

## *The wit in ‘the grocer of despair’ – M. Zembaty’s melic and poetic translation of L. Cohen’s songs*

### *„Sprzedawca rozpacz” i jego dowcip – przekład poetycki i meliczny utworów L. Cohena przez M. Zembatego*

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#### **Keywords:**

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#### **Słowa kluczowe:**

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#### **Abstract:**

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the translation of Leonard Cohen’s songs into Polish – what were the strategies the translator used, what decisions did he make – in terms of the notion of melic and poetic translation. The subject of the analysis are three songs written by Cohen: *Hallelujah*, *Suzanne* and *Memories*. They will be compared with their Polish translations by Maciej Zembaty. It is an attempt to answer the question, whether this translation is melic and how the musical aspect of the song influences the textual part, by using the product-oriented comparative analysis of source and target texts.

#### **Abstrakt:**

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zanalizowanie polskich przekładów wybranych utworów Leonarda Cohena – interesują mnie zwłaszcza strategie użyte przez tłumacza i decyzje przez niego podjęte w stosunku do tłumaczenia melicznego i poetyckiego. Przedmiotem analizy są trzy piosenki Cohena: *Hallelujah*, *Suzanne* oraz *Memorie* – zostaną one porównane z polskimi przekładami autorstwa Macieja Zembatego. Podejmuję próbę odpowiedzi na pytania, czy tłumaczenia te można uznać za meliczne i w jakim zakresie aspekt muzyczny wpływa na warstwę tekstową. Umożliwia mi to analiza porównawcza tekstu źródłowego i docelowego.

## The wit in ‘the grocer of despair’ – M. Zembaty’s melic and poetic translation of L. Cohen’s songs

### 1. The author and the translator

Leonard Cohen was a Canadian poet, singer and songwriter, labeled ‘the grocer of despair’ and ‘the prince of bummers’ (De Lisle, 2004), which is justified, as his songs (especially in early years) are mostly dark and melancholic. However, some elements of wit were also to be found in his works. He was first, a poet, whose works could function in a culture even without music; it was poetry he chose for his first path; music came just later.

In the lyrics as well as in poems one can clearly see his four main obsessions: love, power, poetry and religion. Cohen was also fascinated by a Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and this fascination is also noticeable in the lyrics. As he grew up on the edge of Catholic and Judaic tradition, his songs are full of Biblical references, as it is seen in Hallelujah or Suzanne. Cohen also tends to mix sex and religion in some of the lyrics; also women played a very important role in his life and work – Cohen was known to have numerous relationships with women, who influenced his songs, for example ‘So long, Marianne’, ‘Suzanne’ or ‘Chelsea Hotel’.

Leonard Cohen’s artistic output, especially musical, is very popular in Poland – mainly because of two reasons: the first one is the fact that his poetry hails from European literary tradition; Cohen was understood by Poles and Europeans because he was tackling topics which were familiar. However exotic he might seem, he was still understandable (Wyszogrodzki, 2012:306). The second contributor to Cohen’s popularity in Poland was Maciej Zembaty, a singer and satirist, who translated his songs into Polish, so that the Polish listeners could not only admire the musical aspect, but also understand the meaning of the lyrics. He started it in 1975, when he found in himself the same emotional identity as the author, embraced the experience, which Cohen had, writing these songs. His translation is typically melic or even, as Bryll (2004) states, ‘utilitarian’, where the music is the main direction and he managed to render those works in terms of all three codes (Bryll, 2004).

Zembaty himself states that in Cohen’s work there are two main topics: love and alienation. Although he missed some points made by Cohen, he was able to see things that were not clearly seen for other translators: the specific kind of sense of humor and irony which made songs both sad and funny (Zembaty, 2008).

Cohen was translated into Polish also by Stanisław Maciąg, Maciej Karpiński and Alina Braun but Zembaty's works are the most popular among listeners. They were, however, criticized by some of the translation theorists; for instance, Osadnik (2004) stated, that Zembaty is an exemplification of not obeying the rules of linguistic and cultural equivalence – he was more faithful to the receivers of target text, than to the source text. Osadnik refers to his interpretation as 'inadequate'. Bryll (2004) agrees, remarking that Zembaty did not succeed in creating a message which would be adequate to original.

