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BACKWOODS OF LANGUAGE. THE MODERNIST PROSE OF DJUNA BARNES IN POLISH TRANSLATION[1]

Abstract

Only eighty years after the original publication of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* was the Polish literary market enriched by a translation of one of the strangest novels of Euro-American modernism. Marcin Szuster's translation, with the Polish title *Ostępy nocy*, has already garnered praise as well as prizes, leading to the first Polish discussion concerning the work of the eccentric American writer. The focus of this article is to analyze the Polish translation of *Nightwood* with a special interest in Barnes's style, which itself becomes a central character in the novel and which connects, according to feminist critics (K. Kaivola, S. Benstock), to its emancipatory potential. In this article I discuss the claim that the complex style of such prose is the (conscious) manifestation of a woman's voice (as an affect), behind which one can discover a body – one that experiences and is experienced (J. Taylor). The body, both a structural and a rhetorical category in feminist criticism, can be seen in Barnes's prose as an element which organizes both time and space – therefore, the ambiguity of her terms and the complexity of style make for a real translation challenge. Marcin Szuster as a translator needs to follow Barnes's "distinctive point of view," which is a "feminine" one, distanced by gender, experience and time.

Keywords: *Nightwood*, translation criticism, Djuna Barnes, body, text

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The question of what constitutes the selection of a work to be published in translation, and who should make such choices, opens up a discussion of the role of translators in shaping the publishing market and their national literature. The right of translators to establish a given canon and consciously steer its literary path has already been advocated by scholars from the circle of the Manipulation School (Lefevere 1981), as well as in Poland by, for example, Jerzy Jarniewicz in his famous article *Tłumacz jako twórca kanonu* [*The Translator as the Creator of the Canon*] (Jarniewicz 2002). Reviewing Jarniewicz's project in "Literatura na Świecie", Marcin Szuster – a translator of English literary and scholarly works (including John Ashbery, Marshall Berman, Harold Bloom, William S. Burroughs, Bob Dylan, Edward W. Said, James Schuyler, and Marci Shore) – appreciates the "accuracy and power of recognition" of Jarniewicz's essay. While Szuster acknowledges the validity of Jarniewicz's typology, which divides translators into (inter alia) "ambassadors" and "legislators", he criticises Edward Balcerzan's notion of the "reporter translator", characterised by an unprogrammed, neutral translation strategy (Szuster 2015: 336). In this polemic, Szuster appears as a critic aware of the translator's responsibility and the importance of their personal involvement in translation practice.[2] However, does this approach to translation, based on personal involvement and legislative awareness, as adopted by Szuster-translator when confronted with a work written by a woman and discussing issues from the "margins" of culture, somehow engender an active reflection on the canon?

Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, first published in 1936, is a novel about passion between women: eccentric Robin Vote leaves her husband, Felix Volkbein, a Jew with aristocratic roots, and their son, to become involved with Nora Flood and then abandons her for another, Jenny Petherbridge. A friend and confidant of both Felix and Nora, themselves suffering from a doomed love, is transvestite gynaecologist Dr Matthew O'Connor, who, in philosophical tirades, often in vulgar, gnomic utterances, explains the principles governing the night, when the true, depraved nature of love, carnality and sex is revealed. The doctor explains, among many other phrases, that it was "at night that Sodom became Gomorrah" (p. 77) and a man's "«identity» is no longer his own (…) his «willingness» (…) is of another

[2] In another text, reviewing Małgorzata Łukasiewicz's book *Pięć razy o przekładzie* [*Five Times on Translation*], Szuster points out that translation owes its existence to the soft skills of the translator, such as taste, sensitivity and experience (Szuster 2018: 387).

permission" (pp.72–73). Interestingly, in O'Connor's words, the night *de facto* takes on a corporeal character itself: it becomes, "a skin pulled over the head of day that the day may be in a torment" (p. 76); similarly, the branch of the "tree of night" – symbolising, I think, the source of its cognition – "**sweats a resin and drips a pitch** against the palm that computation has not gambled" (p. 75; my emphasis – IS).[3]

Full of allusions, the highly peculiar phrases that make up the characters' monologues become an interpretational and translatorial challenge. Nevertheless, Szuster confronts Barnes's prose – and succeeds: his translation of the novel *Nightwood*, titled in Polish *Ostępy nocy*, was nominated for the Gdynia Literary Award (2019), and awarded the Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński Award for Translation Creativity by the Mayor of Gdańsk (2019). A member of the award committee, Joanna Sobolewska, points out that "Szuster (…) has created for Djuna Barnes a language shaken out of the ruts of banality, a language that boldly indulges in the extravagance of verbal associations, exuberant monologues and creatively discusses the Polish tradition of translating Anglo-Saxon literaray texts" (Gdańskie Spotkania Literackie "Odnalezione w tłumaczeniu" 2019).

