

# THE MELANCHOLY PURSUIT OF IMPERFECTION



*Adam Czerniawski*

The only perfect translation into Polish (as well as Chinese and Urdu)  
of William Wordsworth's

She died, and left to me  
This heath, this calm and quiet scene;  
The memory of what has been,  
And never more will be.

reads:

She died, and left to me  
This heath, this calm and quiet scene;  
The memory of what has been,  
And never more will be.

The perfect English (and Chinese) translation of the conclusion of Jan  
Kochanowski's *Tren X* reads:

Gdzieskolwiek jest, jeslis jest, lituj mej zalosci,  
A nie mozesz li w onej dawnej swej calosci,  
Pociesz mie, jako mozesz, a staw sie przede mna  
Lubo snem, lubo cieniem, lub mara nikczemna!

No other translations can compete with these authorial renderings. Not  
even the following of the Kochanowski *Tren* by Jenny Robertson:

Visit my sleepless bed—like a dream;  
comfort my waking—like a sunbeam  
casting your shadow into the house,  
so full of us, so empty of you;  
so small a daughter, so large a space.

Jan Kochanowski (1530-1584) is Poland's most accomplished Renaissance  
poet, and his most celebrated work is a series of nineteen elegies (*treny*,  
singl. *tren*) on the death of his infant daughter Orszula. In 1827 John  
Bowring published the first selection of English translations from the

*Treny*. A century later Dorothea Prall Radin published the first full translation, and then after a further seven decades, three more integral versions appeared in quick succession: by the Seamus Heaney-Stanislaw Baranczak duo (1995), Michal Jacek Mikos (1995) and Adam Czerniawski (1996). Jenny Robertson and the Peterkiewicz-Singer duo have versions of *Tren X*.

What kind of reader is most competent to select the best rendering of the *Treny*? Surely, a Bilingualist who is himself either a poet, or has a sensibility capable of poetic discrimination, and has a good grasp of the poetic traditions of the two cultures in question. But a Bilingualist will be in danger of having his perceptions so dominated by the original that no translation will satisfy him; whereas a Monoglot will necessarily lack the authority to judge the faithfulness of the translation, but on the other hand, will not be tyrannised by the original. As for the Scholar, he may be too preoccupied with the preservation of a "proper" historical interpretation of the text (to be reflected in the translation) and not sufficiently sensitive to the poetic virtues the translator has managed to retain or to lose.

But whichever person is judged the most competent, he still faces crucial alternatives in the formulation of a basis of his preference. (1) Should a translation aim at assimilating itself into the target culture or should it stress its difference from it? (2) Assuming that all translations necessarily involve compromise, which elements of the original may be omitted and which need at all cost be retained? (3) In the case of a translation of a text from a distant past (say the 16th century) should the translator aim at recreating an archaic idiom, or should he treat the text as if it were contemporary? The author of this article happens to be a Bilingualist, and a poet in the source language; but most importantly, he is the author of one of the integral translations of the *Treny*, and is therefore bound to be prejudiced in favour of his own version, which he prepared on the following assumptions (as stated in that edition):

The *Treny*'s accessibility and directness, as well as its pathos, have contributed considerably to securing the admiration of generations of readers. These characteristics the translator must at all costs strive to convey. At the same time, he must avoid the pitfalls of mawkishness and familiarity, for the strength of *Treny* derives from a balance of immediacy and homeliness, on the one hand, and a sense of *gravitas* and dignity, on the other. As C. Day Lewis expressed it in an introduction to his translation of Virgil's *Georgics*, "The important thing is to steer between the twin vulgarities of flashy colloquialism and perfunctory grandiloquence". I have borne these considerations in mind; I have also aimed at rendering meanings faithfully in an uncluttered modern idiom with-

out padding. To achieve these ends I had to loosen somewhat the strict metrical patterns of the originals and have converted the concluding argumentative *Tren XIX* into prose.

