

AGNIESZKA GAJEWSKA

TRANSLATING FEMINISM

Abstract: Pointing to manifold and long-lasting connections between feminism and translation, the article first presents a selection of multilingual writers (Narcyza Żmichowska and Deborah Vogel), translators (Zofia Żeleńska and Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna) and translation commentators (Joanna Lisek and Karolina Szymaniak) to ask why the work of early Polish feminists is neglected. It seems that one of the causes might be the current colonization of Polish feminist discourse by English. For ethical reasons it would be advisable to recommend a certain sensitivity to locality in feminist translation studies and a recognition of regionalism in cultural studies. The theoretical considerations include two issues: the potential hermaphroditism of the Polish language when its users are women and the “scandal of ‘another’s speech’,” a polyphony and a constitutive lack of autonomy (a feminist discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory). From this vantage point it becomes clear that linguistic choices made by the translator are always individual one-off solutions which resist homogenization, paradigms or (theoretical) generalizations.

Keywords: Polish feminist discourse, the English language, sensitivity as a category, regionalism in cultural studies, politics of translation, rhetoric of nondifferentiation, interlingual transgression, Narcyza Żmichowska, Zofia Żeleńska, Debora Vogel, Kazimiera Hłakowiczówna

Thinking about the canon of feminist texts is problematic because feminist literary strategies clearly demonstrate that feminist writers position their own writing on the periphery and emphasize their rebellion against academic discourse templates and against academic hierarchies. Nevertheless, the increasingly close relationships between the institutional knowledge and feminist criticism force the writers to compromise and assume conformist positions. Yet, the most inspiring aspects of feminist criticism can be found on the fringe: in forgotten archives, at readings, in daring criticism, in novels and poetry volumes which repossess national and identity

myths. Through careful reading one can become increasingly convinced that it is worth gathering courage to think differently from others in order not to repeat the necessary – according to the academic standards – set of footnotes, to imagine other historical, literary and philosophical narratives. As it is easy to stray from a narrow path onto the main tract, it is perhaps advisable to look for a female guide.

For over a century, the works and biography of Narcyza Żmichowska have not been included in the literary canon. For many scholars Żmichowska is only the author of *Poganka (The Heathen)* which is mostly interpreted in the context of a sex scandal.¹ Her passionate search for scientific foundations of morality; her discussions with friends about the books of Taine, Buckle, Darwin, Renan, Comte, Mill; her programme of self-education which included geography, physics and chemistry; her advocacy of the positivist movement in the times of the flourishing Romantic thought in Poland did not have followers for decades:

At that time in Poland Żmichowska was unique, almost monstrous. Moreover, she was too self-sufficient, too independent, she did not know how to become subservient to any camp. For the white she was red, for the red – white; for some too much of a poet, for others too much of a positivist, a male head with a female heart who was in advance of her epoch in literary terms and who offered concentrated thought in new forms (Boy-Żeleński 2007: 15–16; trans. A.M.).

These mutually exclusive juxtapositions indicate the accusations which are often levelled against the emancipation movement: feminists are too liberal and progressive, too much engaged in left-wing activities; they write in an incomprehensible way, confuse hierarchies and overstep the boundaries of genres, disciplines and decency. A suffragette is a monster who consists of incompatible parts, does not fit the framework and is dangerous. This comparison, used by Boy-Żeleński with a well-meaning distance, foregrounds the danger which awaits those ahead of their own epoch: first they are rejected and then forgotten. The metaphor of the silence of women in the public sphere can be confronted, to my mind, with the vision of the culture which is deaf to the voice of women. Those carefully attended to and considered serious discussants are not the ones with unconventional ideas and knowledge, but the ones supported by power, authority, positions or institutions. The misogynist repository contains nu-

¹ For more details about the reduction of Żmichowska's works to one text which, as a matter of fact, hardly refers to her literary programme, see Ritz 2005: 44–59.

merous examples that prove how irritating women's opinions are: nagging wives, boorish mothers-in-law, women with venomous tongues, shrews and gossips are well-known stereotypes in literature, art and film (Gilmore 2001). The rudimentary assumption that only the position of power guarantees the essential value of expressed opinions contributed to the fact that women chose pseudonyms or hid their own identity under their husband's name. If women wanted to participate in serious debates, they had to persist in soliciting the attention of a friendly and heedful society. The postulate addressed to women that they should finally voice their opinions can be added to the postulate that we should learn to listen to the excluded, although their statements may often sound irritating.

