

The Literary Canon and Translation

Polish Culture as a Case Study

Piotr Wilczek

What constitutes a canon? A question formulated in this way can provoke a variety of answers. A canon may be defined as a collection of key works of literature; it can refer to philosophical, political, and religious texts that a particular society has come by consensus to regard as foundational. Today the term *canon* has come to signify authors and works that either used to be included in literature syllabi or textbooks, or those works that repeatedly appear in standard volumes of the history of literature, bibliographies, and literary criticism. The canon has become an issue of much contention in the humanities. The purpose of the debate, interestingly enough, has not been (as one might have assumed) about alterations, but instead about comprehending why the canon is as it is, how it was formulated, and how circumstances can alter and condition its supposedly timeless content. The canon has come to be viewed by some as “the expression of cultural authority created by other people influential in the past”; it has been defined as “the space of cultural conflict” and as “debatable ground, the ground of the battle between various groups, practices and institutions”. This ongoing “hermeneutics of suspicion” can produce one of two consequences: either a new canon is established, or the very notion of a canon is called into question. As Jeremy Hawthorn noted: “When feminist critics started to construct a rival canon or canons, not always as a *replacement* for the ‘official’ canon but also as an *alternative* to it, then this struck at the *claim to universality* that lay behind the idea of a single canon. For, in a traditional sense, if there were several canons then there was no canon.”[1]

My paper is not devoted to this debate; it has been held in numerous books and academic essays. As far as the notion of the canon is concerned I am neither a believer nor a nonbeliever. After having read a great deal about the canon I can call myself an agnostic. I am using this notion as a means to clarify my presentation, for even if the canon, or canons, do not exist, there is still a tendency to produce lists of bestsellers, must-read books, books that changed the world, and so on. The same applies to film as an

intellectual medium. Let me mention just one example, an interesting Web site called Beyond the Canon (<http://beyondthecanon.blogspot.com/>) devoted to the selection of “up to 100 films that [are] believed to have been under-represented by film history” that mean more than “the established, well-exposed classics.” Although the canon of great books proposed by Robert Hutchins in the 1930s as a university program and as a book series may no longer be acceptable and has been altered many times, and while the “Western canon” of Harold Bloom has been studied with suspicion by some as just another pseudoconservative effort to preserve a status quo that in fact no longer exists, there still is and will surely always be a tendency to create canons. It may be worth our while to examine the close relations between canon creation and the process of translation.

The literatures of smaller nations have a chance to begin to function in the “universal” canon only if they are published in English translation.

In 2006 a London publisher Bounty Books brought out *501 Must-Read Books*. It is a sort of illustrated album. It has many pictures and is divided into nine parts (children books, classic fiction, historical books, diaries, contemporary fiction, literature, science fiction, thrillers, travel writing). Each book is discussed on just one page with a brief description and a large picture, usually a cover or an author’s portrait. While the word *canon* does not appear, the intention is clear: to provide the reader with the list of the 501 most important books of all time, masterpieces or “great books.” Among these 501 tomes there is only one by a Polish author: Witold Gombrowicz. At the end of a brief description of the characteristics of Gombrowicz’s novel *Ferdydurke*, the “highly acclaimed” translation of Danuta Borhardt gets equal attention. This translation was published for the first time in 2000 with an introduction by Susan Sontag. The next edition in 2005 has on the cover a quotation from an enthusiastic review in the *Observer* that describes the novel as a masterpiece. Thus we have here the four necessary elements that I claim make it possible for a work of literature from outside the English-speaking world to become a part of the canon: a good translation into English made by an already well-established translator; a well-known publisher (in this case, Yale University Press); a recommendation from a critic who belongs to influential literary circles (in this case, Susan Sontag); and an enthusiastic review in a major literary journal or magazine (*Observer*).

The year 1994 saw the publication of *The Western Canon* by Harold Bloom, a distinguished literary critic and professor at Yale University. While now in print for almost two decades, *The Western Canon* remains the most famous recent attempt to preserve the traditional notion of a pantheon of world literature. Bloom defended the notion of a universal canon against various counterarguments formulated in the American system of higher education by—as he called them in an 1994 interview for *Newsweek*—“pseudo-Marxists, pseudo-feminists, watery disciples of Foucault and other French theorists.” Bloom defends a traditional understanding of the term *canon* against practically the whole establishment of literary theory. The book assails political and sociological methods of contemporary literary criticism as well as New Historicism, especially when interpreted from a Marxist or radically feminist perspective. Bloom makes every effort to redeem the aesthetic value of literature as determinative, and therefore privileges a reading method based on penetrating the text in search of artistic merit rather than for social, political or moral meaning. His collection consists of twenty-one essays that discuss works by Shakespeare, Cervantes, Chaucer, Montaigne, Molière, Milton, Goethe, Jane Austen, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, Ibsen, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and a few other writers in the Western tradition as the greatest of the greatest. In the appendices to his work Bloom mentions a few hundred world literature masterpieces that in his opinion belong to the canon of classic literature.

