

3 Szymek from the Village and Joe from Missouri

Problems of Voice in Translating Wiesław Myśliwski's *Stone upon Stone*

Bill Johnston

This essay arose as a form of *praxis*, in Paulo Freire's (1972) sense of mindful reflection on professional practice. After completing the work of translating Polish writer Wiesław Myśliwski's 1984 novel *Kamień na kamieniu* (*Stone upon Stone*), I found myself curious about the kinds of small- and large-scale dilemmas and decisions that had led to the text taking the shape it did. What follows, then, is not an account of the process itself so much as a post factum discussion. I'd call it an analysis, except that analysis involves breaking things down, while what I'm trying to do here is precisely the opposite—taking a large number of small instances and seeing what they add up to.

Stone upon Stone is a magnificent novel. At 534 pages, it is also a sizeable one; it took the author ten years to complete. It tells the story—or perhaps better, stories—of Szymek Pietruszka, a farmer living in an unidentified Polish village. Its nonlinear narrative, organized in roughly thematic ways into a series of nine chapters with titles such as “Brothers”, “The Land”, “Weeping” and “Hallelujah”, comprises interwoven episodes that, taken together, tell Szymek's life story. He is born around 1920 (no dates are mentioned in the novel), and the stories he tells take us through his childhood in prewar Poland, his experiences as a unit commander in the Resistance during the war and his postwar life up to about the 1960s—in other words, the first two decades of communist rule.

Stone upon Stone is often seen as belonging to the *nurt chłopski* or peasant tradition in Polish literature. Yet this is no ordinary “peasant novel” (if there even is such a thing). The crucial element in the book is *voice*—primarily the voice of Pietruszka himself. The text is overwhelmingly and unwaveringly *oral* in nature; it reads like a vast theatrical monologue. Even the voices of other characters come through in this way, for there is relatively little dialogue, and instead, a small number of key characters—the chairman of the district administration, the village priest, the woman who runs the local grocery store—are given monologues of their own. The principal translation problem, then, was how to create an English-language voice for Szymek. This challenge went far beyond the innumerable local questions of how to translate particular words, phrases or concepts. It is the creation of Szymek's voice in English that I will focus on here.

Many attempts at rendering peasant speech in translation have been less than successful. A notable example in English is Michael H. Dziewicki's 1938 translation of Nobel Prize-winning Polish author Władysław Reymont's 1909 novel *Chłopi* (*The Peasants*). Here's a glimpse of Dziewicki's rendering:

The cart had got as far as the fence, when Vitek showed himself among the apple-trees.

"I had forgotten . . . Vitek! Prrru, prrru! Vitek, I say! you will take the kine to the meadow . . . And tend them well, or you'll get such a flogging as you won't forget."

"Oh, you may kiss—" the lad cried audaciously, and vanished on the other side of the barn.

"None of your impudence. If I get down, you'll see!" (Reymont 1938, 42)

I don't wish to dwell on the shortcomings of Dziewicki's translation—it's only too easy to criticise older translations, and that's not my intention here. The issues should be apparent from this extract. Rather than dwelling on what *not* to do, I'm more interested in describing what *can* be done, and specifically on what I in fact did do in striving to give Szymek an appropriate voice. In my discussion I'm going to make use of the notion of "remainder", a concept that Lawrence Venuti (2004) borrows from Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1990). It seems to me that the Dziewicki translation contains rather too much of particular kinds of remainder for it to function effectively in English. The rest of this essay will concern my own efforts to exclude as much undesirable remainder as possible from the translation and to retain as much control as I could over what remainder remained.

As Venuti points out, any translation from a foreign text, especially a literary one, involves "the release of a domestic remainder" (2004, 485). He goes on:

The foreign text is rewritten in domestic dialects and discourses, registers and styles, and this results in the production of textual effects that signify only in the history of the receiving language and culture. The translator may produce these effects to communicate the foreign text, trying to invent domestic analogues for foreign forms and themes. But the result will always go beyond any communication [i.e., of the original content and style] to release target-oriented possibilities of meaning. (Venuti 2004, 485)

In this chapter, I will use the notion of remainder to structure my reflections on the process of rendering *Stone upon Stone* into English.