I shall judge six of the seven available translations of *Tren X* against my aim “at rendering meanings faithfully in an uncluttered modern idiom without padding”, and the reader will have to judge whether my own has lived up to it. This means reflecting on questions (2) and (3); question (1) is not here a burning issue, since the translations involve a transfer of a Renaissance work into a kindred culture firmly based on Renaissance traditions and values.

\*

I have already quoted a fragment of a translation by Jenny Robertson. Here it is in full:

Where are you hiding, my daughter?  
Europe is wide. Where shall I seek?  
Have you become a child-angel,  
visited far happy isles?  
Does Orpheus sing to you?  
Has the boatman of shades led you  
to the waters of memory loss,  
where no mortal tears may flow?  
Was there found some small stain  
of impurity on your childish frame?  
O, unworthy I, bowed with grief  
to follow your bright steps  
to that holy purging.  
Wherever you are, have pity on me.  
Visit my sleepless bed—like a dream;  
comfort my waking—like a sunbeam  
casting your shadow into the house,  
so full of us, so empty of you;  
so small a daughter, so large a space.

My own version reads as follows:

My fair Orszula, where have you fled?  
Are you above the celestial spheres, numbered  
Among angelic hosts? Are you in Paradise?  
Or are you taken to the Fortunate Isles?  
Does Charon guide you over disconsolate lakes,  
Offering draughts from the erasing stream

And you ignore my sobs?  
     Or, shedding human shape and girlish dreams,  
 Have you assumed a nightingale's form and wings?  
     Or are you being cleansed in purgatorial flames  
 Lest you carry still the marks of tainted flesh?  
     Or have you now returned, to my deep sorrow,  
 To where you dwelt before your birth?  
     Wherever you are, if you are, take pity on my grief,  
 And if you cannot in embodied state,  
     Console me, appear  
 As a dream, shade or vision.

If the monoglot reader is prepared to trust the semantic accuracy of my version, he will be puzzled by the reference to "wide Europe", the presence of Orpheus and by the concluding lines of Robertson's version. These are not wholly arbitrary importations: Orpheus makes an appearance in *Tren* XIV and the concluding lines echo the opening lines (in my version) of *Tren* VIII:

Your flight, my dearest, caused  
     This vast emptiness in my house.  
 We are a crowd yet no one's here:  
     One tiny soul and so much is gone.

But "Europe", narrow or wide, is nowhere to be found.

Overall, unless we are prepared to condone Robertson's version as a legitimate miniaturization of the whole *Treny* sequence (her rendering of the expanded *Tren* X representing a half of her labours), we have to dismiss it as a perversely eccentric exercise.

*Treny* is a poem about the author-father, as much as it is about his daughter. The text is much concerned with his fluctuating emotions and beliefs: now that Orszula has departed this life, he yearns to search for her in the Christian Heaven and the pagan underworld. But in this *Tren* he experiences the nadir of despair: "Wherever you are, *if you are...*". This crucial *if* is missing not only from Robertson's version, but also from Bowring's and Radin's.

\*

Unlike Robertson (and also unlike Mikos and Czerniawski) the remaining translators see faithfulness to the original's rhyming scheme (and, to some extent, the metre) as essential. But if it's necessarily true that all translations rest on a compromise, the question for examination is: which elements have in each case been sacrificed, and has the sacrifice been worth it? The most prevalent consequence of relentlessly retaining a verse-pat-

tern is padding. It's amply evident in the following two twin-versions by Peterkiewicz-Singer and Heaney-Baranczak. I have italicised the phrases, which have no equivalents in the original:

My gracious Ursula, I have lost you. Where?  
In which direction? in what land? *what air?*  
The lesser angels, are you with their hosts?  
Or are you one of Charon's *weeping ghosts?*  
Are you in Heaven? or on the Happy Isles?  
Or does *pale Lethe wash away your smiles?*  
Or are you feathered *and your song as clear*  
As is the nightingale's? or have you shed  
Your maiden graces *now that you are dead?*  
Or do some sins remain from human clay?  
Does Purgatory singe those sins away?  
Have you regained the home you had before  
Your birth *rejoiced my heart* or made it sore?  
If you exist at all, pity my grief.  
And, if you cannot come, for my relief,  
Back in your proper shape, *then as pure soul,*  
Mere shade, substanceless nightmare, come, console.

