

ALEKSANDER GOMOLA _____

On Throwing the Sand in “Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau”: An Analysis of Two Translations of One Poem by William Blake

Introduction

What does a literary work “say”? What does it communicate? . . . Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations. But do we not generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information – as even a poor translator will admit – the unfathomable, the mysterious, the “poetic,” something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet?

These words of Walter Benjamin from the introduction to his translation of poems by Baudelaire (75) describe both a paradox and a challenge which accompanies each translation of a literary work: how to render “the unfathomable” and “the mysterious” if we can translate only information? How to create what is essential out of the inessential matter of language? And, finally, how to distinguish a good translation from a bad one if it is so difficult to define the criteria of equivalence of texts in the source language and the target language?

I wish to address these questions by comparing two very different Polish translations of a poem by William Blake. First I will try to show how they might be evaluated by an attentive reader or a literary critic and then I will analyse them from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. My aim is to show that this perspective – as has already been demonstrated (cf. Tabakowska *Cognitive Linguistics; Gramatyka i obrazowanie; Językoznawstwo kognitywne*) – does provide useful criteria of equivalence that may help to assess the quality of the translation of a literary work. I will take a closer look at two versions of one of Blake's masterworks "Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau," translated by Zygmunt Kubiak and Stanisław Barańczak.

Zygmunt Kubiak is best known for his translations of classical works of Greek and Latin literature including *The Aeneid*, and his translation of Augustine's *Confessions* is widely regarded as his masterpiece. He also translated poems of a modern Greek poet, Constantine Cavafy. As far as English poetry is concerned, Kubiak translated, apart from Blake, the works of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Stanisław Barańczak is an outstanding Polish poet and a renowned translator of English poetry; his translations have won him the admiration of both critics and the reading public.

Although both Barańczak and Kubiak are experienced translators and although the categories "worse" and "better" are not always appropriate terms in translation studies, comparing both translations we must say that Barańczak translated Blake's poem better than Kubiak did. Is it only because of the fact that Barańczak is himself a poet, as was suggested by Benjamin, or are there any other underlying factors which we must take into account when assessing the quality of both translations? I will try to find the answer to that question in my paper.

What a Literary Critic Might Say . . .

Relatively simple as far as its metre and rhyme pattern are concerned, Blake's poem is at the same time a fine example of his prophetic zeal and an accusation directed against the luminaries of the Enlightenment – Rousseau and Voltaire. To reveal its structure, some of the words and phrases have been highlighted: the references to the wind are in ital-

ics, the references to light and seeing are underlined, and the references to people and biblical episodes are in bold face. The words "sand" and "sands," which appear in each stanza and refer to the most important element of the poetic image of the poem, are in block capitals.

Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau

Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau
 Mock on, Mock on, 'tis all in vain
 You throw **THE SAND** against *the wind*
 And the *wind blows* it back again

And every **SAND** becomes a Gem
Reflected in the beams divine
Blown back they blind the mocking Eye
 But still in **Israels** paths they shine

The Atoms of Democritus

And **Newton's** Particles of light
 Are **SANDS** upon **the Red Sea** shore
 Where **Israel's tents** do shine so bright

Kubiak translated Blake's poem twice; below is his first translation:

Rousseau, Voltaire, możecie sztydzić

Rousseau, Voltaire, możecie sztydzić
 Możecie sztydzić, ile chcecie
 Na wiatr rzucacie słowa, piasek
 Wiatr je z powrotem w twarz wam miecie

I każde małe ziarnko piasku
 Zmienia się w klejnot w boskim blasku
 Piasek oślepia wzrok sztyderców
 Lecz wciąż na Pańskich ścieżkach błyszczczy

Atomy mędrców, cząstki światła
 O których Newton mówił, wszystkie
 Są tylko piaskiem z brzegów tego morza
 Gdzie ścieżki Izraela jaśniejają świetliste

(Kubiak, *William Blake* 45)

The simple rhyme pattern of the poem turned out to be too difficult for Kubiak, who managed to retain it only in the first stanza and partly in the second and the third ones (all Blake's rhymes are perfect rhymes, while the rhymes in the third stanza of Kubiak's translation are imperfect and the rhyme pattern in the second stanza is different from the original). The number of syllables to a line is as close as possible to the original (nine in the Polish translation compared to eight in the original) with the exception of the third verse of the third stanza; two more syllables spoil the rhythm of the last stanza altogether. It seems that the poor quality of his first rendering of Blake's work prompted Kubiak to rework it, as soon another translation was published. This time the final result was much better. Still, there are some problematic phrases, which have been marked with question marks below:

Rousseau, Voltaire, możecie szydzić

Rousseau, Voltaire, możecie szydzić
 Możecie szydzić, ile chcecie.
 Na wiatr rzucacie słowa (?), piasek
 Wiatr je z powrotem w twarz wam miecie.