As mentioned earlier, given the profoundly oral nature of the text, it is language that is the crucial ingredient in the Polish, and the same needed to be true of the English translation. In other words, what is important here

are not the events and stories conveyed, but the voice in which they are told. (My instinctive feeling in this regard was confirmed in conversation with the author.) And it is here that one of Myśliwski's greatest achievements can be seen. He created, for the purpose of the book, a Polish which, though it is recognisably "country Polish", is equally recognisably *not* the dialect of any particular region. In fact the author worked hard to create a kind of pan-peasant Polish that identifies the characters—and hence, because it is rendered in a first-person narrative, the book itself—as anchored in a very specific *class* or social milieu, but not a specific place. In other words, it is located in class space, not geographical space. In fact, the latter analogue—the refusal to locate the village of the novel geographically, or even to name it—works powerfully to support the former.

It is important to point out that Szymek's voice is also highly individual. He is known for his facility with words. Many of the jobs he takes on—as barber, as the clerk responsible for civil weddings in the district administration—involve the telling of stories or the making of speeches, and we learn that he excels at such things. His voice, as well as being a peasant voice, is equally distinctively his own. His language is pithy, expressive, filled with humour and aphoristic wisdom. His is a voice that captivates the reader. He is, as the expression goes, a good talker. Dialect, though, presents its own problems in translation. Even if the village *were* located in geographic space, the problems of translating dialect are only too familiar to translators. In his *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*, Clifford Landers's advice about translating dialect is like *Punch* magazine's famous advice to persons about to marry: Don't. Landers explains: "[D]ialect is always tied, geographically and culturally, to a milieu that does not exist in the target-language setting. Substitution of an 'equivalent' dialect is foredoomed to failure" (2001, 117).

For the reasons outlined here, it seemed vital to find a language for the book—which is to say, a voice for Szymek—that clearly marked it in terms of class, and also in terms of what linguist Michael Halliday (Halliday and Hasan 1989) has called *mode*—in this case, the orality of the language—without locating it in any particular variety of English. Of course, as always with translations the proof of the pudding is in the eating. And like many translators, I'd rather leave to other readers the evaluation of whether, or to what extent, the final form of the translation succeeds in its encounter with the issues outlined here. What I can do here is mention a few of the moments where I felt I had hit upon the kind of language—of voice—that I was looking for. Indeed, much as an actor often begins to build his or her representation of a character through a single telling gesture, cadence or prop, so I believe the translator can use certain linguistic felicities as a point of entry in constructing the voice of a writer or a book, and that is what happened in the present case. For my own purposes, for instance, I first truly heard Szymek's voice in English when, at the beginning of chapter 2 (already fifty-five pages into the novel), he says: "There was a road ran through our

village.” This simple structure, missing the relative pronoun “that” which standard grammar requires, to my mind captured the voice I was imagining. I began to build the voice from this and a few other moments like it. These included sentences like: “Pudgy little guy, always sweating up a storm”; “Let him at least learn tailoring, because what could he do here at home”; for the direct speech of another character, “hand to God I’ve not smoked these fifty years”; and expressions such as “till kingdom come”, “time was”, “make no mistake”. Let me emphasise here that what is felicitous about these phrases is not that they are especially accurate renditions of the particular Polish phrase (though that is naturally important too), but that they capture the voice (or voices) I was looking for. From that point on, the translation process involved a series of decisions about inclusions and exclusions. I’ll look first at what I tried to keep out, then at what I tried to keep in.

The danger of undesirable remainder begins with the very word *peasant*. In Polish, *chłop* is no longer used to refer to a social class, but the word itself is still in current usage; it can be applied, without undue prejudice, to mean simply a person who lives and works in the country. It is also used to mean something like “guy”, with an additional connotation of someone strong and muscular. It lacks the direct linguistic association that the English *peasant* has with a lack of culture or sophistication. In previous novels, I’ve often translated *chłop* as “farmer”, “country person”, “villager” or the like. I continued this practice in *Stone upon Stone*. While this obviously detracted from the text in certain ways, it seemed clear to me that in this particular case the supposed ideal of a one-to-one equivalence was totally impossible to attain and that the use of *peasant*, the most historically accurate option for *chłop*, would seriously misrepresent the original text in its English translation.¹

