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How to translate culture? The select fragments of the Polish and English translations of the short story *Der Sandmann* by E.T.A Hoffmann

Introduction

An important issue the translator has to face, apart from the linguistic difficulties, is the difference between the source culture and the target culture. The translator's particular task does not consist only in the conveying of the meaning of the source text into the target language while using the correct vocabulary and grammar. They also have to take into account the culture gap, which needs to be bridged in order to help the recipients from the target culture to understand properly the text from the source culture.

The article discusses the problems encountered by the translator when trying to convey the meaning of the source literary text into the target language. The analysed texts are fragments of the Polish and English translations of the short story *Der Sandmann* by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the leading representative of late German Romanticism, with special attention paid to their correspondence with the source text. The analysed translations are the Polish one by Felicjan Faleński, made in 1867 and the English one by John Oxenford, made in 1844.

For the purpose of analysing the text, the article employs Todorov's theory of the fantastic for building an interpretation model of the Romantic short story *Der Sandmann*.

1. Culture and attempts at its translation

Researchers have proposed many definitions of "culture", both with regard to the natural and non-natural world. In the widest meaning of the word, culture is everything added by people through their work to the existing reality. In order to present the complex picture of the possible distance between the text from the source culture and its translation directed to the recipients from the target culture, the present article

will be based on a somewhat narrower definition of “culture” formulated by the German sociologist and political scientist Max Weber. He claimed that “[c]ulture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which *human beings* confer meaning and significance. This is true even for the human being who views a *particular* culture as a mortal enemy” (Weber, 1904, as cited in Shils, Finch [Eds.], 2011, p. 81). The process of conferring meaning and significance on the meaningless infinity leads to the emergence of different cultural circles, i.e. the separate areas defined by cultural phenomena peculiar to them. In order to take into account all the differences among the individual cultural circles and to avoid the danger of taking the selective cultural phenomena for the dominating ones, it is necessary to maintain proper perspective and pluralism in all the attempts to study culture.

As can be seen from the above, culture is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. This fact can influence the communication between representatives of various cultural circles negatively, since some kinds of meaning and significance in a given cultural circle may not exist, and the existing ones may be interpreted differently in another cultural circle.

When approaching literature as one of the cornerstones of culture, one should pay special attention to the danger of improper or mistaken understanding of some literary texts from the circles of the source culture and translated for the readers in the circle of the target culture, since they do not have enough knowledge about the phenomena of the source culture. In this respect, a special role is assigned to the translator, who has to convey into the target language not only the vocabulary and grammar, but is also obliged to cope with the special issues posed by the cultural dissonance. The translator, then, is a particular medium between the author of the text written in the source culture and his/her intentions, and the recipients living in the reality of the target culture. In this context it is noteworthy to mention that in the translation process the translators play the role of a cultural filter. It means that when translating, they are forced to make choices connected with various interpretations of a given literary text, owing to which they can be considered co-authors of the original text. It is due to the fact that translators as text’s recipients read it through their knowledge of language and the world, noticing the intended and unintended intentions of the author of the source text (Cf. Dąmbska-Prokop [Ed.], 2000, p. 84). All that leads to “the translation in which we can notice the degree of its comprehension by the translator and his ability to express it in a different language, so as not to surrender to the tyranny of the word, but at the same time, while not attempting the absolute fidelity, to retain the equivalence of the contents and the effect” (Dąmbska-Prokop [Ed.], 2000, p. 84).

2. *Der Sandmann* by E.T.A. Hoffmann as an example of the fantastic in literature

The common starting point for most theories of the fantastic in literature is the reality known to the readers, which through the use of supernatural elements be-

