MIRA ROSENTHAL

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ’S POLISH SCHOOL OF POETRY IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Abstract: Examining the ideological underpinnings of the anthology Postwar Polish Poetry, this article considers the impact of Czeslaw Milosz’s translatory choices on the rise in popularity of Polish poetry in English translation in the 1960s and its influence on contemporary American poetry. Postwar Polish Poetry by and large introduced Polish literature to the Anglophone audience. The analysis of the paratext (translator’s preface, author biographies, jacket copy) and the translations foregrounds Milosz’s translatorial, poetological, historical, and political concerns. The article focuses on delineating the anthology’s role in shaping the historiography of Polish poetry for the Anglophone reader and touches on the political commentary embedded in Milosz’s poetological choices. The overwhelmingly positive reception of the anthology reveals, in turn, the needs of American poets during the political upheaval of the 1960s to seek poetry outside their own tradition. Finally, the article argues that the subtleties of the anthology’s framing of Polish poetry cannot be overlooked, for it continues to exert influence on the canon of Polish literature as it develops in English translation.

Keywords: Czeslaw Milosz, Polish school of poetry, Postwar Polish Poetry, poetry translation, American poetry

Thinking about Milosz’s translation of contemporary Polish poetry into English is important to our understanding of the relationship between minor and major literatures before the fall of Communism and in our current global literary culture. Polish poetry in English translation was virtually nonexistent when Milosz moved to the United States to take a visiting lecturer position at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1960. Today, it enjoys a prominent status among eminent American critics and poets. The quality of the poetry being written in postwar Poland and the prominence of Polish émigrés who turned to translating it, Milosz among them, invig-
orated Western interest in the plight of the writer behind the Iron Curtain. The awakening of Anglophone readers to Polish poetry during the 1960s and 1970s was intimately tied to its particular social function, that is, to the picture it provided of the poet’s role in society. The canon of postwar Polish poetry in English translation that Miłosz helped to form became a model of political engagement for American writers.

It would be difficult to overstate Miłosz’s role in bringing Polish poetry to light in English. His interest in the potentially fruitful interplay between Polish and American literary nationalisms began during World War II with his first translations of T.S. Eliot’s poetry into Polish. From this point forward he never stopped promoting American poetry, translating extensively and sending dispatches from abroad while serving as a cultural attaché in the U.S. from 1945–1950. After breaking with the Polish government in 1951 and seeking political asylum in France, he continued to write about the relationship of Poland and the West throughout his ten years of exile there. He began translating into English while living, paradoxically, in France, a testament to the strength of his interest in Anglophone literature. Once he moved to the U.S. in 1960, his translation work turned almost exclusively to initiating Anglophone readers to the world of contemporary Polish poetry. Miłosz’s long-standing interest in American poetry and his break with the Communist government legitimized him politically in the eyes of Western readers. Here was a writer who promoted the values of American literature; here was an intellectual who had experienced war and Communism firsthand, someone who could act as an envoy from another world distant from American experience.

Miłosz’s early translations of Polish poetry (represented most significantly by his 1965 anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*) mark a turning point in American literature. One of the first classes Miłosz taught was a seminar on the translation of poetry for students of Russian and Polish. In addition to codifying his views on translation, the seminar was of practical significance for the Polish poet: it allowed him to test before native English speakers his first whole-scale project of translating into a nonnative language, which eventually resulted in the abovementioned anthology.¹ The seminar on translation “encouraged Miłosz to translate contemporary Polish poetry into English” and marked “a new period in his career as a trans-

¹ The same year, the émigré writer Konstanty Jeleński published a similar anthology in French, *Anthologie de la poésie polonaise*, for which Miłosz wrote a lengthy introduction.
lator” (Gorczyńska 1992: 352; trans. M.R.) he would later call his Polish phase. With the burden of fluency transferred in part to native speakers, Miłosz could focus on the ideological thrust of *Postwar Polish Poetry*, which would become a seminal book for American poets and lay the foundation of a canon of Polish poetry in English translation. Therefore, the anthology deserves a close analysis in order to understand more fully the impact it had on American writers. As translation theorist André Lefevere has pointed out, the packaging of literature through anthologies, histories or biographies creates an image of a writer, a work, a period, a genre, and sometimes even a whole literary tradition. “The nonprofessional reader,” Lefevere writes, “increasingly does not read literature as written by its writers, but as rewritten by its rewriters” (1992: 4).

Before the response of American poets to *Postwar Polish Poetry* is discussed, it is necessary to analyse Miłosz’s repackaging of Polish poetry in English. His translations promoted those authors for whom he felt a kind of enthusiasm, effectively undermining those literary tendencies of the moment that he disliked in Polish literature by way of exclusion. However, of interest is not simply the fact that he presented contemporary Polish poetry selectively, since any editor of an anthology necessarily must make choices; nor is it vital in itself that he seemed to disclose a zealousness for the work of Aleksander Wat, Tadeusz Różewicz and Zbigniew Herbert with the disproportionate number of pages devoted to their work. Rather, the particular criteria he used for selection better present his reasons for the project and its aims. The preface and author biographies for the anthology show Miłosz delineating first and foremost a translatory reasoning, with poetological, historical and political criteria also coming into play.

I will focus on the anthology’s role in shaping the historiography of Polish poetry, an endeavor that would take on even greater scope several years later, when Miłosz embarked on the writing of his textbook *The History of Polish Literature*. The historical criterion for selection emerged in the biographical sketches that preface each poet’s work in *Postwar Polish Poetry*. Taken together, these biographies read like a short treatise on the history of Polish poetry from modernist Young Poland to Miłosz’s present. Far from the objective third-person biographies typical of anthologies, the sketches reveal Miłosz’s voice, often as a first-person account. Rather than focusing on specific accomplishments and biographical facts, they often situate poets within the broader contexts of literary periods and use their poetry as a pretext for more theoretical discussions on the nature of poetry in gen-

---

Czesław Miłosz’s Polish School of Poetry in English Translation 223
ing to Doubleday on Miłosz’s behalf and providing an extensive blurb that appeared on the back cover of the anthology. In 1968, in what would be one of his last letters after a number of years without contact, he wrote to Miłosz with a request:

can you send me a few translations of Polish poets for a little magazine I am starting? (…) I would love to have something Eastern European, for example a bit of your own reminiscences if available in English, or anything of yours and anything of the Polish poets. Why I keep spelling that as one word is a mystery to me… (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 170–171).

Merton’s Freudian slip of the pen is testament to the subtle yet indelible way in which translation establishes a literary canon. Even as early as 1968, the canon was crystallizing into the Polish poetry. Miłosz would further codify the canon in the years to come, often referring to the Polish School of Poetry and arguing to varying degrees of success for other poets he translated into English, such as Anna Świrszczyńska, to be included in the canon. Through his efforts to establish a canon of Polish poetry in English, he both paved the way for the emergence of his own poetry in English and defined Polish poetry for an Anglophone audience, whose strong interest, which continues up to today, is still defined by the particular historical and political view Miłosz delineated.

Bibliography


Miłosz later recollected: “I didn’t have to look for a publisher for my anthology Post-war Polish Poetry: after reading over the typescript, Merton immediately sent it with an enthusiastic letter to the major publishing house Doubleday, where his opinion had weight, and it was a done deal” (Miłosz 1986: 186–187).


