

## A FEMALE POET AND HER MALE TRANSLATOR: A CASE STUDY

MAYA PERETZ  
BINGHAMTON, N.Y. - E.U.A.

In 1985, the 1980 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz published, in cooperation with Leonard Nathan, a collection of highly acclaimed poetry translations, **Happy as a Dog's Tail**. The poems rendered in English were originally written in Polish by Anna Swirszczynska whose name has been shortened and "Americanized" here as "Swir". The collection is monolingual, and the task of decoding the Polish original and preparing the first draft of the English translation has been accomplished by Milosz alone:

*After I completed the translations of the poems -- [the Noblist informs readers in the introduction] -- I showed them to my friend Leonard Nathan, whose poetic insight I trust. He read them carefully and marked all the places where the wording seemed to him doubtful, from the point of view of either American idiom or meaning. Then we sat down over the script and worked together on the marked passages. As I value his contribution, I feel he should be considered a cotranslator (p.XV).*

Since Nathan had no direct contact with Swirszczynska's original, in this paper Czeslaw Milosz will be regarded as the principal translator.

Milosz considers himself a long-time admirer of Swirszczynska's poetry and her personal friend since their youth. It is startling, therefore, to discover a number of discrepancies between the Polish language originals and the poems in Milosz's translation. The differences seem to follow a distinctive pattern: they all are connected to the sensitive issue of gender differentiation, and are usually produced by omissions of gender specific expressions or larger portions of text related

to the author's sexual identity. Since any differences in this case cannot be explained away as resulting from disparities between the author's and the translator's respective backgrounds, or from his misunderstanding of her language clues, one is at a loss how to account for them. A man of letters of Milosz's Stature can hardly be accused of inattention, but how else can one explain what amounts to a cavalier treatment of another poet's codes and messages? If the differences between the original and the translation are results of a conscious decision on behalf of the translator, should the reader not be informed of the reason for them?

At first glance, some deviations from the original indeed seem to be the result of a plain lack of attention. In one poem, for example, the mistranslation involves a simple pronoun. As a result, however, the English version misses the point. Milosz translates:

### ***The Greatest Love***

*She is sixty. She lives  
the greatest love of her life.  
She walks arm-in-arm with her dear one,  
her hair streams in the wind.  
Her dear one says:  
"You have hair like pearls."  
Her children say:  
"Old fool" (p.29).*

In this poem, where the English version refers to "her hair", the Polish original has what must literally be translated as "their grey hair" (p.229). To the reader to whom the original is inaccessible, the translation may suggest that the children in question are scandalized by their sixty-year-old mother's appearing in public in a loving embrace with a much younger partner, and not a member of the same generation. Yet what the original poem conveys is not just the differences in views on the aesthetics of social behavior between the young and their parents or grandparents, but the fact that society judges men and women differently and that older women in love are considered laughable. Moreover, the poem on the facing page, magnificently translated by Milosz himself, drives the point home. It leaves no doubt as to the author's intentions:

### ***The Old Woman***

*Her beauty  
Is like Atlantis.  
It is yet to be discovered.*

*Thousands of humorists  
have written on her erotic desires.  
The most gifted of them  
entered the school reading lists.  
Only her making love with the devil  
had the seriousness  
of fire around the stake  
and was within the human imagination just as was that fire.  
Mankind created for her  
the most abusive  
words of the world. (p.28)*

Taken together, the two poems make it clear that Swirszczynska denounces the dehumanization of older women, the traditional disavowal of their sexuality, and the public denial of respect for their private lives.

Most of Swirszczynska's work demonstrates how strongly she identified with other women. Yet more than one of Milosz's translations seem to dilute this message. It is watered down in the following poem by the translator's choice of a verb and a preposition and, more seriously, by his decision to eliminate a portion of the text:

#### ***A Visit***

*In a home for incurables  
I visited a woman who was about to die.*

*She embraced me,  
I felt through her gray shirt  
the tiny bones of her brittle body  
which would no longer arouse lust or tenderness.  
"I don't want this, take me away."  
Near us, a retarded woman was vomiting (p.14).*

In a literal translation from Polish, the first two lines of the original read: "I was in an institution for incurables/ next to a woman who is going to die" (p.151). Even though the title indicates that the poet was there for a visit, her use of the verb "to be" rather than "to visit" gives the impression that she felt as trapped and helpless as did the hospitalized woman. The above differences cannot be dismissed as minor and meaningless if we take into account the translator's deletion of the final stanza of the original which can be roughly translated as:

*The woman cried for herself,  
I cried  
not just for her (p.151).*

The translator's decision to eliminate this portion of the poem resulted in the diminished emphasis of the significance of the poet's connection with the aged and with women in general.