Paradoxically, the reception of Źmichowska is rather scanty due to the excess of her interests, which she would describe in her correspondence, rather than due to the excess of materials. For years the exchange of letters was for her a substitute of scholarly debates, lectures and polemics. Her political activity and banishment from Warsaw prevented the author of *Czy to powieść?* (Is This a Novel?) from participating in creative discussions and meetings with her friends, her "family by choice." Ultimately, cut off from those with whom she could share her scientific passions, she suffered from depression and her creative writing was hindered (Winklowska 2004). What she left us are only a few unfinished novels, but we do have several hundred pages of letters. Her philosophy of dialogue, the ceaseless confrontation of her own judgements with opinions and knowledge of others, cannot be classified as any specific school of literature or art movement, also because to Źmichowska knowledge did not constitute information, but a thought process, ceaseless restructuring of principles and one's own outlook on life. Her priority was never to stop, never to adopt a defensive position and surround herself with a wall which would cancel out any doubts.

In *Narcyza Źmichowska: feminizm i religia* (Narcyza Źmichowska: Feminism and Religion) Ursula Phillips makes Polish readers aware of the great significance of Źmichowska's knowledge of English, which allowed her to join the main currents of the European thought – the context which helps to understand her works. Therefore, it is not surprising that the author of *Książka pamiątek* (The Book of Memorabilia) constantly encouraged her students to learn English, also due to the valuable "stories written by women." Phillips explains in detail the activities of the Enthusiast Women Association and emphasizes their interest in French and English ideas rather than in conspiracy and patriotism. Źmichowska's good knowledge

of French and frequent correspondence with her brother Erazm, who lived abroad, provide a link between the Enthusiast Women Association and similar Western-European movements, where freethinkers and democrats were described as enthusiasts (Phillips 2008: 214–266).

In her visions Narcyza Żmichowska seems to be equal to such feminist forerunners as Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf, but Ursula Phillips's interest in Żmichowska's works, along with such translation projects as an English version of *Poganka (The Heathen)*,² appears to be a transfer of knowledge for which nobody is waiting. The colonisation of feminism through the English language may also mean that feminists reading in Polish reach for Virginia Woolf's writing more frequently than for the archives. My concern is not the national pride in Polish feminism (which in itself sounds paradoxical or iconoclastic), but rather the category of sensitivity, so dear to all emancipation. The sensitivity consists in acknowledging local conditions, in the regionalism of cultural studies, also for ethical reasons.

We are used to the transfer of knowledge from the Anglo-Saxon countries, but in the current issue of *Przekładaniec* we stray from the beaten track. This decision is already signalled by the issue title, which mentions feminism and not gender, queer or women studies. To my mind, the English terms hide the political potential of the methodology which they relate to (I am not alone in this approach, see Mizielińska 2006: 138). Feminism unequivocally indicates that gender signifies and is problematic. As my readings confirm, gender studies may, though do not have to, distance themselves from political activity by means of the feminist methodology without changing gender stereotypes, without the will to intervene. *Queer studies* translated as *studia pedalskie* (faggot studies)³ or *studia odmieńców* (studies of outsiders)⁴ become an act of transgression and violation of what is considered a norm; they expand academic activities through social activism and participation in the public debate. It goes without saying that the English terminology, in some respects, guarantees security: the linguistic mimesis places the studies of the excluded in the global perspective and allows us to avoid any ideological confrontation. However, this compromise is, to my mind, too big, as it allows the appropriation of the language of the excluded and its use deprived of emancipatory intentions, thus re-

² Maria Wirtemberska's *Malwina, czyli domyślność serca* has been translated by Ursula Phillips as *Malvina, or the Heart's Intuition* (2012).

³ This term was used by the translator Maria Bassaj (Culler 1997).

⁴ Cf. the justification of such a translation in: Basiuk, Ferens, Sikora (2002).

vealing the separation of activism from science and academia.⁵ Therefore, the translation of not only texts, but also of particular concepts becomes a political act and a presentation of one's own ideology. In my opinion, far too often the opponents of this way of thinking about academia forget that conservatism (not only methodological) is also an ideology.