In attempting to uncover Szuster's translation strategy, Barnes's problematic style quickly becomes the main issue. The text situates itself above context, and Szuster wants to be first and foremost the one who translates, not the one who interprets. In the novel's Afterword, for example, he takes a distanced approach to queer interpretations of *Nightwood* (see Szuster 2019: 201)[4], while in an interview with Olga Byrska he claims that "Djuna Barnes interests me from the translation point of view, and the curiosity of a translator is something different from that of a historian of modernism

[3] Quotations in English here and elsewhere further from Barnes 2015. In Polish the quotations read respectively: "Sodoma stała się Gomorą" (p. 95), "traci «tożsamość» (…) i nie jest już panem samego siebie" (p. 90), "czymś w rodzaju skóry naciągniętej na głowę dnia, aby dzień mógł zaznać udręki" (p. 94), "poci się żywicą i ocieka sokiem, który oblepia dłoń niesplamioną kalkulacjami" (p. 93). Quotations in Polish from Barnes 2019.

[4] Szuster cites Jane Marcus's arguments, according to which *Nightwood* allows marginalised people, the "misfits" of the culture (gays, lesbians, transvestites, prostitutes), to speak, thus becoming a precursor of the queer novel, and to some extent even an anti-fascist novel (Marcus 1989: 158). The scholar explicitly acknowledges that her essay is a feminist interpretation of Barnes's prose, and an attempt to revisit discussions concerning issues of race, class and gender (Marcus 1989: 143-144, 145). Interestingly, in her article Marcus criticises a biography of Barnes written by Philip Herring, to which the latter responds in *The New York Times* by distancing himself (as did Szuster) from socially engaged readings of the modernist writer's prose (see Herring 1996).

or a researcher of the LGBT tradition". Szuster adds that on first reading, Barnes's novel seemed to him "utterly maddening, at times venomously ironic, at times peculiarly sublime" (Byrska 2018). A similar view is held by Andrew Goldstone, who draws attention to the irony and combined distance of Barnes's style, calling it "cosmopolitan". According to the scholar, the "social range of significance" of the writer's prose is associated with the "aesthete's detachment – her flair for striking description, her wry or ironic narrative attitude to her characters, and her exuberant, disturbing dislocations of language (…)" (Goldstone 2013: 115).

However, the question poses itself: can Barnes's language and style, as elements on which Szuster places particular emphasis and which lie on the side of the "translator's curiosity", be – in the case of a work so clearly set in context – treated ahistorically? Especially when they enter into a close relationship both with the aesthetics of their time (here: modernism) and express, even if not on behalf of all excluded groups, a decidedly conscious and subversive female voice[5]? It would probably be inappropriate to call Djuna Barnes herself a feminist, but her writing is seen from this perspective[6] and as such deserves the attention of translation criticism, whilst not, however, to the exclusion of more contemporary literary and political criticism (Spivak 1993), especially since, as Magda Heydel points out, the translator is always enmeshed in politics, even unconsciously.[7] The question, therefore, that should begin the discussion on Shuster's translation is how, in prose focused on the female experience, as a record of affect underneath which the body is hidden (Taylor 2012), the tension between the author and

[5] I understand the femininity of prose here as a woman-author's narrative of female experience, but also, following Grażyna Borkowska, as linked to carnality and sexuality (Borkowska 1995). Barnes has been read as "feminine" (rather in the context of the stereotypical characteristics granted to the genders) from the writerly perspective of her time: Anaïs Nin argues that the author manages to write as a woman – "as [a woman] feels" (quoted from Piechucka 2019: 50), while Ezra Pound, according to Julie Taylor, would find her writing too soft, or "flabby" by the standards befitting the predominantly male prose of the time (Taylor 2012: 143).

[6] Shari Benstock writes that, despite Barnes's aversion to "group causes" and "sisterhood", she was interested, as a journalist, in "women's place in modern society"; her work was to some extent emancipatory, it "searched for woman in the patriarchal culture that had abandoned her and sought to give back to woman the voice that had for so long been silenced" (Benstock 1986: 238; 243).

[7] The scholar writes: "The artistic shape of a translated text is a reflection of the ideological attitudes and economic interests in the service of which – or against which – the translator acts" (Heydel 2011).

the translator is distributed and what meanings are constructed by certain translatorial choices?

I.

Although the original publication of *Nightwood* was due in large part to the writer and editor Emily Coleman (see Field 1983: 18), the introduction and general advocacy by T.S. Eliot is regarded as a kind of "quality mark" for this novel in particular. Barnes's prose is positioned in relation to the work of the literary "giants" of her time; on the one hand ennobling it by its similarities to *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* (as Phillip Herring does, see 1995: 213), on the other discrediting it on the grounds that in the distinctiveness of its language it draws insufficiently on the achievements of Eliot and Pound, and only ineptly tries to imitate Joyce (such critical assessments are cited by, among others, Benstock 1986: 242). From a feminist perspective, for example that of Karen Kaivola, *Nightwood* should be regarded as a distinct voice, important in a historical context, representing a moment when the promise of freedom and autonomy for women emerges (see Kaivola 1991: 3). In light of the above issues, the absence of Eliot's introduction in the Polish edition of *Nightwood* becomes a significant element. Instead of a preface by the writer, we have an afterword by the translator, who mentions this preface rather contextually, describing it accurately as "ingratiating, full of evasions and understatements" (Szuster 2019: 194). And yet, the decision not to include a preface is symbolic, freeing the text from the dominance of male authority (Piechucka 2019: 51), which seems particularly important when we are dealing with prose that presents a record of the personal experiences of a female author.[8] One could say that Szuster-translator occupies in this case an intermediate position, although one which is in fact closest to the author, in her contact with the reader.

