Resonating with Job. Czesław Miłosz as a Translator of The Book of Job

Abstract
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This discussion of why the Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) translated the Book of Job distinguishes two meanings of translation in reference to the poet’s work: first as a process, which relates to Miłosz’s life and personal experience, and second as an outcome, which relates to his poetry. The investigation of this problem makes use of some work by Father Joseph Sadzik as well as of Clive Scott’s concept of rediscovery of reading. The article contributes to an understanding of how Miłosz reconciled the roles of poet and translator, of humble servant and rebellious yet fragile human being, of innocent yet disturbing witness. The author argues that the translation of the Book of Job, as a process and as an outcome, reveals the complexity of Miłosz’s craft and its effectiveness in defining the scope of the translator’s duties, of which the most important is to come alongside Job and learn how he coped with his experience of being an innocent victim.

Translation – a tuning-like activity (a product and a process)
As a Nobel prize winner for literature, Czesław Miłosz was aware of the importance of translation as a rudimentary condition of any discourse concerning literature. Firstly, his life experience attuned him to the limitations and possibilities of expression and of speech on various levels. His experiences of World War II, communism and emigration, the loss of his wife and his son’s illness, all overshadowed and determined his view of human ability to speak and to communicate, as well as to express experience that seems to be inexpressible. Secondly, as a poet he was well aware that his art touched upon a superior realm whose manifestation could be magnified or miniaturised for the sake of human perception, leading to a concept of poetry writing as translation of non-verbalised existence. Thirdly, his multilingual childhood and youth influenced his vocabulary and linguistic imagination and sharpened his sensitivity and ability to listen carefully to others.

Miłosz’s attentiveness towards words exceeded standard norms and aspects. The process of translation, according to Miłosz, stems from life in the word and that word’s readiness to be translated and understood, as well as from the dynamic disposition both of the translator and of reality itself. Miłosz’s concept of creativity introduces an element of the unpredictable, expanded form which has been discussed by numerous...
Translation is not only about the encounter with other writers’ works, but also about the experience of acquiring the meaning of something ambiguous, not fully decipherable, difficult to categorize, and of not giving in to the authority of the subject. It is a road leading towards something that might be, or might have been, therefore Milosz as a translator is first of all a creative reader under pressure to make constant choices in the process of verbalizing the emerging meaning.

As a creative writer he was aware that his own poems were subject to the same rules when confronted with other languages. Joseph Brodsky drew attention to this readiness on Milosz’s part to accept loss, comparing the ability of his mind to the power of Job’s mind and valuing his poetry beyond its linguistic realization:

“Even if one strips his poems of the stylistic magnificence of his native Polish (which is what translation inevitably does) and reduces them to the naked subject matter, we will find ourselves confronting a severe and relentless mind of such intensity that the only parallel one is able to think of is that of the biblical characters – most likely of Job”.

Because of the status of the text, its context and the level of engagement of the translator, biblical translation is a specific example of such experience of life and text, the sacred text, with an established tradition of reception in the Roman Catholic church, has a sanctioned status, placing it beyond judgment as text or literature. As such, it evokes a peculiar attitude in the translator, the attitude of identification, which, however, neither derives from their religiousness nor confirms it. Following Brodsky’s line of thought, one might state that the translation of biblical books answers the question not of how to live, but of why. From this point of view, the standard evaluations of Milosz’s translation with reference to such categories as literalism, archaizing or compliance with theological interpretation miss the point, since the primary question is why the poet translated the Book of Job.

**Reasons for the translation**

As he himself pointed out in the introductions to successive translations, Milosz started to work on biblical texts for numerous reasons, such as dramatic personal experience, the poet’s desire to reinforce and renew the sacral dimension of the Polish language, and the decision to pay tribute to the Bible as a text of crucial importance to culture. There were two people who played a pivotal role: Oskar Milosz, who learnt Hebrew and Greek in order to be able to read the Bible in its original languages and Fr Józef Sadzik, who befriended the poet and encouraged him to translate biblical books.

