

Paweł Wojtas, *Translating Gombrowicz's Liminal Aesthetics*, Literary and Cultural Theory, ed. by Wojciech H. Kalaga, Vol. 39 (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2014); 210 pp; Hardcover € 49.95, e-book € 55.57; ISBN 978-3-631-64222-1

Paweł Wojtas's monograph represents the most recent addition to the growing body of English-language scholarship on Witold Gombrowicz.¹ Like his Anglophone predecessors, Wojtas reads Gombrowicz's works through the lens of literary and critical theory. His approach is unique, however, in that he places translation – an important but hitherto neglected problem – squarely at the heart of his study. His approach is also unique in the Polish context, where translations of Gombrowicz's work have been studied with a narrower focus on language and reception.

Translation, for Wojtas, is an active literary practice, but by occupying a liminal position between radical indeterminacy and essentialism it also functions as a metaphor for the postmodern condition. Furthermore, Wojtas suggests, translation mirrors Gombrowicz's "liminal aesthetics" and "existentialism". These notions refer to the writer's fascination with the fluid boundaries between language and being, the structural correspondence between narrative and existence, as well as his tendency to foreground "the self confronted with the other" (p. 189). Wojtas sets out to compare Gombrowicz's Polish originals and their English translations in order to illuminate how the writer's existentialism, which "approximates the condition of translation," is interpreted in different cultural, historical and hermeneutic contexts. His study successfully draws attention to the potential of exploring intersections between Gombrowicz studies and approaches rooted in poststructuralist and translation theory, presenting a rich source of inspiration for further investigations in this field.

Besides a pithy introduction and conclusion, the book consists of four chapters. The first chapter surveys Polish and Anglophone scholars' accounts of Gombrowicz's existentialism, then summarizes the state of research on Gombrowicz and translation. In chapter 2 Wojtas introduces his theoretical framework of deconstructionist and hermeneutic theories: Baudrillard's notion of the *simulacrum* is seen as analogous to Gombrowicz's "existential trope" of form;

1 Hanjo Berressem, *Lines of Desire: Reading Gombrowicz's Fiction with Lacan* (1998); George Z. Gasyna, *Polish, Hybrid, and Otherwise: Exilic Discourse in Joseph Conrad and Witold Gombrowicz* (2011); Michael Goddard, *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism, and the Subversion of Form* (2010); Michal Oklot, *Phantasms of Matter in Gogol (and Gombrowicz)* (2009); Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, ed., *Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality* (1998).

Derrida's concept of *différance* blurs the boundary between text and translation, while Gadamer's hermeneutics highlights the inherently plurivocal character of both translation and interpretation, thus allowing Wojtas to present reading as an event that destabilizes the categories of translation and interpretation, text and existence. Gadamer's insistence on the differences in the intercultural mechanisms of translation also paves the way for Wojtas to bridge Polish and Anglophone traditions.

In chapters 3 and 4, Wojtas discusses how translated texts subscribe to unstable meanings in relation to their source texts. He draws on five texts by Gombrowicz – the four novels published under his name, as well as the play *The Marriage*. The corpus of English translations is unusual in that it includes early relay translations, i.e. Eric Mosbacher's *Ferdydurke* and *Cosmos*, as well as Alistair Hamilton's *Pornografia*. The French and German translations on which Mosbacher and Hamilton based their English versions, however, are omitted from Wojtas's close readings.²

Chapter 3 examines concepts of liminality and liquidity through close readings of *Cosmos*, *The Marriage* and *Ferdydurke*. This substantive and engaging chapter demonstrates how Gombrowicz's "narratives of otherness" are cognate with the existential experience of reading. Wojtas lucidly compares Gombrowicz and Derrida (see pp. 67–69 on their respective concepts of form and *différance*; pp. 75–79 on their rhetoric of liminality). The final chapter 4 examines in what ways the otherness of interpretation is an existential experience. To do this, Wojtas draws parallels between the process of translation and liminal acts of participation. Focusing on *Trans-Atlantyck*, *Cosmos* and *Pornografia*, he analyses translation as an act that approximates experiences of liminality, liquidity and *différance*. One of the sections from this book that will interest a broad readership is contained within this chapter: section 4. 2. 2., titled "Polish and Western postmodern experience as translation," usefully outlines the reception of postmodern writing – literary and critical – in Poland after 1989.

