https://doi.org/10.18778/8220-679-1.05

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CAPITOLO 4
TRADUZIONE E UMANESIMO

Józef Wittlin's translation of *The Odyssey* as a declaration of humanism

Abstract
This chapter deals with Józef Wittlin's Polish translation of Homer's *Odyssey* as a literary channel to convey the translator's own very humanist outlook. It focuses, above all, on the translation's peculiar archaising style, explaining how Wittlin's philosophical beliefs can be expounded by focusing on the style of the translation rather than on the innate qualities of the Greek epic. The translation's style then becomes an interdisciplinary focal point in which stylistics and the translator's personal philosophy converge.
Keywords: Józef Wittlin, humanism, *Odyssey*, translation, style.

La traduzione de l'*Odissea* di Józef Wittlin come una dichiarazione di umanesimo
Riassunto
Questo capitolo tratta della traduzione polacca de l'*Odissea* di Omero eseguita da Józef Wittlin. È percepita come un canale letterario per trasmettere una visione umanistica del traduttore. Si incentra soprattutto sullo stile arcaicizzante un po' peculiare ed espone le opinioni filosofiche di Wittlin che vengono associate più all'aspetto formale della traduzione che alle qualità dell'epopea greca. Lo stile della traduzione diventa un punto focale di interdisciplinarietà ove la stilistica dell'originale e la filosofia personale del traduttore si incontrano.
Parole chiave: Józef Wittlin, *Odissea*, stile, traduzione, umanesimo.

The act of translating with a concrete philosophical agenda in mind inevitably ties the translation to that specific agenda, making it an interdisciplinary vehicle for addressing concerns that extend beyond comparative linguistic and literary matters of source and target texts. It is from this angle that I wish to look at Józef Wittlin's Polish translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, linking it to the translator's humanist outlook. The fact that he committed himself to one of the most important ancient texts, one that lies at the heart of Western civilisation, already hints at Wittlin's worldview. However, relating Wittlin's humanist philosophy merely to the choice of work for translation would tend to limit the discussion about the presence

of humanism in his translation to ways in which intrinsic humanistic qualities are present in *any* translation. Such a perspective, in turn, would to a large extent overlook the importance of the style of the translated text, which, as I shall argue in this chapter, is permeated with the translator's humanistic beliefs. Indeed, it is the style that gives *The Odyssey*'s humanism a more personal touch, that of its translator.

1. Humanism in the life of Józef Wittlin

Józef Wittlin was a Polish poet, prose writer, translator and essayist of Jewish ancestry born in Dmytrów near Lvov in 1896, who died as an émigré writer in the USA in 1976 (Zajączkowski, 2016: 5). In his Lvov high school, he learnt classical languages and literature, afterwards going to Vienna to study philosophy from 1914 to 1916 (Yurieff, 1997: 140). Together with Joseph Roth, Wittlin voluntarily joined the Austro-Hungarian Army, serving in the military for two years (Yurieff, 1997: 11, 140). The traumatic first-hand experience of war, with all its tragic consequences for human psyche, morals and, more broadly, culture, inevitably left a deep mark on young Wittlin's sensitivity as a writer, and he became increasingly preoccupied with questions of morality and the condition of man. Seven years after the end of the war, Wittlin remarks that

> [t]he phenomenon of war, aside from intensified happiness and anger, awoke another passion in poets, i.e. an old obsession to mend the world [...], which explains the poets' keen interest in morality and socio-political problems during the war (Wittlin, 1925: 19).[1]

Rather than undermining the writer's faith in humanity, his war experiences seem to have made it stronger. All his life, Wittlin's understanding of reality was filtered by trust in human goodness and moral codes (Wittlin, 1925: 64), and this love of the people was by no means a fleeting infatuation of the young writer. Almost twenty years after the end of the First World War, the principles and values that are the cornerstone of Wittlin's humanity are raised by the theme of an epic voyage of a vulnerable man in times of adversity, which Wittlin incorporated in his only surviving novel *Sól ziemi*, 1935. The ethical undertones of the novel resonated with contemporary readers at the time of its publication as much as they do today.[2] In his review of the novel, reprinted on the dust jacket of its postwar edition, Emil Breiter, a renowned literary critic of the 1920s and

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[1] All quotations in this chapter are in my translation.