## 2. Hallelujah

The song Hallelujah comes from an album *Various Positions* released in 1984. It took two years to record the song and there are about 240 (some sources refer to even a thousand) covers of this song. The power of this composition, which became a sort of an anthem in 21st century, consists of its simplicity, frugality and rigidity. The voice of the singer, heard from the very beginning of the compositions is to stun a listener (Reynolds, 2012: 192–193).

In the text, the persona goes through different kinds and meanings of word *hallelujah*. There is a clear reference to two biblical stories. The first one is about King David and Bathsheba. He was a harp player and had close relationship with God – the hallelujah at the end of this stanza is happy and spiritual. In the second stanza, David sees Bathsheba bathing; she seduces him and they commit adultery. It weakens him and his relationship with God. There is also a reference to another biblical figure – Samson, who loses his power, when his hair gets cut; here hallelujah is an expression of despair. In the next verse the message is that religion and faith are very personal and it depends on every single believer, how it will be interpreted. Hallelujah here expresses uncertainty. In the last stanza comes the reflection of the past and an epiphany – the speaker finally realizes how his faith should be. It is already complete and he is ready to face God. Here hallelujah means certainty and simple adoration for the lord.

In order to create a melic translation, Zembaty had to make some compromises: both in semantic and poetic layer of the text. Every stanza is built up of six lines, and every third line in stanza ends with 'you', pronounced as /jΛ/ which rhymes with 'hallelujah' on the end of every last line of the stanza, which is not present in the translation. There is also a difference between the types of rhymes used: in source text they are masculine and perfect ('chord' – 'lord'), whereas in target text, the translator used masculine rhymes as well, but both slant ('brać' – 'blask') and perfect ('brzmiał' – 'grał').

In the two first lines ‘I’ve heard there was a secret chord/That David played and it pleased the Lord’ the persona starts the story of David. ‘Tajemny akord kiedyś brzmiał/Pan cieszył się, gdy Dawid grał’ – here the translator changed the subject of the sentence from ‘I’ to ‘akord’. In Polish he was not able to render the indefinite article, but he compensated it with a word ‘kiedyś’.

In the next line ‘But you don’t really care for music do you?’ persona addresses his words to someone, whereas the translator says: ‘lecz muzyki nikt tak dziś nie czuje’ and thus loses the addressee, there is no ‘you’ in the translation. For that operation was Zembaty criticised. According to Osadnik (2004), he was oblivious to the significance of the personal pronouns and their role in structure of the text. Cohen puts a lot of emphasis on it: ‘you’ addresses not only a particular person but also God; ‘I’ is an aspect which fascinates him and is, in a way unique. In the translation this feature is missing.

It goes like this	Kwarta i kwinta, tak to szło
The fourth, the fifth	Raz wyżej w dur, raz niżej w moll
The minor fall, the major lift	

In the next fragment, which describes the song mentioned earlier, there is a progression of sounds, going along with the text, which was faithfully rendered by the translator. The only change here is the tense: ‘it goes like this’ – ‘tak to szło’, but in this way the expression sounds more natural in Polish and the translator was able to sustain the number of syllables.

In the next line the translator changed the meaning. ‘Baffled king composing hallelujah’ – ‘Nieszczęsny król ułożył alleluja’. Baffled, which means ‘puzzled, confused’ was shifted into ‘nieszczęsny’ meaning ‘wretched, unhappy’.

The second stanza starts with: ‘Your faith was strong but you needed proof’. The translator’s ‘Na wiarę nic nie chciałeś brać’ has a slightly different meaning, for it suggests that the addressee has no faith, whereas in original, the persona refers to it as ‘strong’.

