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"We translate in order to differ": Kaja Gucio in Conversation with Jerzy Jarniewicz

Kaja Gucio: For some years now we have been seeing—and, dare I say, enjoying—an unprecedented interest in translators and translation as such. No longer invisible, translators have their names printed on book covers alongside the authors; they are invited to discuss their work in various media outlets, interviewed and, at least on some occasions, expected to speak on their author's behalf, or even act as his or her representatives. While overall this new trend is quite welcome after years of essential obscurity, would you agree that it also has certain drawbacks and might bring new challenges for translators? And, while we're at it, is this awareness of translators' input really such a new phenomenon?

Jerzy Jarniewicz: The main new challenge that this trend poses is the need to redefine translation as such, or, though I know it may sound like a heresy, to agree that literary translation escapes definitions. If translators are now increasingly acknowledged as co-authors, it is because their work is recognised as creative and as involving similar creative activity as the author's work. Translating a poem is in fact reinventing it, writing it again in a different language. It is for this reason that I have been campaigning to have the translators' names on book covers: not to gratify them, but to make readers aware of whose words they are going to read. It is they—translators—who are responsible for the text offered to their readers.

Let me remark on one more important process. The difference, once considered unproblematic, between the original and the translated work, is now being questioned and problematised. It may sound surprising to some of us, but let me remind you that many of the so-called originals are already translations, versions, imitations (is Shakespeare's *Hamlet* really an original text?), or that there are cases when the original does not exist, as

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with *Ulysses*: Joyce left us with many texts which can be called originals of his most famous work—a serious ongoing problem for editors.

Is it a new phenomenon? Yes, indeed it is. We have left, I hope for good, the days when translation was defined by such terms as "subordinate," "secondary," "derivative." Gone are the times when we used to read literature in translation, ignoring the fact that we are reading a translation produced by a specific person responsible for it. Quite recently the Polish Association of Literary Translators launched a campaign that reminds readers that "Shakespeare did not write in Polish."

KG: With such an extensive body of works under your authorial and translatorial belt, so to speak, you occupy a somewhat unique position in the literary field—both the translator and the translated. I am of course interested in your views on other people's translations of your own texts, but before we discuss that, I'd like to ask if you see any overlap between these two professions. Is the AUTHOR in you always separate from the TRANSLATOR? Or perhaps there is some overlap, technical or otherwise, in how you approach existing texts that need to be rendered into Polish, carved out of the original material, and those that you, as the author, conjure up from (apparent) nothingness and summon into being?

JJ: It is not so that as the author I conjure up "from nothingness": this nothingness is most certainly apparent. You cannot write a sonnet without a debt to Petrarch, nor can you write a novel that would not owe something to Cervantes. Literature has no beginning, no zero point, no matter how radical you as an author may be. There is always someone behind you. So, to come closer to your question, the author in me is not separated from the translator. As an author I am aware that I build my sentences in a way defined and tested during my work as a translator. As a translator I allow myself a great amount of liberty—in lexical and syntactic choices, in the kind of music I create—that would be characteristic of an author's work. A critic commenting on my translations of Adrienne Rich's poetry noticed that I often use Polish in a way that I use it in my own poems, without subverting Rich's poetics. And the other way round: there were critics who detected in my verse the impact of English-language poets whose works I had translated. It's a two-way traffic.

KG: To me, a translator is a reader, first and foremost, and it is their grasp of the essence of the text, both source and target, that makes the translation a success (or a spectacular failure, as the case might be). I do not, by any means, believe that we should follow the original to the letter, even if such a feat were possible; I do however think that there are limits

to the translator's freedom—out of loyalty to the text itself rather than to the author. Much has been said about the translator's (un)faithfulness—whether significant departures from the original are a mark of true genius or rather a sign of an inflated ego, an act of usurping the author's domain. Where do you stand on the *traduttore, traditore* conundrum?

JJ: I would agree with much of what you've just said, but first let me take issue with you on a couple of things. The translator is a reader, you say. Yes, but more importantly, the translator is an interpreter, hence my reading, my translation of *Hamlet* will be different from your reading and your translation of this tragedy. Which leads me to question the concept of "the text's essence"—is there such a thing as the text's essence? An aspect of primary importance as to which all readers would agree? If there is such a thing, then it must be something banal, which does not pose any real challenge to the translator. It is not the dubious "generally agreed-upon essence," but the difference that makes two or more translations of the same work meaningful. If we have twenty translations of *Hamlet*, it is because translators see this "essence" somewhere else, as something different. Translation itself is a matter of difference—it never produces the exact copy of the source text, hence what makes it worth pursuing is the kind, the quality, and the quantity of differences. Let me put it bluntly: we translate in order to differ. And it is the difference which we eulogise.

