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"SHAKESPEARE, HE WAS QUITE A GIFTED FELLOW." THE BEGINNING OF STANISŁAW BARAŃCZAK'S CAREER AS A TRANSLATOR*

Abstract

This biographical paper describes Stanisław Barańczak's first attempts at translating poetry as a high school student in 1964. The aim of the paper is to present the birth of his philological passion, and to answer the question of how Barańczak emerges a translator.

The presentation is based on six unpublished translations of Russian and English language poems found in the correspondence of Barańczak and in the hitherto unknown memories of his school friends.

The analysis focuses on the technique of Barańczak's translation work, on reconstructing his motivations, selection of texts for translation, self-assessment of the results, opinions on the authors of the original and evaluation of pop-culture. In addition, the paper offers several facts from the private life of the teenage translator, among others the decision to study Polish philology, as well as his relations with his high school colleagues and teachers.

Keywords: Stanisław Barańczak, biography, debut, juvenilia, translations, manuscripts

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1.

In 2016 and 2017 the author of the present article discovered valuable biographical materials shedding light on a hitherto undocumented stage of Stanisław Barańczak's life and work. These archival materials include, among others, private correspondence from his secondary school years and his first volume of poetry *Na wznak w lesie* [*On his back in the woods*] printed in 1964 in four copies. In total, these materials comprise twenty-two poems, six translations, fourteen drawings, three charades, one comic, one signed photograph, several graphic ornaments accompanying the poems and a few greasy stains and fingerprints. The volume of poetry belongs to a private owner, while the correspondence has been deposited in the library of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Due to conservation procedures, it is not yet accessible for researchers. Its critical interpretation was the basis of the core part of the present author's MA thesis.

The young Barańczak's letters, written in 1964, contain six translations completed before his secondary school-leaving exam: Alexander Blok's *** ("Свирель запела…"), T.S. Eliot's "La figlia che piange", William Shakespeare's "Sonnet XXII", James Joyce's "Strings in the Earth and Air", Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Love's Philosophy" and Robert Burns's "John Anderson, my Jo". These early works shed light on Barańczak's inspirations, document his literary and linguistic inquiries as well as the development of his translation techniques, and – above all – make up a record of his first experiences with translation.

These materials constitute a valuable source of information and provoke important questions regarding the beginnings of Barańczak's career that would eventually lead him to become the author of hundreds of poems, and the translator of several thousand, as well as one of the most brilliant minds of his generation. The reader of Barańczak's texts sooner or later must become intrigued not only by their content and intricate composition, but also by their author's personality.

The latter, however, proves elusive:

> Barańczak wouldn't talk much about himself. In his interviews he would focus on poetry, usually written by other authors, as well as on poetic language and the ethical responsibilities of the poet; on the role, possibilities and duties of poetry in the world of abused and abusive language, conquered by lies and in-

> credible standardisation. His poems communicate more, but usually indirectly. They consistently refrain from the tone of direct confession; the poet never occupies centre stage (Śliwiński 2015).

Thus these new findings bring us closer to understanding how and when exactly Barańczak became an author – or, in the context of the present article, a translator. The collected material may offer an opportunity for reconstructing the very beginnings of Barańczak's translation work; in addition, I am including pieces of interviews with his school friends from the 1st Secondary School in Poznań, which he attended in 1960–1964.

It is impossible to determine the exact date of Barańczak's debut as a translator, or to identify the precise moment when his preoccupation with translation began, as none of these early manuscripts is dated. Dating them would not only enable us to arrange these early attempts chronologically, but also, perhaps, give us some clues regarding his criteria for selecting texts for translation, which at present remain unknown. The six poems are varied in terms of style and belong to different literary periods; they also represent different challenges and levels of difficulty as far as translating them into Polish is concerned.

Nevertheless, it becomes clear that it was in secondary school that Barańczak discovered his fascination with foreign literatures and began to study them closely. In his curriculum vitae, enclosed with his university application submitted on 20 May 1964, he provides a summary of his literary activities:

> I have devoted much time to studies outside the school curriculum. For a number of years I have studied foreign languages: English and German […]. My favourite pastime has long been reading, especially modern fiction […]. I do not limit my tastes to the works of Polish authors; I do my best to also read in the foreign languages that I have learned. Additionally, I compose amateur translations of poems by my favourite authors, especially Russian and English ones (Barańczak 1964, *Curriculum Vitae*).