[2] The importance of ethics in Wittlin's life and work has been widely discussed by Opacki (1990), Ligęza, Wocław (2014), Szewczyk-Haake (2017) and many others.

1930s, links the novel to a classic theme, noting that "[t]he simplest feelings, which have determined the history of mankind, inform the poet's artistic work and explain his life stance" (Wittlin, 1954). Indeed, Wittlin was a humanist in every sense of the word. He embodied the humanism of the Renaissance, and was keen to rediscover ancient texts in his search of knowledge about man. Equally, however, he held the dignity, interests and values of mankind very dear to him, all of which permeate his life and letters. This affinity of Wittlin's literature, along with his humanist concerns for mankind in general, for ancient classical writings was ever-present and it was not just a label attached to him. Much later, in 1962, Wittlin explains why he chose *Orpheus in the Hell of the 20th Century* for the title of a selection of his life's works and, in doing so, declares his literary mission statement:

> Horace called Orpheus the sacred interpreter of the gods, who restrained wild mankind from slaughter […] I've written many of my works published here with the daring intention of stopping wild mankind from slaughter […] (Wittlin, 2000: 13).

His argument, then, is that literature should guide people and remind them what moral virtues they should follow in life (Wittlin, 2000: 11). And it is precisely from the angle of literature as a communicative channel that I wish to look at Wittlin's Polish translation of the Greek heroic poem.

2. Humanism in the Polish translation of *The Odyssey*

Considering that the moral responsibility of literature was central to Wittlin, it is hardly surprising that translating the Greek epos haunted Wittlin throughout his life. His first attempts at translation go back to 1914 but it was not before 1924 that the first edition was published in Lvov (Wittlin, 1982: 9–11). The second edition, published seven years later, was only slightly revised; yet, from then on, Wittlin painstakingly continued to revisit the text for twenty-six years, which led to the publication of the third edition in 1957 (Kubiak, 1982: 431–433). Because of their origins, his translations were destined to convey Wittlin's humanist outlook, taking shape as they did during Wittlin's military service in the First World War, an experience which, as mentioned earlier, had a great impact on the writer. No wonder then that all the three editions of *Odyseja* open with his own poetic elegy to Homer, in which Wittlin lyrically thanks Homer for talking to him soothingly during the war in a way that must have helped the young writer to preserve his sanity in those difficult times (Wittlin, 1931: 43).

However, right from the very beginning, Wittlin's *Odyseja* generated controversy because of its strange, old-fashioned style, which on one hand was criticised as "pseudo-folksy" and "peculiar" (Kubiak, 1982: 432), and on the

other hand secured him the Polish PEN Club Award (Yurieff, 1997: 49). In 1921, while working on corrections for a publisher, Wittlin called his *Odyseja* "a botched job", which made him feel like an "unprolific Jew who couldn't even cope with the Polish language" (Wittlin, 1996: 25–26). Nonetheless, it seems that it was only a youthful crisis of self-confidence, because from then onwards Wittlin generally defended the archaic style. In 1953 and 1954, for example, he published two essays, *Pro domo mea* and *Jeszcze pro domo mea* respectively, in which he takes up the debate on the archaic style in response to his critics (Wittlin, 2000: 626–651). In the preface to the third edition, Wittlin openly admits that it was "with deep regret" that he was forced to remove many archaisms and old grammatical forms from this version (Wittlin, 1957: 20). And yet, even in this edition, the archaic style is a strong presence in the lexical, grammatical and syntactical levels of the text. A few examples are presented in tab. 1 below:

Table 1. Examples of archaised style markers in Wittlin's translation of *The Odyssey*