[8] The autobiographical nature of *Nightwood* has been discussed by Barnes's biographers, both Herring and Andrew Field (1983). Szuster himself affirms such assertions and explains in the afterword that "the basis of the lesbian romance that forms the axis of the book is the relationship between Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood, nine years younger, an American sculptor and illustrator, a woman of original beauty, decadent disposition and unbridled sexual temperament" (Szuster 2019: 198). Wood is the prototype for the character of Robin in the novel.

Critics noting Barnes's eccentric style insist that she was able to "write the body into language" better than perhaps any other female writer of her time (Kaivola 1991: 79); that it is "a language that haunts the body" (Fiedorczuk 2019: 327), that her nouns and adjectives are "everchanging nerve centres" (Maxwell Bodenheim, as cited in Field 1983: 99), and where description becomes a "bodily localisation" (Taylor 2012: 111).[9] Indeed, Julie Taylor points out that the affectivity of Barnes's prose should not be considered in terms of the psychology of the characters, but precisely through corporeal manifestation (Taylor 2012: 111). The physiology of the body in Barnes is marked, for example, by suffering; as one of the novel's main characters, Matthew O'Connor, points out:

> I, as a medical man, know in what pocket a man keeps his heart and soul, and in what jostle of the liver, kidneys and genitalia these pockets are pilfered. There is no pure sorrow. Why? It is bedfellow to lungs, lights, bones, guts and gall! (s. 20)

> Jako lekarz wiem, w której kieszeni człowiek nosi serce i duszę i przy jakim kuksańcu w wątrobę, nerki lub genitalia kieszenie te są chyłkiem opróżniane. Czysty smutek nie istnieje. Dlaczego? Bo jest towarzyszem płuc, kości, kiszek i żółci! (s. 29)

Szuster, although omitting the word "lights"[10], maintains the "seriality" and conciseness of the names of specific organs: the monosyllabic "płuc" [Polish term for lungs] in the genitive; the trochaic "kości, kiszek i żółci" [Polish terms for bones, guts and gall]; and is respectful of consonance and alliteration. The translator makes interesting use of Polish lexis and its associative potential in a place where English merely assumes literalism. The Polish word "opróżniane" can be taken as the equivalent of "pilfer" in the sense of "to steal, to pinch" (*Nowy Słownik Fundacji Kościuszkowskiej* 2002), but in Polish, it also implies the physiological activity of defecation, symptomatic of Dr O'Connor's "pub gibberish" (Szuster 2019: 197). The

[9] Interestingly, as Taylor notes, Barnes herself views *Nightwood* in a somewhat corporeal dimension; more specifically, she views the novel as a corpse: "It lies here on the floor, and I circle around it like the murderess about the body, but do nothing", quoted from Taylor 2012: 113.

[10] *Lights* are the lungs of farmed animals (pigs, sheep, oxen), intended, like other offal, for consumption (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2021). There is no separate term in Polish, and "podroby [offal]" or "flaki [tripe]" somehow fits into the Polish term "kiszki", which Szuster deftly uses.

corporeal lexicon is often complemented by coarse and vulgar terms whose energy is revealed in translation, building up further levels of meaning.[11]

The notion of suffering following the loss of a beloved is manifested through the body: "As an amputated hand cannot be disowned, because it is experiencing a futurity, of which the victim is its **forebear**, so Robin was an amputation that Nora could not renounce" (p. 53; my emphasis – IS). The loss of Robin is physical, and the pain takes on a phantom character. However, the temporal dimension outlined by the bodily metaphor deserves special attention. An amputation is an event that is clearly set between what used to be, i.e. wholeness, and what follows – dismemberment/loss. The future is marked by the loss of the beloved, through which the subject will be defined, just as the absence of a hand defines the "handless". Here is how Szuster translates the above passage: "Jak nie sposób wyrzec się amputowanej dłoni, ponieważ doświadcza ona przyszłości, której ofiarą pada bezręki, tak Nora nie mogła się wyprzeć Robin, amputowanej cząstki siebie samej" (p. 68). The translator smooths out Barnes's intricate syntax, perhaps to make her metaphor clearer. Yet the temporal context which disappears in translation deserves closer attention. "Forebear" is equivalent to the Polish "przodek", i.e. one who represents the past, while "bezręki [handless]" is already the defective subject, i.e. the subject of the future – thus the temporal antagonism, which is not accidental for Barnes, is lost in translation.[12] The translator's choice, however, gains an additional dimension: "forebear" incorporates the verb "to bear", in the sense of "to support" as well as "to stand" (*Nowy Słownik…*); the notion of being "handless" is adequately "burdened" by suffering, while in purely literal (and corporeal) terms it has itself been deprived of the "burden" of some body part. Corporeality appears here both in the general dimension – as a signature of the past/time – and in the most private dimension – as a sign of affect: the suffering of love.

This sphere of intimacy and emotion **expressed by the body** is also revealed in Barnes's language through terms evoking downward movement. It is in this movement, Taylor argues, that the sense of shame in the novel's

[11] There are many associations with corporeality in *Nightwood*, often expressed in bovine metaphors, the bizarre structures that dominate O'Connor's speech. Szuster plays with these, highlighting the emphatic nature of the phrases: "sitting heavy, like the arse of a bull" (p.126) – „wyrzuty sumienia (…), które gniotą nas byczym zadem" (p.152); "Oh, the poor bitch, if she were dying" (p.94) – „Nieszczęsna suka […], gdyby zdychała" (p. 115).

