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Foreignizing Defamiliarized? Translation of Post-Modern American Fiction - Donald Barthelme in Polish.

In defining "foreignizing" and "domesticating" Venuti used a quotation from the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher which I found extremely helpful in understanding the terms. Speaking of methods of translation Schleiermacher notices:

there are only two. Either the translators leave the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, and moves the author towards him.¹

This quotation seem to give the best basis for what Venuti calls "foreignizing" and "domesticating". One should add here certain reservations given by the author in The Translator's Invisibility:

Strategies can be defined as "foreignizing" or "domesticating" only in relation to specific cultural situations, specific moments in the changing reception of a foreign literature, or in the changing hierarchy of domestic values.²

However, introduction of one more limitation would be necessary. Schleiermacher seems to take for granted the division between "author" and "reader" (which, to bring it closer to Venuti's terminology, would be the division between "foreign" and "domestic"). The task of a translator is thus to

bridge the gap. Venuti discusses that issue using examples taken from various writers translated into English postulating "foreignization" as a way of defending "local" values against the hegemony of the Anglo-American culture.

What he does not discuss is the situation where there is no gap such as is that between Rome of Suetonius and England of Robert Graves. What should translators do when the source text uses cultural codes that belong also or exclusively to their culture? What to do when there is no room for acculturation as it has already taken place?

Donald Barthelme, the author whose works I chose as my example is little known in Poland beyond the circle of specialists in the contemporary American literature. As a representative of the post-modern novel he is usually discussed along with Vonnegut, Brautigan, Coover or Reed whose style was described by Andrzej Kopcewicz as characterised by

an inclination to parody, pastiche, burlesque connected with linguistic media deprived of psychological or symbolic depth and causality reduced to an indispensable minimum. ( ...) Apart from often difficult though deceptively simple language of great power of expression, one can find here parodies of language of mass media, slang, conventional rhetoric and lyrics of popular songs.  

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3 An example can be found in Snow White where the heroine remembers Ignacy Paderewski as "the president of Poland" a post which he never held see: Barthelme, Donald. Snow White. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 p. 40 further referred to as Snow White

4 See Venuti, 1992 p. 5

5 Kopcewicz, Andrzej 1982 pp. 379-380
Such a style can decidedly be accountable for a limited reception in Poland. So far only two books of Barthelme have been published, a collection of short stories and the novel *The King*, published in translation of Jacek Wietecki, in 1997. I hope to add soon a translation of the first novel of Barthelme *Snow White* to this list. The two novels which should furnish examples for my paper, present a personal and very post-modern re-reading of classical stories of Snow White, known from the brothers Grimm, and of king Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table first described by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Donald Barthelme is an example for such a discussion as the point of departure for the two novels mentioned above are cultural texts which on the one hand belong to cultures "foreign" to that of the author while on the other which made their way into Polish culture. In the case of *Snow White* the basic text is a German folk fairy tale. When asked "what initially intrigued him about using the Snow White mythology in his novel", Barthelme explained...

...the usefulness of the Snow White story is that everybody knows it and it can be played against... Every small change in the story is momentous when everybody knows the story backward.

Barthelme introduces changes to the story which might be called defamiliarization a rebours. A fairy tale which is

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7 LeClair pp. 42-43.
"strange" by itself is seemingly "familiarised" by a transfer into the reality of America of the 1960s, one, however, that is not completely defined and often distorted in an almost surreal manner. The result is as predicted by Victor Shklovsky

impedes perception, draws attention to the artifice of the text
and dehabituates automatized perception⁸.

Simultaneously, this technique forces the reader to rethink the meanings of the tale and new meanings introduced by the author.