In spite of the controversy, Bloom’s ruling concept has been taken on within the realm of Anglo-American scholarship. But when one starts analyzing it from outside the English-speaking cultures, his version of the canon becomes even more contentious. If one goes beyond the spheres of those larger cultures, say French or Italian, better known to Anglo-American readers and settles on what from a Bloomian point of view might be called a “local” perspective, the issues continue to get quite intriguing. Let us start with my own point of view, Polish culture. Among hundreds of authors and works from around the world constituting the canon Bloom regards as fundamental, he includes the following:

Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*
 Czesław Miłosz, *Selected Poems*
 Witold Gombrowicz, three novels [sic]

Stanisław Lem, *The Investigation* and *Solaris*
 Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*
 Adam Zagajewski, *Tremor*
 (translated by Renata Gorczynski)

Most Polish readers would react to this list with astonishment. There is not a single pre-twentieth century author. Not Jan Kochanowski, generally accepted as the greatest Renaissance poet in the Slavic world; not Adam Mickiewicz, Poland’s bard and Pushkin’s great contemporary. Nor are there the two Nobel Prize winning novelists Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905) and Władysław Reymont (1924) mentioned in the list. Moreover, at the very least two great poets of the twentieth century are missing: Tadeusz Różewicz and Wisława Szymborska, the latter another Nobel Prize winner. Here is where any literate Pole’s eyebrows would really go up: if the selection had to be a minuscule six, why include Adam Zagajewski? A good poet, yes, a sophisticated intellectual, unquestionably—but does he really deserve to be one of the six greatest names in twentieth-century Polish literature, never mind representing its total contribution to the canon of world-worthy writing? How could it happen that such a list, at best deserving the adjective “eccentric” is claimed as canonical by a critic allegedly knowledgeable and renowned? I cannot resist expressing my own astonishment in a classically American way: what in the world was he *thinking*? To try to understand, I once approached Adam Czerniawski, a distinguished translator of Polish literature into English and someone who has engaged in polemics with Bloom. I asked him his opinion of why the American critic and scholar named only these six authors. The answer was as follows: he is simply not familiar with our literature; only these few names have reached his ears. Of course, he cannot be blamed for a gap in his knowledge, for the man is not capable of knowing everything; but he can unquestionably be blamed for pretending to know everything. He “squeezed” into the canon almost the whole bulk of nineteenth-century British poetry so by these criteria there should be some place not only for Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Norwid (who are not included) but also Malczewski, Lenartowicz and Asnyk. If Krasiński were German and Prus French, *The Undivine Comedy* and *The Doll* would have been included in each European canon a long time ago. Our nineteenth-century literature was ignored since we did not exist as a state at that time. The political aspects of canonization should never be forgotten.

Czerniawski's answer focuses on several factors decisive for the presence, or rather absence, of Polish literature in Bloom's classical canon. Most crucial is Poland's political weakness, especially in the nineteenth century when it did not exist as an independent state. It turns out that if you are a nation without a state (even a relatively large one, by European standards) you are disregarded in multiple ways. One of these ways concerns the role of literary translation from the "local perspective" into foreign languages with international influence. It is the translation into world languages that establishes the grounds for the emergence of local values in the classical canon. For many years now I have been exploring how the presence of certain Polish writers on European and American literary scenes depends on the work of translators. A translator and an anthologist (who not infrequently are one and the same person) are coauthors of the canon to a degree that has never been sufficiently acknowledged.

I discuss this issue later in more detail, but first let us return to Bloom's list. For Polish readers this set of names and titles is certainly surprising both in terms of quantity and quality. The presence of Czesław Miłosz, a Nobel Prize winner and that of Zbigniew Herbert, a highly acclaimed poet and essayist are not unexpected, but if the list is limited to only three poets why is Wisława Szymborska, another Nobel Prize winner not the third choice, or (were we to prove our own discernment and not rely on the judgments of the Nobel committee) Tadeusz Różewicz? Instead, the choice is Adam Zagajewski—a poet less highly regarded from the local Polish perspective.