This affiliation was undoubtedly no trivial matter to Anna Swirszczynska. The title of one among her poetry volumes, from which some poems are included in Milosz's collection, stresses this point. Milosz translates that title, *Jestem baba*, as **To Be a Woman**. While this particular interpretation grasps the feeling of dignity with which the poet endows femininity, the image evolved lacks the necessary earthiness of Swirszczynska's unique perception of the physical and social reality of this affiliation. "A woman" is to "baba" as "a lady" is to "a woman". The translation misses several elements of the image: a "baba" is not just a woman, but an old woman, of a lower class, in tattered clothing, and rather sassy. Most importantly perhaps, by canceling the first person singular in which the poet refers to herself as a "baba", and by replacing it with the infinitive, Milosz's interpretation erases the sense of identity confirmed by the phrase "jestem" which means "I am". By using the image of self as a "baba", the poet is effectively saying: Yes, I am a woman, just a woman, a woman with some experience of what it means to live as a woman on this earth. This image involves the body, and what that body endures. In this image the poet identifies with the half of humanity to which she belongs by her biological destiny.

In the Polish language edition of her selected works there is a poem about a "woman/on a gynecologist's table/under the eyes/of doctors.../humiliated like the one being raped..." (p.234). Several other poems describe women in the pangs of childbirth "assisted by death [...]" which listens to [their] moans, /measures the ebbing... of pain/and watches/the midwife's fingers/turning on/the oxygen bottle..." (p.231). The poem entitled "**Normal Delivery**", in my translation reads:

*For twenty hours  
she howls like a beast.  
The doctor tries to help her.  
He cuts the living flesh with scissors  
without anesthesia.  
She hasn't noticed it.  
Too powerful is the torture*

*of her splitting bones.  
What satan  
has invented the world (p.232).*

On a similar subject, the poem entitled "Maternity" in Milosz's collection starts: "I gave birth to life./It went out of my entrails..." omitting what in the light of the whole body of Swirszczynska's poetry does not sound like a slight oversight: the word "screaming". A word per word translation of these two lines would not try to make the experience of childbirth more aesthetic: "I gave birth to life./It went out screaming out of my entrails..." (p.161). In Milosz's translation there is no mention of the baby's sex. The final lines refer to "the air swallowed by these tiny life-starved lungs", while the Polish author specifically says "jej drobnym, chcia<sup>ym</sup> zycia plucom" ("her...lungs"), making it known that another female has been born. This is particularly important if one is aware of the poem whose title I roughly translate as "She Does Not Want to". The information that the new baby is a girl adds yet a new dimension to the birth scream which can come from the daughter as well as from the mother. That poem pictures a daughter whose mother "suffered all her life" and "Brought her to the world/to suffer./She does not want to suffer/She hates/her mother..." (p.236).

Identification with the female of the species in Swirszczynska's poetry comes across as almost exclusively physical: through images of body, as physical toil or pleasure, exercise, running, lovemaking, blood, birth, pain, disease, aging. These of course are not the exclusive property of the feminine half of mankind. There are also poems about men's suffering among Swirszczynska's works. They relate mainly to her experience and memory of the bloodshed she witnessed first hand during the World War II and the Warsaw uprising of August 1944. She worked then as a hospital nurse and, according to her interview with Jan Pieszczachowicz, that experience was crucial:

*War turned me into a different person -- [she told the interviewer]. -- It was then that life first burst into my poems, with the immediate events happening around me. (p.16).*