As if to make the task the more difficult Barthelme does not employ the canonical text of the fairy tale. He is much more concerned with the film Snow White produced by Walt Disney than with the German original. As both texts have been translated (the latter both as film and a book) into Polish a Polish translator seems to have a code which could be applied for translation. It may almost be a case of embarras de richesse as there is a Polish fairy tale of a very similar subject O Sierotce Marysi i siedmiu krasnoludkach by Maria Konopnicka. Therefore, it seems that the only question should be - Do we have the right to call Clem Gapcio? Or maybe we should leave him as Clem?

Problems facing a translator start from the fact that the story is told in a variety of styles none of which can be defined as typical for fairy tales and the distance from the source text

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is such that halfway through the book the author asks his readers the following questions:

2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember?  
   Yes ( ) No ( )

3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince figure? Yes ( ) No ( )

4. That Jane is the wicked stepmother-figure? Yes ( ) No ( )

Therefore, a domesticating via an introduction of style and vocabulary known from various Polish versions of "the Snow White mythology" would destroy the defamiliarization device and would be contrary to the author's intention.

The situation of The King is also complicated though in a different manner. Donald Barthelme combines here the story of king Arthur and the knights of the Round Table with history of Europe, mainly Great Britain, in the years 1940-41. John Updike suggests that the book is "a pastiche of Thomas Mallory's La Morte d'Arthur" though one might as well state that Barthelme used A Connecticut Yankee in the King Arthur's Court by Mark Twain or Tennyson's Idylls of the King. Instead of taking a specific story Barthelme uses a chivalric myth interwoven with reality of the beginning of the Second World War. And thus his heroes comment upon music of Schoenberg and Mahler and listen to Ezra (Pound) broadcasting from Rome only to go a-Maying and fence with other knights.

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9 Snow White p. 88  
10 Król p. 146  
11 The King p. 7-8
From the stylistic point of view the text presents two strata - one realistic and modern and the other medieval\textsuperscript{12}. The problem is, however, that no dividing line can be drawn. Some of the "historical" characters tend to use the most contemporary language (expressions as "to bring someone up to date" or "to be out misbehaving") while other, as Walter the Penniless resort to language of medieval translations of the Bible.\textsuperscript{13} If some generalisation can be pointed out, the characters of which we might expect elevated language use the plainest one while representatives of "modernity" prefer a more "medieval" dialect. Most often, however, the language is rather modern and "transparent". As a result the reader gets a novel which is neither a Second World War story nor a chivalric romance, it is something in between, a post-modern novel.

In both cases there is no possibility of pointing out a clear division between what is "foreign" and what "domestic". Furthermore, introduction of these strategies as they have been used in earlier realisations of the source stories would result in translations contrary to authorial intent.

As for application of another strategy proposed by Venuti that is "abusive fidelity"\textsuperscript{14} understood as breaking certain rules of the target language in order to stress and render specific qualities of the source text I would like to point out a number of reservations. It happens all too often that a demand for an

\textsuperscript{12} It would seem natural to refer to Henryk Sienkiewicz's 	extit{Krzyżacy} as a model of medieval Polish, even though the language there is a 19th century construct based upon southern Polish (mainly derived from the Tatra mountains) dialects.

\textsuperscript{13} 	extit{The King} pp. 106-7 \textit{Król} pp. 97-8

"abusive fidelity" treatment results exclusively from translator's limited knowledge of the source language.

An example of such a problem I encountered in translating *Snow White*. It was the word "cathouse" which can be found in the following passages:

1. [we] wended our way to the county cathouse once a week (heigh-ho). Like everybody else. We were simply bourgeois. (p. 93)

2. I will be in the square at four o'clock by the cathouse clock." (p. 114)  

3. we might expect a quorum of undesirables, sitting in the cathouse square (...) before six p.m. by the cathouse clock, this very day. (p. 132).