The reason for Szymborska's absence seems to be very much in line with our premises about which local works make it into the canon, and why: she received the Nobel Prize in 1996, two years after the first edition of Bloom's book, and outstanding translations of her poetry were published widely in the United States only after the 1996 Nobel Prize. *View with a Grain of Sand* appeared that year; the translation was a collaborative effort by Stanisław Barańczak and his former student Clare Cavanagh. *Miracle Fair* was published in 2001 and was translated by Joanna Trzeciak. In the United Kingdom Szymborska was barely better known. Before the Nobel Prize only Adam Czerniawski had made on Szymborska's behalf the considerable effort that translating poetry demands, and he produced a small selection of her poetry titled *People on a Bridge*. This small book only sparked the interest of a small publishing house, Forest Books. Its American

counterpart was a volume titled *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts*, translated by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire and released in 1981. In this case the publisher was the well-known and highly regarded Princeton University Press, but this collection of Szymborska's poems likewise remained unnoticed until 1996, when it was republished after the author's Nobel success.

By contrast, the poetry of Adam Zagajewski prospered on the American poetry market thanks to the excellent renderings of an influential translator of Polish and Russian poetry, the very same Clare Cavanagh. She is currently on the faculty of Northwestern University. For many years Zagajewski has been a visiting professor at American universities, first at the University of Houston, later at the University of Chicago where he now holds a position on the Committee on Social Thought. Editions of Zagajewski's poetry and essays have consistently been available in mainstream American bookstores, while his new poems have often made their debut in either *The New Yorker* or *The New York Review of Books*. His most spectacular American success was thus described in *Newsweek Magazine* on September 5, 2011:

A week after the collapse of the Twin Towers *The New Yorker* ran Polish poet Adam Zagajewski's "Try to Praise the Mutilated World" on the final page of its special 9/11 issue. Written a year and a half before the attacks, the poem nevertheless quickly became the most memorable verse statement on the tragedy, and arguably the best-known poem of the last 10 years. A critic writing in *The New York Times Book Review* in December 2001 subtly mocked its appeal, "as if America were entering the nightmare of history for the first time and only a Polish poet could show us the way."

Let me quote "the best-known poem of the last 10 years" originally published in English by *The New Yorker* on September 24, 2001:

Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.
The nettles that methodically overgrew
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together

in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
 Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
 You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
 and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
 Praise the mutilated world
 and the gray feather a thrush lost,
 and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
 and returns.

One more example—a poem written by Wisława Szymborska after 9/11, titled “Photograph from September 11” and translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak:

They jumped from the burning floors—
 one, two, a few more,
 higher, lower.

The photograph halted them in life,
 and now keeps them
 above the earth toward the earth.

Each is still complete,
 with a particular face
 and blood well hidden.

There's enough time
 for hair to come loose,
 for keys and coins
 to fall from pockets.

They're still within the air's reach,
 within the compass of places
 that have just now opened.

I can do only two things for them—
 describe this flight
 and not add a last line.

I submit the following for your consideration: today “local” (national) literatures begin to function in the “universal” canon only if they are published in English translation. I have attempted to suggest briefly what could easily be documented at length, namely the extent to which the presence of Polish writers on the American and European markets depends on who gets translated, on what and how well, and finally, on just when. The role of translators and anthologists as coauthors should not be underestimated. Compose a list of the four greatest contemporary Polish poets published in English and you will find the list is different depending on which side of the ocean it was created. In the United Kingdom Miłosz, Szymborska and Herbert would be joined by Tadeusz Różewicz; in the United States

Różewicz, who is hardly known in influential literary circles, would be replaced by Zagajewski (this might change since Norton published an anthology of Różewicz's poetry in 2011). The reason for this “replacement” is that in Britain Różewicz has Adam Czerniawski, an excellent British translator, as his champion, but Czerniawski's translations, alas, are hardly available in the United States. Adam Zagajewski, by contrast, is quite well known in American academic circles, well liked because of his regular presence on American campuses and —thanks to his excellent American translator—well represented in popular but highbrow American literary journals and magazines.