comes distorted in such a way as to become alien for them. The philosopher and literary critic Tzvetan Todorov sees the fantastic as a peculiar literary genre which arose as the result of the conflict of two opposing spheres. The key issue in his definition of the fantastic is the reader's attitude (it could be also the hero's attitude, although according to Todorov it is not a necessary condition for the fantastic) to both depicted worlds. The fantastic means the hesitation between two possibilities (Todorov, 1975, p. 26) of interpreting a doubtful phenomenon: as marvellous or uncanny. It could be classified as a real though uncanny event, or unreal and therefore marvellous. The uncanny events according to Todorov inspire fear, but they do not raise any doubts regarding the possibility of their existence outside literature. On the other hand, the marvellous phenomena are defined as the opposite of the uncanny and they are undoubtedly supernatural. The key issue for Todorov is, then, the constant hesitation of the reader/hero between the two possibilities of classifying a literary event mentioned above. If the reader/hero do not have any doubts whether what they see is reality or illusion, the fantastic is absent. When the reader/hero become certain that an event, which under normal circumstances inspires fear, can be explained rationally, we have to deal with the uncanny. When the reader/hero realize they had contact with the supernatural forces, we call it marvellous.

Der Sandmann is a short story written in the style of a Dark Romantic (*Schauerromantik*) fairy tale. The text was published anonymously in Berlin and opened the collection *Night Pieces (Nachtstücke)*. It is one of the most important texts of Hoffmann and it is open to many possible interpretations. The protagonist of the story, Nathaniel, moves constantly between hallucinations and reality. All his life he has been fighting the memory of a traumatic episode from his childhood centred around the figure of the Sandman. Until the end of the story it is not certain whether protagonist's experiences were real or just a dream of the young Nathaniel. The text does not reveal the answer: on one hand, the main character believes that the dark forces have control over him; on the other hand, his beloved Clara claims it is just a psychological issue. The author leaves the reader uncertain on purpose. It has to be emphasized that in Hoffmann's work imagination, instincts and emotions play a more important role than reason and logic. The real and the supernatural world interlace. The boundary between these two planes is almost unnoticeable and the reader feels that fantasy is actually reality. Nathaniel is unable to cope with the traumatic reality of the past (imagined or not) and to find personal happiness. While everybody around him is surprised by his irrational love for Olympia, he believes he has noticed something which is invisible to others. Being unable to cope with the mystery of Sandman's existence, which has been accompanying him all his life, he falls in love with illusion and commits suicide, because he is unable to exist in either of the two worlds, the real or the fantastic one. The open ending of the text, as the author intended, invites multiple interpretations.

3. Should the Polish and English readers be afraid of the German Sandmann¹?

In German tradition Sandmann is a figure who puts children to sleep by throwing sand into their eyes. The figure should be understood as the personification of the feeling of drooping eyelids and does not have negative connotations in general. For the Polish audience Sandmann is a foreign figure and due to that, emotionally neutral. Only after having read Hoffmann's story, the Polish reader can grasp the meaning of this figure. It will be decidedly negative, since the image of the Sandmann from German fairy tales was on purpose distorted by the writer, even though his positive original is briefly mentioned in the text. However, the prevailing image in the story is the reversal of the positive figure, which is reinterpreted through trauma and fear, creating a figure fit for a horror movie. The example of a positive (in mother's tale) and negative (in the nurse's tale) depiction of the Sandmann can be found in the following descriptions:

Es gibt keinen Sandmann, mein liebes Kind“, erwiderte die Mutter; „wenn ich sage, der Sandmann kommt, so will das nur heißen, ihr seid schläfrig und könnt die Augen nicht offen behalten, als hätte man euch Sand hineingestreut (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 4-5).
– Nie ma żadnego Piaskuna – odpowiedziała matka. – Kiedy wam powiadam: piaskun idzie, to znaczy po prostu, że wam się spać chce i nie możecie oczu otwartych utrzymać, tak właśnie jakby wam kto w nie piaskiem rzucał (Hoffmann, 1999, p. 99).

There is no Sandman, dear child, replied my mother. When I say the Sandman comes, I only mean that you are sleepy and cannot keep your eyes open, -just as if sand had been sprinkled into them (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 141).

„Ei Thanelchen“, erwiderte diese, „weißt du das noch nicht? Das ist ein böser Mann, der kommt zu den Kindern, wenn sie nicht zu Bett gehen wollen und wirft ihnen Händevoll Sand in die Augen, dass sie blutig zum Kopf herausspringen, die wirft er dann in den Sack und trägt sie in den Halbmond zur Atzung für seine Kinderchen; die sitzen dort im Nest und haben krumme Schnäbel, wie die Eulen, damit picken sie der unartigen Menschenkindlein Augen auf“ (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 5).

