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In-between Speaking and Questioning Instructions

This paper discusses whether and how research facilitates translation and vice versa; what are the traps and privileges when a researcher starts translating. How the role of the distanced scholar can be of help to the transparent translator? How does the deep reading of the work facilitate a scholarly interpretation? The paper also presents the difficulties to transfer non-verb case-based phrases such as *swój do swego po swoje* into the non-case Bulgarian and the necessary ground of *Ferdydurke's* and *Ślub's* concepts translated by Dimitrina Lau-Bukowska for the translation of *Cosmos*. Research on the use of repetition and voice in Gombrowicz's sentence constructions facilitates the process of translation while translating Gombrowicz's thesaurus contributes to the scholarly understanding of his world construction. The sense of alliteration and letter play seems to be developed texturally in an act of translation. A crucial difference between a scholar's and a translator's work lies also in the preparation: the former researches mainly the studied topic and related issues, the latter is obliged to get acquainted with near to all possible interpretations in order to make them potential in the translation as well. In sum, by translating one becomes a better researcher as well and translation gets better with research. If once a speaker of Gombrowicz's instructions though, can one step back into a questioner of instructions role?

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Gombrowiczians often are urged to and consequently, they have a hard time labelling Witold Gombrowicz within a certain or single literary school (or nationality). A translator's job seems twice more challenging when, instead of deforming him, one tries to transfer and make immanent all possible schools within his work. Speaking for him, I wouldn't then present him as a (post)modern Polish writer on the cover of *Cosmos*. On the other hand, researching his instruction not to be called "ours", I would rather question the (non)Polishness of his work.

Bulgaria is about to face this issue more and more because of the delayed reception and publication of Gombrowicz's oeuvre.

Strangely enough, it all started very well for the world writer back in the 80s. *Ferdydurke* was published in 1988 – even before Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Gombrowicz appeared in Bulgarian with his first novel and it must have looked very promising for his future presence. The translator, Dimitrina Lau-Bukowska, did a great job with his neologisms and specific language; she chose to translate very creatively the meaningful names of characters. She continued her devoted work with the plays when *Iwona, księżniczka Burgunda* was staged by Elena Tsikova in 1991 and eventually they all appeared in published form in 1997. Several bits of work appeared in literary periodicals in the 80s and the 90s – two short stories, excerpts from the *Diary*, *Trans-Atlantyk*, *Testament*, the *I was the First Structuralist* interview, translated respectively by Lau-Bukowska, Silvia Borisova, Milena Mileva, Svetla Vassileva, Katia Mitova, Slavjanka Hadzieva, and anonymously. However, it's been 30 years since the publication of the first novel in Bulgarian before the last (and only second for our country) was translated and published. Curiously enough, about 30 years separate their original publication as well.

To my knowledge, there is not much research on Gombrowicz in Bulgaria. There are a couple of literary master's theses (Vitka Deleva 2000, Nadia Konstantinova 2001), a comparative chapter of a Ph.D. dissertation (Pavel Petrov 2015), a comparative Ph.D. dissertation (Katherina Kokinova 2015) and a linguistic Ph.D. dissertation published as a book (Dimitrina Hamze 2016). Boyan Biolchev authored the prefaces to the editions of *Ferdydurke* and the plays; Ognyan Kovachev, Dobromir Grigorov, Katia Mitova, Galya Simeonova-Konach wrote singular articles. The 2019 special Gombrowiczian issue of the e-journal *Philological Forum* features two more articles by Bulgarian literary scholars.

Having worked on Gombrowicz's instructions and metaliterary strategies for 10 years, I have achieved some relative distance from his Form. That is why it was very challenging to switch my position into the one "speaking" for him, pronouncing his instructions and thus coalescing with them. The work of a translator seems paradoxically incompatible and at the same time inseparable from a scholar's work. The benefits are that once you know him well, it should be possible to smoothly transfer this knowledge. However, you also need to "unknow", to "forget" your interpretations in order to allow for new ones. When a researcher investigates a topic, s/he studies it thoroughly. Nevertheless, a translator needs to study as many as possible topics and approaches. The critic manipulates the context, while the translator cultivates and nourishes it. If some critics often criticize translations and make their own to

illustrate their argument, the translators need to make all arguments immanent. A translator attends to the whole, unlike the critic who focuses on the singular. The translator is supposed to be much closer to the author, and his “intentions” while the critic is uninterested in them.

