

THE POLISH WALCOTT. TRANSLATING CARIBBEAN IDENTITY

I am primarily, absolutely a Caribbean writer.

The English language is nobody's special property.

It is the property of imagination: it is the property of the language itself.

I have never felt inhibited in trying to write as well as the greatest English poets

(Derek Walcott in: Baer 1996: 106).

In an interview with Rebekah Presson Derek Walcott admitted: “All the time I am teaching I want to be on the beach swimming. That’s what I want to be. But I know what you mean; one can adapt to situations, and you can have a function. I would really prefer to be working and writing and painting in the Caribbean; so I know exactly where I want to be” (Baer, 1996, 193). These words kept coming back to me when I was putting together a Walcott-selected-poems-in-Polish-translation volume (Walcott, 2007), and the juxtaposed images of swimming at home and teaching abroad seemed an apt metaphor for the situation of Caribbean poetry transplanted into a completely different context where the tension between the author’s inner self and the roles imposed on him necessarily come to a stark opposition. In the process of overcoming various practical difficulties a translator and editor always finds a good part of her job, I become increasingly interested in how the native identity is constructed and/or mis-constructed, used and/or abused in translation and reception outside the poetry’s immediate context. What also interested me was to see Walcott’s presence in the Polish context as a case study in the hybrid sphere of in-between, or “intercultural writing” Maria Tymoczko (Tymoczko, 1999, 20) claims both postcolonial writing and translation co-exist in. I would like to make a claim that in spite of the cultural distance and differences in poetic tradition, despite the purely practical problems in rendering the specificity of linguistic presentation of the native as well as the post-colonial discourse and mind in Walcott’s poetry, there are planes on which thematic and ideological convergence with Polish poetry

is possible, although in ways far from obvious. The images of Walcott created in the Polish version of his work may sometimes be surprising.

A few facts should be mentioned first: (a) Derek Walcott's name never appeared in the Polish literary press before 1985, when a single poem was published in *Zeszyty Literackie*, a high-brow literary quarterly; (b) the next time Walcott made it into the Polish literary press was in 1994 (two years after his Nobel), when the same periodical published four short passages from *Omeros*, and another magazine, *Literatura na Świecie*, a world literature review, devoted the space of some 30 pages to a presentation of Walcott's poetry (8 poems) and prose (the Nobel Prize acceptance speech); (c) the first and only book of Walcott's poetry was published in 2007, sixteen years after the Nobel, and its critical reception was, to put it mildly, rather modest. This is the backdrop against which I would like to discuss some strategies adopted by Walcott's translators and editors as well as look at the way these strategies influence the creation of poetic identity.

Jerzy Jarniewicz, himself a poet, critic and translator, speaks about two models of translational policy he calls the ambassadorial and the legislative (Jarniewicz, 2002). A translator adopting the former policy wants to introduce target readers to the work of the authors who have been accepted and in most cases acclaimed as canonical in their source culture. The ambassadorial translator trusts the ready-made categories and hierarchies, makes sure her work is representative of the current situation in the source literature, wants to do justice to the position the author she is translating occupies in his home context or even, as Jarniewicz seems to suggest, by following the opinions of foreign critics (prizes, awards), transfers some pre-existing literary judgments onto her own literary milieu. The legislative translator, on the other hand, is much more independent in her choices, as her main criteria are her personal literary preferences and, more importantly, her ideas and views as to what kind of writing would be beneficial for the development of her own literature. The outcome of the legislator's translation is not supposed to be a mirror image of the great achievements of the source literature but a rearrangement of the canon, a new discovery that she expects could make a new model, a new path, supply her target literature with a new poetic language. Hence there is no interest on her part either in hierarchies or in how representative her translator's choices are, she operates within a sphere of relative artistic liberty. The ambassador transfers ready canons; the legislator creates new ones. Jarniewicz's proposition draws our attention

to the dynamics between the source and target domains and in fact points to the two extremes of a continuum of phenomena: it will not be difficult to show that any act of translation must necessarily contain both types of motivation and the line of demarcation is never so unequivocal, nevertheless the model may serve as a frame of reference for the description of Derek Walcott's translations into Polish.

The first noticeable presentation of Walcott's work was a section in a world literature review, *Literatura na Świecie*, in January 1994 — no doubt an ambassadorial gesture introducing a Nobel Prize laureate, completely unknown in our country to date. That it took place two years after the prize additionally testifies to the fact that there had actually been no translation of Walcott made before and waiting for the occasion.