- Piaskun? – rzekła. – Nie wiesz jeszcze, co to za jeden? To taki niegodziwiec, który przychodzi na zawołanie, kiedy dzieci spać iść nie chcą, i rzuca im garściami piasek w oczy, aż im z orbit wychodzą; wtedy je pakuje do worka i zanosi na Księżyc swoim dzieciom do zjedzenia. Te zaś nie wyłażą nigdy z gniazda i mają jak sowy ogromne dzioby zakrzywione, którymi łapczywie zjadają oczy, powydzierane nieposłusznym dzieciom (Hoffmann, 1999, p. 100).

“Eh, Natty,” said she,” do you not know that yet? He is a wicked man, who comes to children when they will not go to bed, and throws a handful of sand into their eyes, so that they start out bleeding from their heads. These eyes he puts in a bag and carries

¹ Points 3, 4 and 5 are an extended version of the article by the authors *Sens a tekst literacki – Wybrane fragmenty polskiego przekładu opowiadania „Piaskun” E. T. A. Hoffmanna i ich korespondencja do tekstu źródłowego* published in: Jolanta Knieja, Tomasz Zygmunt, Łukasz Brzana (Eds.), *Literaturoznawstwo, językoznawstwo i kulturoznawstwo jako płaszczyzny przekazu we współczesnej glottodydaktyce*, Wydawnictwo Werset, Lublin 2010, p. 159–165.

them to the half-moon to feed his own children, who sit in the nest up yonder, and have crooked beaks like owls with which they may pick up the eyes of the naughty human children” (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 141).

Through Felicjan Faleński translation, Polish culture received a new idea, the one of *piaskun*. On the other hand, in English culture, *the sandman*, which meant originally only the imaginary being who makes children sleepy, received a new demonic meaning, similarly to German culture. At this point one should consider whether the title *Piaskun* evokes the same emotions and associations with the Polish reader, as with the German and English readers, who know the positive original of Sandmann and their surprise after reading Hoffmann’s text, which demonizes the figure from children’s tales, is even greater.

Faleński’s translation of Hoffmann’s story in this respect does not convey the real aim of the German writer. The Polish reader due to the lack of the cultural context will certainly not be as surprised as the German and English readers. A footnote from the translator describing the figure of Sandmann/Piaskun could be helpful in reading the author’s intentions.

4. What’s in a name? The names of the characters

Hoffmann’s choice of names for his characters is not accidental. They contribute to the multi-layered structure of the described world. The names of most characters, apart from their usual purpose of identifying their owners, contain the encrypted message about their character features or their world view. In case of such figures as Nathanael/Nataniel/Nathaniel, Coppelius/Coppelius/Coppelius, Coppola/Coppola/Coppola, the German, Polish and English readers need just to check the etymology of the words derived from other languages of their own in order to decipher these features.

The name Nathaniel is of Hebrew origin and means *a gift from God*. Its Greek equivalent is Theodor, which points to the middle name of the story’s author. Nathaniel, just like Hoffmann, is a Romantic poet, torn between the mundane and the unattainable and ideal world of poetry.

Also the names of Coppelius and Coppola are symbolic. Coppelius is the figure demonized by Nathaniel, who identifies him with the Sandman. In the story Coppelius is a lawyer who performs alchemical experiments together with Nathaniel’s father. Nathaniel, overcome by childish curiosity, sneaks into the room where his father and Coppelius perform black magic. After he has been discovered, Coppelius cries:

„Augen her, Augen her!” rief Coppelius mit dumpfer dröhnender Stimme. (...) „Nun haben wir Augen – Augen – ein schön Paar Kinderaugen.“ So flüsterte Coppelius, und griff mit Fäusten glutrote Körner aus der Flamme, die er mir in die Augen streuen wollte (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 9).

- Oczu! Oczu! – wołał ciągle Coppelius głosem zarazem głuchym i grzmiącym. (...) – Ach! Mamy teraz oczy, śliczną parę dziecięcych oczu! – mruknął do siebie, biorąc w palce rozżarzone węgle, z zamiarem przytknięcia mi ich do oczu (Hoffmann, 1999, p. 102-103).