You saw her bathing on the roof	Lecz sprawił to księżyc a blask
Her beauty in the moonlight	Że piękność jej na zawsze cię
overthrew you	podbiła

Here, the speaker recalls the story of David meeting Bathsheba; the translator renders the astonishment he experienced, but omits the circumstances of meeting. In the original moonlight is only an adjunct, whereas the translator made it an agent, omitting the biblical reference – he is not fully aware of a role of biblical motives in Cohen’s work. Circumstances which are

described here can apply to any similar situation, whereas originally it was a particular event.

You say I took the name in vain	Dlaczego mi zarzucasz wciąż
I don't even know the name	Że nadaremno wzywam go
But if I did, well really, what's it to you?	Ja przecież nawet nie znam go z imienia

Here we have a reference to the Ten Commandments, which is clear in the Polish text as well. In the first line, translator changes an indicative sentence into a question, compensating for the line he omitted ('But if I did, well really, what's it to you?'), but still the translation lacks the 'you'.

The purpose of the next line was to show contrast between two kinds of 'hallelujah' which was rendered by the translator, even though he did not use the dictionary equivalents of the words 'the holy or the broken' – his words 'najświętsze ('holy'), czy nieczyste ('impure', so as opposed to 'holy')' are adequate to create the same effect.

And even though it all went wrong	I chociaż wszystko poszło źle
I'll stand before the Lord of Song	Przed Panem Pieśni stawię się
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah	Na ustach mając tylko Alleluja

In the last three lines, again, there is a difference between usages of rhymes. Although throughout the whole song Cohen used only tail rhymes, in the last stanza there is also one cross rhyme: wrong-song-tongue. In the target text this feature is not present. The translator also changes the word 'tongue' into 'usta' for a simple reason: this connotation sounds natural in Polish, so there was no use in translating it literally.

### 3. Suzanne

The second song Suzanne tells the story of Suzanne Verdal. It was created 'in an act of a clear desperation' (Reynolds, 2012: 70). She was married to a sculptor from Quebec and that is why Cohen wrote 'I touched your perfect body with my mind'. There was no other opportunity of touching her, for her husband was Cohen's friend and they represented the kind of relationship one does not want to violate and 'intrude the shared glory they manifested' as Cohen (cited in: Schneider, 2009) admits.

The river in the song is a stream, by which Suzanne lived – the St. Lawrence River. Apart from the story of Suzanne who was said to make delicious tea, the aim of the song was to 'paint' the landscape of Montreal in winter.

Cohen (in: Reynolds, 2012: 70) himself claimed that he could put any other name in this song, because before he wrote the part referring strictly to Suzanne, he knew that this composition would describe Montreal – the place of his birth and the place he loved; the song describes the view on the river he knew. The character of Suzanne is an element, which adds magic and mystics to the landscape.

Here again we have a reference to faith and religion. There are two main characters in this story: Suzanne and Jesus. In the second verse of the song, the author enclosed a short summary of Jesus' life.

Zembaty himself admits that he had problems and struggled with this particular text and this is seen in his translation which seems to be clumsy and has certain mistakes. For instance, in the very first line: 'Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river' – it means that Suzanne takes the addressee to the place where she lives, to her house and it was translated literally – 'w swe miejsce' which can mean basically anything. Instead he should use words like, for example 'do siebie'.

In the lines: 'And she lets the river answer/That you've always been her lover' translated into: 'I pozwala mówić rzece, że się zawsze w niej kochałeś' the author of the target text slightly changes the concept: being a lover implicates that there is an interaction and 'że się zawsze w niej kochałeś' means only one-sided relation.

The song has almost no rhymes, except for the chorus: 'And you want to travel blind/ And you know she will trust you/For you've touched her perfect body with your mind' – this rhyme was not present in the translation. There is also a problem with an expression: 'perfect body' which was probably not fully understood and interpreted by the translator and was shortened only to 'ciała'. The translator himself admitted that he had a certain problem with this song, especially with the expression 'perfect body' which is ostensibly simple, but carries a hidden meaning, referring to the relation with Suzanne.

The second stanza starts with 'And Jesus was a sailor' – 'Pan Jezus był żeglarzem'. This expression in Polish sounds childish and naive, because this is how children address Jesus in prayers. It does not bring negative connotations but it does not match the image Cohen created either.