Piasek oślepia wzrok szyderców
 Każde ziarenko tego piasku
 Ciągłe na Pańskich ścieżkach błyszczący
 W klejnot zmienione w boskim blasku

Atomy mędrców (?), Newtonowe
 Cząsteczki światła piaskiem wszystkie
 Nadmorskim (?) są, gdzie Izraela
 Przybytki (?) jarzą się świetliste.

(Kubiak, *Twarde dno* 56)

In the second translation we have identical rhyme patterns in each stanza; the number of syllables to each line is also identical, but is it really the poem that Blake intended it to be? When we compare Kubiak's version with the original, we notice at once that some important elements highlighted in the English version are missing or distorted. What strikes us first of all, is the very imprecise rendering of the biblical references contained in the original text. In his first translation Kubiak ignores the original altogether and the "tents" from the last verse of the poem change

into "ścieżki" ("paths"), which results in a complete distortion of the original. His second translation is more accurate, but "piasek nadmorski" makes us think of a seaside resort or a sandy beach rather than of the Red Sea. What is more, there is still a great difference between "tents" and "przybytki," and although "przybytek" suggests biblical language, if a reader does not know the English version of the poem, he / she will not be able to recognize in the two last lines of Kubiak's translation a camp of Israelites at the Red Sea. As an imaginative approach to the Bible is a characteristic feature of Blake's works (Avis 63), it is obvious that this image is for him a symbol of one of the most significant biblical episodes: God's deliverance of His people from the land of Egypt and the Egyptian army. Similarly, in the second stanza, ignoring Democritus, whose atomic theory of the universe was the cornerstone of the rational vision of the world so hated by Blake, is also an instance of gross negligence on the part of the translator. Rousseau, Voltaire, Newton and Democritus were Blake's ideological enemies and therefore ignoring any of them distorts what he wanted to say in his poem.¹

However, the most serious mistake made by Kubiak seems to be his faulty rendering of the first stanza of the poem, namely the image of the sand thrown against the blowing wind, symbolizing the futility of efforts of those who discredit religion and religious visions of the world. In Kubiak's version we find a Polish saying "rzucać słowa na wiatr," which means "to promise something not wishing to keep the promise" and hence has nothing to do with the meaning of the original text. Thus a concrete, vivid and original image of throwing the sand against the blowing wind is rendered in the Polish translation by a phrase meaning something utterly different, simply because of the fact that Kubiak identified wrongly the physical activity of throwing the sand against the wind with a Polish idiomatic phrase "rzucać słowa na wiatr" and expanded it by adding the word "piasek." Whether it should be interpreted as a metaphor or as a simile it is difficult to say, as there is no link between "słowa" and "piasek." Kubiak's translation cannot be a proper equivalent

¹ Cf. this excerpt from *Jerusalem*: "Here Vala stood turning the iron Spindle of destruction / From heaven to earth: howling! invisible! but not invisible / Her Two Covering Cherubs afterwards named **Voltaire & Rousseau** / Two frowning Rocks: on each side of the Cove & Stone of Torture: / Frozen Sons of the feminine. / **Tabernacle of Bacon, Newton & Locke** (*Jerusalem*, chap. 3 – qtd. in Turner 93, emphases mine – A.G.).

of Blake's text also because of the preposition he uses. The Polish preposition "na" ("na wiatr") cannot be an equivalent of the English preposition "against" ("against the wind"), at least not in this context, as "against" suggests conflict and confrontation while "na" is most often the preposition of direction and location. This means that the original image created by Blake disappears for good.