The war experience has made Swirszczynska realize how strong she was; it changed the tone of her poetry. She was not the same poet Milosz had known before the war and before he left Poland for life in exile. "If my first volume was rather like a theatre costume room, my second and third volumes could be compared to a delivery room" (p.16),



the poet explained during the above-mentioned interview. The war experience and the new sense of strength brought into Swirszczynska's poetry the raw reality of life and a new sense of the self-assured, "male" identity of an artist, above and beyond the one confirmed on her by accident of birth. "Song of Plenitude," in **Happy as a Dog's Tail**, is an example of the poet's search for models of strength in images of both female and male personalities. It is a complicated poem and a difficult one to translate. Milosz's English equivalent of the Polish word "pełnia" is given here as "plenitude". But "pełnia" means also "fullness" as well as "full moon". The reflection of the moon is overwhelmingly present in the translated poem in the image of "a pregnant star" which "enters the heaven of serenity," "into an expanding inundation of light." In Milosz's translation we read: "Light flows from my body,/from my head, from my twin breasts" (p.21). Though the moon traditionally appears as an important metaphor in women's lives and art, in Polish its grammatical gender is masculine. Swirszczynska uses it as her point of departure to present herself as possessing what would be socially recognized as a double, male-female nature. And where the translator mentions "twin breasts", the poet refers to what in a literal translation is a "double chest" ("podwójna piers", p.199), assuming a female rather than a male figure. The difference in poetic usage, however, is indicative of the ambiguity in the poet's sense of identity, neglected by the translator. The problem is that while the poet's bond with her female identity is underscored in much of her work, it is not unequivocal, and to express her sense of self as a creator, as an artist, she often tries on male imagery.

Swirszczynska's poetry unfolds as a striking drama of ancient Greek dimensions as she struggles against biology, in awe and revulsion of her own physical being. She does not just accept the body but uses it as a source of energy and knowledge. Freudians would probably chuckle at some of her archetypal imagery, as e.g. when she declares in Milosz's translation: "My suffering is a pencil/with which I write" (p.18). The Polish poet does not buy her femininity wholesale but remodels and reshapes it to suit her human need for a strong, creative life. She fashions her stature according to male models and cherishes qualities which have long been recognized as masculine, such as the joys of solitude and control in love. "The pearl of loneliness... I took refuge in it" she writes. "I am alone, I am strong" (p.20). "I found strength in myself, no one will take it from me" (p.43). "The souls of my lovers... I have them in my dominion.. I look as does a sculptor on his work at their faces... martyred by ecstasy..." (p.25). Her poetry recognizes eroticism as a source of energy not only for lovemaking but in the traditionally "male" way, for physical as well as

intellectual labor. After a night with a lover, she declares:

*Now I have a light body and a clean soul.  
My lust chemically cleansed  
I violently desire  
[...] a heavy toil, hard, human work [...].  
I am strong, I can carry  
burdens which are carried by the strong(p.77).*

Having translated the author's message so clearly, how is it possible that in other poems the translator has misinterpreted her codes? Was it because to him she was still the poet he knew personally as a young man? Has he underestimated her strength and identity, not heard the new tone in her post-war poetry, because he still had that younger, more traditionally "poetic" vision before his eyes, and such a vision was more powerful to him than her more mature identity? Milosz's mistranslation of "A Very Sad Conversation at Night" offers a strong clue. Unfortunately, only a Polish-speaking reader of the original with the ability to differentiate between feminine and masculine voices will recognize it. In this dialogue, a male speaker entreats: "You won't leave me", and the translator had a woman respond: "No, dear" (p.46). In Swirszczynska's original, the woman's reply is far less assuring; she says: "I don't know, dear". Without playing a self-taught psychologist, does the reader have the right to perceive a bias and wishful thinking in the translator's interpretation of the text? Since any speculation would be inappropriate, we can only assume that the answer lies in the web of mystery surrounding male-female relations from which even the most distinguished of humans cannot always extricate themselves.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

MILOSZ, Czeslaw and Leonard Nathan, **Happy as a Dog's Tail. Poems by Anna Swir Translated by...** Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publ. 1985.

ANNA SWIRSZCZYNSKA, **Wybor wierszy** (selected Poems). Czytelnik, 1980.

JAN PIESZCZACHOWICZ, "Wywiad z Anna Swirszczynska" (An Interview with A.S.) in **Przekroj** (Crosscut), Cracow, 1984.