In one of the next lines: 'But he himself was broken/long before the sky would open', translated into 'Lecz zwał się zanim jeszcze/otworzyły się niebiosa', although the translator did not translate the word 'broken' literally, he managed to create the same effect, as the author of the source text. This is a reference to the moment of his death. In the next line: 'Forsaken, almost human' translated into 'Zdradzony, niemal ludzki' he did not recreate the same image, because 'forsaken' is not equivalent with 'zdradzony' and each of this

two words brings different connotations. In the original text this is a clear reference to one of Jesus' seven sayings on the cross: 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'. The translated version: 'zdradzony' may be interpreted rather as a reference to the moment before Jesus was killed, when he was betrayed by Judas. It disturbs the chronology of the story.

'He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone' – 'Jak kamień zapadł Jezus w mądrość swą' here, the author creates an image of wisdom like it was a liquid, using the word 'sank'. The translator tried to recreate this effect by referring to Polish expression: 'Przepaść jak kamień w wodę', but he failed, for he made a mistake, by mixing two expressions: 'Przepaść jak kamień w wodę' and 'Zapaść się pod ziemię'. It could be also a deliberate action, made in order to convey the meaning of 'sank' and 'beneath'. This expression refers to the moment of death and in the original it is clear, whereas in the translation this aspect was lost.

In the next stanza, the persona gets back to the character of Suzanne. By her description he uses the expression 'Salvation Army counters' referring to a particular organization. The translator used ellipsis in this case; by using a hyperonym – 'Z jakiejś akcji dobroczynnej', he still conveys the meaning, but does not confuse the listener with an unknown entity.

In the next line the author again creates the image of Montreal in winter, using a simile 'and the sun pours down like honey'. The translator changes this stylistic figure into a metaphor – 'Słońce kapie złotym miodem', but this has no negative effect on the image.

In the last line of the stanza, before the chorus, the author uses the expression 'While Suzanne holds the mirror' which is a reference to the Shakespeare's 'Hamlet': '(...)to hold as 'twere the/mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own/image (...)'. It means that Suzanne is the reflection of the nature around and the image he creates is in fact her. The translator did not understand this reference and translated the expression literally, which made the line sound completely out of context.

The mistakes and inconsistencies in this translation are caused by unusual rhythm, which was difficult to recreate in another language. But there are also mistakes caused by lack of knowledge – e.g. missed references.

#### 4. Memories

Memories is completely different in character than the previous two songs. It is not serious and should not be treated that way. It has no biblical references and it does not match Cohen's image as an author of depressive, melancholic lyrics and poems. It functions more in terms of a joke, romantic irony or a wink towards the audience.

Here, Cohen creates a picture of 1950s school dancing, but also, what is more important, the atmosphere of young desire. It creates a nostalgic image, to which everyone would come back at a certain moment of their lives and tells the story of a school dance. The song is based on the dialogue between a boy and a girl: firstly, the boy asks for something, the girl is not fully convinced, but she plays with him, she does not deprive him of hope completely. The song is not completely serious: either in terms of music and arrangement or in terms of lyrics – it is just bantering between two young people.

When Zembaty started translating Cohen, he underwent a metamorphosis. From a satirist with a special penchant for absurd and paradoxes he became a subtle poet, learning from his ‘Canadian master’ (Bryll, 2004). While working with this composition, for a moment he came back to his satiric roots. The song, written in the metre of waltz has changed its character in the Polish version: in the first place, the original version is played on the electric guitar with the accompaniment of trumpets in a doo-wop manner, whereas the translation is only played on the acoustic guitar and sounds more ballad-like. Zembaty in a way plays with this composition. Apart from translating the text, he adds a spoken introduction which explains the situation and supplements the lyrics. It also adds the comical effect to the composition. It was a reasonable decision; he could not base an effect he wanted to create on evoking memories using lyrics only, as it was done by Cohen, because his audience’s memories did not match the ones, which were pictured in the original.