When we carefully read the second stanza of the original text, we can see that the sand thrown against the wind by Voltaire and Rousseau in the first stanza is now *blown back* and *blinds* them. Kubiak, however, does not notice that and although he inserts the phrase "piasek oślepia wzrok szyderców," it does not make too much sense without the earlier image, lost in translation. What is more, it is also misleading, as it seems to suggest that "piasek oślepia wzrok szyderców" not because it gets into their eyes, as we have it in the original text, but because it reflects the sunlight. Indeed, by ignoring just one of the words highlighted in the second stanza, i.e. "blown," Kubiak is not able to render the dynamism of the stanza and the single image of the men throwing sand against a gusty wind that keeps together the first and the second stanza of the original is split in his translation into two separate images, very different from the one contained in the original text. Kubiak does not notice either that in the second stanza of Blake's poem the sand that "blinds the mocking eye" is contrasted with the sand that shines on Israel's paths and later on, in the third stanza, is seen on the Red Sea shore. After comparing a grain of sand to a gem, which makes us think of *Auguries of Innocence*,² Blake closes the metaphor from the first stanza, immediately creating a new poetic image, in which the sand thrown by Voltaire and Rousseau and blown back by the wind becomes the sand that shines on the Israel's paths. The stylistic / cohesive measures he uses include the pronoun "they" used twice, the conjunction "but" and a juxtaposition of the verses. Kubiak retains the juxtaposition and the contrast in his first translation, yet he spoils the rhythm. In his second translation, to save the meter and to restore the rhyme pattern, he changes the order of the verses and gives up on contrasting the roles of the sand in each image (cf. lack of "lecz" in the second translation), yet in doing so he distorts

²Cf. the opening stanza of the poem: "To see a world in a grain of Sand / and a Heaven in a wild Flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / and Eternity in an hour."

the meaning of the original text altogether. As far as the third stanza of Kubiak's translations is concerned, it must be repeated that an inexact translation of words and phrases that have clear referents in the original makes this stanza a very faint echo of the English version.

Barańczak's translation, presented below, was published between the publication of the two translations by Kubiak:

Drwij sobie, drwij, Rousseau, Wolterze

Drwij sobie, drwij, Rousseau, Wolterze
 W nicość wasz śmiech się przeistoczy:
 Pod wiatr miotacie *garście piasku*
 I wiatr *tym* piaskiem dmie wam w oczy

Zmienia się w Klejnot *każde ziarnko*
 Gdy boska jasność *w nie* się wciela
Piasek co mąci wzrok Szydercom
 Skrzy się na ścieżkach Izraela

Atomy Demokryta – świetlne
 Newtona Cząstki – *to piach* złoty
 Na brzegach Morza Czerwonego
 Gdzie Izraelskie lśnią namioty

(Barańczak 185)

There is a marked contrast between Barańczak's translation and those of Kubiak, not only with regard to the general impression, no matter how vague and ambiguous the term might be, but first of all with regard to the accuracy of the translation. Comparing the highlighted words and phrases of Blake's poem with their Polish equivalents chosen by Barańczak, we notice that Barańczak renders the English text accurately and precisely.

The explicitness of the text was not distorted, the references to the Bible and to Newton and Democritus are present, and the reader knows exactly what Blake wishes to tell him / her. What is more important, Barańczak, unlike Kubiak, renders the original image of throwing the sand as precisely as it is possible. The secret of Barańczak's success lies also in the fact that his rendering of the phrase of the original text "against the wind" as "pod wiatr" reflects the image of two conflicting forces: the men and the wind, absent from Kubiak's translation. A closer

analysis of the first stanza of Barańczak's translation reveals another interesting thing. The English phrase "in vain" that closes the second verse of the second stanza and consists of two syllables only, was rendered into Polish as the long phrase "w nicość wasz śmiech się przeistoczy," consisting of nine syllables and occupying the whole second verse. "What a waste of metre!" – one might say; "What a force behind these nine syllables!" – somebody else might point out. Yet although he extended a two-syllable collocation of the original text into a nine-syllable rhetorical expression, Barańczak preserved the rhythm and rhyme pattern of the first stanza and did not have to change the structure of the poem as drastically as Kubiak did in the second stanza of his translation. How was it possible? Barańczak is simply *not* faithful (if by fidelity one means in this case literal translation) to the original text of the first two lines of the first stanza and instead of repeating the initial phrase "mock on, mock on" he refers to it using the word "śmiech," gaining in this way four syllables *more* to be used for his long phrase. Kubiak's translation *is* faithful to the original, but fidelity of translation is in this case a burden not a blessing; because he repeats "możecie sztydzić" in the second verse of the first stanza, he has *only* four syllables left to render "'tis all in vain" and thus is forced to use a completely unconvincing phrase "ile chcecie," which will probably be associated by the reader more with an act of resignation on the part of Blake rather than with the futility of action of rationalists and deists sneering at religion. The last verse of the first stanza also discloses the different solutions adopted by translators and their consequences. The phrase "the wind blows it back again," possible to be rendered in many ways, is translated more explicitly by both translators, but in a different way. When choosing the part of the body attacked by the wind, Barańczak opts for "oczy" and thanks to the coherence of the text it is easier for his reader to interpret the phrase "mąci wzrok" from the second stanza as "to blind." Kubiak chooses "twarz," probably because of the fact that, according to his translation, the wind blows back "słowa," not "piasek," and in doing so he increases the distance between the meaning of the original text and his translation.

