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CZESŁAW MILOSZ AS A TRANSLATOR
OF THE POETICS OF GRAMMAR
AND LANGUAGE ASYMMETRIES IN THE POEMS
OF HERBERT, RÓŻEWICZ AND SZYMBORSKA

Abstract: This article discusses Czesław Miłosz as a poet-translator of the poetry of his younger colleagues: Herbert, Różewicz and Szymborska. The comparative analysis focuses on features largely neglected in translation studies, such as Polish-English linguistic asymmetries and the poetics of grammar, that is, the functions of definite, indefinite and zero articles, verbs and their aspects, personal pronouns as well as the auxiliary verb jest/is. Whereas some of these items cannot be translated adequately because they cause aesthetic loss in any translation, others allow for adequate, sometimes even “optimal” translation.

Key words: Miłosz, poetics of grammar, language asymmetries, translation of Różewicz, Herbert, Szymborska into English.

Introduction

German-language Slavists see language asymmetries as a particularly fascinating phenomenon that occurs “half-way between texts,” i.e. between a literary text and its translation into another language. The asymmetries mainly concern grammatical categories, usually when one of the languages, be it source or target, allows the selection of certain grammatical elements which are absent in the other language (Schultze, Matuschek 2005; c.f. Schultze, Matuschek 2006). For instance, there are two forms of addressing a person by name in Polish, the nominative and the vocative; nei-
Both English and German offer this choice, their nominatives and vocatives being identical. This is particularly significant in poetic texts, where the translator has no way of rendering the semantic nuances that stem from the possibility of selecting either the nominative or the vocative. Conversely, while Polish has no morphological representation of the article, both English and German allow the choice between the indefinite, definite and zero article.

Polish presents more occasions for making grammatical choices than English, the chief language of interest in this paper. Obviously, Polish poets make use of this repertoire of facultative elements – at times consciously, at times somewhat intuitively. It seems that this artistic device is particularly evident in the Polish poetry of the 20th century. Of the poets discussed here, Tadeusz Różewicz is possibly the one who uses the greatest variety of alternate forms in drama and prose, as well as in poetry (c.f. Schultz, Matuschek 2006: 221–223, 229–230). In Szymborska’s poetry, facultative grammatical elements are not the most frequent or the most typical features of her individual aesthetics (Schultz 2008: 28–34); and yet, in some of her texts, the facultative elements do have a major impact on this aspect of the text. Herbert seems to work less and less with facultative forms, but some highly expressive examples can still be found in his poetry (c.f. Schultz, Matuschek 2005: 209–210; Schultz 2008: 23–27).

It is interesting that all poetics of grammar (c.f. e.g. Schultz, Matuschek 2006: 214, especially note 3) are usually ignored in analyses of the poetry of Różewicz, Herbert and Szymborska and its translations. This is less of a surprise in translations of Polish literature into Slavic languages, such as Czech (e.g. Kardyni-Pelikánová 2010: 138–139), which are somewhat akin to Polish in this respect. Yet this lack of interest in the poetics of grammar can also be seen in translations of Polish poetry into English, in which poetic actualisation of alternative forms encounters numerous language asymmetries.

This is why we shall be mainly interested in instances of poetics of grammar in selected poems by Różewicz, Herbert and Szymborska, and in

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1 The choice of Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert and Wisława Szymborska reflects the German reception of Polish poetry. Różewicz, Herbert and Szymborska are, alongside Czesław Miłosz, the post-war Polish poets of the latter half of the 20th century who have been received with the greatest enthusiasm in Germany (cf. Jekutsch 2002: 173). A similar perspective is voiced in English-language literature by Ursula Philipps when she describes the predilection of translators for Różewicz, Herbert and Szymborska, reflecting “the real importance of these poets” (Philipps 2000b: 1095).
their translations by Miłosz. Obviously, we must bear in mind that Miłosz approached the poetry of his colleagues not as a specialist in comparative linguistics but as poet-translator for whom English was a foreign language, not a native one. At times the competencies of a poet translator and a philologist translator do happen to coincide. This was the case with Miłosz’s collaborator, Peter Dale Scott, a native speaker of English, philologist, professor of English Studies and poet. The primary context of Miłosz’s translations should be mentioned here. Since Miłosz used his translations in class with American students (Miłosz 1980: 112), it is not inconceivable that he might have targeted this particular audience in his work. As is well known, he would “consult native speakers about his English translations” quite early on (Baran 1981: 56). Given what Miłosz had to say about the poetry of Różewicz, Szymborska and Herbert (see below), we might suppose that his translation work was mostly independent of any research context, from analyses of the poetics of individual Polish poets performed by literary scholars. This position is often a manifestation of the inner independence that marks many poets who also deal in translation. Obviously, we shall not be able to explain the possible contexts in which the Miłosz translations under discussion came to be.

Before we proceed with a discussion of examples of the poetics of grammar in his translation, it is worth pointing out the forms of Polish-English asymmetries that will be of the greatest interest here.

**Polish-English language asymmetries**

The following grammatical asymmetries can be indicated here from the vantage point of the Polish language: the article (1), the adjectival attribute (2), jest in its functions as copula and as verb (3), the personal pronoun (4), the grammatical sense and the meaningful content of verb aspects (5), the vocative as a form of address (6) and double negation (7).

These details are of some significance in translating the poetics of grammar. While replacement functions and meaningful contexts usually allow an unambiguous choice of the definite, indefinite and zero article (Tabakowska 1993: 788; Schultz, Matuschek 2005: 204–205), sometimes, and

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