The pattern of rhymes used by the author is reproduced in the translation, rhymes are in both cases masculine – to sustain the type of rhymes translator decided for example to use ellipsis changing the word ‘lapel’ into ‘piers’: ‘I pinned an Iron Cross to my lapel’ – ‘przypiąłem więc Żelazny Krzyż do piersi swej’ and thus in Polish version accents are placed in the same pattern as in the original.

He even added a rhyme in a place where it was not present in original:

She says, you’ve got a minute to fall in love	Szepnęła, masz minutę by zakochać się
In solemn moments such as this I have to put my trust	W tak uroczystej chwili, muszę wierzyć że

‘She says’ was translated into ‘szepnęła’ which adds to the atmosphere of intimacy.

The rhythm and rhymes seem to be most important aspect in terms of this translation, but the textual part is also rendered faithfully. He did small



changes in terms of semantics, though, but it does not change the meaning of the whole song. Interestingly enough, this song was changed in terms of lyrics to the smallest extent.

In the first verse: 'I said, look you don't know me now, but very soon you will' was translated into: 'Powiedziałem, jeszcze nie znasz mnie i to twój wielki błąd'. Although the message of the translation is more straightforward the result and effect is the same. It indicates, that there is a certain condition ('you don't know me now'/'jeszcze nie znasz mnie') but it should be changed soon ('but very soon you will'/'I to twój wielki błąd').

Here, Zembaty decreased the semantic changes to a minimum and applied them only to aspects which were not significant – for example, in the last stanza, he changed 'paper streamers' into 'confetti' – it was not so important to use an exact equivalent as long as it brings the same connotations; changing it into something cognate helps to save the rhythm.

The only thing he did not save was the anaphora in the chorus:

So won't you let me see	Więc czy pokażesz mi
I said won't you let me see	Powiedz czy pokażesz mi
I said won't you let me see	Gadaj czy pokażesz mi
Your naked body?	Swe nagie ciało?

This change seems to have been done on purpose; the choice of word he used ('Powiedz', 'Gadaj') and imperative make the impression of growing tension between the characters. Still, the rhyme was based on the same vowel as it in the original – /i:/. Similarly, in the last chorus, instead of repetition of 'And all my faith to see', he wrote: 'Że pokażesz jednak mi/Pokażesz w końcu mi' which also strengthens the expression – shows growing desire and hope.

## 5. Conclusion

Zembaty was one of the few, who were able to catch the wit within a seemingly depressing, dark and melancholic world created by Cohen in his songs. He also rendered their musical value, which however required some sacrifices.

However, there are some aspects, which were missed by the Polish translator. First, the Judeo-Christian references, which are deeply rooted in Cohen's childhood. Zembaty was not fully aware of the significance of this motive, which is seen e.g. in the lines of the song 'Hallelujah', where he omitted the reference to the story of David meeting Bathsheba. He did not see a Shakespearean reference either (in 'Suzanne'), which leads to a conclusion, that he was oblivious to some parts of the background of the translated works.

The main aim of Zembaty's work was to convey those composition in the same way as they were created: as a song. To sustain this form and all its elements, the translator has to make some sacrifices in the semantic layer of the text, but still he manages to convey the general message of whole composition. This requires from the translator not only linguistic competence, but also a good ear for music and 'musical sensitivity' (Bryll, 2004). Saving the musical layer was the frame, restraining all the actions taken in order to translate the song. As Bryll (2004) states one of the important musical aspects of those works which have to be saved is a cantilena. It is a smooth flowing style in some vocal music, present in Cohen's works and it is also present in their translation.

Zembaty succeeded in finding the key points of Cohen's songs: the image that those compositions evoke was rendered and they have a similar effect on the listener. He slightly changed the arrangement in order to apply more to the Polish tradition of bards and sung poetry and thus, those songs in Polish are for Poles the same as for the Canadian in English. All these factors may contribute to the statement that this translation is sufficient in terms of equivalence, for there is a balance between the textual and musical layer of the song, which were both rendered.

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