Even this short analysis of the original text of Blake's poem and its Polish translations shows why Barańczak's translation is better than those of Kubiak. Yet everything that has been presented above applies only to the texts in question and has no universal character. If we wish to

find more universal criteria which would help us to distinguish between a good and a bad translation, we should look at Blake's poem and its Polish versions from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

What a Linguist Might Say . . .

Cognitive linguistics gives us an important insight into the process of translating a literary work and its criteria may be very useful if we want to assess the quality of translations discussed in this paper. The cognitive linguistics perspective may help us first of all to see what is wrong with Kubiak's translation of the image of throwing the sand against the wind. Using Langacker's criteria, presented by Tabakowska, of scene construal (*Gramatyka i obrazowanie* 56; *Językoznawstwo kognitywne* 48), perspective and vantage point (*Językoznawstwo kognitywne* 62), we may say that scene construal, perspective and vantage point of the English text and of Barańczak's translation are identical. What makes them different is the level of specificity (*Cognitive Linguistics* 53; *Gramatyka i obrazowanie* 62). The greater specificity or concretization of Barańczak's translation ("throw" – "miotacie"; "sand" – "garście piasku") makes the image in his text more impressive than that of the original. Scene construal in Kubiak's translation has absolutely nothing to do with the original and does not depict throwing the sand at all. The word "sand" is just added to the phrase "rzucać słowa na wiatr" that represents the conceptual metaphor WORDS ARE THINGS³ and, as such, is highly lexicalized and its illocutionary force is much weaker than that of the phrase "to throw the sand against the wind," which is not a standard element of the English lexicon. As Tabakowska writes, it is a "dead" metaphor used automatically by speakers (*Językoznawstwo kognitywne* 93) and therefore is not very useful in rendering the imaginative and creative language of Blake. Non-equivalent scene construal not only distorts the meaning of the first stanza but also disqualifies the whole translation by Kubiak, because, as was shown above, the second and the third stanza of the poem

³Cf. "zamienić z kimś dwa słowa," "gładkie słówka," "dać słowo," "dobierać słowa," "ważyć słowa," "cedzić słowa," "wielkie słowa," "szukać słów," "chwytać kogoś za słowa," "trzymać za słowo," "zwrócić słowo," etc.

are a continuation and a development of the image created in the first stanza. Therefore, while Barańczak develops in his translation a scene that is an exact reflection of the scene of the original, Kubiak translates in the second and the third stanza just the keywords of the original, not being able to create out of them a coherent, concrete and convincing image. If we take scene construal as presented by Tabakowska as the basis of equivalence in translation (*Językoznawstwo kognitywne* 99), then we can answer the question why Barańczak's translation is better than that of Kubiak.

Non-equivalent scene construal is also the reason why Kubiak's version of the two last verses of Blake's poem is less acceptable than that of Barańczak. (Kubiak's first rendering of these verses cannot be regarded as a translation at all.) The scene construal of the original text is clear: its elements are the sandy shore on which there are some tents shining in the sun. The correlation between these elements may be explained in terms of profile and base (*Językoznawstwo kognitywne* 54); the shore is the base and constitutes the immediate scope of the sand and the tents. The same elements, the same perspective and the same vantage point make up the scene in Barańczak's translation, although there is one significant difference (see below). The profile / base correlation between the shore, the sand and the tents is identical with that of the English text. Kubiak ignores in his translation the word "shore" and forces us to accept something linguistically questionable, namely the fact that the noun "piasek" is the base for tents and their immediate scope. By removing "shore" / "brzeg" from the scene, Kubiak loses its most crucial element that is both the immediate scope and the base for "namioty" / "tents" and "piasek" / "sand" and leaves the reader disoriented. To which location does the relative pronoun "gdzie" from Kubiak's translation refer? The only possible answer is "piasek nadmorski" but then the Polish text does not make too much sense, because when we rearrange the sentence from Kubiak's translation, it reads "na piasku nadmorskim lśnią przybytki Izraela."

With regard to the difference between the scene construal of Barańczak's translation and that of the English text mentioned above, we can say that the contrast between "namioty" as the profile and "brzeg" as the base is stronger in the Polish version of the poem than the contrast between "the tents" and "the shore" in the English version, thanks to the fact that the word "namioty" is the last element of the Polish sen-

tence, which is an exemplification of the end focus principle as described by Enkvist (qtd. in *Językoznawstwo kognitywne* 123). In the English text accentuating this word in the same way was of course not possible.