In discussing with my editor at Archipelago, Jill Schoolman, some of the words and expressions I used in the first draft of the book that I shared with her—including some elements of language that had served as points of entry into building Szymek’s voice in English—it emerged that some of these sounded too “uneducated”. This was another remainder I did not wish to include. Szymek is not a great fan of reading (at one point he says he could never see the point of reading: “You read and read, and in the end it all went into the ground with you anyway”), but he is both literate and intelligent, as well as being what many an elementary teacher might describe as “highly verbal”, with immense reserves of self-expression. It was important not to make him sound like a village bumpkin. For this reason, we decided against expressions such as “there was two of us” or “there’s going to be hangings”, “the table that its legs fell off”, and other similar turns of phrase.

The other huge issue to face in such a translation is the US–British divide, a crevasse that as an Englishman working in America I personally straddle on a daily basis. At the very outset of the process I decided that I could only be true to one side at a time. Since I live and publish in the United States, and my main readership is likely to be here, Szymek had to sound American, not

British. For this reason, some of what an American friend of mine calls my “colourful expressions” had to go. The word *lads*, so perfect for the Polish *chłopaki* in being able to refer both to boys and young men, was not going to work; it needed to be removed. The same applied to certain (as it transpired) un-American turns of phrase such as “I’d be stood there” or “have a sit” and certain idioms like “to give someone what-for”, “get your own back” (meaning to take revenge) or “it’ll make no odds”. This too—British English—was an unacceptable remainder for an (imagined) American audience. Indeed, it was over this issue that Jill Schoolman jokingly created the character of Joe from Missouri, a Midwestern American reader who occasionally shrugged in incomprehension at certain Britishisms he encountered in the text. Jill and I agreed that if Joe from Missouri couldn’t understand it, it probably had to be excluded.

Of course, it needs to be pointed out that the “Americanness” of a text can only be invisible to an American audience—it’s a literary sleight of hand that only works in a given geographical and linguistic context. To other English-speaking readers, it will be the American expressions (*hollered, gotten, cusswords*) that stand out. Thus, even if this translation is considered successful, its success can only ever be local in place and time.

Yet the concept of “American English”, while immediately comprehensible to a Brit like myself, is in fact a very imprecise term. Although, as suggested earlier, to a British reader the text will seem clearly American, I wanted to keep it clean of particularly jarring or egregious forms that, not merely *being* American, actively call attention to themselves. For this reason there are no *ain’t*s in the book. *Gonna* and *wanna* appear only in the quoted speech of other characters, never in the narrator’s voice. I struggled with the word *because*. My first temptation was to use *’cus* or *’cuz*, but this too seemed to draw attention to itself. In direct speech, of which there’s a great deal in the book, especially the long monologues in voices other than the narrator’s, I eventually allowed myself *cause*, with no apostrophe—the apostrophe is a marker of eye dialect, something I wanted to avoid at all cost, since it always contains a reference to (and preference for) the “correct” standard form, whereas it was crucial that Szymek’s language be allowed to exist in its own right.² In this regard I took my lead from numerous authors I admire, including Cormac McCarthy, who gives us nonstandard speech as it comes (or more precisely, as he invents it) and lets it be itself, with non-apostrophised spellings like *somethin*, *ast* (for “asked”) or *Tain’t* (for “It ain’t”), to take a few random examples from his novel *Outer Dark* (1993).

The exclusion of British English, of eye dialect and of language perceived as uneducated are part of the attempts to limit the remainder present in the translation (an attempt, let us remember, that is only ever partial, though no less valuable and necessary for that). For similar reasons, rather like numerous translators of *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon literature, I strove to keep the number of Latinate words to a minimum, always preferring a word of Germanic origin where there was a viable choice, since a similar

preference has been widely attested by linguists in spoken English discourse. Another thing missing, by the way, are semi-colons. Very early on in the translation process I decided that the semi-colon, that most written of punctuation marks, didn't belong in Szymek's monologue. Part of my reason was to prevent the text from *looking* like written language—a further example of literary sleight of hand. Another reason for this decision was self-discipline—used as I am to translating wordy, self-consciously literate authors like Witold Gombrowicz and Jerzy Pilch, who revel in the written word, composing intricately constructed sentences in which semi-colons are an essential device regulating the cadences of the prose, I decided as I began work on *Stone upon Stone* that denying myself that option would serve as a constant reminder of what I was translating. I found this a very productive restriction and continued the practice throughout the book.