Wojtas uses an impressive array of secondary literature, including key theoretical works and major studies on Gombrowicz. One important monograph that ought to have been included is Alfred Gall's *Performativer Humanismus: Die Auseinandersetzung mit Philosophie in der literarischen Praxis von Witold Gombrowicz* of 2007, translated into Polish as *Humanizm performatywny*:

2 Wojtas's book appeared almost simultaneously with Danuta Borchardt's translation of *Trans-Atlantyck* – an alternative version that can productively be read side by side with Nina Karsov and Carolyn French's direct translation of the same novel published in 1994. Wojtas is in an excellent position to apply the conceptual framework proposed in his book to their comparative analysis. Let us hope to hear more from him in the near future.

Polemika z filozofią w praktyce literackiej Witolda Gombrowicza (Cracow, 2011). Wojtas also misses an excellent opportunity to engage with Gombrowicz's own practice as a translator and his views on translation. There is, for instance, a lively debate on Gombrowicz's famous co-translation of *Ferdydurke* into Spanish and French, while his correspondence provides a wealth of material on his relationship to translators and translation.³ I was also disappointed with the cursory treatment of the writer's biography: Wojtas dwells on the simple fact of Gombrowicz's exile, but fails to look deeper into the complexities of his lived experience. The embarrassing blunder by which Gombrowicz's death is dated to 1965 instead of 1969 (p. 117) is symptomatic of the fact that the living writer is conspicuously absent from this study.

Wojtas has developed an original and valuable take on Gombrowicz, but the limitations of his book seriously undermine his authority. While a more thorough peer review process might have mitigated some of the above-mentioned deficiencies, other shortcomings should have been corrected by an in-house editor. Despite revision by a native speaker (see Acknowledgements), serious issues with vocabulary, grammar and usage impair the comprehensibility of Wojtas's writing – a weakness that is particularly compromising in a book that relies so much on close attention to language. Overwritten, abstract, and with postmodernist jargon densely woven into unnecessarily complex sentences, the text often remains unclear. Appallingly poor copyediting further thwarts the book's readability. While continental scholarly publications often provide detailed signposting in the table of contents, Wojtas's headings and subheadings are more playful than informative. Given that the book lacks an index, the tantalizing labelling of sections such as "Transgressing the liminality of translation" (this section actually focuses on *Pornografia*) can be a little frustrating. An index of names and subjects, as well as a more carefully edited bibliography, would no doubt have enhanced the book's usability.

The crippling flaws of this monograph point to a deeper, systemic problem with the academic publishing market. Polish universities, keen to raise their international profile, set great store by the their faculty's English-language publications. The present volume was co-funded by the LSW Academy in Warsaw, where, according to the publisher's website, Wojtas works as Adjunct Professor of English Literature and History. No precariously employed junior

3 For a very recent contribution to this debate see Daniel Balderston, "Rex Café, Buenos Aires, 1947: On the Spanish Translation of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*", *The Polish Review*, 60 (2015), pp. 29–37. I discuss Gombrowicz's attitude towards translation in my introduction to his correspondence with Jerzy Peterkiewicz. See "Witold Gombrowicz: Listy do Jerzego Pietrkiewicza. Wprowadzenie", ed. by Tuł'si Bhambry, *Teksty Drugie*, 1/2 (2011): 313–328.

faculty member should be blamed for taking an opportunity to advance his or her career. But can it be wise to entrust one's book to a publishing house that provides poor quality control and minimal editing and marketing – especially if English is not one's most comfortable language and one has little prior experience with the publishing process? Revenue-seeking presses certainly benefit from their symbiotic relationship with scholars who agree – out of indifference, excessive self-confidence, or the apparent lack of a better alternative – to forgo the rigorous processes of serious academic publishing. In the long run, however, this symbiosis is financially unsustainable and will not serve the academic community.⁴ Nor will it benefit individual authors or their institutions. If Polish scholarship is to gain prestige in international academic circles, it will not be through a host of poorly written, run-of-the-mill monographs. The solution lies in rigorous peer reviewing, high-level professional translation and meticulous (copy)editing. This comes at a high cost, of course, but sometimes less is more.

Wojtas's argument is grievously marred by the uneven quality of his writing and research, as well as the book's low production value. This is a shame, since his work has potential. I can only hope that the innovative perspective presented in this volume will inspire international students and scholars of Gombrowicz to continue to explore intersections between literary criticism and translation theory.

Review by Tuł'si Bhambry

4 Even the most well-endowed research libraries struggle to keep up with the flood of low-quality scholarly publications, which is why many titles – often translated and produced at high cost to the Polish taxpayer – remain out of readers' reach. Many librarians, reluctant to strain their budgets by acquiring pricey volumes from disreputable presses, recommend open access publication as a more sustainable alternative. See Dale Askey, "Some thoughts on Peter Lang", < <http://bibliobrary.net/2011/01/17/some-thoughts-on-peter-lang/> > accessed 25 August 2015.