The only earlier instance of Walcott's text published in Polish was "Forest of Europe" (*The Star-Apple Kingdom*, 1979) in 1985 in *Zeszyty Literackie*, where it was presented as one of three American poems (picked at random, it seems: the other ones were by Robert Pinsky and Baron Wormser) that were supposed to illustrate the fascination with Central and Eastern Europe on the part of American culture. "Forest of Europe", a poem dedicated to Walcott's close friend Joseph Brodsky — a Russian writer and dissident well-known to Polish readers — is a meditation on the nature of political oppression and the position of the poet in any totalitarian system: Osip Mandelstam sent to a labour camp in Stalinist Russia and Brodsky, a poet in literal and linguistic exile, forced to live away from his native land and native language, in America, "far from Russian canals quivering with sunstroke, / a man living with English in one room" who recites "lines from Mandelstam" during a Writers' Congress in snow-packed, barren Oklahoma, where one can also encounter the traces of a "Gulag Archipelago", the Choctaw Indian forced relocations of the 1830s, the so called "Trail of Tears". "The tourist archipelagoes of my South / are prisons too, corruptible", says Walcott in the final part of the poem, thus including also his native land into the circle of the violent power of "mastodons [who] force their systems through the snow", no matter whether it happens in Russia, the Caribbean or all the exiles' promised land, America.

Read in the context of Central European poetry and from the Polish point of view — such a perspective is reinforced in the translator's note where Walcott is presented as an American (!) poet fascinated by our part of Europe — the text of the translation reveals next to nothing from what in other contexts might have been construed as its native,

Caribbean, post-colonial meanings or contexts. The Polish reader learns that the author's experience — about which we know nothing — as well as that of the Choctaw people, is somehow similar to what the Communist oppression must have been to Mandelstam and Brodsky. Introduced as an American poet (Stanisław Barańczak, the translator, attaches this label to Walcott again in his anthology of American poetry (Barańczak, 1999), as if completely unaware of the tension between homeland and country of exile, which is so crucial to the creation of Walcott's voice) — the poem's meanings are reduced here to its Western dimension only. To sum up, what we get is neither an attempt to introduce Walcott as a great poet of the English-language tradition nor to present his oeuvre in terms of a new poetic voice that could trigger changes in Polish writing, but an act of literary appropriation. The poem serves as an ambassador of Eastern European poetry, and its translation into Polish is supposed to inform us, its Polish readers, of the position the literature of our part of Europe occupies in America. This is paradoxical if one thinks about the construction of the poem itself, where the history of totalitarianism in Central Europe is used as an enlightening parallel to the history of oppression in America and in the Caribbean¹.

The 1994 presentation in *Literatura na Świecie* had a completely different agenda. The section opens with "The Sea Chantey" from *In a Green Night* (1962, misspelled as "In the Green Light"), a beautiful litany-like poem taking us away from the well-known Eastern European history and politics, into the centre of the Caribbean seascape.

The epigraph to the poem comes from Charles Baudelaire's "L'invitation en Voyage" (1857), an idealized vision of a lovers' trip to an Earthly paradise, *La splendeur orientale* and "*Sa douce langue natale*" being maybe the most salient traces of the Old World sentimental and idealized attitude towards the New World. The juxtaposition of the description of the Antilles and Baudelaire's use of the European poetic topos introduces the concept of "mimicry" (Bhabha, 2004,126) as an ambiguous way of achieving/imposing culture by/on the native. Walcott's poem starts as an aestheticized

¹ In an earlier poem "Preparing for Exile" (*Sea Grapes*, 1976), the figure of Osip Mandelstam is invoked in the context of a decision to leave the Caribbean: "Why do I imagine the death of Mandelstam / among the yellowing coconuts". Here the link between the poets and their political contexts is much less obvious and what is more important, points to the way Walcott makes use of European culture in his work.

vision of the Antilles: there is music (“all the I’s”), embroidery (“needles of anchored frigates”, “strait-stitching schooners”, “refracted embroidery”), mythology (Odysseus, Cyclopic volcanoes, Flight and Phyllis) religion (Sabbath, communion, Leviathan, a seafaring Christian, and intrepid people). These categories organize the reality. Still, given all those “European” categories of perception and description, the image is not a “tourist vision” and this is achieved, to my reading, through a radical artistic gesture of making the poem an abstract pattern, a song, a chantey, a work of art rather than a realistic representation, a discussion or an ideological statement.