So much, then, for what *isn't* in the translation. What *is* in it? Well, I write this paragraph and the following ones in all humility, as a nonnative speaker and writer of American English; this was my attempt to imitate the rhythms of what might imprecisely be termed standard spoken American English as I perceive them and as they might be used to give Szymek from the village his English-language voice.

I have a colleague who told me she prepared for the translation of a late-nineteenth-century Polish novel by reading the works of Thomas Hardy. I believe this kind of preparation is dangerous since it runs the risk of introducing too much of the wrong kind of specific, identifiable remainder into a translated text (quite aside from the fact that I'd never want to even attempt to translate a nineteenth-century novel into nineteenth-century English). I also believe strongly that though there will always be a remainder, it is much more interesting and effective if this remainder is hard to pin down, like a sound whose source you cannot identify. I say more about this in the following. In thinking about Myśliwski's text, though in fact I found it impossible to bring to mind any English-language writer who might offer the danger of a model, there were conscious or unconscious general echoes in my mind of the kind of voice I was looking for. The profound orality of the language put me in mind of that great tradition in twentieth-century American writing of informal, accessible, spoken-sounding narration that I see (in a very simplistic manner) as leading from the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway narrating *The Great Gatsby*, through J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, to many contemporary writers. (A complementary tradition of deeply poetic and "difficult" authorial language might be seen to lead from William Faulkner to Cormac McCarthy and beyond.) In broad terms, it was this spoken, informal quality I was after, though with a much earthier feel that almost puts me in mind of Seamus Heaney and how he writes about writing. (It might be worth mentioning that one of the greatest joys of translation is precisely *imagining* a voice that doesn't yet exist in English and must be created from scratch, using bits and pieces of what one already has, plus whatever else the Muses pass along to one.)

Throughout the text, then, I employed stylistic features that mark the text as spoken rather than written language in English, without carrying any association with a particular region, class or language variety. Elision is used extensively, of course (*I've, he'll, they'd*, etc.). I also had to learn to write run-on sentences, something that James Joyce was fine with but most of us have conscientiously eschewed in formal writing. This was a hard prejudice to overcome, but after a while it felt wonderfully liberating, and I came to feel comfortable adding it to my stylistic repertoire. I also included other commonly attested features of spoken English, including the omission of initial pronouns (“Turned out I was right”; “Always works for me”) and initial modals (“You forgotten?”); various forms of fronting (“Mikus, he had his boy climb up in a tree”); widely used nonstandard forms of speech (“there was this sort of bindweed twirled across the top”); using *their* with a singular unknown antecedent (“Whoever he spares will have to walk on their own two feet”); use of *this* in place of the indefinite article (“Then all of a sudden there’s this banging noise”); omission of articles (“sky’s blue as a cornflower”); idiomatic expressions that I felt were sufficiently widely used not to be perceived as being attached to any particular variety (“not for all the tea in China”; “I’ll have your guts for garters!”; “You’re no spring chicken yourself”; “like there was no tomorrow”); other locutions that would be considered imprecise in written language (“they said on the radio”; “Some of them had hats that you didn’t even know what to call them”; “he’d push him aside and be all angry”). With all these features and more, the goal was to keep in some of the remainder—colloquial spoken English—but to exclude unwanted associations with *particular* English-language classes, regions, registers and so on.