We could thus distinguish three levels of closeness to the fabric of a text: 1) *the reader* who reads a part of a part and only partly, for s/he may skip a page or two, or be interrupted by a phone call or a fly, so he needs an expert in order “to appreciate the relationship and the harmony of its individual parts” (Gombrowicz, 2000, p. 70) (Gombrowicz & Błoński, 1986, ss. 69-70); 2) *the expert/ critic* who takes a certain vantage point towards interpreting the text; sometimes bases his/her observations on another person’s interpretation – if reading the text in translation; 3) *the translator* who then again makes use of the work of critics in addition to his/her investigations. My work on *Cosmos* has shown that all levels should be undertaken as stages while bridging language and sense alike. Not every translator has a critical scholarly background and not every literary scholar has the privilege to have translated the work being studied, but in these rare chances, one can benefit from previous practice. Moreover, my experience shows a notable difference in the research produced *before* in contrast to the research produced *after* having translated the novel. Moving a step back to the reader – let’s assume that the translator is still a kind of reader rather than a critic – this interestingly corresponds to George Steiner’s and Roland Barthes’ distinctions between a reader and a critic. The former stays very close to the text while the latter is distanced from it so that he sees it in essence: “It is of the essence of the reader's attempt to abolish or sublimate that very distance which the critic stakes out. To memorize is, simultaneously, to enter into the text and to be entered into by the text” (Steiner, 1979, p. 443). Besides, “To go from reading to criticism is to change desires, it is no longer to desire the work but to desire one's own language” (Barthes, 2007, p. 40). Yet, a common trait for the critic and the translator is that they both produce a text, they are in love with a text. Only, the critic loves *his own* while the translator loves the text of another *as his own*, thus “adopting” “this bastard” sent by the author to the publisher (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 97) (Gombrowicz, 1997a, ss. 125-126).

Characteristic of the translator’s work is that s/he not only perceives and reads the text but s/he rather processes it at least twice by way of simultaneous reading and writing. Thus s/he engages in a double act of coalescing with the text – once as taking the pouring text in (essentially, rereading) and then being the text. Only that way s/he could simultaneously embroider letters while having the whole text in mind. Essentially, a translator is an invisible presence, resembling “a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink

and clamoring to become visible" on the blank pages (Nabokov, 1980, p. 379). However, it's not advisable to use loosely the word translator here. There are three kinds of translators according to Nabokov's typology:

[1] the scholar who is eager to make the world appreciate the works of an obscure genius as much as he does himself; [2] the well meaning hack; and [3] the professional writer relaxing in the company of a foreign confrere. The scholar will be, I hope, exact and pedantic: footnotes – on the *same* page as the text and not tucked away at the end of the volume – can never be too copious and detailed. The laborious lady translating at the eleventh hour the eleventh volume of somebody's collected works will be, I am afraid, less exact and less pedantic; but the point is not that the scholar commits fewer blunders than a drudge; the point is that as a rule both he and she are hopelessly devoid of any semblance of creative genius. Neither learning nor diligence can replace imagination and style (Nabokov, 1981, p. 319; numbers inserted by me – K.K.).

It seems that all three may err in one way (or another) but most likely the good translator is the one to forget himself, to make himself transparent, to be a genius (i.e. talented), to be knowledgeable and to possess the gift of mimicry, to "be able to act, as it were, the real author's part by impersonating his tricks of demeanor and speech, his ways and his mind, with the utmost degree of verisimilitude" (Ibid.).

