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Weronika Szwebs
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

A Review of Kasia Szymanska's *Translation Multiples. From Global Culture to Postcommunist Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2025)

Trends that have emerged with the advent of contemporary Translation Studies have certainly made quite a stir—we have been encouraged to relegate the question of equivalence to the background, to view translations predominantly as facts of the target culture, functioning alongside its other cultural products and bearing ethical significance, and to acknowledge the translator's subjectivity and visibility. Yet older categories and habits persist stubbornly, among scholars and the reading public alike, often constraining translation's prerogatives to a relatively narrow domain. Both in the phenomenon which it examines and in the approach which it adopts, Kasia Szymanska's book may serve as yet another invitation to recognize and appreciate the formative, creative potential that lies in the practice of translation.

The existence of multiple translations of a single text and the study of such phenomena—whether called retranslations or translation series—is, of course, nothing new. What, then, makes the idea underlying Szymanska's book innovative? The author focuses on highly specific instances of retranslation: those that, taken together, constitute a single book or a discrete artistic project, yet do not take the form of an academic edition. In such cases, multiplicity is not merely a by-product of reception unfolding over time; rather, it is a consciously embraced quality at the core of a literary endeavor. The term "literary" is significant here. Szymanska proposes that translation multiples be understood as a distinct literary genre—one that emerges in dialogue with a foreign-language original, is often conceptual in character, and frequently draws from experimental practices.

A translation multiple, as construed by Szymanska, represents a new quality in relation to the individual translations that comprise it. Often

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closely connected to the target cultural context, it tells a story, constructs a narrative, and offers an interpretation that exceeds the aims of the original. In the case of such practices, the translator's role cannot be understood in narrow terms. The translator becomes the creator of an artistic project, a writer who draws on the original as inspiration for their own literary work, a commentator of surrounding realities—independent, visible, and creatively autonomous.

According to Szymanska, translation multiples are challenging—and are meant to be so—on several levels and in different regards. What exactly gives them their subversive and provocative force depends largely on the individual case and its specific context. Firstly, they challenge the reader. Their conceptual, often experimental character, combined with the implications of multiplicity itself—the programmatic inconclusiveness and disruption of semantic fixity—makes them difficult to assimilate. They may appear "distracting and alienating," prompting readers to reconsider overly optimistic assumptions about translation as a transparent vehicle of communication, a bridge between cultures, or a guarantee of mutual understanding (37). Secondly, translation multiples challenge deeply entrenched Western principles of translation—ideals that have proved remarkably resilient despite decades of theoretical critique. It is telling that Szymanska begins by recalling the legend of the translation of the Septuagint and the miraculous concord among the seventy-two translators, a story that helped establish the import of equivalence. Translation multiples openly contest this sanctified model of one-to-one correspondence. Finally, translation multiples have the potential to challenge—and critically engage with—broadly understood political conditions, a theme already signaled in the book's title. In a global culture in which English occupies a hegemonic position and often functions as its own measure, translation in general—and the translation multiple in particular—undermines the assumption of full translatability and commensurability. In the Polish context, the transition from the monolith of centrally controlled culture in the People's Republic of Poland to democratic pluralism created conditions in which translation multiples could serve as a means of working through earlier ideological homogenization and commenting on newly reconfigured power relations.

To understand how translation multiples operate in practice—what they are, how they are constructed, how they draw on the works that give rise to them, and how they engage the contexts—let us consider a few specific examples. In the first two chapters of her book, Szymanska discusses translation multiples created in English. The telling subsection title, "Translation Multiples Tell Their Own Story," invites us to ask what kinds of narratives this literary genre can produce and by what means. One example is *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem Is*

Translated (1987) by Eliot Weinberger. The multiple renderings of the 9th-century original are conceived as its incarnations, recasting in Buddhist terms Walter Benjamin's notion of translation as the text's "afterlife." Weinberger brings up the visual metaphor, shaping his collection as a series of distinct acts of seeing and perceiving the same poem. Within such a framework, both the multiplicity itself and the variation inherent in language become far more than just the nemesis of sacred equivalence. Another captivating case is *Le Ton beau de Marot* (1997) by Douglas Hofstadter, which includes as many as eighty-eight renderings of Clément Marot's 16th-century poem "À une damoyselle malade" ("To a Sick Damsel"). The original is conceived as a musical work that can be performed in many different ways. The inclination to think in musical terms informs not only this overarching concept, but also the translational strategies: Hofstadter often privileges sound over meaning. The volume also constitutes a meditation on loss and death, painfully intertwined with the author's personal experience—his wife, who contributed one of the translations, fell ill and died during the book's preparation. These two examples illustrate only part of the richness of the Anglophone translation multiples examined by Szymanska.