[12] Barnes pursues criticism of the past in *Nightwood*; modern times, as well as the future, mark the decline of history – especially aristocratic history (see Radia 2016: 68).

characters is laid bare (Taylor 2012: 113). The title of the first chapter, *Bow Down*, refers primarily to the story of Felix, who is embarrassed by his own background; the protagonist "bows down" to the aristocracy. Shuster's translation – *W pokłonie* – actually illustrates this humiliation towards a past era, which Barnes, however, treats with ironic detachment. The term "bow down" does not so much mean giving a bow (i.e. reverence), as humiliation[13], which would perhaps be better conveyed in Polish by the imperative mode: "skłoń się" or even "pochyl się". It is worth comparing this point with the parallel title of the penultimate chapter: *Go Down, Matthew*. In Shuster's translation, *Przeto idź,* Matthew again loses the vertical, degrading character of the metaphors, which in Barnes's words is not accidental. This is all the more so because the downward direction, this mark of disgrace, also signifies the sexual sphere within which the characters' experiences constantly revolve. For example, in the opening scene of this chapter, when Dr Matthew O'Connor goes to church and there speaks to his penis, "bending (…) head over and down" ("z pochyloną głową", p. 119; 144) – his sense of shame stems from his fear of impotence.

Admittedly, Szuster does explain his translation decision in the footnotes (p. 190) where he notes that the title of the chapter refers to the religious song *Go Down Moses, Let My People Go,* which he translates as *Przeto idź, Mojżeszu, uwolnij mój lud,* thus drawing attention to the biblical context behind the work. The words of the song relate directly to the passage in the Book of Exodus when God reveals himself to Moses and commands him to deliver the people of Israel. In the Polish translation of The Bible – *Biblia Tysiąclecia* – we read: "**Idź przeto** teraz, oto posyłam cię do faraona, i wyprowadź mój lud, Izraelitów, z Egiptu" [**Go therefore** now, behold, I send you to Pharaoh, and bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt] (Exodus 3:10; my emphasis – IS). Yet in the English edition there is a clear downward direction: the Nile Valley is supposed to be lower than the Promised Land, hence the Bible translation usually reads: "Go, get thee down"

[13] The humiliation and shame of the protagonists is highlighted by Taylor (2012: 113). This, however, is not at odds with the findings of Field, who sees in *Bow Down* references to the folk opera of the same title and points out that this was originally intended to be the title of Barnes's entire novel. The opera tells the story of a man vying for the affections of two women, but it is in the form itself, built on the distinct musical declamations of the characters, who are characterised by passion and loneliness, that Field sees the matrix for *Nightwood*, also pointing out that Barnes's father and her grandmother created and composed their works in a similar way (Field 1983: 183).

(21st Century King James Version); "Go down at once" (Amplified Bible); or "Go, and get down" (Modern English Version) (see Exodus 32: 6–8). The Polish translation abolishes the injunction to go down, to get down, which is intentional in the English original referring to the Bible and also to the African-American religious song.

Moreover, the song *Go Down, Moses*, sung in the nineteenth century by slaves who identified their fate with that of the enslaved people of Israel, also opens up an important social context, literarily rooted (from today's perspective) in, for example, William Faulkner's novel of the same title. And although Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* did not appear until six years after the publication of *Nightwood,* and although Barnes's *Go Down, Matthew* was potentially provocative as well as profane, as it relates to the bondage of the body (which, as it were, "betrays" the Doctor – a transsexual), in a national-historical context the two novels throw light on each other. As Taylor writes, the declaration of a kind of pride stemming from the biblical source of this phrase, cited in the context of the song of the black slaves, prompts us to consider how often similar declarations are preceded by the shameful scenario of history (Taylor 2012: 133). It would seem all the more legitimate to follow the title *Zstąp, Mojżeszu* [*Go Down, Moses*], proposed by Zofia Kierszys, who translated Faulkner's novel in this way in 1966. Translating the *Nightwood's* chapter as *Zstąp, Matthew* would seem more appropriate not only because of its reinforcement in the translating and historical-literary tradition, but also because of its interpretation. *Zstąp, Matthew* emphasises the downward direction, which is associated with disgrace and marks the transition from the sphere of the *sacred* to the *profane*. This transition is more important because the carnal-erotic scene – Matthew's speech to the penis – is taken up not elsewhere, but in the church.

The nature of the phrase "go down", which recurs repeatedly in the novel, refers to sexual experience not only in the case of Dr O'Connor, especially since, as Taylor explains, a movement in Nightwood is always "a movement of, within and between bodies" (Taylor 2012: 111). The scholar particularly emphasises the erotic significance of the phrase "go down" in the passage when Dr O'Connor talks to Nora about women "who turn the day into night" (p. 84):

> the young, the drug addict, the profligate, the drunken and that most miserable, the lover who watches all night long in fear and anguish. These can never again live the life of the day. (…) They acquire the 'unwilling' set of features: they

