



'The translator's extraordinary artistry'

An Interview with Magdalena Heydel, Conducted by Karolina Król

Karolina Król: How did your acquaintance with Barańczak begin?

Magdalena Heydel: I was writing my Master's thesis on [Edward Estlin - KK] Cummings - among other things about his translations by Stanisław Barańczak - and it just happened that Barańczak was in Poland at that time and my supervisor, inestimable Stanisław Balbus, asked him if he would like to read my work and write an additional review. As a result, I have in my collection a review written by Stanisław Barańczak on the dissertation in which I am quite critical of his renditions of Cummings.

KK: What do you think about Barańczak's concept of translation? Many people claimed that individual poets lost their distinctness in his translations, becoming similar to his own idiolect.

MH: Stanisław Barańczak is a powerful translator. This is a figure who perceives his translation works as part of his literary activity rather than in terms of reproduction, which we learnt - or, rather, we were trained - to describe in the categories of humbleness, imitation, being in the shadow, and so on. I do not want to say that the attitude of being in the shadow and following the author is necessarily a mistake, or that it is not a good way of translating, but I also do not want to say that such a capable author of translations who leaves his stamp on the texts and treats translation as a creative activity makes a mistake. For me, the most interesting thing is to look at the output of Stanisław Barańczak, or any other translator, with reference to the space of possibilities of the given genre, if I may say so, or the type of creation which we call translation.

The question about Barańczak's output is very vast and difficult. You open a space for a huge debate. It seems to me that if we want to give a description of this output in a reliable way, it is not worth using terms such as 'accusing' or 'objecting' or 'defending'. It is, generally speaking, not this description mode. It seems more interesting to me to try to describe the way in which Stanisław Barańczak carries out his translations. And here surely the creative rather than reproductive element is brought to the forefront on different planes – from the very theoretical concept which Stanisław Barańczak constructs on the basis of what was elaborated by the Poznań school animated by Edward Balcerzan, to the purely poetic side, i.e. such a kind of artistic freedom which he exercises in translation and which was a framework for his translations.

KK: There is the question about whether this freedom is not too great...

MH: Then again, we would try to assess and say how far one may or may not go. It seems very interesting to me to see how the creative personality of Stanisław Barańczak works on these texts. Besides, only someone who is confident about their own standard can assess if this is too far or not. I am not sure of my own standard in assessing translation works and I would rather not absolutise, and it seems to me that it would be some kind of dogmatism if I said that translation is up to this point and then it is not. What is there behind this line: is this no longer a translation or maybe this is something more than a translation, something different than a translation... where is the boundary? Stanisław Barańczak, I should think, would ask this question in the following way: is it worth writing a very good poem in Polish, taking into account also the fact that the translator will drift away from the stereotypically imagined shape of the original text, or is it perhaps better to stick to this image and work more economically on the poetic layer? He would definitely go for the first of these two options.

KK: I am wondering about the issue of freedom, thinking of, for instance, the recently published rendering of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, made by Jacek Dukaj. Is it hard to say whether the change of the realities is still a translation or, rather, an independent creation of alternative stories?

MH: Of course, but Dukaj himself insists that his work is not a translation and he actually gets upset when critics try to compare him to translators and demonstrate that he is a mediocre translator or, on the contrary, an extraordinary translator. This is one side. The other side is that Barańczak does not introduce changes of this type, i.e. he does not resort to such apparent adaptation procedures in the substantial part of his translation activity, namely one concerning the so-called 'serious' poetry. It is true, however, that there are such areas in Barańczak's output where major changes are introduced. This could be observed, for instance, in his renditions of 'non-serious' work and translations – rare, for that matter – of children's literature, such as Dr Seuss. Again, it seems that the same principle comes to the foreground,

i.e. writing a good work is more important than what can be referred to as a translation which is a humble but not a really brilliant rendition of the original. In addition, Barańczak knows what he can afford to do in different genres; he makes clear divisions in this respect. It seems very interesting to me that the flexibility which he maintains in his translator’s job confirms this preliminary assumption, i.e. that it is possible to use different concepts of working with the text in relation to different literary genres.