It is in Barańczak's nature to be active: from his early youth he uses every opportunity to better himself. After coming back home from school, having done his homework and household chores, every evening he would write letters and post them right afterwards at the neighbouring post office. The stamps reveal late postage hours: 10:00 p.m., midnight, once even 2:00 a.m. (Barańczak 18 May 1964, 26 May 1964, 11 June 1964: letters no. 14, 16, 19).

He constantly races against the clock only to remain the prisoner of time. He repeatedly complains in his letters of having done much less than he intended, reproaching himself for laziness (Barańczak 11 May 1964: letter no. 12). As his school-leaving exams approach, he tries to concentrate on his studies; nevertheless, his varied interests make it impossible for him to limit himself to simply revising the material:

> As for now, I decided to tell myself that Żeromski would be useful for my exams and settled on the balcony, reading his *Journals*. Simultaneously – may this testify to my diligence! I engaged in two other activities: munching on the remaining cherries and sunbathing. It took me a surprisingly long time, until half past one (Barańczak 18 June 1964).

The young Barańczak is also interested in music: he plays the trumpet, the flute and the accordion. In the music shop, he practises playing the double bass (Barańczak 14 March 1963: letter no. 3); he also takes private music lessons. He reads voraciously, as well as writes and translates poetry. Often he goes to the cinema, the theatre and various concerts. Aside from this, he proves to be a dutiful son, collecting the family car from the mechanic or helping relatives to sell fruit from their orchard near Poznań. Yet still the relentless ticking of the clock urges him to "work more efficiently" (Barańczak 17 March 1964: letter no. 4). Few people are equally hard-working and none would say that his efforts are insufficient. Barańczak's sister Małgorzata Musierowicz declares that "passionate industriousness runs in the family; it is for us a completely natural dynamic" (Musierowicz 1995: 22).

2.

Although Barańczak is known mostly for his translations from English, he was interested in Russian literature as well. As early as in the 1970s, he was commissioned by Seweryn Pollak to edit a two-volume anthology of 18th- and 19th-century Russian poetry (in the end, however, the anthology did not get published, Pollak 1976). He also published collections of poems by Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky. As time passed, due to the political tensions in the 1980s, Barańczak's translations from Russian were rarely published under his name.

He started to learn Russian in his early childhood, together with his sister Małgorzata Musierowicz, who describes the experience as follows:

> We were the only two kids in the whole region who enjoyed learning Russian – just because it was a foreign language which felt like a puzzle; it also had an additional asset in the form of a new alphabet that one had to learn (Musierowicz 1995: 58).

We can read about their progress in Barańczak's book *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu* [Saved in translation], where the author shares his personal literary experiences and describes his first attempts at translating:

> Some time before that I'd learnt Russian by myself, plodding through Pushkin and Chekhov – the level of Russian taught at school back then could discourage anyone and I had a strong desire to read great authors in the original (…). Translation was a great passion of mine from my youth. I'd endeavoured to translate poems even before I started to write them: in secondary school I laboured – for enjoyment alone – on poems by Rilke and Eliot that had a long time before been translated into Polish by someone else. Next, I attempted to translate Russian poems, selecting those I knew and liked: some pieces by Blok, some by Akhmatova … I need not add these were but amateurish attempts (Barańczak 2004: 76).

Barańczak's school friends agree with his assessment of the quality of their Russian lessons. They also supplement a few important details:

> The level of Russian was very low, especially given that our teacher would often show up after having too much to drink the night before. Besides, Fedya[1] didn't care much about educating the youth; rather, he'd cast lingering looks at the schoolyard where boys played ball. Sometimes he'd ask Stanisław to take over the lesson and then he just stared absently at the window, occasionally adding some remark (Ciesielski 2016).

> Fedya was often clearly hung-over and he would ask Stanisław to take over the class. So Barańczak's first teaching experiences were at school during Russian lessons, supervised by the teacher. When it was time to grade students Stanisław gave Fedya a list or whispered suggestions, asking for higher marks for his mates (Linke 2016).

These accounts suggest that while Barańczak was still at school, his command of Russian far exceeded his teacher's requirements. The most gifted student in his class, forced to rely on self-study, he nonetheless tried

[1] Fedya: Edward Sobkowiak (b. 4 June 1943), Russian teacher in the 1st Secondary School in Poznań.

to befriend the teacher, who – despite being disinterested in his job – could still make a good discussion partner about topics unrelated to the lessons and engage in conversations about the language that fascinated Barańczak outside of the classroom. As Barańczak's school friends point out, Fedya was a young man, not much older than themselves, and he gladly became friends with his talented student.