Style marker	Archaising strategy	Examples	English translation and explanation
Lexical	the use of obsolete words	domarad	nostalgia
		obiata	a Slavic pagan offering to gods
		korab	a ship
		zaoczyć	to notice
	the use of folk vernaculars and regional borrowings	żertwa	a Slavic name for an offering to gods (from Old Russian)
		widun	a prophet (from Ukrainian)
		umrzyk	a deceased (from a vernacular in the Kielce region)
	the use of archaising neologisms	litosierdzie	a neologism meaning "mercy" (an amalgam of "litość" and "miłosierdzie", both of which mean "mercy")
		natchniewać	an imperfect form of the word "natchnąć" (to inspire), non-existent in standard Polish
	old words that are still rarely used	zmiarkować	to guess, to realise

Style marker	Archaising strategy	Examples	English translation and explanation
Grammatical	the use of 1st person plural conjugation suffix "-im"	przybylim	instead of "przybyliśmy" (we came); this suffix is typical of some vernaculars in the Wielkopolska, Kujawy, Mazowsze and Pałuki regions
	the use of obsolete plural forms	bogi	instead of "bogowie" (gods)
	the use of an old-fashioned relative pronoun, widely used in the translation of the Polish Bible	któregom	instead of "którego" (whom)
Syntactical	the use of an obsolete predicate structure, present in some vernaculars	w domostwie Kirki my jego trupa opuścili	instead of "w domostwie Kirki jego trupa opuściliśmy" (we have left his corpse in Circe's house)
	the use of the conjunctions "i" and "a" as sentence openers, followed by an inverted word order suggestive of the 16th and 17th- century Polish translations of the Bible[3]	I tak mu odpowie boski, przemyślny Odysej […]	A sentence opening with "i", followed by a predicate "odpowie", and then the subject "Odysej" (And the divine and clever Odysseus replies him in these words…)

Source: own elaboration.

The table lists only a few of a whole plethora of archaic words and structures in Wittlin's translation. Not only do they give an outdated appearance to the text, but they can also interfere with the reading of the texts, as much when they were first published as they do now. Aware of the potential challenges for the reader, Wittlin compiled a glossary of archaic and rare words which accompany his translation of the epos. This paratextual addition indicates that the degree of archaisation is relatively high, even in the last revised edition of *Odyseja*, which contains many fewer obsolete words than the previous two editions.

[3] See Szurek (2013: 193–220) for an insightful analysis of these Bible translations.

However, my point is that there is much more at stake than simply a challenging reading process and the controversy that this peculiar style has generated. What I wish to focus on is the aim that Wittlin may have had when archaising the style of his translation of the epos. Answers to these questions, as argued by the translation scholar Kirsten Malmkjær,

> are often provided in terms of factors which are to a greater or lesser extent within the writer's more or less conscious control, such as e.g. political persuasion or ideological or gender position (2003: 39).

And indeed, Wittlin unhesitatingly invites his readers to link the text to him as a real person. In his preface to the 1931 edition, for example, Wittlin playfully asks the reader for forgiveness "if [they] see less of untamed history and more of the translator himself in this *Odyssey*" (Wittlin 1931: 19), and draws a link between the translation style and his own personality:

> If translations were to be always entirely faithful to the original text, then the translator would always be rid of his/her own personality in them, because the only way to see [the translator's] individuality is through his/her style. For translators, form is everything because it is through form that they convey their craftsmanship and their own temperament (1931: 19).

And yet, this is all that the reader is left with, since nowhere does Wittlin explain what this archaic style should reveal. Making these links more explicit is, it seems, in the hands of the reader.

This exercise should begin, I believe, with the rather obvious observation that the stylistic peculiarity of Wittlin's *Odyseja* draws the reader's attention to the words on the page rather than to the epic itself. The abundance of obsolete, obscure words and structures overwhelm the reader, pushing them out of their comfort zone in the reading process. Words cease to be familiar and, instead, become strangers that you desire to know better, learn what they really are and what they really stand for. This pursuit, in turn, may give rise to several other questions, such as: How does language evolve? Why do words mean what they mean? What do words make us think of? To what end is language used? Is there really only one Polish language? Why is some of it forgotten or moved to the margins of Polish mainstream culture and literature? All these questions, as I shall argue further, tie in with the translator's literary mission to mend the world which I referred to earlier, and with his intention – beyond the epic poem's translation – to comfort those who are "disconsolate, defeated and dissatisfied with life", and who feel let down by religious beliefs and dogmas that suddenly become meaningless (as maintained by Wittlin in his preface to the second edition, 1931: 7, 10).

