the conflict between restriction and freedom, or: with its restricted freedom (“*ograniczona swoboda*”);⁵⁴ 5) the translation has to deal with the interpretation of the original, with its own maximalist aspirations (“*totalistyczne aspiracje*”) and to be careful with the possible linguistic otherness that the original provides. This difficult weighing up of possibilities has to be considered by the criticism of translations.

Barańczak’s manifesto, just like Kopacki’s essay and more than Benjamin’s foreword or Nabokov’s commentary, is actually concerned with translation, with its possibilities and restrictions. It provides practical advice so that the reader or the professional critic is able to judge a translation. On the other hand, Barańczak is just as passionate as Nabokov when he demands that translation evokes a metaphysical shudder that, he presumes, has already been the effect of the original. The different paratexts presented here follow completely different agendas which are closely tied to their authors’ aspirations and interests. This is what makes them different from the academic discourse which at certain times demands that certain topics be tackled, as, in the times of globalisation and of world literature the question of the own and the other, or, in the structuralist age: the linguistic potential of translations.

⁵³ Andrzej Kopacki, “Mała typologia wady,” in *O nich tutaj (książka o języku i przekładzie)*, ed. Piotr Sommer (Kraków/Warszawa: Instytut Książki, 2016), 95–105; here: 98.

⁵⁴ Kopacki, “Mała typologia wady,” 98.

Abstract

The article is concerned with the “other” side of translation studies – not with the academic discourse that has had a strong impact in the context of globalisation and the study of the “own” and the “other” in the last years, but with essayistic forms that have developed around translation(s) right from the beginning of translation theory: forewords, commentaries, manifestos. Writers, philosophers, and translators have always been commenting, describing, prescribing or defending (their) translations or translation in general. Walter Benjamin’s foreword to his translation of Baudelaire, Vladimir Nabokov’s commentary on his own translation of Pushkin’s *Yevgeni Onegin* and Stanisław Barańczak’s translational manifesto, his *Manifest translatologiczny*, are analysed in regard to translation theory. It turns out that Benjamin’s foreword as well as Nabokov’s commentary take their translations (of Baudelaire or Pushkin) mainly as a springboard for questions and experiments transcending the actual translation, while Barańczak (as well as later Andrzej Kopacki) in his manifesto developed a kind of manual for translation criticism.

Key words: translation Studies; paratexts; Walter Benjamin on translation; Vladimir Nabokov and Pushkin; Stanisław Barańczak’s manifesto on translation; deconstructivism and translation theory