“And now the apprentice washes his cheeks / With salt water and sunlight”, says Walcott in a two-line section separating the poem’s two parts. The translator uses the Polish word “majtek”, (“a deckhand”) to render “the apprentice”, a choice changing the reading of the poem in a significant way. The word “apprentice” has an intertextual and autobiographical connotation in Walcott, as it refers to the figure of an apprentice artist, the poet/painter from “Another Life” (Walcott, 1973). In a wider perspective the image may be seen as a metaphor of the artist as the creator of the Caribbean identity. What the apprentice has at his disposal is salt water and sunlight, the rest is waiting to be created, named, described, and the second part of the poem turns into a catalogue of discovered, nearly epiphanic images:

The soft vowels of inlets,
The christening of vessels,
The titles of portages,
The colours of sea grapes,
The tartness of sea-almonds,
The alphabet of church bells,
The peace of white horses,
The pasture of ports,
The litany of islands,
The rosary of archipelagoes

The poem is more of a celebration of creative resemblance than a feeling of the menace of mimicry (Bhabha, 1994, 88). The mimicry here is not so much a restriction or

limitation but rather a condition for creativity, a chance for the apprentice artist to see and to activate his invention. Great European literature enables the artist to pronounce names, cut out his new world from the chaos of undefined reality. In this context the choice of the next poem to be presented to the Polish reader seems to fit perfectly well. It is “Names” (*Sea Grapes*, 1976), a poem about the genealogy of “my race” which “began as the sea began, with no nouns and with no horizon... with no memory, with no future”. “Have we melted into a mirror, leaving our souls behind?” asks the poet and goes on to look for the mockery in the elegance of naming “the uncombed forest... uncultivated grass” Castille, Versailles, Corinth with the “belittling diminutives”. Here the mimicry is necessary and beneficial when confronted with the shapelessness of the native landscape and helplessness of the native tongue (“nothing in our hands // but this stick to trace our names on the sand/which the sea erased again, to our indifference”) but at the same time it is appropriating, dominating, dangerous: “Their [the ones’ who named the harbours — MH] memory turned acid / but their names held... they could not live / except they first presumed / the right of every thing to be a noun”².

This poem includes some nouns in French Creole translated into English by a teacher at a local school, but the actual words at least get a chance of being pronounced, they are there, although their English equivalents try to suppress them. The powerful last scene of the poem pictures schoolchildren who prove that nature (the native) is stronger than culture (the imported) just as the palms “are greater than Versailles, / for no man made them... no man unmade them”. The “damned little Arabs”, as the teacher addresses his pupils, refuse to see the stars in the sky in terms of European mythology — Orion or Betelgeuse — but they see them as “fireflies caught in molasses”.

Apart from the poems I have discussed, apparently carefully chosen in the “ambassadorial” gesture to present the Caribbean Walcott and his main themes — the third in this group being “Sadhu of Couva”, a poem introducing the Indian context — there are also five poems rendered by another translator, four texts from *Sea Grapes*

² In his Nobel Prize acceptance address, Walcott says: “By writers even as refreshing as Graham Greene, the Caribbean is looked at with elegiac pathos, a prolonged sadness to which Claude Levi-Strauss has supplied an epigraph: *Tristes Tropiques*. Their *tristesse* derives from the attitude to the Caribbean dusk, to rain, to uncontrollable vegetation, the provincial; ambition of Caribbean cities where the brutal replicas of modern architecture dwarf the small houses and streets”. (1998: 76)

(Walcott, 1976) and one poem, “Map of the New World”, from *The Fortunate Traveller* (Walcott, 1981). This last text evokes the theme of creation through mimicry, again by mentioning Homer’s *Odyssey*, later on re-written by Walcott in the form of his book-length epic masterpiece *Omeros* (Walcott, 1990). The first four poems, though — “Endings”, “Midsummer, Tobago”, “Winding Up”, “The Morning Moon” — are completely different: they seem not to touch upon the post-colonial condition at all but show an existentialist Walcott, a man struggling with his own life, loneliness, sense of loss, the coming of old age.