As a matter of fact, there are probably no reasons to introduce changes to translations of serious works. Considering the fact that Barańczak serves as a populariser of poetry in the anthology titled *444 wiersze poetów języka angielskiego XX wieku* [444 Poems by 20th-Century Poets of the English Language] – and it is difficult for me to comment in more depth on his translations from languages other than English – if he puts himself in such a role, this is not because he wants to challenge the authority of the authors whom he introduces into the cultural circulation of the Polish language. Even if the translation activity of Barańczak is far from humble, it is by no means – as it seems to me – polemic or questioning the value of the translated text. Barańczak often says that there is a lot to be done with regard to the presentation of poets of the English language to the Polish reader. When he left Poland, he suddenly stood in front of a huge library in Harvard, where everything *was*, and I have a vision in my mind that he simply felt weak in the knees, his hands began to tremble, his eyes opened wide, and he thought: “God, so much of it!”. It should be remembered that it was 1980, which is the moment when Poland was really still provincial with regard to access to the goods of world culture. For instance, the access to the contemporary poetry of the English language was very limited, which is why, to the best of his efforts and interest – which cannot be denied to young Stanisław Barańczak – that glance at the shelves where everything *was* may have led him to the state of euphoria.

KK: That euphoria could surely account for this incessant persistence of Barańczak in creating his translational work. The poet confessed in *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu* (*Saved in Translation*) that it had been precisely translation that he devoted most of his time to (obviously apart from sleeping).

MH: I agree, especially that traces of that euphoria are present in both his essays and correspondence, in which Barańczak says that he will translate as much as he can. If his translation output is compared to poetic areas presented by other translators, it is possible to speak about different kinds of records broken by Stanisław Barańczak. In addition, there is this element of delight which seems immensely important to me. There are translators who work through strife, struggle, battle. There is a load of evidence for Barańczak’s delight in the text documents which he left.

KK: During the conference titled ‘Ameryka Barańczaka’ (‘Barańczak’s America’), differences between Barańczak’s anthologies and Sommer’s anthologies were pointed out on a number of occasions.

MH: I agree, there are many differences. They choose different poets to translate and they are interested in different aspects of poetic language. But, on the other hand, there are also authors who were translated by both, such as Cummings or Seamus Heaney. Piotr Sommer was the first translator of Heaney into Polish; his renditions are unusually interesting and really valuable. Later on, Heaney was translated mainly by Barańczak and it was him who canonised the Irish poet in the Polish literature. Surely you know the essay by Jerzy Jarniewicz which states that there are “translators-ambassadors” and “translators-legislators”. Making this distinction, Jarniewicz chooses Barańczak and Sommer as representative figures. Stanisław Barańczak is the translator who reaches for areas – as he declared himself, for that matter – which are unknown but full of treasure. He indicates that we are really falling behind with absorbing foreign literature of, for instance, the 20th century (not only in English) and there is a lot to be done in this respect. Sommer, in turn, is not interested in this. Sommer renders these poets in whom he is personally interested, and his taste and choices are very specific as opposed to ‘omnivorous’ Barańczak. I am not claiming that what he chooses is not worth attention. On the contrary, Sommer is such a poet and such a translator who is willing to work on the peripheries. He was interested in the Scots and the Irish, and if also in Americans, then not those from the current mainstream but, rather, those off the mainstream. Barańczak and Sommer are very different in this respect. When it comes to composing their anthologies, Barańczak can be described as someone who takes care of the representativeness of his choice. Examples of such ‘representative anthologies’ include *Od Chaucera do Larkina. 400 nieśmiertelnych wierszy 125 poetów anglojęzycznych z 8 stuleci* (*From Chaucer to Larkin: 400 Immortal Poems of 125 English-Language Poets over 8 Centuries*), *Fioletowa krowa. 333 najświetniejsze okazy angielskiej i amerykańskiej poezji niepoważnej od Williama Shakespeare’a do Johna Lennona* (*The Purple Cow: 333 Most Famous Specimens of English and American Non-Serious Poetry from William Shakespeare to John Lennon*), *Antologia angielskiej poezji metafizycznej XVII stulecia* (*An Anthology of the 17th-Century English Metaphysical Poetry*), *Od Walta Whitmana do Boba Dylana. Antologia poezji amerykańskiej* (*From Walt Whitman to Bob Dylan: An Anthology of American Poetry*)... Barańczak intends to show what is the best. He is aware – and I am convinced that it is implied in his works – that time passes by, life slips away, the disease hits, and one should not get distracted, one should deal with what is the best in order not to be late in the first place.