Evidently, Nabokov has strong requirements for good translation (even though he himself fails them) and Milan Kundera is also well known for having severe demands for his translators. How about the third trans-Slavic mousquetaire, Gombrowicz? Does he instruct us on how to translate (the way he expresses his strong opinions on criticism)? Provided that he translated himself *Ferdydurke* without knowing Spanish, can he demand anything from a translator? He discusses other people's quality of translation in several entrances of the *Diary*. It doesn't seem exaggerated to say that to Gombrowicz the very act of writing is perceived as translation:

Yet I realize that one must be oneself at all levels of writing, which is to say, that I ought to be able to express myself not only in a poem or drama, but also in everyday prose – in an article or in a diary – and the flight of art has to find its counterpart in the domain of regular life, just as the shadow of the condor is cast onto the ground. What's more, this passage into an everyday world from an area that is backed into the most remote depths, practically in the underground, is a matter of great importance to me. I want to be a balloon, but one with ballast; an antenna, but one that is grounded. I

want to be capable of translating myself into everyday speech, but—*traduttore, traditore*. Here I betray myself, I am beneath myself (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 42) (Gombrowicz, 1997a, ss. 56-57).

Yet another self-betrayal we may see in the absence of reflection on the translatability of his work. The neologisms and language play that Gombrowicz is notorious for and which posits the main challenge for translating are so essentially rooted in the Polish language and context that sometimes they are almost untransferable and unthinkable in another language. The phrase *swój do swego po swoje* is representative of this problem. What was the most challenging in translating the key phrase in *Cosmos* was to think of – or rather to make up – an equivalent in the non-case Bulgarian and simultaneously somehow retain its verblessness. It was very important not to introduce a verb because it would have fixed its otherwise unclear connotation. The phrase seems to change its meaning throughout the novel while remaining unchanged itself. There were many and many options and neither seemed appropriate enough. They either meant something else or sounded clumsy. In addition to its historical economic context, the anti-Semitic implications, the everyday use of language, its relation to *wsobność* (which in turn relates it to Stanisław Wyspiański's *każdy sobie rzepkę skrobie*), and to *Ferdydurke*'s *(po)bratać się*, Gombrowicz's twist of its meaning and the erotic-onanistic subtext, along with perhaps even the notion of Dasein-with, I had to find a way to introduce it without lengthy explanations or fixed meaning. My skills as a researcher were useful in digging the original meaning of the phrase, as well as to trace the process from excess (*przesada/nadużycie*) through being intrinsic (*nieswojo*) to various contingencies that lead to different kinds of chaos and disorder in the novel. However, this couldn't replace consultations with language experts and finding a solution. A decisive factor was, eventually, the artistic sense and the preservation of the rhythm. Thus, a literal rendering was chosen. To date this translation issue is closed while in my research I am still coming to new layers of meaning such as the reference to Aristotle's discussion of friendship defined as *likeness* in *The Nicomachean Ethics*: "like people are friends, whence come the sayings 'like to like'"¹ (1152-1153b). It is a relief that the translator's work may be completed once published. However, it is also terrifying to know that you may have missed something vital and the readership may be forever deprived of it. Happily, with research it is different – even published it can always be disproved or elaborated in another piece.

For a toddler in translation like me, Lau-Bukowska's skillful work on *Ferdydurke* and the plays (and *Iwona* in particular) were there to learn from. Some of Gombrowicz's concepts

¹ Translated as „swój do swego” in Polish. Acknowledgements to Tomasz Kaliściak for this suggestion.