> become old without reward, the widower bird sitting sighing at the turnstile of heaven. (…) Or walks the floor, holding her hands; or lies upon the floor, **face down,** with that terrible longing of the body that would, in misery, **be flat with the floor; lost lower than burial**, utterly blotted out and erased so that no stain of her could ache upon the wood (…). Look for the girls also, in the toilets at night, and you will find them **kneeling** in that great secret confessional crying between tongues, the terrible excommunication. (pp. 84–85; my emphasis – IS)

> podlotki, narkomanki, rozpustnice, pijaczki i te najbardziej nieszczęśliwe, kochanki, które czuwają do rana w udręce i strachu. Te już nigdy nie będą mogły żyć dziennym życiem (…). Nabywają „niechcianych" rysów: robią się stare, nie dostając nic w zamian, a każda, jak ptasia wdówka na obrotowej bramce do nieba, siedzi i wzdycha (…). Albo przemierza podłogę swojego pokoju, zaciskając dłonie; albo leży na podłodze, **twarzą w dół**, z tą straszliwą tęsknotą ciała, które w nieszczęściu chciałoby się **wtopić w podłogę; zapaść się głębiej niż grób**, doszczętnie wymazane i do czysta wytarte, żeby najmniejsza plamka jej cierpienia boleśnie nie kalała drewna (…). Nocą poszukaj w toaletach także dziewcząt, a znajdziesz je **na klęczkach** w tym wielkim tajemnym konfesjonale, jak pomiędzy języczkami wykrzykują słowa strasznej ekskomuniki. (pp. 103–104; my emphasis – IS)

Women who are cast out of society find refuge only under the cover of darkness. The Doctor says, however, that the most literal collapse is for those women who love unhappily. Their appearance changes; their bodies collapse. Among them are lesbians, between whom lovemaking always takes place in a position of humiliation, literally kneeling. And although Barnes, in a letter to James Scott, explicitly refutes the sexual implications of the above passage by pointing out that "go down" means "exactly what it says", Taylor proves that in the first, more explicit version, the scene describes oral sex between women (Taylor 2012: 119). It is difficult to find the erotic dimension of the expression "go down" in both Polish phrases "przeto idź" and "zstąp" – in Polish, in this context, only "zejdź niżej" can be proposed[14] – nevertheless, the term "zstąp" seems to open up wider levels of meaning[15], without, importantly, losing the intertextual references.

[14] "Zejdź niżej" as a translation of "go down" captures the imperative nature of the phrase, especially if juxtaposed with "bow down" as "pochyl się" ("pochyl [bend]" rather than "pokłoń [bow]", if we want to highlight further, erotic connotations). Yet the title "Zejdź niżej, Matthew" loses the obvious intertextual reference.

[15] *Słownik języka polskiego PWN (The PWN Dictionary of Polish)* states that "zstąpić" also occurs in the sense describing "some phenomena, feelings: to overcome someone or something", https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/zstapic;2547427.html [access: 23.03.2021].

However, it must be acknowledged that Szuster's lexical mastery combined with his rhythmic sense captures the passage's imagery and interpretive potential, even if stripped of its sexual implications. The translator's intuition, which makes it possible to salvage additional contexts from the translation (sometimes not directly indicated in the original), is revealed, for example, in the book's title and the word "nightwood" itself. Julia Fiedorczuk, the author of the only critique of Shuster's translation to date, *O czym nie da się mówić*, *o tym trzeba śpiewać* [What can't be talked about, must be sung about] writes that:

> In *Nightwood* you hear "wood" meaning forest, but also the name of the lost mistress. This is lost in the Polish translation, but we do not regret it – the iambic "ostępy nocy" sounds far better than any more literal translation of the title (such as "nocny las"). (Fiedorczuk 2019: 331)

Alicja Piechucka, on the other hand, draws attention to semantics, writing that "ostęp" [backwood] is by definition an almost inaccessible area, and it is easy to get lost in «nocny las [night wood]», if only because "it is impossible to plan the night" (Piechucka 2019: 51). Szuster's suggestion captures the sonorous and interpretive character of the novel, although it loses the hallmarks of Thelma Wood, as well as Joyce, with whom an American scholar, Kaivola, finds a rather significant reference: "In this respect, *Nightwood* sees the return of *Night Town* from *Ulysses*, but with a change, substituting the natural image of the forest for the cultural image of the town" (Kaivola 1991: 84).

The word "ostępy" from the title would resonate well with the word "zstąp" proposed in this article as a translation of "go down" due to the consonance in syllables. And yet, in the passage dealing with the fall of the heroines, Szuster's translation decisions nevertheless open up a wider interpretative context. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, one of the meanings of "go down" is also "to sink below the horizon". Although the term "to sink" does not appear explicitly in the text, Szuster's "wtopić w podłogę [be flat with the floor]" expresses the desire for the impossible referred to in the original: to pass to the other side, like the sun or a body sinking – as the translation reads – "głębiej niż grób [lower than burial]". This desire for "passage", manifested in degradation (including sexual degradation), is nothing less than an attempt at bodily transgression that would bring liberation to all the characters in the novel.

II.