It is through Wittlin's style in *Odyseja* that he tells us how we can protect our humanity, along with our dignity, freedom, ethics and tolerance, when

everything else acts against them. When our faith in humanity sinks for whatever reason, immersing yourself in the ancient texts that gave rise to Western civilisation can compensate for that desolate feeling. Greek myths, along with the Scriptures, embody unchangeable values that make us human. The ethical code conveyed in them is the moral reference point which, once set in stone, has guided Western civilisation from its beginning. Myths may seem to be related to historical facts, but their real anthropocentric role is to help people understand what happens to them and around them (Kopaliński, 2008: 777). And this may prove difficult when what we call reality is clouded by ideological and political dogmas that feed into various discourses that govern our lives. No wonder then that classical works and the Scriptures have been constantly retranslated, rewritten and reinvented, and that the translation of Homer has been "the ambition of every European literature" across the generations (Parandowski, 1955: 299). The story of Odysseus alone has inspired many literary masterpieces, such as Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses* (1842), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Jean Giono's *The Birth of Odysseus* (1949) to name but a few. It is through our continuous literary involvement in these classic texts that we pay homage to the values built into these texts. And thus, by translating *The Odyssey*, Wittlin did exactly that, because he saw Greek and Biblical myths as "an eternal matter which conceives the soul", and which conveys "the totality of love, suffering and yearning of all mankind" (Wittlin, 1931: 14). The presence of these two ancient cornerstones of ethics, Greek mythology and the Scriptures, is reinforced by Wittlin's style. Ubiquitous obsolete words give an illusion that the ancient past and the core humanistic values are within our reach and hence feel much closer to the reader. Here, the Bible-inspired style serves an intertextual function, referring the reader to the Scriptures as another moral guiding light, which is otherwise not overtly present in the Greek epos.

The employment of folk vernacular, too, extends the reader's journey to the core human values beyond those of antiquity: rural culture and folklore can be seen as yet another source of innocence, in which an idealised countryside remains unblemished by corrupt political influences and disorientating information owing to the countryside's proximity to nature and its isolation from the wider world. This pastoral serenity of *Odyseja*, evoked by the archaised style, stands in stark contrast with ills marring our own lives and the outside world. It is a reminder that escaping to nature and the countryside can soothe our troubled souls, just as Homer's *Odyssey* soothed Wittlin during the war.

Admittedly, fascination with folklore, folk poetry, imagery and oral traditions, was an aspect of the poetics of the Young Poland artists who derived their inspiration from folklore in their attempts to reinvent the language of poetry at the turn of the 20th century (Hutnikiewicz, 2004: 68–69, 93–94). Wittlin's employment of vernacular, however, outlived the poetics of Young Poland, which died out after the end of the First World War, because he was

determined to retain the archaic strategies in all the three post-war editions of his translation of *The Odyssey*. His dedication to archaisms suggests that rather than being just a literary fashion, they were for Wittlin the means by which he sought to rediscover rural culture in search of peace of mind.

