

Andrzej Kopacki

Laudatory Speech for Martin Pollack

Good evening, Martin. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

Just what does it mean to be a translator?

That's a tricky question and one that has become suspiciously relevant these days. I say "suspiciously relevant" because passing fads and short-lived cultural trends are dodgy by definition.

Literary translation has become fashionable. It's a staple focus of conferences and seminars, symposiums and workshops nowadays. The good old translator, once the wallflower in the ballroom of literature, has suddenly been asked to dance. But the music is not very pleasant because the orchestra seems to be playing—literally—out of tune. It does not seem to know the score, but only abstract concepts hatched in the theory of translation, cultural studies and linguistics. These abstract concepts are apparently needed for the "transcultural" world to reflect on its own globality.

Passing fads should not be overestimated; between one ballroom and another, the translator puts on the overalls of a pipefitter of literary works. Things are supposed to be fast and neat. The payment will be made according to the rate set by the works dealer. The name of the man or woman in the overalls, with a black case full of nuts and bolts, seems unimportant. There is no space for it on the website. The face? Who remembers the face of a pipefitter?

Yet translators have always been with us. Let's face it: the vast majority of literary works would have never been known to us had it not been for translators. Imagine a faucet without water, a bulb without electricity, a lock without a key. Now take the literary pipefitter out of the picture and try to imagine great writing without translators.

Martin, I'm sorry I've been keeping you out of the picture for so long in this introduction. Today you are not putting together any new literary works or dancing in the ballroom of literature. You are here today for us to look at you and answer the question: just what does it mean to be a translator? A translator named Martin Pollack.

When Grandma learned about my decision to enroll for Slavic studies, she said she couldn't understand where my love for Slavs came from... But before long we saw Slavs standing between us. Grandma would get increasingly impatient when I talked about my studies, about my friends in Warsaw, and I would get edgy seeing her react in this way ... Finally, almost imperceptibly, I broke my contact with her and my uncle ... When I returned home after two years of studying in Poland, Grandma, in her helplessness, wrote me a letter in which she expressed her (not quite unfounded) concern that I could one day appear in Amstetten with a Polish woman as my wife ... Or even worse: that I could marry a Jewish woman ... I reacted with a stern, harsh letter in which I declared that I was severing my relations with Grandma (*Śmierć w bunkrze* [retranslated from Polish; English title: *The Dead Man in the Bunker*], pp. 185-186).

I'd much rather talk about some easy and pleasant things here, but I can't really do that. What's more, Martin, I think you wouldn't really want me to do that. Because your "love for Slavs" was not at all easy and pleasant. Things were not easy and pleasant for you when in 1980 "the Slavs" refused you the right to enter Poland as a journalist—even though you had visited the country earlier. That redirected your professional career. Actually, it was not Slavs as a whole nation who did that; it was evidently done by one stupid, red-faced Slav whose ethnic origin does not matter. You knew that and you didn't turn your back on our tribe.

This is the first defining feature of Martin Pollack the translator: his non-opportunistic stance that is perhaps shared by other translation “pipefitters.” A person needs to make friends. But I don’t know what should come first: nature, culture? People, those friends of yours from Warsaw? Or perhaps the language, the sounds, which have an exotic ring to them in the Austrian ear? Or perhaps our historical, cultural—maybe Galician?—affinity?

Originally, I thought I’d ask Martin to tell us about all that. This is far more important for our insight into the art of translation than any conceptual buzzwords from the arsenal of theory. I was going to ask Martin to do that, but it now turns out that there is no need. To my surprise, two weeks ago, in Martin’s latest book, *Topografie der Erinnerung* (A Topography of Memory), I saw a section entitled “My Polish Lessons.” It’s as if the author had guessed what I was seeking. And he met my request by spinning a tale about “his” Poland. Specifically, what does he tell us? I will not talk about that; read it for yourselves to find out. And people *will* read it, Martin, because I can assure you that all your Polish fans are very curious about your story.

And now for something easier and more pleasant. I refer to the time when your countryman, Christoph Ransmayr, a writer who is also known in Poland, persuaded you to go on an imaginary trip to the Poland of the 1980s. You went for it, and traveled all the way to the old Galicia of the turn of the century. You traveled in your imagination across the lands of the Poles, Swabians, Russians, Boykos, Hutsuls and Hasids. At the same time, you translated *The Emperor* by Ryszard Kapuściński into German. This biographical fact is a convenient excuse to recall the words of Kapuściński, the man who lent his name to the award you are about to receive. Fifteen years ago, he made the following comment about your first book in the Polish magazine *Literatura na Świecie*:

[...] The author makes long and methodical preparations for his trip to Galicia. He studies maps of that region of Europe [...], browsing through antique shops

to find old postcards with views of all those towns and monuments. He also looks for travel guides for those who traveled to Galicia in those days. He tries to establish at what time a train from Lvov left for Vienna a hundred years ago (it would leave at 6:10 p.m.). He notes down information about the hotels: where they were and what kind of amenities they offered. He also provides information about good restaurants and what they offered in the way of specialties of the house. He does not neglect to warn the reader against bad restaurants in which they could find an old nail in a meatball.” (*Literatura na Świecie* 1/2001, p. 315)