In his discussion of *Sea Grapes*, Edward Baugh (Baugh, 2006, 88-120) claims that the volume carries over the moods and themes from the autobiographical poem *Another Life*: disillusionment at the betrayal of the Caribbean dream, also by local politicians eager to convert the islands into a tourists’ paradise. Interestingly, none of those chosen by the other Polish translator, Andrzej Szuba, are among the poems Baugh quotes as examples. I find this fact particularly telling in the light of Baugh’s remark that *Sea Grapes* is judged to be quite far away from “protest poetry” (Baugh, 2006, 96), and Walcott’s own comment that the noise of the so-called protest poetry has nothing to do with the volume of one’s feeling (*ibid.*). The Polish translator’s choices, especially when presented outside the immediate context of the volume or a wider context of Walcott’s work, show an alternative way of reading Walcott, one liberated from the dominant paradigm in which his work normally functions. This poetry is not only about the creation of the new world and its identity vis-à-vis the troubled relation to the colonizer’s culture, the colonial past and the grim, commercialized post-colonial present. What Szuba does, already by choosing the poems for translation, is not an ambassadorial gesture of presentation but a consciously legislative decision. Szuba has translated several more poems — I included all of them in my book — and all of them share certain features. They are short, lyrical, descriptive, relatively ascetic in form and all of them but two come from the same volume. The best example is perhaps “Midsummer, Tobago”, a short poem in which, except for the title, nothing indicates the Caribbean context. Still, if we remember — and Polish readers for the most part don’t — that Tobago is thought to be the island of Robinson Crusoe, the connection with Walcott’s main theme becomes apparent and the meaning of the poem changes. Otherwise it is a powerful, condensed image which develops into a reflection on time and the transience of life.

Szuba's presentation is perhaps the most coherent of all the Polish images of Walcott, also because his translations are very good poetically. Seen against the backdrop of the disputes on the duties and responsibilities the poet and poetry has with respect to ideological, political and historical issues, Szuba's stance is clear and his proposition liberating. Again though, as in the case of the translation of "Forest of Europe"—although the direction is reversed — in the context of the whole of the poet's oeuvre one cannot see it otherwise than as a distorted, or, to put it more delicately — a partial vision. When I asked the translator to consider doing more poems for my volume he refused and said he had already completed his adventure with Walcott and what he had translated in the early 1990s was what interested him in the poet. This was the voice he needed and found useful. Szuba is himself a poet and his own writing is a completely different from what constitutes the recognizable rich, descriptive, often epic style of Walcott's verse. It is minimalistic and ascetic, radically lyrical and private.

We have seen three versions of the Polish Walcott so far, but there are more. The team that worked on the selected poems consisted of eleven people — although I am not sure we can really be called a team. There was no teamwork, of course, and since many of the translators are poets themselves, their choices and solutions tended to be highly idiosyncratic and individual especially as for reasons too complex to discuss here the translations were produced over a period of more than ten years. The final outcome is a pretty risky, heterogeneous collection entitled *Map of the New World* which tries to — struggles to, and I know it better than anyone else — combine and reconcile many different voices and all the possible translation policies placed between the ambassadorial and legislative extremes of the scale. I have no time here to discuss them in detail so I'd like to address just one more issue.

Two of the reviews of the volume dub Walcott "the Homer of the Caribbean", an allusion to the great (in both senses) epic poem *Omeros*, a Caribbean Odyssey, which brought Walcott the Nobel in 1992. Paradoxically, the text of *Omeros* is represented in the volume only by four relatively short passages translated in 1994. Again, when I approached her, their translator said she was not interested in doing any more translations from the epic; what she had wanted to achieve when she worked on the four passages was, she claimed, to grasp this strange feeling of Homeric verse transplanted into the New World and try to add a new dimension to the meeting of the apparently alien

traditions. Walcott's enormous project, to voice his native culture and pay tribute to the people who form it, has thus been appropriated in translation and turned into an experiment in poetic form. It is the identity of the European epic tradition, rejuvenated by the poet from outside Europe and not the identity of the poet's culture, nation, country and language as created within the epic form that becomes the central issue here, if only because we, the readers of the translated passages, never actually learn anything of the history of the Caribbean Achille and Philoctete, nor get access to the plot of the epic. The translated passages function as separate poems.