It is always language that is problematic. Every woman who uses the Polish language ceaselessly negotiates her own stance towards the language of the official and public sphere, which requires her to sometimes use feminine word endings and on other occasions – masculine endings. Izabela Filipiak has even managed to find a patron of such transformations: the mythical bard Tiresias,⁶ who was a man in the first half of his life and a woman in the second (Filipiak 1999: 97). If we look at this comparison carefully, we will notice a hermaphroditic status of the Polish language used by someone ready to adopt the role/position of a woman.⁷ Usually, in feminist criticism we investigate the oppressive quality of masculine personal forms and the inaccessibility of social spheres for women (Środa 2003; Karwatowska, Szpyra-Kozłowska 2005). Here the greatest opponent turns out to be the rhetoric of nondifferentiation or the universalization of the masculine gender. Hence the sexualization of masculine categories as well as the recognition of physiological, corporeal and hormonal aspects of masculinity are postulated (Braidotti 1994; Grosz 1994). To reveal the mechanism of the universalization of masculinity, it is not enough to analyse vocabulary, grammar and idioms. To undermine such categories as a norm or representativeness, borderline cases need to be analysed because

⁵ Obviously, I understand that the mere use of the term “feminism” does not in itself imply political involvement, but I am convinced that it is connected with activism to a greater extent. One of the examples illustrating the separation of academic feminism from the social one is Margaret R. Higonnet's “Feminist Perspectives on Comparative Literature,” which appeared in a recently published anthology *Niewspółmierność. Perspektywy nowoczesnej komparatystyki. Antologia* (Disproportion. The Perspectives of Modern Comparative Studies. *An Anthology*). In the footnote the author emphasizes: “There should be a distinction between feminist activists who fight for the abolition of the social barrier discrimination and proponents of feminist theories and criticism who concentrate mainly on the social significance of these barriers as well as on literary forms shaped by them” (Higonnet 2010: 383–384). Yet, it is important that such a distinction appears in the translated text; in the Polish language academic feminism, i.e. theory and criticism, is gender studies.

⁶ Due to his blindness Tiresias is also a patron of activities associated with the sensitivity to disability issues (cf. Koppers 2008:174–82). For further information on The Tiresias Project go to: http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/alicia_grace.

⁷ An interesting example of taking this stance towards language is Michał Witkowski's prose.

the divisions into the private, public and social spheres are superimposed onto the grammatical masculine category. Yet, masculinity perceived as a gendered, sexual and physiological being (Grosz 1994) can also reveal its erotic and subversive character. It is obviously a utopian linguistic project, but I will allow myself this thought experiment. It does not victimise “female users” of the Polish language, but it gives them an opportunity to momentarily take over masculine categories and use them as elements no more representative than feminine categories. This utopia also consists in the excess, proliferation, expansion into various directions, being more than one, undermining (even if momentary) of identity boundaries.

The translator’s stance reveals the scandal of authorship, the scandal – to use Bakhtin’s term – of “another’s speech,” polyphony as well as the constitutive lack of autonomy of every text. Moreover, it indicates the necessity of interlingual transgression, the insufficiency of the “native” culture, the desire for transfer and dialogue which has no limits. Additionally, the translator’s craft fully reveals communication problems and negotiates between individual words and phrases, proving the compromising nature of every linguistic decision and the impossibility of designing the reader’s reception. Yet, there is more to it: female or male translators demonstrate that individual choices exist, that solutions are mostly one-off, that they resist homogenization, paradigms, theories, and generalisations. Thus, translators often claim they are not interested in the theory of translation, and even if they are, it is not useful during the translation of a specific text. In her article “Palec, który wskazuje księżyc” (A Finger Pointing to the Moon), Olga Tokarczuk concentrates on the close cooperation between translators and authors and emphasizes:

For the writer translators often act as helpful psychoanalysts – they ask the most astounding questions. These questions should be written down, saved and published every so often in separate editions to let readers appreciate the miracle of writing and the difficulty of translation. And the miracle of language in general. Owing to translators, the obvious and the universal lose their intrinsic coherence and become obscure and completely local (Tokarczuk 2010: 21; trans. A.M.).

Therefore, translators may be considered researchers of individual cases, interested not in representativeness and majority, but in a single phrase, verse and style.