> Stanisław was on excellent terms with our Russian teacher, Fedya. From late spring until the summer vacation, regardless of the weather, all students were obliged to spend every break in the schoolyard (unless it poured). During every break, the caretaker Mr Brycki – the only guy allowed to wear a hat indoors without getting a slap – looked into each classroom to make sure that everyone was out. One day in our classroom the window was open and Stanisław was sitting cross-legged, smoking, on the wide ledge. Gobsmacked at such outward display of insubordination, the caretaker charged at him rag in hand, but froze at the sight of Fedya sitting and smoking opposite Stanisław. Smoking was strictly prohibited in our school and everyone had to steal away to the loo (which was then outside the main school building) to take a puff or two – yet Stanisław could just sit there and smoke together with a teacher, and in the classroom no less! Fedya became his spiritual guide and introduced him to various intricacies of Russian philology that far exceeded any information included in school textbooks. Stanisław was thirsty for this kind of knowledge and probably this was the reason behind their friendship. It was clear that it was Stanisław who sought it, not the other way round (Tomaszewski 2016).

Russian was Barańczak's favourite school subject and in the first years of secondary school he preferred it even to the Polish lessons, despite the common revulsion towards "our Soviet friend." In fact, Poznań's Faculty of Polish Studies came close to never receiving one of their eminent graduates:

> The final year was the moment when everybody had to make a choice. Stanisław initially decided to pursue Russian philology, which worried Professor Ciemnoczołowski[2], who urged him to rethink his decision. I witnessed one of their conversations. After the bell signalled the end of the lesson, everybody left the room except for Stanisław, who was still collecting his textbooks. Ciemnoczołowski stood over him, looked him in the eye and said

[2] Artur Ciemnoczołowski (1930–1990): Polish teacher in the 1st Secondary School in Poznań (attended by Barańczak) in 1954–1964; in 1964–1976 principal in the 2nd Helena Modjeska Secondary School in Poznań.

> emphatically: "Stanisław, I know you want to read the best literature in the original. So keep learning Russian, but choose Polish philology!"
>
> I waited in the doorway. Ciemnoczołowski kept persuading Stanisław until he talked him around. He paid him the most attention among all our teachers. In the ninth grade, he would propose to him new books to read, but later on Stanisław became so well informed himself that he was well able to make his own choices. The teachers could not keep up with him (Puacz 2016).

Maybe the story would have been different had the Russian teacher been more passionate about his job, enthusiastic enough to inspire Barańczak to pursue this area of study.

3.

In the letters written in 1964, Barańczak evokes icons of world literature: Mayakovski, Blok, Lermontov, Eliot, Shakespeare, Joyce, Shelley and Burns. From his young years, Barańczak filled his imagination with the voices of those who promised to widen his aesthetic horizons and then carefully selected the elite circle of literary influences for his own early writings. He looks for inspiration in the works of authors whose style appears promising and worthy of further development.

The scale of Barańczak's literary explorations is truly impressive. The school reading list was too narrow to accommodate his interests; instead, he read extensively on his own, on a scale suited to the needs of a university student of literature rather than someone in his own age group. His interests covered a wide range of topics, focusing specifically on high literary fiction and poetry.

We do not know the chronological sequence of Barańczak's earliest translations but his material selection proves that, from the very outset, his ambition was to measure himself against the literary greats.[3] Selecting pieces for translation, he was not motivated by the level of difficulty; in fact, it was quite the opposite:

> Burns is not so relevant here, perhaps, but I'm still including him, as he was much more difficult to translate. The piece is written in some dreadful Scottish

[3] Barańczak acknowledges this himself in the aforementioned excerpt from *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu*.

> dialect I'd never have understood but for the German translation printed alongside (Barańczak, 8 June 1964: letter no. 18).

The witnesses' accounts quoted before leave no doubt that the young Barańczak was well capable of enjoying Chekhov, Pushkin and other Russian classics in the original language versions. It is much more difficult, however, to establish his level of spoken and written English at that time, despite the fact that as many as five out of these six early translations were done from English.