The dynamism that manifests the desire to free oneself from the prison of the body is above all evident in those passages which speak of physical proximity, even tightness, for example the scene in the speeding little carriage when emotions escalate and eroticism mixes with violence as Jenny harasses Robin. However, this time, the rendering in the translation of Barnes's essential dynamics of female carnality is not reduced merely to lexical choices, but rather to syntax and rhythm, whose boundaries (parallel to the bodily boundaries on a semantic level) also have to be crossed:

> Then Jenny struck Robin, scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking, clutching and crying. Slowly the blood began to run down Robin's cheeks, and as Jenny struck repeatedly Robin **began to go forward** as if brought to the movement by the very blows themselves, **as if she had no will, sinking down in the small carriage, her knees on the floor,** her head forward as her arm moved upward in a gesture of defence (…). (p. 69; my emphasis – IS)

> Wtedy Jenny uderzyła Robin w twarz, rozhisteryzowana rzuciła się na nią z pazurami, bijąc, szarpiąc i płacząc. Po policzkach Robin zaczęła powoli spływać krew, Jenny wymierzała kolejne razy, a Robin, jak gdyby pod ich naporem, **bezwolnie przesuwała się do przodu i opadała na kolana**, z pochyloną głową i ramieniem uniesionym w obronnym geście (…). (p. 85; my emphasis – IS)

The dynamism of this scene, based on parallelisms, repeated participles, and short statements, is shaped differently in translation. The translator merges the individual elements, losing the detail of the description, the sequence of events (the phrase emphasising the feeling of imprisonment of the heroines is completely lost: "sinking down in the small carriage"), an enumeration that fragments the body ("her knees", "her head", "her arm") and conveys the fieriness of the movements. There is no doubt that an utterance constructed in this way sounds much better in Polish, but the question is: to what extent should Barnes actually be corrected?

A Welsh writer, whom Szuster approached, asking for a consultation on a "particularly intricate passage in *Nightwood*", stated that, in his opinion, Barnes's original sounds "like a bad translation from Proust" (Byrska 2018). Although it is impossible to agree with this point (and Szuster does not), there are sentences in *Nightwood* that are like those described by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, translator of Proust, as being similar to "a man walking

a tightrope" (Boy-Zeleński 1958: 29). Barnes's language is in some places uncertain, stilted, "thrown off balance" (Kaivola 1991: 65), making the reader "dizzy" (Murek 2018: 59). Although the comparison between Szuster and Boy-Żeleński may seem out of place due to the time distance between them, the fact that Szuster translates from English, not French and that he is definitely far from Boy-Żeleński's "castrating" inclination (Rodowska et al. 2018) with his tendency to "trim" and "flatten" the original (Siemek 2016: 74), nevertheless it seems that in some places the strategies of both translators take the same direction, especially when it comes to dealing with the complex syntax of Barnes's sentences. Boy relies primarily on **rhythm**, as he notes: "And still throughout this work I heard the inner music of Proust's thoughts, and this I tried to preserve and render" (Boy-Żeleński 1958: 30). Szuster, similarly, seeks a "current of language" in Barnes's prose, which sometimes also means a freer flow (Szuster 2019: 197).

However, when we consider particularly dynamic passages in the novel, such as the one presented above, in which the peculiarities of bodily movement are rendered by means of a fractured rhythm – discontinuous, requiring abrupt stops and starts – Szuster adopts a rather defensive stance and is inclined to temper the briskness of the syntax. Thus, in another passage describing Frau Mann – Felix's friend from the beginning of the novel, the trapeze artist through whom the protagonist meets Dr O'Connor and Nora – the syntactic smoothing of the translation largely alters the rhythm of Barnes's original sentence:

> (…) something of the bar was in her wrists, the tan bark in her walk, as if the air, by its lightness, by its very non-resistance, were an almost insurmountable problem, **making her body, though slight and compact**, seem much heavier than that of women who stay upon the ground. (pp. 11–12; my emphasis – IS)

> (…) w nadgarstkach było coś z drążka, w chodzie – coś z pokrytej mieloną korą areny, jak gdyby powietrze, właśnie ze względu na swoją lekkość i przenikliwość, stanowiło problem prawie nie do pokonania**; ciało, drobne i jędrne**, wyglądało na znacznie cięższe niż ciała kobiet, które nie odrywają się od ziemi. (p. 19; my emphasis – IS)

Szuster builds up two smaller constituent particles, eliminating parallelisms ("by its lightness, by its non-resistance") and participles ("making"); he also introduces an intonational drop where in the original there is a rather rhythmic continuation, or even building up tension ("…were an almost

insurmountable problem, making her body…"). The translator amplifies the text and shifts the meaning slightly: the phrase "the tan bark in her walk" – meaning that Frau Mann's gait has something of the quality of bark, that it is to some extent rough and therefore lacking in fluidity – takes an elaborate form and indicates that in the heroine's gait there is, instead of bark, "coś z pokrytej mieloną korą **areny** [something of the **arena** covered with ground bark]". Although here Szuster lengthens the elements of the sentence, elsewhere he clearly avoids repetition, such as in the passage when Nora speaks of her lover's life using the words "her dissolute life, her life at night" (p. 140), rendered into Polish merely as "jej rozpasane nocne życie [her dissolute night life]" (p. 168). The translator is not afraid to raise the register and make poetic a passage that originally sounds relatively simple; for example, "she wanted darkness in her mind" acquires the form "Chciała, żeby jej umysł spowiła zasłona ciemności (…) [She wanted a veil of darkness to shroud her mind]" (p. 168). Undoubtedly, Szuster's translation perfectly (though not always equal to the original) creates the space in which to convey *Nightwood'*s lyrical character. However, as Kaivola accurately observes: "Lyrical writing provides a form capable of articulating structures that are oppressive towards women […] while it also expresses an impossible longing to escape these structures entirely" (Kaivola 1991: 11). Thus, when Barnes relies on dynamism and exchanges poeticism for inappropriateness, she thereby creates a conscious – which should be rendered in translation – space for emancipation.