\*

Ursula, my sweet girl, where did you go?  
Is it a place or country *that we know?*  
Or were you borne above the highest sphere  
To dwell *and sing* among the cherub choir?  
Have you flown into Paradise? Or soared  
To the Islands of the Blest? Are you aboard  
With Charon, *scooping water while he steers,*  
And does the drink inure you to my tears?  
Clad in *grey* feathers of a nightingale,  
No longer human, *do you fill some vale*  
*With plaintive song?* Or must you still remain  
In Purgatory, as if the slightest stain  
Of sin could have defiled your soul? Did it return  
To where you were (my woe) before being born?  
Wherever you may be—if you exist—  
Take pity on my grief. *O presence missed,*  
Comfort me, *haunt me; you whom I have lost,*  
Come back again, be shadow, dream, or ghost.

Padding is self-evidently a violent crime: nothing can justify a translator forcing clauses and phrases on the original; or consequentially leaving out

elements present in the original—as happens in the concluding lines of the Bowring and Radin versions quoted below.

Mikos, while attempting some rhymes, is closer to Czerniawski in his preferred adherence to meaning; but when he does attempt rhymes (in the concluding four lines) the result is unintentionally comic:

My gracious Ursula, where are you gone?  
Along which way, to which land are you borne?  
Are you raised high above all the heavens  
And numbered there among little angels?  
Are you in Paradise? Or carried to  
The Blessed Isles? Does Charon ferry you  
Across lakes of sorrow and make you drink  
Waters of oblivion so you know nothing  
Of my tears? Have you shed maid's form and dreams  
And taken the nightingale's shape and wing?  
Or purged in Purgatory, if a minute  
Bodily stain has yet remained on you?  
Did you go after death to where you were,  
Ere you were born to bring me deep despair?  
Wherever you are, if you are, *pity my dole*,  
And if you are not able as *your former whole*,  
Console me, as you can, and *make an appearance*  
As a dream, a shade, or *an illusory substance*.

The remaining two translations (by Bowring and Radin) also give preference to strict versification, but they also bring into prominence another problem: should the translator attempt to recreate a language contemporary with that of the original? And if, as I maintain, Kochanowski still sounds fresh and modern, what's the point in now making him sound archaic simply in order to acknowledge the fact that he composed the *Treny* four hundred years ago? Both translators affect an antique style, or so it might appear to us at first sight. It's more likely that Bowring is simply imitating the contemporary poetic mode, for such it would have seemed in early 19th century, although to us it sounds antique, or even quaint. Whereas Radin, translating a century later, would seem more consciously to be evoking a past diction, as well as—from an academic's point of view—creating “poetic” effects; or so they would have seemed to a readership in the twenties as yet unaffected by the revolution in poetic diction accomplished by Hopkins, Pound and Eliot. Radin and Bowring are full of “thee's” and “thou's”, signals to a late-20th century English reader that we are (a) moving into the past, and (b) moving into the “poetic” mode; however, Polish has no such simple and clear indicators; moreover—as I

elements present in the original—as happens in the concluding lines of the Bowring and Radin versions quoted below.

Mikos, while attempting some rhymes, is closer to Czerniawski in his preferred adherence to meaning; but when he does attempt rhymes (in the concluding four lines) the result is unintentionally comic:

My gracious Ursula, where are you gone?  
Along which way, to which land are you borne?  
Are you raised high above all the heavens  
And numbered there among little angels?  
Are you in Paradise? Or carried to  
The Blessed Isles? Does Charon ferry you  
Across lakes of sorrow and make you drink  
Waters of oblivion so you know nothing  
Of my tears? Have you shed maid's form and dreams  
And taken the nightingale's shape and wing?  
Or purged in Purgatory, if a minute  
Bodily stain has yet remained on you?  
Did you go after death to where you were,  
Ere you were born to bring me deep despair?  
Wherever you are, if you are, *pity my dole*,  
And if you are not able as *your former whole*,  
Console me, as you can, and *make an appearance*  
As a dream, a shade, or *an illusory substance*.