KK: The choice of authors whose texts he translated and presented in *Biblioteczka Poetów Języka Angielskiego* (*A Library of English Language Poets*) could point to such an understanding of his vocation as a translator.

MH: Yes, these are giants. Barańczak chooses for his *Biblioteczka* poets whose names went down in the history of poetry. It is possible to make an accusation of it – and it did happen that he was accused of that – and say that it is easy to translate those who are best when somebody had already

made the choice of the names, but that it is more difficult to see grandness in those whose art has not been called grandness yet. However, it is also possible to describe this in a completely different manner, i.e. as a gesture of presenting what is worth knowing, what undoubtedly builds cultural heritage, and what the Polish language does not have in its resources. Personally, I do not have such a critical nerve in myself so as to see any shortcomings in Barańczak’s attitude. I think that in order to describe something, first you have to understand before you can start to criticize.

KK: This measuring himself against the giants is also a kind of test to one’s own artistry and capabilities as a translator.

MH: Indeed, measuring himself against major poets was also undoubtedly a test in itself for Barańczak. I think that it is also worth describing this phenomenon; this is so agonic – almost Bloomish – that he measures himself against the grand ancestors without unnecessary modesty but, rather, as equals. Each incarnation made by the translator is some kind of a self-challenge. I am convinced that Barańczak displays a lot of vulnerability, so to speak, to this kind of challenge or ‘auto-bet’. This is a kind of poetic game with oneself; bouncing off one’s own limits, transgressing one’s limitations. Barańczak is interested in those poets who capture emotions and senses not only directly with words, but also through their artistry and poetic art. It is essential to him (which is closely connected with his ethical and meta-physical programme) that poetry is a ‘no’ said to death, but this ‘no’ is said to death not so much by the word itself as by poetic artistry. On a side note, this is a grand topic of the 20th century: whether we are allowed, whether it is possible – and if so, then how – to write beautiful poetry in the century which witnessed such terrible historical events.

KK: And whether it is possible to write poetry in the first place. Theodor Adorno famously said that it was impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz.

MH: Exactly. It turns out that poetry is possible and assumes different forms. Barańczak looks for those authors who do not give up on art. Poetry written in difficult moments of the 20th century is characterised by certain amorphism, i.e. it says, with every fibre of its being, that there are no longer any rules. We are in the world of fluidity, scream, and whine; well-formed and elegant speech is indecent and surely unauthentic. Barańczak did not translate Ginsberg and similar poetry, and he says in his correspondence with Czesław Miłosz that he is not interested in literature which turns into whine, and he is delighted with poetry which is capable of preserving the form in the face of death.

KK: Since you mentioned the correspondence between Barańczak and Miłosz, could you say something more about it? During the aforementioned conference in Poznań, titled ‘Barańczak’s America’, you delivered a lecture on Barańczak’s letters to Miłosz. We do not have access to them – they are

kept in the archive in the Beinecke Library and have never been published. Moreover, you mention that the public knows only that part of the correspondence which was written by Barańczak, which largely hampers the overall reception of the exchange.