By making a decision to translate, do we take an ambiguous, not entirely defined stance at the intersection of texts, of another’s/one’s own lan-

guage? Do we become linguistic hermaphrodites, freaks, Siamese twins?⁸ Do we lose subjectivity through its scandalous expansion, through adding ourselves to someone else? And perhaps due to the presence of the translator's name on the title page we pay tribute to all those who – often imperceptibly – contributed to the creation of the text in this, rather than another, shape? Do we then make translators visible and opaque for a moment? Translation would, therefore, be capable of highlighting the constitutive feature of the so-called original: poly-authorship understood as the effect of reading, conversations, and exchanges with other languages/people. New translations enter a dialogue with a series of translations, thus revealing the controversy over linguistic details which are significant. They are interesting testimonies to the reception, careful reading and polemic between translators.

Perhaps the acceptance of this insolubility of subjectivity helps those whose efforts have been dismissed and trivialised to emerge from the shadow. When I think of the historical and cultural contexts in which translation operates, I recall the monumental undertaking of *The Boy Library*. A vast and ideological project, it aspired, together with French literary translations, to usher liberal ideas into the Polish consciousness, but it was accused of corrupting Polish readers with “the classics” and of relishing pornography. Barbara Winklowska proves that the admiration over the grand scale of the Library usually excludes the most important participant and partner in the undertaking, Zofia Żeleńska. The author of the Boys' biography attempts to avoid this omission by describing Żeleńska's methods, which included editing and collating texts at night in bed with a hot flask of strong tea by the side and several packets of cigarettes not to get up for as long as possible. Żeleńska edited Boy's translations – as we know from her son – practically until her death (Winklowska 2001: 64–69). She can be placed among the women who are known to have worked lying down, such as Zofia Nałkowska or Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, but they are writers, creators. I can also think of the heroines who spend their lives in bed or on the chaise longue, such as Mary in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Emilia in *Nad Niemnem* (On the Niemen) or Piotr's wife in Eliza Orzeszkowa's *Dziurdziowie* (The Dziurdzia Family). These female characters usually act as negative reflections of the righteous and courageous female protagonist; they are ignored,

⁸ I have decided on these corporeal metaphors inspired by the texts of Elizabeth Grosz, who describes the borderline cases of corporeal subjectivity and undermines the questions related to the division into the “normal” and “abnormal” subjectivities (Grosz 1996).

they do not participate in any events and they do not influence the plot, but they create a comical interlude with their migraines, unidentified pain and bad moods. I interpret the characters' lying in bed as a peculiar point of resistance, as a refusal to participate in the public sphere defined for them by their family or widely accepted social roles. Therefore, lying in bed would be an act of passive resistance against the social sphere where there is no room for those lying in bed, it would be an act of engaged conformism.

To return to Zofia Żeleńska: Boy dedicated his whole undertaking to her and asked (as their son recalled) for her permission to mention her name as a co-translator of the Library, but she refused. We do not know what influenced her decision (the son claimed it was her modesty), but what can we imagine? Let us consider what would have happened if Zofia Żeleńska had allowed her husband to mention her as a co-translator. Collecting books by women and the impact of specific books on their lives deserves to be described in a separate article. This phenomenon was already described by Agata Zawiszewska in her book on Irena Krzywicka, where Zawiszewska reformulates the reception of Krzywicka's works and deemphasizes the influence of great men on her mother, her library and identity choices which shaped the publicist (Zawiszewska 2010). There is a difference, though, between the library's effect on a writer and a married woman who accompanies her husband in constructing a translation canon. If Żeleńska had been mentioned on the title pages, she would have certainly encountered some of the criticism levelled at Boy. Besides, did Żeleńska—the wife really have a choice? Did her husband's life and her own, most of all their affairs, give her an opportunity to participate in the public life? By putting her name on the title page, would she not have subjected herself to malicious comments, which affected her anyway? The longer I think about it, the less surprised I am that she preferred to lie down and close her bedroom door not to be disturbed.

Every time translation makes us consider multiculturalism and national languages. This aspect seems to me extremely interesting in the context of feminism and sensitivity. The turn of 20th century, a very important period for the emancipation of women, is a multilingual heritage which allows us to analyse the categories of the centre/periphery in a way which does not focus on central positions.⁹ What I have in mind is the privileged position

⁹ Dorota Wojda discussed the transfer of these two notions in a very interesting way in her interpretation of Bruno Schulz. She drew attention to the significance of irony in his short stories: it destabilises the otherness of colonial and postcolonial models (2007: 244–245).

of “patriotic” attitudes in the history of literature, the elevation of writers by emphasizing their loyalty towards Polishness, the perception of the partition period as a ceaseless fight of eminent individuals for the national identity.