Today we know that Barańczak's critical assessment of his early translations, voiced in *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu*, can be attributed to his characteristic modesty. These "amateurish attempts," as he calls them, were in fact extremely ambitious and – we know this from his correspondence – constituted an important part of his early creative activity. He clearly regarded translation not as a pastime but, rather, a continuous effort whose results were registered in a separate notebook:

> I am just now looking at my translation notebook and I feel tempted to copy for you some other texts (Barańczak 8 May 1964: letter no. 11).

These poems copied in his letters are very carefully handwritten, with neat spacing between the individual lines, which shows that none of the translations was composed while writing the letter. The seventeen-year-old poet clearly transcribed finished pieces, whose initial versions were composed elsewhere, with various modifications, additions and elisions. Barańczak reveals that both his own poems and translations are copied off from separate notebooks, allocated to these different creative pursuits:

> Recently I've written two poems but I am only including one of them, because the other one was inspired by a jazz tune from Wicio's record – since you don't know the song, the poem will tell you nothing (Barańczak 18 June 1964: letter no. 20).
>
> I am just now looking at my translation notebook and I feel tempted to copy for you some other texts. I am feeling awfully idyllic and lyrical, so I've done one poem by Blok that goes as follows: "Свирель запела на мосту…" (Barańczak 8 May 1964: letter no. 11).

Should these notebooks be discovered one day, no doubt the known corpus of Barańczak's juvenilia will grow by several, if not several dozen, translated poems.

The pleasure he found in translation was closely linked with his enjoyment of learning foreign languages, for which he was obviously gifted. Translating allowed Barańczak to tie this enthusiasm for studying languages with another great passion of his: literature.

Studying literary classics can be viewed as a substitute for conversing with the other, which catered to the young Barańczak's literary ambitions as well as his need to "mingle with the masters." Through his creative digressions and literary analyses, he engages in a dialogue with literary works by opening his imagination, intellect and emotions rather than his lips:

> In that happy time when I did hardly any studying, I translated several pieces by Mayakovski and Lermontov, telling myself it would help me prepare for my exams. One of Mayakovski's poems is exceedingly funny; it tells the story of a chap who goes to the hairdresser's to have his ears combed. The other one required a lot of fiddling to find enough synonyms for the word *Kadet* (Kadets = Constitutional Democrats, if you remember your Bolshevik Revolution). But none of these translations were any good, so I'm not copying them for you (Barańczak 26 May 1964: letter no. 16).

Why does Barańczak tell the addressee of his letter the story from Mayakovski's futurist poem "They Don't Understand a Thing"? He clearly treats the addressee like a partner for discussions and musings on literature, someone potentially equally interested in drawing more inspiration from literature and finding new grounds for expanding his philological interests.[4]

The young Barańczak enjoyed reading both demanding works and lighter, more humorous pieces – as evidenced by the aforementioned poem by Mayakovski. As can be seen in his letter, the young translator could be critical of his attempts and would consciously take up new challenges. He often approached translation as an exercise permitting him to improve his poetic skills:

> I'll copy this Shakespeare piece for you now. It's a really great poem, only it loses much in translation (especially mine). It could easily refer to us two – as you'll see. But I just want to tell you that I only translated it today, so I'll

[4] The correspondence discussed here and the accounts of Barańczak's school friends suggest that – with the exception of his Polish teacher Artur Ciemnoczołowski – he did not discuss his literary explorations with any elders. The letters written when he was seventeen years old evidence his quest for role models and need for individual engagement with the texts he found intriguing.

> probably soon spot some bits I won't like and change this or that. For now, it's more of a translation-in-progress, but oh well (Barańczak 26 May 1964: letter no. 16).

Barańczak obviously linked his translation activities with studying foreign languages and, perhaps initially, he did not regard them as an independent pursuit but rather like an offshoot of his reading and effort to improve his linguistic abilities. Or maybe he simultaneously deciphered new lines and jotted them down in Polish to analyse the "flexibility" of the pair of languages based on their ambiguity and exchangeability:

> I wanted to send you this little translation of mine. But then it occurred to me that you couldn't possibly assess the translation without knowing the source, so let's try a small experiment – I'll include both my version and the original poem for you to compare. Just please remember one thing: if a translation is even half as good as its source, it means it's a brilliant one (Barańczak 29 May 1964: letter no. 17).