The remaining two translations (by Bowring and Radin) also give preference to strict versification, but they also bring into prominence another problem: should the translator attempt to recreate a language contemporary with that of the original? And if, as I maintain, Kochanowski still sounds fresh and modern, what's the point in now making him sound archaic simply in order to acknowledge the fact that he composed the *Treny* four hundred years ago? Both translators affect an antique style, or so it might appear to us at first sight. It's more likely that Bowring is simply imitating the contemporary poetic mode, for such it would have seemed in early 19th century, although to us it sounds antique, or even quaint. Whereas Radin, translating a century later, would seem more consciously to be evoking a past diction, as well as—from an academic's point of view—creating “poetic” effects; or so they would have seemed to a readership in the twenties as yet unaffected by the revolution in poetic diction accomplished by Hopkins, Pound and Eliot. Radin and Bowring are full of “thee's” and “thou's”, signals to a late-20th century English reader that we are (a) moving into the past, and (b) moving into the “poetic” mode; however, Polish has no such simple and clear indicators; moreover—as I

already remarked—Kochanowski's language, although in some respect dated and even needing a dictionary, still comes across as fresh and contemporary, an effect belied by the *thee-thou* convention. I present the two versions anonymously, and I have again italicised the departures from the original, dictated by the demands of versification.

(I) My dear delight, my Ursula, and where  
 Art thou departed, to what land, what sphere?  
 High o'er the heavens wert thou borne, to stand  
 One little cherub midst the cherub band?  
*Or dost thou laugh in Paradise*, or now  
 Upon the Islands of the Blest art thou?  
 Or in his ferry o'er the gloomy water  
 Doth Charon bear thee onward, little daughter?  
 And having drunk of forgetfulness  
 Art thou unwitting of my sore distress?  
 Or, casting off thy human, maiden veil,  
 Art thou enfeathered in some nightingale?  
 Or in grim Purgatory must thou stay  
 Until some tiniest stain be washed away?  
 Where'er thou art, ah! pity, comfort me,  
 And if not in thine own entirety,  
 Yet come before mine eyes a moment's space  
 In some sweet dream *that shadoweth thy grace*.

\*

(II) Wither, o wither fled! in what *bright sphere*  
 Art thou, my Orszula a *wanderer*?  
 Say, hast thou wing'ed above yon heavens thy flight,  
 A cherub midst the cherubim of light?  
 Dwell'st thou in Eden's garden? —or at rest  
 Reposing midst the islands of the blest?  
 Doth Charon waft thee o'er the gloomy lake,  
 And bid thee waters of oblivion take? —  
*I know not*; but I know my misery  
 Is all unknown, *is all a blank to thee*—  
 Thy gentle form, *thy angel thoughts*, where now?  
 A nightingale *of paradise* art thou;  
 Thy mortal taints all purified—*if taint*  
*Could stain the spirit of so fair a saint*;  
 Thou art return'd to that same *hallow'd spot*  
*Thou didst make holy* when earth knew thee not.  
 But, wheresoe'er thou be, compassionate  
 My misery. If this terrestrial state



Be closed upon thee—pity still,—and be  
A dream, a shadow, or *something yet to me!*

Conventional wisdom has it that a classic needs to be retranslated every fifty years. In this instance is translation (I) replacing translation (II), or *vice versa*? Is it possible to tell that a century divides them? But assuming that both Bowring and Radin wished to take us back to the sixteenth century, isn't their versions' "datedness" indicative of success rather than failure? And if all translations become dated in time, is there ultimately any difference between an antiquating and a modernising translation? There are several strands here that need untangling.