I would also contest your claim that we should be loyal to the text itself rather than to the author. Not because I think otherwise—what would loyalty to Homer mean?—but because I feel that my loyalty binds me primarily with the language of translation. If I feel that a given text is worth translating and if I translate it, it is not because of the loyalty to that text, but because I believe that this text may become a fruitful intervention into the target language, that it can allow me to discover the hitherto unknown or dormant possibilities of my tongue, that it will start an interesting dialogue with literary works of the target language. Otherwise, I would not see much sense in translating.

In my understanding of the process of translation, I often refer to Roman Ingarden's theory. To Ingarden, Husserl's student, the literary work, or in fact any work of art, contains within itself areas of indeterminateness, or "lacunae in definition." While reading and interpreting, we concretise the text, filling up its gaps, making determinate what is indeterminate in it, moving its potential elements into a state of actuality. This theory can be applied neatly to literary translation. We can see the source text as an area of potentialities, and each translation as an effect of the concretisation of these potentialities. Let me quote Ingarden himself: "[T]he concretion of the work is not only the reconstruction thanks to the activity of an

observer of what was effectively present in the work, but also a completion of the work" (40). What I find most significant here is that Ingarden makes a distinction between reconstruction and completion—the former being an objective and derivative process, the latter a more subjective and creative one. And this is indeed what happens when we translate: we *reconstruct*, but we also *complete*, which means that we expand, elaborate, specify, concretise, making each translation a unique text. In this, the translation becomes "the common product" of author and translator.

This is why significant, creative departures from the originals are neither marks of genius nor signs of inflated ego, nor acts of usurping the author's domain. They are simply a necessity. I cannot imagine any translation of a significant literary work that might do without departures. Literature—and we are talking here about artistically valuable literary works, not about literary products—is first and foremost a journey into the possibilities of a given language. Languages differ—what is possible in one language, may not be possible in another language. You have to depart in order to translate.

KG: In that case, what liberties can (should?) a translator take?

JJ: I would not be foolish enough to define them. What liberties can novelists take? And what about the liberties that composers may enjoy? I do not think anyone would dare to answer such questions.

There are translations that we may easily call faithful, but there are others that depart from the original, sometimes radically—should we forbid them, get rid of them, cleanse the history of literature by removing such works as Ezra Pound's translations of Sextus Propertius? Translation is an art, and as an art it allows—or requires—liberties. If these liberties are limited, it is always a sovereign decision of the translator, not of any external legislator. Someone might say that with Pound's poem, as with Zukofsky's version of Catullus or with Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, we are leaving the domain of translation and moving into what should be called adaptation. My response would be to argue that adaptation is one of the many types of translation, or, more radically, that all translations of literature are by nature adaptations. Translation is not a discrete phenomenon, but a spectrum or a continuum extending from verbatim translation to free translation, which many would be happy to call adaptation. Who will be brave enough to indicate where "translation proper" ends and "free translation," or "adaptation," begins? And one more comment in this respect: we have no problems with calling *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, and *Flaubert's Parrot* novels, though these works differ in form, and each undermines the definition of the novel we may have arrived at while reading the other two.

KG: With the ever-growing awareness of translators' existence come the ever-increasing expectations and criticisms, justified or not, from professionals and the general public alike. While it's never pleasant to be on the receiving end, critical voices are necessary; it has to be said, however, that they are getting more and more personal these days. In your experience, should we, as translators, take into account such feedback in our subsequent endeavours? Not as a means to garner others' approval, obviously, but perhaps in order to revaluate our own choices and strategies?

JJ: I do not think that the problem with critical voices about our work is that they are getting more personal. It is rather that there are so few of them. A case in point is the new Polish translation of *Ulysses* [by Maciej Świerkocki], which garnered much response. On this occasion many articles revisited Joyce and his novel—but I have not come across any substantial text which would analyse the quality of the translation. *The new Polish "Ulysses"? Yes, let's talk about Joyce then!* One of the leading weeklies published a lengthy review of this new edition in which the reviewer, having competently discussed the significance of *Ulysses*, admitted that he had not read the new translation! It turns out that you can review a new Polish *Ulysses* without paying any attention to the fact that it is a new translation, the first after half a century, a translation polemical with the previous rendering of the novel into Polish.

KG: What is your take on the latest approach in translation analysis, namely "translator studies," where the emphasis is placed on the translator rather than the text? Are critics justified in their focus on translators' personal details and biography? Do you see value in such an interpretative perspective?