Barańczak conducts experiments in language anatomy. To study individual elements of language, he dissects texts only to recompose them piece by piece, obtaining various results. It's not by accident that in "Hemofilia" ["Haemophilia"] (Barańczak 2014: 491), the final poem in his *Wiersze zebrane* [Collected poems], approaching the end of his career as a poet, he returns to its beginnings. Here, playing word games is not a mere sport but rather an echo of these early attempts at creating witty rhymes. The poem includes various images from Barańczak's youth, but it is hard to differentiate between authentic samples and contemporary paraphrases mimicking those early works. Nevertheless, factual scenery, setting and characters suggest the possibility of interpreting the poem as a quasi-autobiographic statement. This seems to testify to the importance of those early works, as the poet, reaching the final stage of his artistic development, is eager to look back to its beginnings.

4.

The young Barańczak's thirst for knowledge allowed his interests to transfer into other spheres of life. On the other hand, in relations with his peers he tries not to concentrate on his literary pursuits. He made friends easily

enough, even though his friendships were never very close. Still, friends gave him access to mass culture. He was an avid follower of foreign music trends. He was not very enthusiastic (!) about early The Beatles' records (Kwarciński 2017); as a lover of jazz he tried to promote this genre among his friends. He even wrote Polish lyrics to "Hello Dolly," from the musical by the same title, which contributed to the song's popularity among the students of the 1st Secondary School in Poznań (Bicz 2016).

As a versatile reader, he was interested both in 19th-century classics and modern works, but he measured all texts, from poetry to popular songs, against the same high standards. When he was seventeen, after the Labour Day celebrations, he attended a festival where local bands played dance music. His sensitive ear caught not only false notes but also incorrect pronunciation of English lyrics. Polish bands struggling to imitate Western performers could not count on Barańczak's approval:

> I walked across the main square in Jeżyce. There were many people still partying and the same band we had disliked earlier. I stood there for a couple of minutes but got awfully depressed without you. On top of that, the band played pathetically and sang some stupid songs, deforming English words. So eventually I had enough and went home.

These "deformations" could only partially be blamed on the performers' incompetence. Printed lyrics were a rarity and, without these, musicians in Communist Poland would simply jot the words down phonetically as they listened to a song on the radio. Well acquainted with literary masters, Barańczak must have suffered much more than other listeners at such concerts. And, typically, he would not suffer gladly.

Barańczak's sensitivity to various literary genres and openness to approaching them from many different angles prompted him to search for supplementary reading. Apart from literary works themselves, he would reach for author biographies and critical interpretations – he was well aware that any literary work is inextricably linked with its contexts. For this reason, upon completing his translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnet XXII*, he is still plagued by doubt:

> The thing about the sonnets is that nobody really knows whether they were written for some lady or for a young man. (…) If the latter is true, as some scholars suggest, I would have to make some alterations in my translation, for instance "Dopóki jesteś młody" ["So long as you are young" (masculine inflec-

> tion)] instead of "Dopóki jesteś młoda" ["So long as you are young" (feminine inflection)]. In English, as you well know, there is no grammatical difference (Barańczak 8 May 1964: letter no. 11).

The young translator, working on his rendition, interpreted the addressee as a woman. Years later, he would return to the issue of the addressee's gender. As a professor of literature, he made light of the whole debate on the identity of this mysterious figure, claiming that it did not offer any significant insights for the poems' interpretation. Besides, he claimed that the initials used in the cycle are fictitious and moreover cannot be applied to all the sonnets:

> It is beyond all doubt that the addressee of the sonnets 1–126 is a young man, referred to by the initials H. W. The critics have established that these initials **might apply** to two people: Henry Wriothesley and William Herbert. The heated debate has continued for years – both theories have their supporters (Barańczak 2011).

Even as a teenager, Barańczak stood out among his peers, displaying exceptional literary and linguistic abilities. Under the guidance of his Polish teacher, these qualities soon began to lay the foundations for his future accomplishments. His individuality, curiosity, bright mind and thirst for knowledge allowed him to access literary classics at a young age. His wide horizons were obvious to all who knew him – his friends treated him as some sort of a harmless freak, well-versed in books and modern music, while the teachers were thrilled with his rapid progress. But in the midst of these cheering voices, the most audible voice is the one of Barańczak himself: determined, an insatiate reader, fascinated by language and tirelessly pursuing different meanings in texts, studying languages and passionately deciphering new phrases. His love for languages prompted him to try his hand at translating. Thanks to his literary genius, over the years he produced masterful translations of many literary classics, which will continue to inspire admiration for a long time to come.

Translated by Aleksandra Kamińska

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