In his 1975 *Outsiders*, translated into Polish by Anna Kryczyńska and published in Poland in 2005, Hans Mayer discusses the “scandal of outsiders”: women, homosexuals, Jews and analyses the reasons for the failure of bourgeoisie enlightenment. Mayer proves convincingly that thinking about common good usually implies violence towards minorities (Mayer 2005: 531–549). The society open to otherness would have to include anti-assimilation positions¹⁰ in their debates on identity – the positions that do not seek unity and transformation, but acceptance. In this respect, the findings of Karolina Szymaniak, who researches the aesthetic views of Debora Vogel, are telling. The author of *Być agentem wiecznej idei* (To Be an Agent of the Eternal Idea) points out the poet’s active participation in the Zionist movement. At the same time, Szymaniak’s interpretations revolve around identity choices related to linguistic choices. Unlike Julian Tuwim and Zuzanna Ginczanka, Debora Vogel decided to write in Yiddish, despite the fact that this language was not appreciated even in her wealthy Jewish home, where it was treated as a jargon. Besides, Vogel did not know Yiddish well enough, so she constantly asked Rachela Auerbach to proof-read and edit her pieces of writing. Vogel attempted to write in Yiddish, although she did not raise Jewish issues. Therefore, the choice of language is a crucial part of her view on life, it can be read as ideological and political. The issue becomes complicated, if we take into account the fact that Vogel was recognized neither by Polish nor by Yiddish artists. She encountered like-minded people only in far-away America, where she published her works till the end of her life (Szymaniak 2007: 169–222).

The intersections between Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish, which are not always obvious, are indicated by *Nieme dusze. Kobiety w kulturze jidysz* (Mute Souls. Women in Yiddish Culture) edited by Joanna Lisek. The authors combine ethnic identities, not necessarily equivalent to linguistic choices, with the issues of gender difference and intercultural inspirations, reminding us of individual decisions that allow us to understand

¹⁰ The disregulation of these categories of assimilation is worth mentioning. When Poland was partitioned, the reluctance towards the assimilation of the partitioners’ language and culture was viewed positively, whereas in the 19th and 20th century the necessary assimilation of Jews was strongly debated.

the approaches of the individual artists towards aesthetics and language (Lisek 2010).

When it comes to the question of translation and political involvement, we must consider the cases when translation activity is a compromise because of the exclusion from the public debate and an opportunity to earn one's living. When I look at a small library in Kazimiera Iłłakowiczówna's studio, I have no doubts that she did not read any translations. The post-war life of this disciplined clerk, the first woman appointed to the post of a ministerial advisor in the Second Republic of Poland, a personal secretary of Józef Piłsudski, does not resemble her pre-war life style and recognition. Only after 1947 did she return to Poland (from Romania where she had been evacuated along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), where she was reluctantly welcomed for political reasons. She settled in the provincial Poznań and supported herself by writing, foreign language tuition and translation. Maria Dąbrowska admired Iłłakowiczówna's translation of Schiller's *Don Carlos*. In Poznań people still talk about her visits to the railway station and her conversations with mechanics about locomotives, which she used in her translation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.¹¹ She also translated the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Pledge*, works by Wolfgang Goethe, Heinrich Heine and Sándor Petöfi. The very selection of names (as well as literary genres) demonstrates her skills and competencies, although we should bear in mind the fact that translation was for her only a substitute of public activity and it was ended by the loss of eyesight (cf. Ratajczak 1998: 5–19).

The translation of feminism is, therefore, multifarious, especially if we consider individual cases and carefully interpret specific texts. The articles collected in this issue attempt to present translations and theories of feminism as widely as possible. Therefore, they discuss translators as well as literary motifs and particular concepts. I have always felt that the Polish publishing market lacks a series of the most important feminist texts in translation. Nonetheless, I am aware of the fact that for the last two centuries the idea of emancipation has revolved among different languages and cultural conditions. Feminists or emancipators have been active in international federations or groups, they have attended symposia on association management and globalisation as well as women conventions. I cannot

¹¹ The precious source of information about Kazimiera Iłłakowiczówna is Elżbieta Andrzejewska at the Raczyński Library in Poznań, who looks after the writer's studio at 4 Gajowa Street.

forget, however, that some of them feel much more confident when they are accompanied by a female translator.

trans. Agata Masłowska

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