JJ: If you take it for granted, as I do, that translating literature is a creative activity, making the translator the co-author of the text, then the focus on their personal details and biographies may be justified to the same degree that it is justified in relation to "proper" authors. There are authors such as, say, George Byron, whose biographies can be an important, contextual dimension of their literary work and its interpretations. The same can be said of translators. Sometimes it helps to know who translated a particular text, and when, and where. We have, for example, inclusive or egalitarian translations of the Bible rendered by translators who associate themselves with feminism. In order to appreciate their work fully, it is helpful to know where they come from, what their ideological agenda is, why they depart from former ways of translating the Bible. Recently, in Poland, a new translation of George Orwell's essays has appeared. The

translator, Dawid Czech, identifies himself politically with the left and claims that his translations of Orwell are an attempt to rescue this writer from his former right-wing, conservative translators. Czech's goal is clearly defined, and we can now judge how effective he was in pursuing this goal. So when I read the new version of Orwell's essays, I focus on what makes these translations (supposedly) leftist: is it the more frequent use of the active voice? of everyday vocabulary? In this way, biographical details of translators, such as one's political alliance, may provide illuminating contexts for our readings, extending the frames of reference, focusing our attention on particular aspects of the text that we might otherwise neglect.

KG: Not only are you an established author yourself, but a number of your own works, both poetry and prose, have been translated. To what extent (if any) have you been involved in that process? Do you retain a sense of ownership of the translations? Not in terms of copyright, obviously, but, perhaps, "parental" responsibility?

JJ: No, I feel no need to control, nor in any way to affect translations of my work. Translations belong to the translators; they are responsible for what they do with texts. Once I have published my work, it belongs to the readers, interpreters, translators. It happened once that a poem of mine had been rendered into English with rhymes, though the original was unrhymed. My first reaction was to contest such an enterprise, but I quickly realised that this is exactly what makes literary translation—these journeys your works make between languages and cultures—worthwhile. A translated poem is always a different poem. Another translator may come and translate the poem without rhymes, but, say, with alliteration. That's the beauty of difference.

I know of writers, quite a few in fact, who would never relinquish their control over translations. What competence do they have as translators, what is their command of Polish? If Homer wanted to control Alice Oswald's reworking of *The Iliad*, we would never have *Memorial*. The situation reminds me of Samuel Beckett's plays with extremely detailed stage directions—what it leads to, this quenching of the director's initiative, is the actual waning of the theatrical potential of such plays as *Waiting for Godot*. Literature will live only if it is left to the translators.

KG: Does your experience as a translator in any way inform your own work as a poet or author? Do you think you handle the written (or spoken) word differently than someone who's never had to grapple with somebody else's text?

JJ: When I translate, I discover the potentialities of the target language, I shift its limits, I visit its territories which I haven't hitherto experienced. If it isn't what the so-called original authors are doing when they work on their own texts, then what is it? I see my translations as an extension of my work as a poet. Whatever is gained in one, contributes to the other.

Maybe this is particularly true in the case of poetry. When I look at the names of people translating poetry, the overwhelming majority are poets in their own right. An interesting phenomenon which may be invoked here is the popularity of what I call "translation-poems"—these are poems which have been inspired by the practice of translation, poems which blur the distinction between translation and the original, poems written by poets in their own right who double, often incidentally, as translators. Look at Robert Lowell's *Imitations*, which includes his translation-poems from Greek, German, French, Italian, Russian. But by no means is he the only one: I can refer you to *Tender Taxes*, Jo Shapcott's translation-poems from Rilke, or to *The Eyes*, Don Paterson's translation-poems from Machado, or to *A Double Sorrow*, Lavinia Greenlaw's translation-poem from Chaucer.

KG: In an ideal world, we would only be working with texts that we find truly worthy of the readers' (and our own) time and attention. The reality, however, is different, to put it mildly, and only a select few can afford to be picky. Where, in your opinion, is the line that a translator should never cross when it comes to accepting an assignment? Can we be held accountable for the very choice of works we agree to translate?

JJ: This line is defined by economic necessities—translators' work is so badly paid that we can speak of scandal. Many of my colleagues, especially those at the beginning of their careers, work for next to nothing and have no opportunity to choose texts for translation. Many of them have to translate low-quality works which in private they may despise. This is not how things should be, but I would be far from blaming them. Yet in an ideal society I would expect translators to identify themselves with the texts they translate. I would like to see translation as a refined form of literary criticism which introduces us to what is most interesting in world literature. The translator's name on the cover of a book should be a recommendation for us, readers. A guarantee of high quality not only of the translator's work, but also of the text that they have decided to render into their language. I, for one, often buy books because of who translated them rather than who wrote them. It is the name of the translator that attracts my attention first.

KG: And the other way round—do you think that certain works should not be translated by certain people? I'm referring here to events such as the controversy when Marieke Lucas Rijneveld was first announced as the Dutch translator of Amanda Gorman's poems, but later resigned, after some critics argued that the job should go to someone more like the poet herself—"spoken-word artist, young, female and unapologetically Black" (Flood). I still remember my own astonishment when my translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* came out and nearly all interviewers asked what it felt like to work on Hemingway's book "as a woman." Do you think that gender, ethnicity, age, or perhaps some other characteristics should have any bearing on the choice of the translator? If so, under what circumstances? And who gets to decide?