Interestingly, in a discussion of the experimental form of *Omeros* Walcott quoted his friend, the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz: "Poetry has surrendered too much of what it used to do" (Baugh, 2006, 191) and added, "what remains in the Caribbean, and in Caribbean fiction is the human element of storytelling... I think that contemporary culture has absolutely lost the idea of narration" (Baugh, 2006, 191). Walcott's idea was to revitalize the tradition of narration within a poem: to pay tribute to his culture but, at the same time, to regain for poetry a lost realm of storytelling. That poetry in the 20th century has narrowed down the scope of its interests to a very restricted area was one of Miłosz's central concerns and he more than once turned to English-language poets for inspiration on how to widen the scale of the poetic voice (cf. Heydel 2002: 88 *passim*, 255 *passim*). It turns out that Walcott's effort went in the same direction.

So the image of Walcott as the Homer of the Caribbean has been introduced and accepted in Poland without much textual evidence — an ambassadorial and rather colonizing gesture again, this time on the critical level. One of the reasons for this stems from the fact that a comparison of Walcott to Homer, rather than to any English-language poet, appears in a Joseph Brodsky's essay on Walcott "The Sound of the Tide", reprinted as an introduction to the Polish volume. It contains the famous statement that "poets' real biographies are like those of birds, almost identical — their real data are in the way they sound" (Brodsky, 1986, 164). Brodsky, whose text is a very strong recommendation for Polish readers and a guide in bridging the cultural distance, stresses the native, Caribbean character of Walcott's work but at the same time praises its universal value. On the one hand there is in Walcott's poetry the loving attention to the material aspect of the world he describes, the rich sensuality of his imagery, the deep epic breadth of his verse that aims to grasp his native reality in its paradoxical mixture of beauty and

ugliness; on the other — there is the English language and the whole poetic tradition of the Old World the poet, Walcott’s “red nigger”, has in him. Calling Walcott “a black poet of the Caribbean”, Brodsky remarks, is “as myopic and misleading as it would be to call the Saviour a Galilean” (Brodsky, 1986, 166). And it is the language — the voice, the way it sounds, the poet’s true biography — that creates the identity of Walcott’s poetry, a powerful identity that exceeds the limits of class, race or individual ego. Brodsky also says that Walcott belongs to no poetic school and refuses to be easily classified while the stunning multiplicity of metrical and stylistic forms of his poems has for years, like the tide, licked the shores of English-language literature. This, according to Brodsky, is the power of the Homer of the Caribbean, the archipelago “discovered by Columbus, colonized by the British, and immortalized by Walcott” (Brodsky, 1986, 174-175).

Brodsky’s beautiful essay is a strong frame of reference for any readings of Walcott in Poland — much stronger, I think, than Walcott’s Nobel acceptance speech, also included in the volume. The terms in which Brodsky discusses his friend’s poetry may serve as a common denominator for the multiple voices the poet has been given in translation. My book is not a definitive Polish Walcott — and I am not sure there is ever going to be one. For the time being the Polish Walcott is an inhabitant of the hybrid sphere where his identity is undefined and multivocal, and the variety of the translators’ choices and policies reflects — I hope — the lushness and richness of the poetry. I would like to close with a quote from Walcott’s interview with William Baer, where he comments on discovering Auden in the Caribbean. I believe the stress put on the ambivalence of distance and closeness makes it true also of discovering Walcott in Poland: “What one heard reading those poems — even in the Caribbean, in another climate and another culture — the distance doesn’t count, really — was the vigor and wit and freshness that is there in those poems” (Baer, 1993, 197).

Works cited:

- Baer W. (ed.); 1996, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi
- Barańczak, Stanisław; 1999, *Od Walta Whitmana do Boba Dylana. Antologia poezji amerykańskiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie
- Baugh, Edward; 2006, *Derek Walcott*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- Bhabha, Homi; 2004, *Of Mimicry and Man*, (in:) *The Location of Culture*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, pp. 121-131
- Brodsky, Josif; 1996, *Less than One. Selected Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Heydel, Magda; 2002, *Obecność T.S. Eliota w literaturze polskiej*, Wrocław: FNP
- Jarniewicz, Jerzy, 2002, *Tłumacz jako twórca kanonu*, in: R. Lewicki (ed.), *Przekład — język — kultura*, Lublin: UMCS, pp. 35-42
- Tymoczko, Maria; 1999, *Post-colonial writing and literary translation*, in: Susan Bassnett, Harish Trivedi (eds.), *Post-colonial Translation. Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, pp. 19-40
- Walcott, Derek; 1998, *Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*, in: idem, *What the Twilight Says. Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, pp. 65-87
- Walcott, Derek; 2007, *Mapa nowego świata. Wiersze wybrane*, in: Magda Heydel (ed.), Kraków: Znak