The poet also had a strong conviction that the Polish language was in great need of renewal: of liberation from slogans, clichés and double meaning and restoration

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1 For an extensive study of the subject, see: Magdalena Heydel, Gorliwość tłumacza, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013).
of a sense of adequacy between reality and the word. Before he translated the Book of Job, Miłosz read Psalterz Puławsy and the Polish-Hebrew Bible translated by Rabbi Isaac Cylkov⁴. He admired the Leopolite Bible, the 16th century translation of the Bible into Polish. In his preface Miłosz avoids personal remarks as well as scholarly discussion of the biblical book itself. His comments on the existing Polish translations are reduced to the necessary minimum. Instead of a personal account he provides a list of quotations, and instead of scholarly comment he points to the fundamental work of Robert Gordis⁵ for further reading. The poet presents a very pragmatic attitude: he read all the existing Polish translations of the Book of Job as well as some contemporary translations into other languages that he knew, such as English, Russian and French. He also read the text in Hebrew regarded as the Book of Job, as he learned that the source text is not a single coherent one. The last remark in the Preface is addressed directly to the reader, who is advised to read the book aloud and pause frequently. This turns out to be a remark of great significance because it shows Miłosz’s expectations towards the reader.

Undoubtedly, the poet’s personal life with its difficulties and tragedies was a strong influence on his translation activity. Translation of the biblical books emerged as a kind of strategy that helped him to overcome pain; working on it on a regular basis provided a distraction, and because of the nature of the texts this work enabled him to find a sense of community and continuity.

As for readers – it can be argued that translation of any biblical books from Hebrew into Polish by a Polish émigré in the USA was neither expected nor particularly desired. This task had a predominantly personal, intimate character, to a degree that bordered on paradox: interlingual translation in its essence facilitates communication; however, at the same time it excludes other languages from immediate participation in communication. By focusing on Hebrew and Polish, Miłosz excluded or at least distanced himself from his English linguistic realm of emigration. Simultaneously, he learned to formulate a concept of a community of readers by acquiring the biblical text from different linguistic perspectives.

**Aims: purification, dignity, community**

A sense of loss had accompanied Miłosz since the Second World War, when he had faced the unprecedented annihilation of people. The impact of the war upon him was highlighted by the poet himself in conversation with Jerzy Turowicz:

“It was no doubt my own painful thinking of Poland, as the land dishonoured by the crime of genocide, that influenced my decision to translate the Book of Psalms. The connection with the Old Testament for me has the power of cleansing ritual. I do not know how much people in Poland are aware of what happened in 1939–1945, in the sense of some kind of flaw on the earth

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— I would say. (…) I do not know if poets are called to take part in the process of purification. This might be one of the important motifs for me⁶. (ASW highlighted)

The poet asserted that the trauma of war destroyed people and societies, and also ruined not only communication between them but the very concept of communication itself. When a pure evil pretends to follow logical and reasonable rules, rationality is simultaneously stripped of any values. Perhaps this is why the figure of the biblical Job appears as a point of reference in many literary texts associated with World War II⁷, as Job discusses the irrationality of suffering. The biblical Job, as a righteous man, a patient sufferer and a self-confident rebel ready to quarrel with God, even to sue God, provides a wide range of illustrative attitudes towards pain and suffering to those who have their own share in the history of calamities.

The process of purification is considered by Miłosz as a poet’s duty. Miłosz explains his activity as a Bible translator with reference to the genocide of WW2, especially the Holocaust. He also admits that this was one of the important reasons for his translation of the Book of Job in particular.

“Obviously, while I was working on the Book of Job, I could not help visualizing people praying in vain, the colour of earth, the shape of clouds, the ungraspable beauty of nature, and everything my imagination still cannot come to terms with, just as it cannot come to terms with Job’s complaint in myself”⁸.

One of the rituals of purification and of coming to terms with Job’s complaint could be that of confession, understood as a sacrament in the Catholic Church in which Miłosz was brought up. This sacrament is often referred to as the sacrament of reconciliation, because God reconciles people with himself by a sanctifying grace. Another aspect is revealed in its role as a sacrament of penance that demonstrates the sorrow of a believer. Taken as a sacrament of conversion, confession evokes hope for forgiveness and joy through reunion with God. Miłosz, being a poet and a translator, desires to confess, to be reconciled and reunited with God, to serve his penance, to simultaneously receive and to bestow absolution. The effort of translation can be understood here as a process of confession, revealing one’s own weaknesses and failures, purifying language and exposing oneself to the judgement of others. Nevertheless, the question of who can give absolution remains open.