(1) While it's true that all translations in time show their age, and that those wilfully affecting the antique mode, cover themselves with instantaneous patina, that fact doesn't help the translator decide whether patina should gradually cover his work, or whether he ought rather to manufacture it.

Laying on the patina suggests fraudulence: it's an attempt to deceive a twentieth century reader into believing he is time-travelling into the sixteenth century, reading a four-centuries-old poem or, more accurately, a *sixteenth century translation* of that poem. But is "making it new" any better? The reader is now asked to believe that he is reading a 20th century poem or, more accurately, a *translation* of a twentieth poem, an equally fraudulent notion. The conclusion has to be that, because four centuries separate the original from the translation, fraudulence is unavoidable, because the gap cannot be compressed, any more than a circle can be squared.

(2) There is a tendency to view literary translation as an activity quite distinct from original literary work. This is justified in the case of prose and drama translations, which are normally done by professional translators to order. Dramatists and novelists don't as a rule translate dramas or novels. Poets, however, habitually engage in translation of poetry as an extension of their creativity. So why, for example, is Pope's *Iliad* seen as dated and needing retranslating, whereas his own poetry is accepted for what it is? The difference resides in the fact that in the case of a translation the original is there against which the translation needs to be matched; there is of course no such yardstick in the case of an original poem, since the original is the yardstick. So successive translations are successive attempts at matching the original; but it need not follow, contrary to what the pejorative "dated" implies, that an old translation must be discarded in favour of the new, any more than that *The Rape of the Lock* need be discarded in favour of *The Waste Land*, for ultimately, what decides whether a poetic translation or a poem survives, is aesthetic qual-

ity: some translations, like some poems, fade into oblivion simply because they are bad pieces of literature. The need to retranslate is there not necessarily because previous efforts have failed but because every age needs to reinterpret the classics; indigenous classics are reinterpreted via critical reassessment, foreign classics via new translations; and so, just as Samuel Johnson's critical judgments have retained their force, so has Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*. Sadly, this isn't true of Bowring's or Radin's labours.

(3) I have just argued that since all translations become "dated", translators who attempt to recreate a past linguistic idiom should not face condemnation. Again, analogy with a poet's own work may prove illuminating: some, like Milton in *Paradise Lost*, will strive to transcend contemporary spoken idiom, some, like Wordsworth, will insist on employing a language "really used by men". Is *The Prelude* therefore a better poem than *Paradise Lost*? Is Ezra Pound's ultra-modern translation of Propertius better than his archaic version of "The Sea-farer"? We are in fact gradually being led to the difficult conclusion that, just as in the case of poems, so in the case of poetic translations, we cannot start with a definition in the expectation that it will provide an universal test of quality. Pound's archaic "The Sea-farer" is virtuosic, Radin's Kochanowski is an endearing failure. The archaic mode has a bad name not so much because it is intrinsically flawed but because successes in that mode are rare.

(4) But even if one eschews the antique mode on principle, success in the modern idiom is not guaranteed; for there is not one modern idiom, but many. One has, as Lewis reminds us, to steer clear of, for example, "flashy colloquialism"; advice not heeded by certain modern translators of Homer and Dante. A translator needs to have a clear understanding of the stylistic range of the original and have sufficient linguistic sensitivity to be able to reproduce that range in the translation. Orszula simpering in *Paradise* (Radin, Peterkiewicz-Singer) like a cross-gartered Malvolio, or appearing like an "illusory substance" (Mikos) exemplify failures in this respect; Radin and Mikos also create comic effects by overly emphatic rhymes.