Another important element of cognitive linguistics, so important, that, according to Tabakowska, it may be regarded as "a crucial aspect of equivalence in interlingual translation" is iconicity ("Iconicity" 386). Its definitions and main forms are also presented by Tabakowska ("Linguistic Expression" 409; *Językoznawstwo kognitywne* 76). In my analysis I would like to focus on the iconicity of the first two lines of Blake's poem and its translations.

Reading carefully the first two lines of Blake's poem, and especially reading them aloud, we must agree that their illocutionary force is determined not only by their semantic contents but also by their iconicity, namely by the repetition and the inner rhythm of the verses. That repetition, a traditional rhetoric and poetic device, has also a great iconic force, was demonstrated by Müller in his analysis of *King Lear* (311ff) and we can see it at work also in Blake's poem. The phrase "mock on" appears two times in each line and the regular, short rhythm is the result of the accumulation of many one-syllable and two-syllable words (with the syllable-to-word ratio of 1.1). Repetition of "mock on" stresses in this case the irony and the feeling of supremacy on the part of the speaker, while the accumulation of short words accentuates the dynamism, force and energy contained in these verses. The extent to which iconicity strengthens the illocutionary force of the English text becomes visible when we compare it with its Polish versions.

Kubiak's version is again weaker than that of Barańczak. Although the semantic contents of the original is preserved in his translation, yet the overall effect is less than impressive compared to the illocutionary force of the original. Kubiak uses long words (the syllable-word ratio is 2.25), which spoils the rhythm, and although the phrase "możecie szydzić" is repeated twice, it is not the best equivalent of "mock on" because its imperative aspect is expressed by a modal verb, while the semantic contents by a bare infinitive, which weakens the illocutionary force of the whole phrase. Barańczak's translation preserves one aspect of the iconicity of the English text, namely the rhythm, but only in the first line (syllable-word ratio: 1.8), yet the rhythm of the second line is very different from the original. However, Barańczak's equivalent of "mock on" is

better than that of Kubiak; "drwij sobie" performs in Polish the same semantic / pragmatic role as "mock on" in English, and their illocutionary forces are comparable. Nevertheless we must say that in both cases the iconicity of the English text was lost in translation.

The type of iconicity discussed above might be classified as syntagmatic, or more precisely as exophoric iconicity (Nöth 23). However, in Barańczak's translation we may find an interesting example of iconicity that is closer to onomatopoeia, present only in the Polish version of the poem and visible (and audible!) in the verb from the last verse of the second stanza: "skrzy." The initial consonantal cluster of the word may be regarded as an imitation of the sound of grains of sand when we walk on it, because we have the same combination of consonants in the Polish onomatopoeic word "skrzypiec," used to describe the sound made by creaky doors or stairs. This type of iconicity may be defined as "phonaesthesia" or "associative iconicity" (A. Fischer 126, 129).

Finally, we may notice some interesting differences between the two translations when we look at them through the prism of the coherence of the text. Reading the English text carefully, we notice that in almost every verse there is the word "sand" or a clear reference to it⁴ and the reader goes effortlessly from one verse to another, led by these words and phrases. Barańczak's translation mirrors exactly the coherence of the original, with the exception of the word "sands" from verse 11, which is now in verse 10. Kubiak's translation distorts the coherence of the English text in two ways. Firstly, as was mentioned above, the pronoun "je" in the first stanza directs us to "słowa" not "piasek." Secondly, the word "piasek" opens the second stanza as the subject and the agent of the sentence. Because in the last sentence of the first stanza "piasek" was the object and the patient of the sentence, we may get the impression that "piasek" from the first stanza and "piasek" from the second stanza are two different things.

⁴v. 3 – "the sand"; v. 4 – "blow"; v. 5 – "sand"; v. 6 – reflected; v. 7 "blown," "they blind"; v. 8 – "they shine"; v. 11 – "sands."

Conclusion

Summing up our evaluation of the two translations of Blake's poem, we may say that even "the unfathomable," "the mysterious" and "the poetic" may sometimes become visible, clear and tangible. In my analysis I tried to show that such categories as scene construal or the iconicity of a text may help us to distinguish between a good and a bad translation of a literary work. Bearing in mind that the central problem of translation studies is finding criteria of equivalence that might be a touchstone for existing translations and guidelines for future ones, I hope that my analysis corroborates what has already been demonstrated by others, namely that such criteria may be provided by cognitive linguistics and that the tenets of cognitive linguistics, even if they do not resolve the paradox described by Walter Benjamin, at least shed some new light on the nature of translation.

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