Eyes here, eyes! said Coppelius in a dull roaring voice. (...) Now we have eyes enough a pretty pair of child's eyes. Thus whispered Coppelius and taking out of the flame some red-hot grains with his fists, he was about to sprinkle them in my eyes (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 144)

When we analyse this scene taking into account the etymology of the word Coppelius – in Italian *coppo* means *eye-sockets* and *coppela* is *the crucible*, used e.g. during alchemical experiments – it is quite understandable that the scared Nathaniel becomes traumatized by the contact with Coppelius. When during one of such alchemical experiments the boy's father is killed, Coppelius disappears and Nathaniel during the following years manages to regain his balance. However, as a grown-up he has to confront his childhood trauma once again, since he believes that in the figure of the optician Giuseppe Coppola he meets the hated Coppelius. Also in case of this character his name and profession evoke fear in the reader and give rise to the question whether Nathaniel's fears are legitimate.

Both the Polish translator Faleński and the English translator Oxenford retained the original names of the characters, which does not hinder Polish and English audience's understanding of their meaning. Also in case of Clara/Klara/Clara the original name was retained, but the hidden sense of the name may not be as obvious for the Polish and English reader as for the German-speaking one. Admittedly, German-, Polish- and English-language readers automatically associate her name with the adjective *klar* – *klarowny* – *clear*, but only the German reader can reach the conclusion that Clara's world view is typical for the Enlightenment – in German *Aufklärung*. The analysis of the text shows that the author constantly disputes the Enlightenment ideals, justifiably criticizing them. For instance, he writes:

Clara hatte die lebenskräftige Fantasie des heitern unbefangenen, kindischen Kindes, ein tiefes weibliches zartes Gemüt, einen gar hellen scharf sichtenden Verstand. Die Nebler und Schwebler hatten bei ihr böses Spiel; denn ohne viel zu reden, was überhaupt in Claras schweigsamer Natur nicht lag, sagte ihnen der helle Blick und jenes feine ironische Lächeln: Lieben Freunde! Wie möget ihr mir denn zumuten, dass ich eure verfließende Schattengebilde für wahre Gestalten ansehen soll mit Leben und Regung? – Clara wurde deshalb von vielen kalt, gefühllos, prosaisch gescholten; (...) (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 20-21).

W istocie, Klara posiadała żywą wyobraźnię dziecka, duszę kobieco tkliwą i głęboko kochającą, ale zarazem umysł bystry i przenikliwy. Stąd nie lubiła dziwaków i fantastów, i jeśli jej się zdarzyło spotkać gdzie którego, nie mówiąc wiele, bo z natury była małomówna, już byстрыm spojrzeniem i ironicznym uśmiechem zdawała się mówić: „Moi przyjaciele, niech wam się nie zachciewa, żebyśmy brała wasze przywidzenia za

coś prawdziwie istniejącego na tym świecie”. Z tego względu Klara była nawet przez wiele osób pomawiana o chłód, nieczułość i prozaiczność (Hoffmann, 1999, p. 110-111).

Clara had the vivid fancy of a cheerful, unembarrassed child, a deep, tender, feminine disposition, an acute, clever understanding. The misty dreams had but a bad chance with her, since, though she did not talk, as indeed talking would have been altogether repugnant to her tacit nature, her bright glance and her firm ironical smile would say to them: “Good friends, how can you imagine that I shall take your fleeting shadowy images for real forms with life and motion?” On this account Clara was censured by many as cold, unfeeling and prosaic (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 151).

The reasonable Clara, who rejects with disgust the fantastic mysticism, is unable to understand even her fiancée Nathaniel, since she admits the possibility of demon's existing only in his imagination. That is why he claims that her soul is cold and unfeeling, closed to the deep mysteries.