JJ: The reasons why certain authors would refuse their permissions to translators of different gender, colour, age, ethnic group, etc., may be twofold. Behind some of these decisions are one's political views—an attempt to exclude someone perceived as an ideological opponent, a representative of a social group seen as a privileged, oppressive force. I can understand that translation rights may be granted exclusively to those with whom the author identifies himself or herself—in the name of some kind of solidarity. Why should I give permission to an established male translator when there are so many excellent, yet "invisible" female translators? Granting translation rights may be an act of intervention into an unjust social or political system. But there is also another reason: you may refuse to give your text to somebody, believing that if that person is different from you in some major aspects which you have addressed in your work, he or she will not be able to understand the emotional weight of the text well enough to render it adequately. If some authors require a particular translator on the grounds of their gender, ethnicity, age, it is their decision, which I respect. A decision which is more than a result of one's literary choices—it is often a political or ideological declaration, which any author has the right to make.

KG: This has already been discussed at length on a number of occasions, but I'm still curious if you would agree that every generation needs its own versions of literary classics. Or perhaps it is possible to produce a definitive translation, once and for all? Maciej Świerkocki's new *Ulysses* was one of the literary events of the year, as was, perhaps to an even greater degree, Anna Bańkowska's retranslation of *Anne of Green Gables*.

JJ: I would not say that every generation needs its own versions of literary classics, because to say so would be to impose on the art of translation a ridiculously rigorous rule. There may be generations which will need not

one new *Hamlet*, but three. There may be generations which will not need a new *Hamlet* at all. It is not the flow of generations that matters, but rather the evolution of the target language, the emergence of new schools of literary interpretation, or simply a fortunate instance of an exceptionally talented translator being born. In Poland a new translation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* was recently published—the direct impulse behind it were the women's strikes and marches which in October and November 2020 spread all over the country after tougher regulations in abortion law were passed. Olga Śmiechowicz, the translator, made these events reverberate in her version of *Lysistrata*, introducing, for example, slogans from these marches. So it was not a new generation that necessitated the new translation of Aristophanes, but a political urgency: almost half a million people protesting in the streets all over Poland against what they saw as brutal curtailment of women's rights.

KG: Your own translations include a new version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. What was it like to tackle Joyce after Zygmunt Allan's 1931 *Portret artysty z czasów młodości*? And do you think that previous translators are in any way present in your "process"?

JJ: My new translation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was published almost a century after the novel's first Polish translation. Since that time the Polish language has undergone numerous changes. Our knowledge of Joyce's work is now incomparable to what was available to my pioneering pre-war colleague. These two reasons might be enough to understand the necessity of a new translation. But I also had my own approach to the novel, which determined my work. I saw it as a Bildungsroman, not so much of the eponymous character, but of language itself. Stephen's growing up to maturity is in fact the story of his language passing through various—nineteen—intermediary stages before reaching its autonomy. Each stage has to reach a point in which it exhausts itself, compromises itself, and needs replacement. Joyce, in my reading, has not offered us a psychological novel of development, but a work in which psychology is a correlative—or a function—of language.

KG: Do you consult older versions, compare them to your own, or perhaps avoid reading them entirely?

JJ: Working on my translation, I kept the old version away from me. I needed utter freedom from the successes and failures of my predecessor.

KG: Finally, and only if you are willing to reveal such information, of course—is there any particular work of literature that you are hoping to translate more than any other?

JJ: Having translated *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and two shorter, less known pieces by Joyce [*Finn's Hotel* and "From a Banned Writer to a Banned Singer"], I dream, but not obsessively, of translating *Ulysses*, though the chances of it are slim, as the novel has just been successfully re-translated. Maybe in twenty years I will return to this idea.

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Kaja Gucio is a Piotrków-born, Łódź-educated, Warsaw-based translator, following a career path set by fate and choice in equal measure. She leads a precariously vicarious life through the characters of the books she translates. Thus far, in her translatorial capacity, she has tackled Nobel, Pulitzer, and Booker Prize winners, as well as authors who have not won anything, which is sometimes a pity, and sometimes not so much. With titles such as Morrison's *Beloved* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* under her belt, she tends to get anxious about future endeavours; fortunately, however, an awful lot of brilliant new books

get written each year. She reads most of them, and then translates some. A firm believer in the "*sine* cat *non*" principle, she lives and works under constant supervision of her cat Ciri, a highly critical and detail-orientated feline. Other than that, she does some knitting.

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