The attempt to break down established structures, the specific, broken rhythm, and the peculiar syntax, which escalate as the feelings between the main characters grow, can also be found in the novel's finale, when Nora, following her dog, arrives at the chapel where she meets Robin. Szuster himself writes in the afterword that the final scene "brings to mind the coda of a symphony" (Szuster 2019: 195). It appears like a *crescendo*, where notes, the sounds of growls and jaws, build up commensurately. The reader, from the perspective of Nora, who observes everything, sees the animalised Robin dancing possessively with the dog:

> Then she began to bark also, crawling after him – barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying

> out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees. (p. 153)
>
> Potem ona też zaczęła szczekać, pełznąć jego śladem – szczekać w napadzie jakiegoś obscenicznego i przejmującego śmiechu. Pies skowyczał, biegając z nią czoło w czoło, jak gdyby chciał ją ominąć; skradał się miękko i powoli. Biegał tam i z powrotem, skowycząc z głębi krtani, a ona szczerzyła zęby i skowyczała razem z nim, w coraz krótszych odstępach, czoło w czoło, aż zrezygnowana padła z rozłożonymi rękoma i odwróconą, zapłakaną twarzą; wtedy pies też dał za wygraną i położył się obok, oczy miał nabiegłe krwią, a jego głowa spoczywała płasko na jej kolanach. (pp. 183–184)

The entire original paragraph is formed by three sentences based on parallelisms, in which a series of rapid constituent parts, spat out in a rifle-like manner – equivalent, alliterative and anaphoric, beginning with a conjunction or pronoun ("and the dog", "and lay down" (…), "his eyes", "his head"), as if we were gasping, unable to catch our breath – there is a pause, a breath, a clear cadence emphasised by inversion ("soft and slow his feet went (…), grinning and crying with him (…), her face turned and weeping (…), his head flat along her knees"). Each segment represents, as it were, individual body members, both human and animal, so that it is not clear where the feet end and the paws begin. What follows is a final attempt at bodily transgression. The turns and sudden stops attest, as Alan Singer points out, to the "discontinuity" of Barnes's rhythm (Singer 1984: 84); in addition, in the finale itself, the syntactic particles shorten, creating a distinct acceleration.

There is no doubt that Szuster's translation exploits the potential of the native language – the translator removes what the Polish syntax rejects and the English syntax considers literary, such as repetitions ("crying in shorter and shorter spaces" – "w coraz krótszych miejscach"); he also removes unnecessary conjunctions and pronouns. Elliptical phrases, thrown in casually ("until she gave up, **lying out**, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping") are combined with each other in a subordinate relation (definitely closer to the Polish language), which makes the whole thing more fluid ("w coraz krótszych odstępach, czoło w czoło, aż zrezygnowana padła z rozłożonymi rękoma i odwróconą, zapłakaną twarzą"). Moreover, Szuster shifts meanings again: in the original text, the dog's head at the end rests on the floor, alongside the knees of the lying Robin, but not *on* her knees. And although this is a minor change, it seems to be completely unnecessary, especially since these words are the last in the entire novel and

create a specific, lasting image that the reader is supposed to hold in their mind's eye for a few more moments.

The text in translation sounds strictly prose-like, without any sort of poetic rhythm; it flows, and the regularity translates into a more logical picture of the whole. Yet if one had left Barnes less coherent and not so lexically sophisticated (in the original, Robin and the dog simply "gave up"; in Shuster's text, to avoid repetition, it reads: "zrezygnowana [resigned]" and "dał za wygraną [ceased]") – would it not have better succeeded in conveying the "possessive" character of the situation? All the more important because this character is a direct sign of the modernist narrative, in which the aforementioned "logical" image, obtained in translation, is out of the question because the difference between reality and illusion has already been blurred – the subject has lost its Cartesian (i.e. logical) possibility of cognition, and the world is no longer regular and orderly.[16] While Szuster is absolutely right to call Barnes's novel "mad", he is wrong to abandon "the curiosity of the historian of modernism" (Byrska 2018) in his translation as we discover its "madness" through a reflection on the times from which this prose grows. Formal experimentation stems from a re-evaluation of the subject's perspective, which, in turn, stems from a re-evaluation of thinking about the body, which, especially in modernism, becomes the only tool of delimitation. In addition, when Cartesian reason collapses – as Żaneta Nalewajk, for example, points out – it becomes the only source of cognition: "Interpretation, i.e. seeing the world, is completely determined by the corporeality of the subject, it always means looking from a certain perspective" (Nalewajk 2006: 15).