Another way to nurture love for and faith in mankind is to be inclusive and democratic, an idea that is, too, signalled by Wittlin's archaic renditions of *The Odyssey*. The lexical richness, perhaps even strangeness, built on folk dialects, borrowings from other languages and newly-coined archaic words raise a question about the politics of language that Wittlin himself addressed in 1954, when, in an ironical tone, he proposed formulating a rule that would regulate what word should or should not be part of the accepted Polish lexis (Wittlin, 2000: 648). Who makes such decisions and on what grounds? Consequently, if some words and languages are approved to be "correct", then others, together with cultures that own and use them, are inevitably marginalised from mainstream discourses. History has seen plenty of such discriminatory practices with regard to language and its users – Wittlin's painful self-accusation of being an unprolific Jew struggling with Polish which I have mentioned earlier did not, after all, come of nowhere. Rising anti-Semitic tendencies in the first three decades of the 20th century inevitably affected Polish Jews, who began to be increasingly self-conscious. Julian Tuwim, for example, another Polish writer of Jewish descent, was accused in the *Prosto z mostu* (Straighforward) literary weekly of not writing in proper Polish, and contaminating it with a jabbering Jewish Polish language, which was unworthy of "true" Polish literature (Gliński, 2013). This is only one example of linguistic discrimination in the history of Poland but, surely, it has been experienced by many minorities across the globe. In this regard, the polyphony in Wittlin's *Odyseja* may be seen as a manifestation of linguistic inclusiveness, informed by tolerance and openness, two intricate components of a humane approach to otherness and others, who only then can flourish in appreciation and safety.

This linguistic inclusiveness leads to a broader reflection on the role of language as a building block of a humanist outlook and practice. No doubt this creative potential of words can also be abused for unethical and inhumane gains by twisting the meaningful integrity of words. Wittlin was well aware of this phenomenon and, in 1942, wrote an essay entitled "Puste słowa" (Empty Words), in which he lays out his concerns (Wittlin, 2000: 138–140). He saw how words, losing their correspondence with their referents, could be misused; and he linked this phenomenon with the unsettling times of war, hunger, oppression, which corrode the moral integrity of people and societies more broadly. At this stage, words transform into empty words, mere "sounds that express fake content, deforming it morally" (Wittlin, 2000: 138). Considering what one might call the vulnerability of words, Wittlin's employment of obsolete forms is bound to make us think of how easily some meanings of words disappear or, worse still, are made to disappear. By the same token, if moral values, which should be eternal, become

meaningless and disused, they are bound to turn into unused archaisms. This is what Wittlin wrote in 1935 in an essay commemorating Henri Barbusse's death:

> Let us put 'mankind' in quotation marks, because who pronounces this word without irony these days? How many of those who used to believe that 'man is kind' survived? We all know now that man is not good and kind and that maybe the word 'mankind' in the sense in which this word was used by humanists is only an archaism now. So let us archaise knowingly (2000: 508).

If by "knowing archaisation" Wittlin meant recovering the lost validity and significance of fundamental values for mankind, then archaisms, also in his *Odyseja*, may well be viewed as manifestations of ethical integrity which, for a self-professed humanist, must be promoted amongst his readers. In this way, the archaic style becomes Wittlin's declaration of humanism.

This text-world connection imposes a huge responsibility onto language users because misused language can work against the freedom and dignity of other people. At the same time, however, the impact of words on reality endows writers, especially those of a humanist persuasion, with a mission to write in order to promote deeply humanist values – which Wittlin sought to accomplish. In order for a literary work to fulfil this task, however, the text must have the potential of engaging with and stirring the reader's mind beyond the plot level. This can be achieved also by a translation's distinct style, which accommodates much more than what the source text has to offer. In this sense, the stylistic strategy of archaisation in Wittlin's *Odyseja* becomes a device that unearths his commitment to humanist values, in particular those that are built on language. Such a role of a literary style makes every translated text special, because it is shaped by various individualities of translators. And so Wittlin rightly noted that Łucjan Siemieński, the author of an earlier Polish rendition of the Greek epos, "must have sensed entirely different things in the epic poem than he did, because otherwise his [Wittlin's] translation would be of no use" (1931: 19).

3. Conclusion

Works of literature, viewed as acts of communication, inevitably channel the author's experiences and sensitivity in a more or less overt manner. This function of literature stands true also with the case of translated works and translators, their co-authors. However, though every translation is a joint effort of the original writer and the translator, translators have less space to express themselves than the authors of the original work. And yet, their ideologies can be knitted into their style whose careful examination in the light of the translator's philosophical life stance can reveal much more beyond the substance and the themes of the work in translation.

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