What does all this have to do with translation? A lot—because every translator knows that they must do this archivist, laborious, detective-like job in order not to make—pardon my Greek—hermeneutic mistakes. You did such a job, Martin, in your capacity as the author of books such as *Po Galicji* (Across Galicia), *Ojcobójca*, and *Śmierć w bunkrze* (*The Dead Man in the Bunker*). Ryszard Kapuściński, using a term coined by Clifford Geertz, called what you do as a writer a “blurred genre.” You prefer the term “creative non-fiction,” admitting at the same time that Kapuściński’s work has become a model of literary reportage for you. If I may dwell on this subject, I would add that—alongside another of your good friends, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, as well as the esteemed late W.G. Sebald—you are the co-founder of a new genre. Here in the 21st century, it makes us redefine what we have come to call documentary literature.

And what about translation? Exactly. Would you have become such a great translator of Kapuściński were it not for your firsthand experience as a writer? In your “Galician” prose, you uncovered images of the world as seen through the lenses of different languages. You interpreted these images and rendered them into German so that they could appeal to German-speaking readers today. It may not be particularly creative, but let me quote myself from years ago

(because repeating something that has already been said before seems to be a fairer thing to do than pretending to be creating something new):

Martin Pollack's language, the stuff of his narratives, is particularly sensitive to Otherness. It does not shy away from paths where Otherness has left its mark. It follows these paths, examining its icons: peculiar terms, names and testimonies in which Otherness is reflected. This forest is full of luminous places and shining oddities: mysterious words, sounds and meanings, sometimes arranged into a popular verse, and sometimes into a story about the nooks and crannies of Galician linguistic geography, such as folk art in a local Swabian dialect" (*Literatura na Świecie*, 1/2001, p. 321).

Can you imagine better intellectual, cognitive and linguistic qualifications in a translator? A translator who is a friend of another world that he wants and likes to adapt linguistically to his own time and space continuum. A translator who is also a writer and understands the requirements of the material. Martin, you have both of these features, like perhaps only a few other translators today—the true masters of the art of translation. And there are very few masters of the art of translation these days.

In fact, there are no sharp distinctions here. Let's leave "the theory of influence"—or rather the theory of flows between a text by a foreign author, a translation and someone's own writing—to eager academics who will write learned dissertations on this subject—rather useless to the "pipefitters of literary works." I hope theoreticians will mark your words about the literature of Kapuściński, the man who lent his name to the award you are about to receive—your words about what his work means for you as a writer. A brief excerpt:

Apparently it's called comfort literature, a literature that is especially close, one that has a calming effect ... I draw important stimuli from it. It's not easy

for me to quote specific examples because usually this happens, in a sense, subcutaneously, without people being aware of it, but I will try. When I was working on a book about the Halsmann case ... —a 1928 criminal incident in Austria that took on international dimensions and was often compared with the Dreyfus affair—I was primarily grappling with the problem of finding the right tone of narration, of adapting the language to the subject matter ... After a few not very satisfactory attempts, I finally returned to that archaic language from 1928 and started drawing from its vast resources. I remember that I came up with this idea after my talk with Ryszard [Kapuściński] years earlier about his *The Emperor* and the deliberate use of Polish archaisms there. In other cases it's not so easy to put your finger on the problem of influences, which does not necessarily mean that they do not exist (*Trzy podziękowania i jeden ukłon*" [Three Thank-Yous and a Bow]).

To find the right tone of narration, to adapt the language to the subject matter ... Doesn't the author's struggle that you described reflect the very essence of a translator's work? Sure, not every translator is a writer at the same time in terms of composing original texts. But I can probably venture the statement that every translator aspiring to a major artistic role is a writer.

Your work, Martin, is in this respect a reason to ask questions that I will not answer here. Would you have become such a great creative non-fiction writer yourself without translating the dozen or so books by Kapuściński? And also by others that you have rendered into German for a German-speaking audience: by the likes of Andrzej Bobkowski, Wilhelm Dichter, Michał Głowiński, Henryk Grynberg, Daniel Odija, Teresa Torańska, Andrzej Stasiuk, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, and Mariusz Wilk. And once again: would you be such a great translator of all of these authors if you had not been encouraged by Ransmayr? If you had not worked with him and had not published your work in the *TransAtlantik* magazine edited by Enzensberger? Would you have become such

a great translator had it not been for all your work and books, which somehow arose from this? I have no idea what would have happened if that had not been the case, but fortunately I do not have to know. It's enough that you are with us and so are your books.

Martin, when you won the Angelus Award, some non-expert apparently asked backstage during the awards ceremony in Wrocław: "Who won?"

"Pollack," came the answer.

"So! I thought that they would hand the award to a Pole."

Martin, please accept my heartfelt congratulations.