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## TRANSLATION CRITICISM AND ITS BOUNDARIES<sup>1</sup>

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Translation criticism has apparently never been at the centre of Translation Studies. On James Holmes’s map, read from the left, it occupies the last position, on the extreme right, listed as point 3.24 (Holmes 1972: 78; Toury 1995: 10). Indeed, Susan Bassnett in her introduction to *Translation Studies* (2014 (1980): 20), calls it the “One final great stumbling block waiting for the person with an interest in Translation Studies”. This is primarily due to the lack of a universal model against which to evaluate translated texts. The criteria for evaluation are, after all, historically and culturally conditioned, and every translation is closely linked to the context in which it was produced (Bassnett 2014: 20). Carol Maier in her entry “Reviewing and Criticism” for *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, reminds us, moreover, that Translation Studies has in fact never had a universal model, and the contemporary discourse on translation, emphasising its multivariate nature and the visibility of the translator and his/her translation decisions, even their “second-author” prerogatives, makes us doubt whether such a model is at all possible – or even necessary (Maier 2009: 236, 241).

In addition to the lack of universal tools that allow us to categorically decide what is a “good” or “bad” translation in all circumstances, there is also the question of appropriate competence: linguistic, literary, and cultural, in addition to time, patience and philological diligence. In Poland,

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Edward Balcerzan discusses the ephemeral existence of translation criticism, a scholarly activity which obliges researchers to make a double, “confrontational” reading, juxtaposing the translation with the original. Moreover, this procedure should not take place without recalling previous, competing translations that make up the “translation series” of a given foreign-language text (Balcerzan 2009: 133). As can be seen, therefore, translation criticism is a demanding field, and metacriticism even more so.

Not surprisingly, then, in the past few years there have been relatively few publications even partially devoted to translation criticism as a sub-discipline, or its tasks and perspectives. And yet the subject is gaining momentum – in applied, not theoretical, terms. Practice abhors a vacuum. What makes a “good” or “bad” translation is decided on an ad hoc basis. In 2015, Juliane House published an upgraded version of her translation evaluation model, stating, “[T]o my knowledge this model is today still the only fully worked out, research-based, theoretically informed and interdisciplinary conceived approach to translation quality assessment of its kind” (House 2015: 1). An original method of critical point analysis for the evaluation of written translations was proposed by Joanna Dybiec-Gajer (2013); the catena method, adopted from biblical exegesis and applied to translation studies by Agata Brajerska-Mazur, can also be used to evaluate a translation (2012). In addition, Maria Piotrowska devoted a good deal of space in her methodological book to the translation assessment system (2007, 2016).

Indeed, contrary to my opening sentence, translation criticism has in fact long been at the very centre of Translation Studies, and has always been at the heart of a translator’s thought processes: doesn’t the idea of the adequacy or inadequacy of the intended solution underpin every decision of the translator? Self-criticism aside, the critical temperature of polemics between translators can be very high, and the mere translation of a work already translated into a given language by someone else also falls per se into the field of translation criticism.

Not surprisingly, a number of critically interesting books on translation criticism have been published in Poland: “O nich tutaj” [It’s About Them Here] (2015) edited by Piotr Sommer; an anthology of selected essays published in the periodical “Literatura na Świecie” between 1984 and 2014; *Gościnnosc słowa* [Hospitality of the Word] (2012) and *Thumacz między innymi* [Translator Inter Alia] (2018) by Jerzy Jarniewicz; and *Powtórzenie i różnica* [Repetition and Difference” (2014) by Tomasz

Swoboda. Commenting on the selection of texts for his anthology, Piotr Sommer points, tellingly, to their atheoretical and unscientific nature: “These are essays that are the most intellectually buoyant and the least susceptible to theory jargon, thought about and written as ‘close’ to the original text as possible, with integrity and expertise but without pretensions to scientism, fair but not subject to the phantasms of objectivity” (2015: 6).

This peripherality and, at the same time, centrality – a small number of statements from the meta-level, with an emphasis on the practical dimension – of translation criticism within Translation Studies, most probably stems from the duality of its purpose. It is, as Edward Balcerzan argues, an axiological activity, constantly reminding us of the foreignness of the original. The former, it would seem, follows on from the latter. The latter, on the other hand, consists of the following:

[any] dissimilarity from the original is a constitutive feature of translation “as such”, and the aim of criticism is to maintain this fact in the reader’s consciousness. The primary aspiration of translation criticism thus remains (...) as a warning to readers: a sign of otherness to counteract any naïve trust in the translator’s decisions. (Balcerzan 2009: 133–134)

Does this therefore imply that axiology is by no means the most important concept, or that the question of what constitutes a “good” or “bad” translation is not in fact the central question of translation criticism?

Distinguishing between an “ordinary” translation review and a study on translation is not difficult. A review is more of a report, and is less specialised and evaluation-oriented; academic work on translation increasingly seeks to avoid evaluation. The contemporary Translation Studies discourse tends to write about translation in such a way as not to use value-laden terms, and notions of the “fidelity”, “reliability” or even “adequacy” – but also, for example, “congeniality” or “excellence” – of a given translation no longer seem appropriate.