Translation to Miłosz is a kind of echo of some utterance, as that utterance is also an echo of thought. Thus it is a way to encounter the inexpressibility of experience, particularly of suffering. The Book of Job provides a wide range of shades of pain and serves as a template to test Jewish and Christian theological concepts as well as the traumatic history of Poles and Jews and their relations, particularly in reference to the Holocaust. Christians and Jews share the sacred biblical text, which they have quoted, discussed and

called on for centuries. The process of translation of the Bible brings a sense of stability, continuity and common ground. Miłosz, who learned Hebrew and Greek in order to translate biblical texts, returns mysteriously to the world before the destruction brought about by World War II, to the original syntax and words and their initial meaning, for which he tries to find adequate synonyms and equivalents. In a way he returns to his school years, when he started to learn Latin, and figuratively, he learns to speak again. In his quest for an unharmed tongue he goes even further, as he tries to re-establish confidence in and intimacy between the languages that had once coexisted in a speech spoken on the streets of the multilingual Wilno/Vilnius of his childhood, inhabited by Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, Germans and Russians. It can be argued that his decision to translate the Book of Job becomes an artistic gesture of symbolic meaning that could be described as “going towards”, “coming alongside”, “being in tune” with those who identify themselves with the source text. Purification of language and purification of relations among the real users of languages cannot be separated. Miłosz communicates a sense of “survivor’s guilt” as his own personal pain, his own ever-smarting wound. A survivor who has been traumatised by helplessly witnessing the crime of the Holocaust cannot justify his own life in front of those who perished. In a very deep sense the poet reverses the recurring question in the Book of Job, “Why did all this happen to Job?”, by asking another one: “Why did all this not happen to me?”. In this way he testifies to a sense of guilt in the psychological rather than the moral sense. By learning Hebrew, Miłosz endeavoured to find a way to encounter the Jews in a religious perspective as the chosen, not ‘selected’, people, the people chosen by God. His decision, as a survivor of World War II, to lend his voice to the annihilated was a means of paying tribute to them and keeping Hebrew present and alive. Thus it became a symbolic action, though a restrained one. Miłosz does not pretend to speak in the name of the Holocaust victims, he imitates their voice in the act of translation of a text they might have used.

In this case, Miłosz treats translation as a shadow, an echo, a part of mourning. The dream of a language or speech that conquers all languages and draws the subject towards transcendence played a great role in the paradigm of Miłosz’s poetics. In the preface to the Book of Job, the poet states clearly that while translating this book, his thoughts were accompanied by an image of people plunged into despair, calling on God for mercy without an answer yet simultaneously surrounded paradoxically by God’s graciousness, visible in the beauty of nature. This image caused him deep pain and disappointment with God’s justice, and led to his personal accusation of God.

A poetic explanation of the need for Bible translation can be found in Miłosz’s poem “Readings”, as noted by Father Jacek Salij, who treats this poem as a kind of manifestation of dignity. However, for Salij it is only the Gospels that truly reveal the dignity of speech⁹.

“You asked me what is the good of reading the Gospels in Greek.

I answer that it is proper that we move our finger

Along letters more enduring than those carved in stone,
And that, slowly pronouncing each syllable,
We discover the true dignity of speech”\(^{10}\).

In reference to this poem it needs to be stressed that it describes the process of translation in physical terms: movement of fingers and articulation, pronunciation. There might be a concern regarding the appropriateness of such bodily reference in confirming the “dignity of speech”, but this is a deliberate strategy which enhances the artistic paradox of inexpressibility. To approach any Biblical text, one has to humbly accept bodily human limits. The only accessible item for human understanding is a syllable, rather than the entire message, although that too can be acquired, but slowly and carefully, not all at once and not entirely. Sometimes it can be misunderstood and contaminated.

Salij comments additionally on the subtlety of the Miłosz translation, which draws the reader very gently into a sacred space:

“To put it simply, the reader receives in this translation a sacred text, not only a fundamental text of European culture of universal significance which has avoided enforced modernisation”\(^{11}\).