These issues became all too clear to me in 1999 when a special double edition of *The Chicago Review* devoted to “New Polish Writing” was being prepared. As a professor of Polish literature at the University of Chicago I was one of the consultants and coauthors. The idea was to present works of all genres written over the previous decade by writers of all generations. But the editor, Bill Martin (then a graduate student at Chicago, now a professor at Colgate University in New York) made a fateful revision to the plan. He decided to include poems from Polish poets who were already considered “classical” or “canonical” that represented their “greatest” work. I then realized that among the four poets he wanted to include there was no room for Tadeusz Różewicz. Instead, together with the two Nobel winners Miłosz and Szymborska, and the indisputable Herbert (who by that time also had an influential translator and critic, Stanisław Barańczak, championing him in English), Martin decided to include Adam Zagajewski. A compromise was finally reached and both Różewicz and Zagajewski appeared in the list of contents, but my astonishment remained. How could he not plan to include Różewicz? I have now supplied you with my then-conclusion, a verdict that I have seen reinforced since. The answer is, it is all about translation.

The author of an anthology is inevitably at least a canon contributor, and if he has the status of a Harold Bloom he is a canon creator as well. If, as in this case, an anthology of recent Polish literature published in the United States becomes the prime source of knowledge about this literature with no alternative available, it inevitably becomes “canonical.” We can criticize such an anthology, just like we criticize Norton or Oxford anthologies of classical British or American literatures: they impose an academic canon of

fundamental works of literature. Although that issue of *The Chicago Review* had different goals and ambitions than a Norton anthology, it ended up fulfilling a similar role when no other anthologies of contemporary Polish literature were available. When there are no other opportunities to learn about recent Polish writing, what was intended to be an overview turns canonical and definitive. You will appreciate how mixed my feelings were a few years later when I saw the collection on a required reading list at one of the top Slavic departments in America.

The author of an anthology is inevitably at least a canon contributor, and if he has the status of a Harold Bloom he is a canon creator as well.

The aspiration of the *Review*'s editors was, of course, completely different: the idea was to present only newly prepared translations of works of writers of all generations, published in Polish between 1989 and 1999 and unavailable in the United States. This was not supposed to be a representative presentation of new Polish literature, and certainly not a judgment about the best of the best. For starters, there were numerous limitations due to the lack of qualified translators and to copyright issues. The ultimate selection was a subjective amalgam of a series of choices made by the editor and his advisors, including myself. Let me give just one example: a large selection by a young female writer, Natasza Goerke, was included because the editor of the anthology was her translator and admired her work. She has never been popular in Poland among critics and readers, yet based on the *Chicago Review* Natasza Goerke looks like a canonical writer.

In his introduction the editor of the anthology wrote:

Although I had some naive hopes of being “comprehensive” at the beginning of this project, circumstances and my own increasing familiarity with the wealth of work out there have made it clear that even with over seventy-five contributors contained in a whopping four hundred pages, this collection is far from complete. There are many writers I would have liked to include here but was unable to for the usual reasons of time, space, and organizational fray; and many important names have been left out due to the somewhat arbitrary restriction of including only work written or published since 1989. Nevertheless, this special issue is “the most comprehensive” of any collection of contemporary Polish writing to date; and whether or not that criterion in itself has validity, we hope

this issue will inspire readers and publishers to further acquaintances with Polish literature and culture.

This editor was conscientious enough to point out the obvious limitations of time, space, availability of translators explicitly, but such caveats tend to get overlooked when the anthology represents what is available of Polish literature in English and is included on college reading lists. It soon becomes a “canonical” work.

As I come to a close, the standard phrase *in summary* takes on a certain irony as I assert that anthologies of translations are the main sources in the creating and shaping the literary canons. As Armin Paul Frank has observed, “Translation anthologies are. . . indispensable in the study of translation and literary culture. . . [and they] were, until quite recently, part of a ‘shadow culture’ over-looked, by and large, by cultural critics, literary historians, and translation scholars alike.” A translation anthology (including selections of poems of one poet translated to another language) is “one of the most enlightening and memorable ways of transferring culture internationally.” The translator/anthologist has great power to impose on the uninitiated his/her canon of foreign literature. However, s/he needs to be supported by other authorities—publishers, critics, and public figures active in media and cultural life. The combined efforts and judgments of the translator, the publisher, and the literary critic are each crucial for a translation to achieve success.

