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TRANSLATION’S DECEIT:
CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ AND NEGRO SPIRITUALS

Abstract: This article discusses the politics of translation of eleven negro spirituals, which Czesław Miłosz produced in 1948, while working as a cultural attaché of the Polish embassy in Washington D.C. Initially, Miłosz intended to publish all of these translations in the Polish literary weekly *Nowiny Literackie*. Although only a few of these translations appeared in the weekly, the article proposes that Miłosz’s project played a role in opposing the Soviet cultural and political domination of Poland after World War II. Drawing parallels between research on slavery and the analysis of power structures in post-war Poland presented in *The Captive Mind*, the article argues that Miłosz’s translations were driven by the “ethics of deception” akin to resistance strategies inscribed in the original contexts of production of negro spirituals. The article relies on theories of translation developed by deconstruction to question the traditional hierarchies between “translation” and “the original,” and, consequently, to complicate Miłosz’s position as “a translator” of spirituals. Since spirituals are improvisational by origin, specific examples of Miłosz’s translation choices demonstrate that his role in the translation process was participatory and creative rather than imitative. Thus the article concludes that the translation of spirituals enabled Miłosz both to be and not to be the author of these texts, a subversive move in the Soviet-dominated system, where direct expressions of longing for freedom (only implicitly voiced in the spirituals) may not have been welcome. This interpretation is consistent with Miłosz’s other early works, which draw parallels between Polish post-war and slavery/colonial experiences, and adds to current debates on the possible convergences between post-Soviet and postcolonial conditions.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, negro spirituals, translation, ethics of deception, social realism, postcolonial

Czesław Miłosz’s diplomatic service in Washington D.C. (1946–1950) was most fruitful for his translation. During this period Miłosz completed
Polish renditions of works by almost thirty poets, mainly from English, Spanish and Chinese, and he published most of these translations in Polish literary journals. Subsequently he included them in Kontynenty, a 1958 collection of essays and translations. Miłosz’s post-World War II correspondence, gathered in the volume Zaraz po wojnie, offers interesting insights into the poet’s motivation for being a translator during that time. The letters document Miłosz’s exchanges with the editors of the leading Polish literary magazines: Kazimierz Wyka (Twórczość), Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (Nowiny Literackie), Karol Kuryluk (Odrodzenie) and Ryszard Matuszewski (Kuźnica), all of whom repeatedly begged him for new poems. However, Miłosz kept sending them translations instead, excusing himself with his temporary “reluctance to publish.” In the letter to Iwaszkiewicz, dated October 1947, he explained: “I have a lot of my own poems, but I suffer from a strange disease, a reluctance to publish that results not so much from pride but from scruples and fears of the pitfalls of popularity, which is an extremely dangerous thing” (Miłosz 2007: 184; trans. K.J.).

“The pitfalls of popularity” can be read as a code phrase that signalled the poet’s unwillingness to pander to the socialist state and the aesthetics of social realism it promoted (cf. Miłosz 2007: 150). Miłosz could not write about these issues openly in his letters because of the censorship to which his correspondence was routinely submitted. However, the poet’s later comments, also included in Zaraz po wojnie, show clearly that, in the context of ideological limitations imposed on his own poetry, Miłosz assigned certain strategic roles to his translations. In the introduction to his correspondence with Irena and Tadeusz Kroński, Miłosz explains that “in 1950 [he] planned to hide from social realism in the translation of Shakespeare” (Miłosz 2007: 270; trans. K.J.). Similarly, Miłosz describes his translations of Pablo Neruda as an anti-dote to contemporary Polish poetry, which in his view became “bland” after being “tailored to the Soviet taste” (Miłosz 2007: 412, trans. K.J.). Also, in his conversation with Renata Gorczyńska, included in Podróży świata, Miłosz admits that, as a translator, he was guided by “a sense of duty:” “I had to do something to fight this drabness in Poland. Because I am a poet, I was able to introduce a shot of colour” (Miłosz, Gorczyńska 1992: 74; trans. K.J.).

The above statements indicate that translations in which Miłosz chose to “hide” between 1946–1950 were important to him for at least two reasons. First, they allowed him to continue working creatively and publishing without major ideological compromise. Second, the translations were
difficult to find a better proof of Miłosz’s ambivalent attitude towards the notion of “authorship” in translation and of his transracial perception of human experience, two elements that are crucial to the understanding of the politics of his translations of negro spirituals.

Miłosz’s ability to transcend racial divisions is manifested also in his choice of language. In the “original” context, the language of negro spirituals, African American Vernacular English, can be viewed as their racial marker. In his introduction, Miłosz explains that “the dialect” of spirituals does not have a Polish equivalent, and he decides to use standard Polish for his translations, with occasional elements of folk style (1948: 4).16 Perhaps it was the standard Polish of the translations, essentially free from any foreignness, that made the editors of Nowiny Literackie read negro spirituals outside of the limits of racial discourse. After all, it is quite possible that despite Iwaszkiewicz’s apologies for “an accidental” splitting of the translation sequence, the members of his editorial board did notice that Miłosz’s full selection of spirituals contained an accumulation of freedom motifs, which would have been inconvenient for the political authorities. Neither “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” nor any of the three translations analyzed earlier, in which Miłosz’s authorship is particularly evident, were published in Nowiny Literackie. Despite the potential of “deceit,” the game that Miłosz played through his translations did not bring a desired effect. Thus, the translator’s “fury” was fully justified: Nowiny Literackie may have “killed” his work with premeditation.

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Bibliography


16 For example, one characteristic of folk poetry that Miłosz follows is the use of the pronoun ja (“I”) in lines such as Czasem ja jestem. A standard Polish structure would omit the pronoun (Czasem jestem) because the grammatical form of the verb “to be,” jestem, already implies the “I.”
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