MH: This is the correspondence of two authors who are very important to me. I dealt with the translation output of both of them. Both lived in the United States. They are representatives of two different generations, yet they are close to one another with regard to their ethos and also as far as their artistic choices are concerned. In these letters, Barańczak clearly turns to his master. This is correspondence which is private, but at the same time there is no doubt that it is devoted to professional literary issues. These immensely interesting letters seem to be an excellent comment on the works of both poets. Barańczak writes with great respect and his critical remarks concerning texts by Miłosz are always made with a bow. It would be interesting to know whether this to any extent affected Miłosz's way of thinking and refining arguments. On the other hand, the question remains about to what degree Miłosz reacted to what Barańczak sent him. It can be seen from the letters that Barańczak sent Miłosz every single thing which he had produced, i.e. each subsequent volume of his translations. The opinion of Miłosz must have been of considerable importance to Barańczak. There is also quite an interesting difference there. Miłosz underlines various sentences and fragments in the letters from Barańczak which puzzled him or aroused his interest. In the correspondence about Philip Larkin, he marks 'hints' concerning what he could change in his own text devoted to Larkin. He underlines, for instance, the sentences in which Barańczak criticises his concept of pessimism and nihilism in Larkin's poetry. If I remember well, Barańczak does not make any comments concerning poems by Miłosz, yet when Miłosz sends him typescripts of his essays, Barańczak presents his numerous reflections or he comments on theses put forward by Miłosz. Barańczak, in turn, never sends Miłosz unfinished texts which would require some kind of reworking; instead, he presents him with ready and already published texts, often stressing that he is interested in Miłosz's opinion yet he does not ask about advice. With this gesture, he becomes, in fact, independent from the opinion of Miłosz. This can result from the fact that he would like to spare Miłosz the effort. On the other hand, I am convinced that Barańczak is very sure of himself. He knows what he wanted to write. He knows that he thought the thing over and wrote it the way he wanted, so now any critical remarks of Miłosz are, in reality, reviews of a reader rather than workshop comments.

KK: Was there any polemics between the poets in their correspondence?

MH: Apart from that concerning Larkin (the poets were engaged in polemics with regard to the understanding of the concept of lyric poetry, i.e. what it really is), Barańczak sends Miłosz his anthology titled *Z Tobą, więc ze Wszystkim. 222 arcydzieła angielskiej i amerykańskiej liryki religijnej* [*With Thee, Therefore with All: 222 Masterpieces of English and American Religious Verse*] and

he feels obliged by the reaction of Miłosz to explain how he understands the “lyric poetry” phrase. Naturally, I have not seen the letters by Miłosz, because they are in the archives of the Barańczaks, but I gathered from Barańczak’s answer that they had discussed this very notion. They were wondering to what extent this phrasing is up-to-date. Barańczak defends the category of lyric poetry, trying to justify it by the subjective position of the person speaking, and reflection on the world. Miłosz finds this category slightly *passé*, associating it with the Young Poland.

KK: Comparing the output of both poets, it is perhaps possible to arrive at similar conclusions. Poetry by Barańczak, in particular his late poetry, is personal; it concerns mainly the individual. In *Sztuczne oddychanie* (*Artificial Respiration*), the poet gives a voice to the protagonist whom he dubs N. N., yet in the vast majority of his texts he speaks directly without using any mask lyrics. Miłosz uses this device much more often, starting from his excellent *Voices of Poor People*.

MH: There are direct utterances of the subject also in religious lyric poetry which Barańczak translated. In this correspondence there is another interesting polemic, i.e. one concerning *A Year of the Hunter* by Miłosz. Barańczak is full of enthusiasm, but he completely disagrees with the portrait of Cyprian Kamil Norwid sketched by Miłosz. He sent his comments after reading the whole book, so they probably had no impact on *A Year of the Hunter*. Thinking of polemics between the authors, it must be remembered that their letters are by no means theoretical treaties. Barańczak reacts with enthusiasm to what Miłosz sends him, what he read, or comments on what he sends to him. It is not that they intentionally take up selected topics; instead, they pay attention to the issues which emerge from concrete situations, concrete books or texts. Barańczak draws attention to a certain feature of the poetry by Miłosz, namely that it is anchored in the concrete thing. Poems of great metaphysical, poetic, or cultural importance are always deeply rooted in a very concrete situation, place, and time.