Let me give you one more Polish example of how a little-known work can become successful abroad if such a combination exists, but can also be a failure if a translation is good yet external support of this kind is lacking. *Laments*, a series of poems written by the Polish Renaissance author Jan Kochanowski, is now considered to be a masterpiece of world literature. It was translated into English by Adam Czerniawski; the translation was published in 1996 by a Polish university press. This publication went almost unnoticed in English-speaking countries. The revised version published in 2001 by a small academic publisher in Oxford received a few reviews in literary journals. Like the first edition published in Poland, it did not have a chance for a wider reception, but this second time for a very different reason: already in 1995 both Faber and Faber in London, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux in New York had published the *Laments* translated by Seamus Heaney, a Nobel Prize winning poet, and by Stanisław Barańczak, a poet and professor at Harvard University. The authority and prestige of the publishing

houses and translators themselves, the combination consisting of four great “brand names” (Faber and Faber; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Harvard; Nobel) meant that even the Oxford edition of Czerniawski’s translation, by many experts considered to be better than the work of Barańczak and Heaney, passed almost unnoticed, often barely mentioned in the reviews of the “Harvard-Nobel” team. Under such circumstances, two other translations published later by small Polish publishers and translated by Professor Michael Mikoś of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and by a young Irish translator, Barry Keane, had no chance to be noticed.

The combined efforts and judgments of the translator, the publisher, and the literary critic are each crucial for a translation to achieve success.

Without the four factors of an influential translator, well-known publisher, the recommendation of a respected public intellectual, and enthusiastic reviews in prestigious journals and magazines, even the greatest masterpieces remain unknown in the mainstream market, the way Szyborska’s poems were until 1996, or Kochanowski was for centuries, or as Różewicz remains until this very day. Together with Miłosz—who, remember, had been living in California for much of his life prior to the Nobel, a professor at a prestigious American university—the best known Polish poet is the University of Chicago’s Adam Zagajewski. Rumors have circulated for many years that he has been a serious candidate for a Nobel Prize, especially in 2010 and 2011, based on one of the most reliable sources of information in these matters, the bookmakers’ services (*serwisy bukmacherskie*). Zagajewski has not received the prize yet, but if he ever does we will have a better appreciation of how it came to pass. Professor Clare Cavanagh, his translator into English, should share this success with him. ▲

This lecture was delivered at Cleveland State University on 31 January 2012.

NOTES

[1] Jeremy Hawthorn, “Canon,” in Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Edward Arnold 1922, 26 (Hawthorn’s italics); also Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Herbert Lindenber, *The History in Literature: On Value, Genre, Institutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Andrea Lanoux, *Od narodu do kanonu. Powstawania kanonów polskiego i rosyjskiego romantyzmu w latach 1815-1865* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2003).

Imperiological Studies

A Polish Perspective

By **Andrzej Nowak**. Kraków: Societas Vistulana (www.vistulana.pl), 2011. 239 pages. Bibliography. ISBN 978-83-61033-46-2. Hardcover.

Margaret Peacock

Since the partitions of the late eighteenth century, the Polish population has struggled to understand the nature and legacy of empire. In particular, they have wrestled with the pivotal role that Polish perceptions of victimhood have played in shaping national identity. Andrzej Nowak has undertaken a difficult project attempting to chronicle how Polish victimhood has played both a constitutive and a destructive role in shaping Polish identity. He has endeavored to provide a more nuanced understanding of the negotiations of power that have continued over the centuries between the centralizing Russian/Soviet state and those countries that have occupied the vital margins of the empire. In so doing, he has opened the doors for further exploration in the burgeoning field of Imperiology.

Imperiological Studies offers a set of loosely connected chapters that deal with a number of pressing questions in the history of Russo-Polish relations. Little is given in the way of an over-arching argument in the book’s four-page introduction. Instead, the reader is asked to approach each chapter as a self-contained essay. The chapters cover a wide range of topics, some of which are more successful than others. The first chapter, for instance, begins with a lengthy and often seemingly tangential exposition on Euripides’ story on Iphigenia in Tauris. Professor Nowak argues that this ancient narrative can serve as a blueprint for understanding the nature of the Russian imperial relationship with Poland and provides an explanation for what he calls an “anthropology of violence” that has historically shaped Russia’s interactions with its neighbors.

Subsequent chapters examine how Russian elites involved in the imperial project in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took the lessons that they learned from their work in the western parts of the empire and applied them to the south, and vice versa. He chronicles how Russia had developed an overarching imperial style by the nineteenth century that included turning