there such as *gęba, morda, mina, kalkulować, niemożność/ niemóc, świństwo*, etc. were the necessary ground for succession in translating *Cosmos*. I do hope that both novels as translated in Bulgarian sound as written by the same author. Specific difficulties in my first translation were the construction of the narrator's train of thought (partly similar to Fuks's and Leon's), the word constellations forming gradations, concretizations of synonyms. Combinations, associations, relations, and connections seemed to be the building blocks of *Cosmos* as a simultaneous result and prerequisite for events and phenomena. It was interesting to conduct Gombrowicz's play with active/ passive voice ("The cat was hanged. I hanged the cat".) which switches the vantage point. I debated with the editor and with experts in Polish about Gombrowicz's use of *niedrogi-tani-taniej*. This is something typical for Polish and not for Bulgarian. That is why they see the first two as synonymous while I insisted that it is representative of the many lexical gradations in the novel. Words of common root or prefix were paid special attention as they also contributed to the rhythm. It was pure joy to dive into rhymes and the lyrical sounding of the novel with all its alliterations and assonances. An important aspect of that seems to be the specific punctuation of the work which serves as instruction for intonation (see the disorderly poured words without punctuation in contrast to the strictly ordered lists of words separated with commas). It is also interesting that here the bearer of sense and meaning is not the whole sentence as much as the singular word. That is how the constellation of words form the world. Direct speech constitutes another key characteristic with it being weaved in the narration without quotation marks. Concerning attending to the rhythm again, I kept the (uncommon for the Bulgarian, but very typical Polish) participle forms. One of the biggest tasks in translating *Cosmos* is certainly Leon's jabbering. In addition to the importance of contingency in the novel, we may see it as a form of dada art. The phrases *wycieczka-ucieczka, znalazłem-znalazłem*, and *gęźba nad gęźbami* among others were especially challenging. It was also thought-provoking to find out an expressive way to transform "the Big Bang scene" with Kulka and the hammer/ axe. There are many words for strong sounds, clanking and cracking in gradation, that illustrate the scene acoustically (*młoty, łomoty, łomotanie, loskot, wbijanie, wbicie, walić, walenie, thuc, huk, halas*, etc.). A good translation is often advised to attend to the whole sense, to the picture and the artistic tools being used, while in translating Gombrowicz yet another special stress is put on the constructive lexical clusters such as *chaos (rozgardiasz, gmatwanina, pogmatwany, mieszanina, płataniny, zawilość, rozhowor, rozjuszony, rejwach, rumor) VS bezład (nieład; bez składu ni ładu, fala za falą; bezrząd, nieporządek, rozbełtanie, rozpad, rozprzężenie, odmět, zamęt, wiklanina)*; as well as *zanadto (extra, dość, nadetatowe, za dużo)*; or *odrobina*

(*drobiazg, szczegół, detal, drobnostek, rozdrobiony*); also *tłok (nawał, chmary i roje)* or Leon's various *male przyjemności (rozkosze, frajdy, etc.)*. Translating Gombrowicz's thesaurus contributed to my scholarly understanding of his world construction while my research on chaos and disorder along with the excessive served as ground for the search of their Bulgarian equivalents. Finally, I decided to keep the original names of the characters with a few notes on their layers of meaning.

When Gombrowicz comments on his work on translating *Ferdydurke* in Spanish, he describes his relationship with the novel as “nothingness” (*nicość*). (Curiously enough, my work on translating *Cosmos*, for me seems to be everythingness). It may seem that “the ridiculous impotence of words in the face of life” (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 172) (Gombrowicz, 1997a, s. 220) is essentially what writing does – it tries to translate a *reality*, this very dangerous word which comprises of Gombrowicz's central theme in *Cosmos* and a key thread throughout his work: “in order (...) to be able to possess reality, it must first be put through a being that can be attractive... that is, that can surrender itself... a lower, weaker being.” (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 372) (Gombrowicz, 1997b, ss. 111-112). Translating seems to be *an attempt at possessing reality* which in the case of *Cosmos*, is an attempt at possessing the reality of (meta)fiction, that is, “a reality that is creating itself” (Gombrowicz, 2012, p. 674) (Gombrowicz, 1997c, s. 203). In short, translating *Cosmos* can be seen as an attempt at possessing the reality of self-created reality. After speaking His instructions, I go on with questioning them in my research on the reconstruction of Gombrowicz's theory of metafiction.

It is unbelievable how much more one can add to one's knowledge and skills within fifteen months of translation in contrast to ten years of research. Or at least this is the sense of what I learned from my first translation. I believe it's only the beginning of a beautiful and enriching journey.

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