KK: Barańczak defines metaphysics in a similar manner, juxtaposing it with mysticism. According to him, metaphysics should stem from the real concrete world and only later wander towards other dimensions. Mysticism, in turn, lacks this quality of being rooted in the concrete.

MH: Talking about this concreteness, it works a bit like when we notice in others what we are intrigued by. This can also be connected with the observation concerning the poets that Barańczak chooses to translate. When we look at the contents of *444 wierszy poetów języka angielskiego XX wieku*, none of these poets is an author who would write some great metaphysical treaties and generalise too much. They all work close to the world and the detail, which by no means belittles the importance of their works. Robert Frost – obviously famous for picturing nature and rural life, somewhat similar to Heaney, Cummings with New York, Auden with his humour, Bishop, who is, after all, a master of description and an immensely detailed one...

KK: This is perhaps what the power of art would be all about. Art is impossible to be one hundred percent classified into any categories; it is somewhere in-between. To what extent, in your opinion, did Barańczak succeed in assimilating the English-language poetry into the Polish culture?

MH: It seems to me that this is a case to a very large extent despite endeavours of different publishers not to reveal it today. His translations were published, then they disappeared and are now almost impossible to buy. Hence the idea of the *444 wiersze* anthology. Note that when one speaks of the English-language poetry, the name of Barańczak immediately appears and even if somebody does not have access to these texts, they will still be aware of the existence of the translations by this particular figure. He created some kind of canon and showed a great wealth of what delighted him. His achievements regarding the acquisition of Shakespeare are certainly not to be underrated. His renditions triggered an enormous explosion of renewed interest in Shakespeare. It seems that Barańczak's enthusiasm and delight made many people – including not necessarily specialists – realise that Shakespeare is not some kind of strange antique shop with a glass display cabinet, but a vivid author who is worth reading.

I also suspect that Barańczak's intention with regard to assimilating the English-language poetry is connected with the desire to adopt a certain model of literary life. Namely, in Anglo-Saxon countries – especially in America – poetry is treated as one of the types of discourse present in the public space. The number of festivals, the publishing market, the fact that poetry appears in the public space and accompanies different events – also non-literary ones – and that poetry is promoted as a kind of discourse about the world; that occasional poems are written; that there is the institution of poet-laureate who performs a public function... It all looks completely different in Poland due to the fact that we continue to be invariably animated by the romantic spirit, which says that the poet is a bard meant for higher purposes, and writing letters on planting cabbage is an absurd of all sorts. Due to his translations and the way he wrote about poetry, Barańczak made an attempt – as it seems to me – at democratisation, or maybe he gave a chance for democratising the approach to poetic works. It must also be stressed that these translations began to appear in our country at the time of a civilisational, political, and cultural transformation, which is why foreign poets began to come to Poland, invited by – among others – Jerzy Illg. It turned out that they are vibrant people rather than monuments; that they are normal, they laugh, talk to readers, are willing to sign books... It seems that Barańczak's translation activity, apart from its other merits, found a very good moment for popularising that poetry in Poland.

KK: And how were these translations received back then? I am under the impression that nowadays a new translation is an event only in the hermetic literary circles and, regrettably, is not really present in broader awareness.

MH: We are all doing our best to turn new translations into events also in the public space, but this is not always successful, especially when there is

no support on the part of the market. Today, the Polish literary life functions in market categories rather than only in the categories of cultural values. This was slightly different in the 1990s. When Barańczak came to the Jagiellonian University to give lectures on Shakespeare and translating poetry, he attracted unusual crowds. It was difficult to get to the lecture room. It was similar in the case of lectures with Miłosz. The lecture hall in Collegium Novum was bursting at the seams. The same happened when Josif Brodski came. At that time, these events had a dimension of discovering new discourses, new areas, new ways of poetry existence. To my mind, Barańczak completely changed the way of thinking about translating poetry. It is no longer possible to translate as if Barańczak did not exist. It was him who set certain standards of poetic maximalism.