(underlined by ASW)

Strikingly, the translation, understood as the outcome of Miłosz’s work, claims to be something more than just another translation of a biblical book. It becomes evidence of spiritual struggle, not only on the part of the protagonist of the source text. It reveals itself as an intimate encounter of a translator with “the translated”, which is no longer identical with or even similar to the so-called source text, an encounter that takes both the original and the translated texts as exchangeable alternatives of expression in the core sense.

The qualities and values ascribed to Miłosz’s translation by Salij bring into consideration a spiritual dimension that can be understood as a fulfillment of a projected ritual of purification. To Salij, the translation is also proof of how much one can achieve when one aspires to an unachievable ideal. Not all opinions of Miłosz’s translations, however, are so flattering. Take this comment by Marek Piela:

“According to his preface to the translation of the Psalms, Milosz aimed to create a new stylistic variation of Polish which could be used in sacred texts and in worship. He describes this style as elevated. My investigation shows that the biblical books translated by Milosz do indeed differ stylistically from other Polish texts. Unfortunately, this effect is brought about mainly by means of literal translation, which makes the style more awkward than elevated. It distorts the message of the original text and precludes the achievement of semantic and stylistic equivalence to the Hebrew source”\(^{12}\).

For Miłosz, to read and to translate the Bible is to pay tribute to words, to re-discover the dignity of existence that sanctifies any language and gives it gravity. In such ways

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a translator also re-discovers a sense of community, in its broadened sense, as a sense of community between the author, the translators and, perhaps, contemporary and future readers.

**Muteness**

With further regard to the figure of the translator, the poem “Readings” discusses the status of the translator as one who is guided by an unknown power, but who also possesses sound knowledge of the source text and, what is of greater importance, the exclusive capacity to discover the hidden realm of words. In such a way the text itself gains the status of a medium. A poet-translator traverses native and acquired languages, compares them, seeks a meaning, although without looking for a third language of a mystical or primordial, mysterious nature. Traversing languages in the quest for meaning reveals the conditions on which a message can be expressed and accepted in these languages. Whether the expressed affinities are compared, strengthened or weakened, silence opens up a discussion on the mode of communication. It can be argued that the *Book of Job* as a source text for Miłosz’s translation presents mainly the views and opinions on Job and the debates of his friends, paradoxically highlighting thereby the silence in which the protagonist is immersed.

Job’s muteness can be analysed in various aspects and one of them leads to the conclusion that innocence has nothing to explain. It is only sin that requires defence, as innocence is taken as self-explanatory. Each additional explanation of innocence evokes suspicions that start a vicious circle. Every explanation of transgression evokes the hope of finding a proof of innocence or at least of good will. Innocence therefore appears in the discourse mainly with reference to a defence speech for a sinner, not for a victim.

There is nothing sentimental in Miłosz’s gesture of self-identification with Job; perhaps it manifests his hope of getting an answer to suffering and pain in general. Nevertheless, such identification indicates the solution: to walk with Job with dignity along the path of loss – without judging or comparing or becoming embroiled in friends’ disputes and accusations.

Miłosz belonged to the generation of great hopes and expectations, the generation that saw the rebirth of Poland as a state. He witnessed two world wars and faced personal tragedies that led him to disperse himself into pieces, into vowels of pain, into separate sounds. As a witness to the 20th-century violence, Miłosz’s right to translate the *Book of Job*, despite not being a biblical scholar, seems indisputable. The goal of his effort to find a voice with which he can identify and with which he can join in despair and hope, is reached.

This reading of Miłosz as a translator draws on Clive Scott’s idea of translation, particularly on his call for a change to the partial view of the translator. The notion of “a writerly metabolism” in particular provides a broad perspective on translation as an existential need, not only an exclusively linguistic activity. The translated text
generates not only an audience of the source text but also an audience for itself. Scott distinguishes a translation that aims to be “a faithful one” from a translation that seeks to co-author with the author of the original work or to produce a text that is not faithful to it, but in which the original author is still present in the process.

Scott’s attitude highlights the transformative realm of translation, co-existence and co-authorship to an unprecedented extent. For him, translation is a crucial tool for acquiring meaning – a sufficient, unique and dynamic form of thinking. The remarkable shift in the goal of translation shows that the identification of the source text with the translating subject is of the greatest importance.