\*

To state a banal but often overlooked fact: translations are needed for those ignorant of the source language. The Target Monoglots will therefore be the arbiters. But what criteria will they employ? Only aesthetic criteria are available to them: a translation will be judged solely on its merits as a poem in the target language. It will be seen as merging into the target-language literary tradition. The merging will be the more thorough in the case of poetry because the best translations will be by poets who fre-

quently are, like Heaney, monoglot, relying on cribs. And since poets translate mainly not because they sense a duty towards monoglot readers, but because they wish to extend their own poetic range, these translations will inevitably bear the marks of the poets' own poetics. This is true of Dryden, of Pope, of Robert Lowell, of Seamus Heaney's *Treny*, and even of Pound's protean performances. (Unless, that is, we have the rare case of a poet translating not into but out of his native tongue; not having a poetic style of his own in the target language, he is likely to try to reproduce the appropriate styles of the poets he has chosen to translate.) So paradoxically the preferred translations will be those that have departed furthest from their originals, and the preferences will be voiced by readers ignorant of the source language.

Can this mean that the Target Monoglot has the last and only word, and that all the multifarious problems of translation turn out to be irrelevant? Are Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portugese* and the Borgesian Pierre Menard's Spanish translation of *Don Quixote* the relevant exemplars? For the opposition let me quote Bogdan Czaykowski, another thorough poetic Bilingualist, who therefore is in a position to compare translations with originals:

The chief principle of Czerniawski's translation is semantic faithfulness understood not only as faithfulness of detail [...] but as faithfulness *vis-à-vis* the emotional and intellectual structure of the sequence. The greatness of Kochanowski's *Treny* is not dependent on its versification. It depends [...] on the moving unity of thought and feeling where the preponderance of feeling ultimately succumbs to a preponderance of thought. [...] The Heaney-Baranczak version is poetically very beautiful, perhaps even—paradoxically—too beautiful. The translators had resolved to maintain the original versification, including the rhymes, which at times leads to padding and bending the text to exigencies of rhyme. But there is another issue: the great fluency of the verse (which the translation undoubtedly owes to the poetic craft of the Irish Nobel prize-winner) means that the emotional and intellectual structure of Kochanowski's masterpiece is less visible than in Czerniawski's version.

Yet he too finally comes down firmly on the side of the Target Monoglots: "But which of the two translations will win for itself a permanent place in the English language will be decided by readers and critics ignorant of Polish."

Need they settle for only one? Perhaps both, and others, will find

favour, for different reasons. This for example is true of the many versions of Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*. And is there no escape from the Czaykowski-Czerniawski Paradox? There is, because the Target Monoglots don't flourish in isolation. Their judgments are moderated by the opinions and advice of suitably equipped Bilingualists.

\*

It's quite clear what we mean by padding and consequential distortion, and what we mean by archaic language. But semantic faithfulness is, as Czaykowski indicates, and as I have implied in my own remarks quoted above, a very elastic concept in the context of poetic translation; it's also an elusive concept. How, for example can we satisfactorily test Czaykowski's judgment that "the great fluency of the verse (which the [Heaney-Baranczak] translation undoubtedly owes to the poetic craft of the Irish Nobel prize-winner) means that the emotional and intellectual structure of Kochanowski's masterpiece is less visible than in Czerniawski's version"? Any application of such a wider definition in the examination of the Kochanowski translations would require a separate, lengthy analysis. Here I have confined myself to the narrow dictionary sense in order to highlight the plague of padding and offer some thoughts on archaic usage.

*Books referred to in this essay*

- JOHN BOWRING, *Specimens of the Polish Poets*, London 1827.  
 JAN KOCHANOWSKI, *Treny*, transl. Dorothea Prall Radin, in:  
     Jan Kochanowski, *Poems*, Berkeley, 1928.  
 JAN KOCHANOWSKI, *Laments*, transl. Seamus Heaney and Stanislaw  
     Baranczak, London, 1995.  
 JAN KOCHANOWSKI, *Treny* \* *Laments*, transl. Michal Jacek Mikos, 1995.  
 JAN KOCHANOWSKI, *Treny*, transl. Adam Czerniawski, Katowice 1996.  
 JERZY PETERKIEWICZ AND BURNS SINGER, *Five Centuries of Polish  
     Poetry 1450-1970*, 2nd edn, London 1970.  
 JENNY ROBERTSON, "Two Threnodies after Jan Kochanowski", *Poetry  
     Ireland Review*, No.29, Summer 1990.