5. Das Perspektiv versus lornetka and pocket-telescope

The interpreters of Hoffmann's work devote much attention to the analysis of the eye motif, as has already been pointed out above. The motif re-appears in another context through the recurring object in the story – the pocket telescope. In the German version the object is called *das Perspektiv*. Nathaniel observes through the pocket telescope he bought from the optician Coppola the adorable Olympia, daughter of Professor Spalanzani:

Olimpia saß, wie gewöhnlich vor dem kleinen Tisch, die Ärme darauf gelegt, die Hände gefaltet. – Nun erschaute Nathanael erst Olimpias wunderschön geformtes Gesicht. Nur die Augen schienen ihm gar seltsam starr und tot. Doch wie er immer schärfer und schärfer durch das Glas hinschaute, war es, als gingen in Olimpias Augen feuchte Mondesstrahlen auf. Es schien, als wenn nun erst die Sehkraft entzündet würde; immer lebendiger und lebendiger flammten die Blicke. Nathanael lag wie festgezaubert im Fenster, immer fort und fort die himmlisch-schöne Olimpia betrachtend (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 28-29).

Olimpia siedziała jak zwykle, z rękoma założonymi na stoliku. Teraz mógł dopiero przyjrzeć się jej cudownie pięknej twarzy. Tylko oczy wydawały się dziwnie nieruchome i martwe. Jednak w miarę jak się jej przypatrywał, wyraźnie budziły się w nich wilgotne jakieś blaski, jakby promienie wstającego księżyca. Powiedziałbyś, że zdolność widzenia rodziła się dopiero w tej postaci. Stopniowo oczy jej ożywiały się coraz mocniej. Nataniel stał jakby przykuty do okna, nie umiejąc oderwać wzroku od widoku bosko pięknej Olimpii (Hoffmann, 1999, p. 117).

Olympia was sitting as usual before the little table, with her arms laid upon it, and her hands folded. For the first time could he see the wondrous beauty in the form of her face; only the eyes seemed to him singularly stiff and dead. Nevertheless, as he looked more sharply through the glass, it seemed to him as if moist moon-beams were rising in

the eyes of Olympia. It was as if the power of seeing was kindled for the first time; the glances flashed with constantly increasing liveliness. As if spell-bound, Nathaniel reclined against the window, meditating on the charming Olympia (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 156)

There would be nothing out of the ordinary in this description, were it not for the fact that Olympia is actually a mechanical wooden doll, who comes to life thanks to being watched by Nathaniel. However, it is only possible when the admirer looks at her through the pocket telescope which distorts the reality seen with naked eye, allowing to see it from a different perspective. The German-language reader is able to connect the word *das Perspektiv* – translated by Faleński as *lornetka* – with the word *die Perspektive*, meaning the perspective or prospects for the future. When interpreting this fragment in the context of the whole story, it has to be pointed out that looking through the pocket telescope allows Nathaniel a chance look into his own near future, when he is going to turn out to be a mechanical man. In this case the author's intended meaning could not be completely conveyed by the Polish translator, since the Polish word *lornetka* does not carry the same connotations as the German word *das Perspektiv*. The situation is different in Oxenford's English translation. He used the word *pocket-telescope*, which etymologically refers to seeing or examining a distant object, which makes the English version closer to the original.

Conclusion

To conclude, Hoffmann's text is a Romantic approach to poetic creation which deprives the known world of unambiguity. The author's intention is to create the uncanny world, different from the one we live in. It is up to the readers, to their intelligence and cognitive knowledge, how deeply they manage to penetrate the text, and how far they succeed in going through Hoffmann's plot maze. In this respect the role of the translators seems to be a very important and difficult one, since they are responsible not only for the correctness of the translation regarding the language, but it should also aspire to grasp in the target language the meaning of the original text coded in it and connected with the circle of a given culture. Felicjan Faleński's translation, despite a few shortcomings caused mostly by the linguistic differences between Polish and German and the lack of a wider cultural context, seems to fulfil its purpose. The English translation by John Oxenford, however, seems to be much closer to the original. It is due to the fact that the Anglo-Saxon culture is the common denominator both for the German-language culture and English-language culture.

In accordance with Hoffmann's intentions, both translations do not impose clarity and unambiguity on the text, but allow to understand its whole dynamics and ambiguity. The interpretation of the story according to Todorov's theory leaves the most important question posed by the text unanswered. Did the demonic Sandman exist in reality in the persons of Coppelius/Coppola, or was he just a figment of Nathaniel's imagination?

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Abstract

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Keywords

German Romanticism, fantasy literature, theory of fantasy literature