Tomasz Swoboda, in the above-mentioned book *Powtórzenie i różnica*, writes:

I will not pretend that in the approaches presented here I am avoiding direct criticism, i.e. reprimanding, reproaching, sometimes even ridiculing. I do think, however, that such criticism is an analysis and interpretation: not only of the translation itself, but also of the status of the translator and the translation itself. (2014: 6)

Does this create a phantasm of objectivity, as Piotr Sommer claims? Is a judgement-free description really possible? This is easier said than done. In Elżbieta Tabakowska's studies on translation, axiological formulations are almost non-existent – in her book *Mysł językoznawcza z myślą o przekładzie* [Linguistic Thought with a View to Translation], individual translation solutions were evaluated by the researcher twice over, as being both “ingeniously translated” and “less fortuitous” (2015: 55). In his excellent analysis of “Sailing to Byzantium”, Tomasz Bilczewski, analysing Yeats's original poem with translations by Czesław Miłosz, Stanisław Barańczak and Jolanta Kozak (and including incidental comments on the translations by Ludmiła Marjańska and Bogdan Czaykowski), resolutely avoids any evaluation, stipulating instead that his aim “was not to create a value hierarchy of these proposals, but to indicate the various interpretative possibilities they open up” (2010: 286). And yet he does praise the exceptional accuracy of some solutions (for example, in Barańczak's translation, 2010: 271, 278). Analysing a selection of Shakespeare's plays in Polish translations, Agnieszka Romanowska notes that she is more interested in “the kind of Shakespeare that Iwazskiewicz, Miłosz and Gałczyński gave us, rather than whether these translators translated him faithfully or freely, beautifully or sloppily, ‘satisfactorily’ or ‘badly’” (2017: 20). As Romanowska asserts, “Translation criticism (understood as reading and interpreting a text) framed in terms of cultural translation studies does not deal (...) with the differences between the translated text and the original text as deviations from the letter of the original, but rather examines them from the point of view of the translator's creativity”. But there are also her – extremely rare – unrestrained remarks concerning the brilliant rendering of situational humour (2017: 228, in a footnote), or the splendidly translated name (2017: 280, also in a footnote). To be honest, we encounter such interventions with pleasure, joining the author in their sense of enchantment with the text, which is inevitable, as Rita Felski argues, for even the most neutral researchers (2008: 51 et seq.). It is, of course, human nature to judge.

Almost all studies on translation remind us of the foreignness of the originals – a requirement noted by Balcerzan – but is this enough? It is not difficult to imagine an approach in which most Translation Studies texts, including those attempting to distance themselves from axiology, are in fact translation criticism, *sensu largo*, a field which, after all, is by no means reduced to the mere evaluation of literature. So could translation criticism in fact be regarded as the core of Translation Studies, or is this too much of a generalisation?

It could just as well be said that since the criteria for evaluation are inextricably linked to the context – the literary context of the translated text and the empirical context of the critic – and therefore historically variable, the very core of translation studies is the history of translation. As Ewa Kraskowska observes,

The cultural turn has brought (...) an interest in the whole, so to speak, infrastructure of translation phenomena – the institutions and individuals participating in and mediating translation communication, situated within a particular historical, social and political reality – which has significantly changed the work of the translation critic. As such, philological methods and theoretical approaches have given way to queries regarding various types of archives, sociological perspectives and historiography. (2018: 60)

If we place the emphasis on a temporal dimension (even a newly published text becomes a brick from which the edifice of literary history is already being built), does translation criticism become translation history?

And yet, even with an “ordinary” translation review, the most distinctive translation criticism genre, things are not so simple. Peter Newmark, author of an elaborate confrontational model of translation criticism writes: “It is all too easy (...) to ignore the fact (...) that good translations can and do tolerate a number of errors” (1988: 191). In that case, how many errors can a good – or even a merely adequate – translation tolerate? And who decides what constitutes an error?

And here we are almost back to where we started: within which translation theory, or on which theoretical model of translation does our critical and evaluative construction support itself? Is it the Jeromean one, stigmatising the eternally guilty translator for not being able to exactly reproduce the sacred text on a 1:1 scale (Bassnett, Lefevere 1998: 2–3)? As Stanisław Barańczak once mocked:

“Translator Y’s translation of poet X’s poem is full of fatal errors (...) It is a complete scandal that the translator speaks of ‘a garden panting with the scent of elfin thyme’, i.e. *Thymus serpyllum*, while the original clearly says ‘evening stock’ (*Matthiola bicornis*). On the other hand, it must be noted with appreciation that the translation rhymes.” Such is the typical criticism of translation. (1992: 35)

We write about “comparative philological work” in translation criticism essays much less frequently now than before, which, as Ewa Kraskowska,

notes, “in many cases increases the attractiveness of those articles and monographs in the eyes of readers” (2018: 59). On this point we would probably be inclined to agree: translation criticism cannot simply be reduced to a florilegium of translation howlers.

A propos of evaluation criteria: do you like the cover of this volume? Did you appreciate the technical quality of the photograph as well as the photographic precision regarding the reproduction of the original (admittedly, an extra-linguistic original)? Did personal preference prevail: were you intrigued or put off by its distinctive colour? Or did it catch your eye, but as regards its subject matter, your genre preferences are different?

This issue is also a kind of florilegium: here you will find a selection of works devoted to translation criticism, from Poland and the wider world. From the broad theoretical perspective and hermeneutic model of translation criticism originally proposed by Friedrich Schlegel to the present day, as exemplified by Piotr de Bończa Bukowski, through Olga Schmidt’s diagnosis of translation criticism as a remedy for the crisis of the concept of world literature, to Izabela Sobczak’s applied translation criticism: a case study of *The Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes translated into Polish as *Ostępy nocy* by Marcin Szuster. In addition, Krzysztof Majer describes the critical-translational dimension of retranslation and his own struggle with Herman Melville’s prose, while Kinga Rozwadowska discusses translation criticism on the Internet.

We wish you an inspiring read.

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