“Translation attempts neither to reconcile languages nor to demonstrate their differences as inalienable, as measures of cultural identity or indelibility. Is it translation’s function to act out, again and again, the right-thinking ethnic ritual whereby one understands and imaginatively inhabits the ‘other’ and seeks to preserve it, even in one’s own linguistic sphere? I think not. More important is the entirely personal enterprise of alterity: I confront another to become myself; this is neither the concealment of the other in self, nor the preservation of other in self, but the transformation of the other into self, where the transformative process itself is what counts, is what must remain visible, is both process and project. It is for this reason that there is no difference between intra-lingual and interlingual translation.”

These words resonate particularly with Miłosz’s experience of translation of biblical books, his eagerness to learn Hebrew and to identify himself with the silent Job. Scott’s statement on the role of the poet strikingly evokes an image of the sacred, the mysterious service of a priest, of a prophet. Miłosz was well aware of such connotations when he declared in the Preface to his translation of the Book of Job that he did not want to be identified with the figure of the “wieszcz” or bard, a kind of prophet common in Polish romantic literature. Depriving himself of a voice by being “a translator only” becomes a gesture and an integral aspect of the translation of this particular book. Father Stanisław Pasierb commented in a comparable way on Miłosz’s oeuvre:

“It is a rare thing for a prominent creative writer to give up his own voice, as it were, and let God take it over in the way that the prophets did: ‘Here I am, send me’. It is as if such poems as the remarkable ‘Oeconomia divina’ were not enough for him, even though here the encounter between old catastrophism and eschatology took on the dimensions of a dramatic theological vision. Miłosz decided not only to speak to God, but also to lend him his voice, so that God’s Word could speak through his words. This is how the biblical Miłosz was born, the Miłosz who translated the psalms, the Book of Job, The Book of Five Megilot, the Gospel according to St Mark, and the Apocalypse.”

When a poet, a master of poetic craft, abandons his claim to be considered as a superior artist in favour of a silence generated by his own choice, it can be taken

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as an act of humility and obedience. Miłosz identifies himself with a pious servant who is able to articulate syllables only. It can be argued that in such a way he associates a general experience of inexpressibility with his own helplessness in expression and action in the encounter with the atrocities which he and others experienced.

At the same time, however, as an object of admiration and jealousy, of resentment, Miłosz turns out to be a scapegoat, as defined by Rene Girard. Miłosz was aware that his life in the USA, associated with freedom, safety and wealth, was an object of desire and therefore of jealousy. Working on biblical translation in Polish while living in an English language environment can be seen as proof that the poet abandoned all attempts to gain social acceptance and readers. On the other hand, Miłosz manifests his independence from circumstances and temporal determinants and also demonstrates his faith in the community of readers to come. In this context, the importance of solitude and silence emerges dramatically as an effect of artistic choice, not a result of exclusion or misunderstanding. We may connect this with the remark by Clive Scott\(^{15}\) that a translator not only transmits the text but shares in its authorship. As Scott sees it, translation is a form of experimental writing. The personal input of the translator as a reader has a great influence on the translation, though it is almost impossible to establish its parameters. At the same time, a translation opens a source text to self-regeneration, so that Milosz’s translation of the Book of Job brings this text to his times through his readers’ experience and makes connections of which the original author or authors (or editors) could not be aware.

We translate psycho-physiological perceptions which derive from a source text into a target text which embodies those perceptions. The translator as a writer joins the writer of the source text at the point where latencies in the source text can become ‘patencies’ in the translator’s individual experience as a reader. That is to say, the translator as writer puts into words what in the source text has not come to words, what has been made available by the source text, an existential layer beneath the expression of ideas. It is only by writing (translating) that the reader can make perceptible the adventures of his/her reading consciousness, and that these adventures can become an integral part of the translated source text.

To conclude: Miłosz’s translation of the Book of Job engaged him in every aspect of his life as a writer and as an individual subject who encountered situations and problems similar to those described in the biblical book. The poet as a translator took the role of a humble servant and a simple tool, yet was simultaneously personally involved in the discussion conducted in the source text, to the extent that he became its co-creator, who identified himself with Job and Job with himself. In this way Milosz as a translator examines his personal spirituality and actualises the source text, making it alive. His translation resembles creative writing, and moreover it engages the reader to perform its reading individually and creatively.

Bibliography