Even more attention, however, is devoted to translation multiples created in Polish. Szymanska argues that the emergence of the genre in Poland was closely tied to the post-1989 ideological landscape: "As [translation multiples] break through the illusion of one-to-one equivalence, they also discredit beliefs in one monolithic truth about society, one authentic ideology, and one ideal system" (62). She devotes three consecutive chapters to Polish realizations of this practice. The first case, Barańczak's humorous "Oratorium Moratorium" (1991), is interpreted as a commentary on the political aftermath of a systemic transformation which failed to resolve all the existing problems. The homophonic translation of "La Marseillaise" becomes a vehicle for presenting political content through playful mishearings: Barańczak distributes "various voices and political arguments among different renderings of the same original fragments" (85). This polyphony reflects the political landscape of early 1990s Europe, the positions represented by various political camps, as well as skepticism and reluctance toward the "new" post-communist Europe. The clash between the noble ideals behind the anthem and contemporary prejudices suggests that such ideals are not applied equally to all nations.

Another post-communist Polish translation multiple is Robert Stiller's rendering of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, published in two parallel versions: the "R" (Russianized) and the "A" (Anglicized), with a third, "N" (Germanized), planned but never completed. Whereas the English original employs Russian-inflected slang to evoke Cold War anxieties, Stiller's dual strategy foregrounds pressures emanating from two

hegemonic forces: the communist USSR and the capitalist United States. The gesture of multiple translation expands the novel's critical horizon, testing different sociopolitical scenarios and articulating a more general resistance to imperial dominance. The linguistic power struggle mirrors broader geopolitical tensions that did not end in 1989 and remain an inherent element of the fate of a "minor" country.

The third example is the 2012 volume *Ten cały Brecht* (*All that Brecht/This whole Brecht*), authored by four translators—Jacek St. Buras, Jakub Ekier, Andrzej Kopacki, and Piotr Sommer—which presents four distinct approaches to the poetry of Bertolt Brecht. Although the date of publication might seem too late to frame the book as a direct post-communist reaction, its link to the communist context and the democratic transition derives from the way the German author had been introduced, shaped, and read in the Polish People's Republic. Embraced by the authorities for his leftist engagement, he was presented as an ideological ally of the state, a simplified image that in turn provoked an oppositional rejection. By offering multiple, sometimes divergent translations of the same poems, *Ten cały Brecht* dismantles this reductive portrait and opens up new possibilities for reading Brecht beyond earlier homogenizing frameworks.

Though highly rewarding, Szymanska's book, like the phenomena it examines, is challenging in many respects. Particularly with regard to such complex practices as translation multiples, often conceptual and experimental in nature, the reader feels compelled to engage directly with the literary works themselves. While this is possible for a broad Anglophone audience in the case of translation multiples written in English, those unfamiliar with Polish must rely on the back translations which Szymanska provides to approximate the practices of Polish translators. Writing in English about translations into a language largely unknown to international readers is a bold gesture, since it inevitably compounds the difficulties. Szymanska handles this challenge with skill, and readers who are open to engaging with the multiplicity present on various levels will find her book stimulating, as it offers significant insights into both the creative and the critical potential of translation.

Weronika Szwebs is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. Her main research interests involve translation studies, the reception of Polish literature abroad, contemporary Polish literature as well as literary and cultural theory. She published a monograph on the Polish translations of contemporary French and American theory in

the humanities, *Translacje teorii. Derrida, Barthes, Said i Butler po polsku* (*Translations of Theory. Derrida, Barthes, Said and Butler in Polish*). She translates literary, social, and cultural theory from English into Polish (Julian Baggini, Hans Gumbrecht, Silvan Tomkins, Donna Haraway, Rita Felski, Jennifer Wenzel, and others).
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9806-515X
weronika.szwebs@amu.edu.pl