As the word "cathouse" was not to be found in the dictionaries I use (mostly British) I tried to analyse it, taking its meaning to be "an official building with a clock", probably town hall (in German *das Rathaus*). The reason for such an approach was that Barthelme plays with words replacing them sometimes with similar though of a different meaning as in "The bishop in his red mantlepiece strode forward." The word "mantle" (a coat) changes into a mantelpiece (a shelf above fire place). In the translation the mantelpiece was replaced with equally strange in the context "płaszczka" (a ray) An initial idea was to replace "cathouse" with katusz (a

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15 Similar quotations with references to "cathouse clock" can be further found in *Snow White* on pages 166-7
16 *Snow White* p. 110
17 Snow White p. 112.
torment), only during the editing process a friend of mine, better educated in the American idiom, pointed out that "cathouse" means in American English a brothel. A solution was found in the Polish word "zamtuz" (probably also from German *das Schandhaus*) which retains the meaning and similarity to *Rathaus*. A similar case example was the term "horsewife" (replacing "housewife") translated as "kura domowa".

*Król*, however, includes an example of abusive fidelity which resulted from an incomplete comprehension of the text. In a dialogue on pages 9 to 12 a hero/heroine Varley (in Polish text the first verb form which allows establishing gender appears only on the page 11, in English it is on page 6 when Guinevere says "You are a handsome old woman, Varley") addresses queen Guinevere "mamo" (mother) which replaces English "mum". As on page 12 we learn that Varley is fifty years old while queen Guinevere only thirty six a literal understanding of this situation is highly improbable and might only be explained as an example of surrealism. The explanation of this mystery can be found in Jan Stanisławski's *The Great Polish-English Dictionary* in entry "mum 4. (colloquial) mamuśka, 5. (slang) see 'madam'". The translator retained then additional meaning, losing completely the primary one. Abusive fidelity can be therefore, especially in texts which do not offer a clear context such as these under discussion, an easy excuse for translator's incompetence but can hardly be propagated as a working strategy.

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18 *Król* pp. 9-12 *The King* pp. 3-6
The strategy applied in *Król* is decidedly foreignization. Jacek Wietecki decided that the whole text should be rendered in an old-fashioned language often regardless of that of the original. Thus a rather colloquial sentence "she's been out of pocket for some weeks" changes into "wszelki słuch o niej zaginął". This tendency for a rather strange usage of idiomatic expression can also be found in this passage:

- You're royal enough for the purpose. Not quite top drawer, of course, but Arthur's son, nevertheless.
- Masz w sobie dosyć królewskiej krwi. Co prawda nie należysz do pierwszych wśród równych, ale jesteś wszak Arturowym synem.

The effect is as if the translator did not share the author's faith that the book should be "foreign" or exotic enough for the reader without the need to resort to any further defamiliarizing (foreignizing) devices.

I cannot, quite naturally, evaluate the effect of my attempt at translating *Snow White*. It was my aim to find a way to reproduce the strange and varied style of the novel applying, when necessary, both strategies and thus e. g. translating proper names (such as Meat Street or Neat Street the meaning of which is obvious for an English-language reader) but trying to retain strange and foreign style used by Barthelme. While trying to achieve this I attempted not to

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20 *The King* p. 8 *Król* p. 14
21 *The King* p. 25 *Król* p. 29
break the rules of my target language what (in which respect I fully agree with Venuti) results all too often in "translatese". Judgement whether I did this successfully must be left to the readers.

Naturally, all these reservations should be first of all applied to translations of the post-modern literature, probably only very few of them could be defended on a larger scale. The existence of such cases as these presented above where the literariness is based upon the exotic presentation, the unfamiliar, should, nevertheless, be taken into consideration.

Praising Blackburn's translation of Julio Cortazar's short stories Venuti called his work "foreignized enough to be compellingly strange". To close this short presentation I would like to say that a translator should be able to distinguish a text which is "compellingly strange" by itself. If I may refer again to Friedrich Schleiermacher, the solution would be to "leave the author in peace and not to try to move the readers - your duty is to reproduce the distance."

Bibliografia


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22 Venuti, 1995 p. 4
23 Ibid. p. 267