As emphasised earlier, I was at pains *not* to imitate any particular style or dialect of English and so mostly restricted the kinds of language I drew on to spoken constructions that are very widely found across the United States, and often beyond. At the same time, I did want to deliberately set the text off-kilter at times to convey a sense of otherness that I hoped would be difficult if not impossible to locate specifically in linguistic space. (Such an effect is of course intensified by the foreignising element surely present in any translated text, and especially one set in a mid-twentieth-century Polish farming village, by definition remote in cultural space and time from any potential twenty-first-century American reader.) I introduced a couple of small linguistic elements borrowed from different places. I employed an expression used by my Geordie grandfather in north-east England to refer to something in a high place—he would say it was “up aheight”, and that phrase found its way into the translation. Also, I have spent a lot of time around Lakota Indians, and they have a particular way of using the word *here* as a contrastive link; this too I borrowed: “they said that the parents were Christians and that Jesus himself was christened, and here there’s a propeller instead of a Lord Jesus on the tomb”. I toyed with one or two other verbal quirks, like deliberately not inverting modal and pronoun after

nor—“nor I didn’t want to” rather than “nor did I want to”—but this drew too much attention to itself, so I abandoned it.

To give a flavour of the kind of voice I was looking for, here’s a short passage from chapter 5 about a new woman who has come to work at the district administration where Szymek is employed. This, more or less, is the voice I had imagined for Szymek Pietruszka in English:

Though on the other hand, why should I have trusted her. I didn’t even know her, and there’s always a bit of truth in gossip. Maybe she just knew how to cover her tracks. She wouldn’t have been the first one to set her sights on the chairman. He was the chairman, after all, and he could always make life difficult for you if you weren’t careful. What else could they have seen in him? Pudgy little guy, always sweating up a storm. But he knew how to turn on the charm. When he’d do his rounds of the offices in the morning he’d always have a nice word for each of them, smile at one, kiss the hand of another, stroke another one’s hair like a father. And he wore this big ring with a red stone, supposedly it was a keepsake from his father, he’d flash it in front of every girl. Except that when someone came from the county administration he’d slip it off and hide it in his drawer. Some people said it wasn’t anything to do with his father, that Maślanka had been a hog trader during the war and done well for himself. Whatever the truth was, after a guy like Rożek, whose every second word was “fuck,” because with him what was in his head was on his tongue, the new fellow was almost like a squire. So she could have been one of those that gave in to temptation. (Myśliwski 2010, 251–252)

The Polish original reads as follows:

Choć z drugiej strony czemu miałbym jej wierzyć. Nie znałem jej przecież, a w ludzkich plotkach zawsze jest coś prawdy. Może się tylko tak potrafi maskować. A za przewodniczącym niejedna się w gminie uganiała, w końcu to przewodniczący i zawsze mógł zaszkodzić. Bo cóż by innego w nim widziały? Nieduży, grubawy, a jeszcze wciąż się pocił. Ale przymilny to on umiał być. Z rana, kiedy obchodził pokoje, każdej coś miłego powiedział, do tej się uśmiechnął, tę w rękę pocałował, tę pogłaskał po włosach jak ojciec. Jeszcze nosił wielki pierścień z czerwonym okiem na palcu, niby pamiątka po ojcu, to każdej tym pierścieniem pod oczy błyskał. Tylko że kiedy przyjeżdżał ktoś z powiatu, zdejmował ten pierścień z palca i chował go do biurka. Mówili niektórzy, że to nie żadna pamiątka po ojcu, tylko świński w czasie wojny handlował i majątku się dorobił. Wszystko jedno, jak było, ale po takim Rożku, u którego co drugie słowo było kurwa, bo co miał w głowie, to i w mowie, ten prawie za dziedzica mógł być. To mogła się i ona na niego skusić. (Myśliwski 2008, 249)

Of course, how Joe from Missouri actually reads Szymek from the village cannot be predicted, least of all by the translator. It is illuminating, however, to conceptualise the translation process in retrospect around the notion of remainder and to reflect on what was deliberately omitted and what deliberately added, as well as to speculate on what remainder the translation has, often unwittingly, retained.

NOTES

1. An even more problematic failure in this regard was the Polish word *ziemia*, which is crucial to the novel yet simply cannot be rendered using a single term throughout the book. I translated it variously, depending on context, as “land”, “earth”, “ground”, “soil” and “dirt”. My only hope is that these words taken together—particularly the ones with greater semantic overlap like “earth”, “ground” and “land”—would together create for the English-language reader a semantic network that at a subconscious level would draw connections between the related terms. It is of course impossible to say whether such a hope is reasonable, let alone successful.
2. For more on the politics of displaying spoken language in written form, see Ochs (1979).

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