KK: As you happened to mention Barańczak’s lectures, could you say a few words about your first contact with him?

MH: Our first meeting was connected, as I mentioned before, with his review of my Master’s thesis. Barańczak could not be present at the viva, but we went for a coffee later. Back then I was a very young person and probably did not use that opportunity, since I found it difficult to speak freely with him. I remember that during that conversation Barańczak said one very important thing. He stressed that American English is completely different from British English. Naturally, these were the times before the advent of globalisation and this distinction was much more vivid than it is now. He thought not only about issues concerning the language, but also about distinctness of poetic traditions.

KK: One of the issues of *Przekładaniec. A Journal of Translation Studies* concerned ‘Ameryka Miłosza’ (‘Miłosz’s America’). What is Barańczak’s America like?

MH: I hope that the publication after the conference at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań will give an insight into Barańczak’s America. There is a lot to be done in this respect. Firstly, it is necessary to wait for access to Stanisław Barańczak’s archive. Secondly, it is worth reading those magazines in which Barańczak published his texts in English, and check who he got acquainted with. This would allow one to follow his presence in American cultural circles. That world is presented as very tempting in his poems and essays. It offers certain ease and freedom, inclines towards the human being, and is not only a place of constant struggle. On the other hand, Barańczak quite quickly exposes this ease as a certain illusion. Everything, it seems, is for sale and, at the same time, it is devoid of any value. Ignorance accompanying Americans in contact with such an E. E. (Eastern European) as Barańczak certainly turns out to be painful.

The difference is also visible in university life. Barańczak comes to America from a country in which there are huge deficiencies when it comes to access to culture; everything is acquired with effort, with a sense of deficiency. In the USA, in turn, universities are well-prospering companies. I suspect that it must have been quite a bizarre experience for him to shift

from the intellectual circles in Poland, where science is a value in itself, to the world in which science is actually a commodity. Now a question appears about the frame of mind of a person who deals with literature of a country which is not necessarily the most important in the world when Polish or Slavic studies do not seem to really correspond with the American reality. Within the English-speaking world, Barańczak was probably famous mostly as an author of journalistic and critical texts which he published in the press. There were not many publications of his poems in their English translations. This thread appears in his correspondence with Miłosz, who thinks that those translated poems by Barańczak are at odds with his later poetry. Barańczak, in turn, replies that his later poems are practically untranslatable.

KK: Do you notice any differences in the functioning of literary magazines in America and analogous periodicals in Poland?

MH: In Poland, there used to be many periodicals devoted to culture which disappeared soon after the system transformation. The economic reality largely changed the cultural reality. I am under the impression that now the situation in Poland is slightly changing. There are several literary titles, but there are problems with the common ground for an exchange of ideas on culture, and in particular on literature. We have, for instance, *Pismo (Magazine)*, which by definition is supposed to be the Polish *New Yorker* – it is yet to be seen if it will come true. The idea itself to publish poems whose role is to talk about the world is surely very significant. The presence of literature in the public discourse is greater in the United States. Poetry is present in both the *New Yorker* and in the *New York Times*. In any case, in order to compare the situation of literature in Poland with that in the USA it is enough to look at literary or cultural columns in daily newspapers as well as the number of their literary supplements. There are bulky sections devoted to cultural events there. But not in Poland. It is worth remembering that promoting culture (e.g. 'Polityka Passport Awards') is not the same as a conscious conversation about literature, and drawing into its orbit both specialists and interested readers. We are still waiting for magazines which would discuss the currently released books from within different fields.

SUMMARY

The interview focuses mostly on Stanisław Barańczak's methods of translation and his translation oeuvre. Similarities between Polish and American literary life also play a significant role in the text. Another important issue is Barańczak's and Czesław Miłosz's correspondence which has not been fully published and remains stored in Beinecke Library archives.

Keywords

Stanisław Barańczak, translator, poetry, Czesław Miłosz

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