The final scene in Barnes's text must therefore resonate with ambiguity, because Nora, who observes everything, does not really know what she sees: with the invalidation of the boundary between illusion and reality, the boundary between human (Robin) and animal (the dog) collapses; the transgressive capacity of the subject is represented purely by the senses, which are expressed, on a style level, in the disjunction of syntax. The lost perspective of the characters is conveyed directly through Barnes's poetics. The sentences are short, clipped – especially in the finale; the space between each word tightens, just as the distance between Robin and the dog

[16] On modernism as an epistemological watershed moment, followed by a breakthrough in the aesthetics of the text, steering it towards a breakdown of traditional (realist) writing practices see, for example, Sheppard 1993.

shrinks; the rhythm speeds up, just as Nora's breathing, who is observing the situation, speeds up. This particular impression of visualising frame by frame is lost in a translation that is too stylistically smoothed out. And perhaps it would have been adequate to stick to the text of the original and instead of the passage: "(…) zrezygnowana padła z rozłożonymi rękoma i odwróconą, zapłakaną twarzą; wtedy pies też dał za wygraną i położył się obok, oczy miał nabiegłe krwią, a jego głowa spoczywała płasko na jej kolanach", to have rendered it more simply, in a more dynamic, more nonchalant way: "aż się poddała, rozłożyła na podłodze, z rękoma blisko ciała, z twarzą odwróconą i zapłakaną; wtedy i pies się poddał, położył, jego oczy przekrwione, a głowa płasko ułożona wzdłuż jej kolan". Perhaps the heightening of the register and the detailing of the imagery ("cry" – "skowyczeć"; "went" – "skradał się") should be abandoned in favour of greater parallelism and ellipticity so that Barnes can resonate not only as a writer of her time but also as an artist finding individual forms of expression.

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If one were to define the Barnes-Szuster relationship on the basis of Lori Chamberlain's arguments – who describes the translator both as a father defending the "chastity" of his daughter (the original) and as a seducer who makes a "mistress" of the text's author (and the text itself), while at the same time correcting it somewhat (Chamberlain 1988: 457) – it could be argued that, on the one hand, Szuster, like a worried father, wishes to "soften" in places and bring Barnes's unruly prose into line with the norm, while on the other hand, like an affectionate lover, he directs his greatest attention, to use Balcerzan's rhetoric, to the "body" of the original: the mastery of language and style.[17] However, *Nightwood* is a novel in which "body" and "spirit" are completely equal; the style becomes a direct representation of corporeality, as expressed through the textual structure which should be understood in two ways: a) metaphorically, as an epistemological-aesthetic project of modernism (Nalewajk 2006) in which the subject learning about the world is equipped only with the senses; b) more literally, as a record of intimate, autobiographical experiences, if only in the context of the expres-

[17] "**The body of** the literary prototype turns out to be the letter, no longer a metaphor in its strict sense but a synecdoche of the word, which must be read as a synecdoche of other properties of the text, material, that is, inferior and even sinister" (Balcerzan 2005: 47).

sion of sexuality and affect (Taylor 2012). Barnes, as Benstock points out, "resented the claims her body made on her, the ways in which it proclaimed a sensuality to which she could not respond" (1986: 254). It seems that both perspectives, the modernist (or Barnes's perspective as a modernist) and the feminine (or Barnes's perspective as a woman), become a real challenge in translation. The translator has to both decode the potential meanings of the original arising in part from the historical context (thus becoming, in a way, a critic of modernism), and – being aware that one follows the other – take the trouble to adopt the perspective of an author operating in a patriarchal environment, attempting (just like Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield) to use the aesthetic revolution of modernism to develop new, individual and intimate codes of expression. One of these codes is the body as a structural category, present at the level of lexis and syntax, in the rhythmisations (built on consonances, parallelisms, repetitions) through which the deformation of style often occurs. Barnes not only draws on modernist poetics but also desires to consciously transcend it. Not surprisingly, she remains at some distance from the poetics of Eliot or Pound; she cannot imitate them if her prose is to retain its emancipatory potential – and it is with an awareness of this potential, as Kaivola points out, that her novel should be read in the first place (Kaivola 1991).

Fiedorczuk assesses Szuster's translation as "poetic, blunt and brave; precise, but not tied to the original, dealing superbly with Barnes's syntactic idiosyncrasies, enriching the Polish language with a new quality that, for want of anything better, could be described as camp" (2019: 329). She accurately points out the places that Szuster treats a little too carelessly (those relating, for example, to issues of identity and gender; Fiedorczuk 2019: 329–330). Yet it is precisely this campness of the translation, even if achieved "for want of anything better", that becomes its greatest shortcoming. The translator's perspective, based mainly on respecting the author's distance and irony, limits the potential of Barnes's prose, eliminating both the moments that may be considered clumsy (broken rhythm, syntax) though consciously created, and those that are more sublime (for example, the repetitive lexis associated with downward movement). The translation strategy to smooth the language of the original work is of course considered as one of the universal translation strategies (Kraskowska 2018: 57). Szuster adopts it, thus making Barnes's prose more comprehensible and accessible to the general reader, but what is lost in translation seems all the greater the more the translated text could be considered a lesson in the affective history of

culture and the corporeality it constructs. The question on a female reader's mind in the context of Barnes's presence as a modernist and a woman in the Polish literary canon is what she would sound like in Polish if, at least in part, her prose was left "balancing" on the edge of madness and error and not so "unashamedly literary", as Fiedorczuk (2019: 331) puts it. Or perhaps more "unashamedly" feminine? To give way to Barnes, even if it means, as it were, manipulating the art of translation in favour of its politics?

Translated by Kamil Petryk

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