

Taboo in Translation in the Polish Versions of Philip Larkin's "This Be The Verse"

Krzysztof Puławski
University of Białystok

Abstract. The presented article examines the notion of taboo in translation in Philip Larkin's poem "This Be The Verse" and its three Polish translations by Jerzy Jarniewicz, Jacek Dehnel and Maciej Froński. In the first part of the article, we find information on Larkin's reception in Poland and translations of his poems. We also learn that in addition to supporters such as Barańczak, Jarniewicz and Dehnel, he also had well-known opponents, the most famous of whom was Czesław Miłosz. The second part of the article deals with the idea of different types of taboo is presented together with an analysis of Larkin's dealings with this notion. The types of taboo discussed here are: profanity, ancestors, immediate family and God. Larkin seems to be breaking all of them, yet retaining a classic verse structure and certain elegance that present a great challenge to his translators. In the third part, we look closer at the three Polish translations of "This Be The Verse", focusing on how the subsequent translators have dealt with its taboos. They all had a difficult task, which they accomplished in a variety of ways, all of which have been carefully researched and described. Finally, as the author, I also present my own version of Larkin's translation of the poem, but leave its assessment to subsequent researchers.

Keywords Larkin, Barańczak, Jarniewicz, Dehnel, Froński, translation, taboo

Introduction

It is difficult to say whether Philip Larkin has penetrated Polish poetic consciousness, although his presence in Polish poetry has been strongly supported by two literary theoreticians, translators and poets: Stanisław Barańczak and Jerzy Jarniewicz, the former as a translator, and Jarniewicz rather as a promoter of his poetry. They have recently been joined by Jacek Dehnel, who in 2007 published three of the poet's most important volumes of poetry in a book entitled *Zebrane*, and later, with reference to Barańczak, a volume entitled *Śnieg*

w kwietniową niedzielę. 44 wiersze, and more recently his novel entitled in Polish *Zimowe królestwo* (*A Girl in Winter*).

To Barańczak we owe first and foremost the volume of translations of Larkin's 44 poems, which was published in 1991 as number two of Biblioteczka Poetów Języka Angielskiego (the English Poets' Library) series, which shows the importance the translator attached to these poems (the first one was devoted to Emily Dickinson). In the introduction, entitled *Intensity of Sadness*, he presented not only a profile of the then little-known poet in Poland, but also a brief characterisation of his poems, together with their four most important elements: ordinariness, lack, unfulfillment and irony. Barańczak regarded Larkin as a poet of deep but also calm sadness that made him look at life and himself – especially himself – without unnecessary illusions. He also wrote of the poet's "profound honesty of thought" (1991, 12) and his apparent "inversion of the accepted norm" (1991, 13), when hope is hidden beneath a layer of pessimism.

After Barańczak, the baton was taken up by Jerzy Jarniewicz, who, as he writes (2018, 17-18), came into contact with Barańczak in the late 1980s precisely on issues related to Larkin and commented on his translations, which he read while they were still in typescript. Jarniewicz devoted two essays to Larkin in his 2001 book *W brzuchu wieloryba. Szkice o dwudziestowiecznej poezji brytyjskiej i irlandzkiej* (*In the Belly of the Whale. Sketches on Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*), and then five years later a whole book, entitled *Larkin. Odstuchiwanie wierszy* (*Larkin. Listening to His Poems*), and these are probably to date (including the short preface to Dehnel's selection) the most comprehensive analyses of the poet's work, important also in the Polish context, for in both we find reflections on reactions to Larkin in Poland. And these were both negative (Czesław Miłosz) and positive (Tomasz Majeran, Bronisław Maj).

However, as far as Jarniewicz's translations of Larkin are concerned, I counted only five, and all of them were printed a long time ago, in the fourth issue of 'Pismo artystyczno-literackie' from 1988. Jarniewicz himself explained this in an interview with Zofia Zaleska as follows:

Indeed, the two authors you mentioned, who are important to me, I did not translate, although this does not mean that the ones I did translate I do not like! By no means. I think the trouble with Larkin or Eliot is that I know them too well, and this awareness would paralyse me when working on their texts. If an oeuvre has

been critically accompanied for many years and screened from all possible angles, then no translation of it satisfies afterwards. (Jarniewicz 2016, 206)¹

Critical literary motifs also appear in the case of Jack Dehnel, who wrote an MA thesis on the translation of Larkin's verse² and a short afterword to his second selection of Larkin's poems, but was primarily concerned with translations of *The Hermit of Hull*. Dehnel also admits to a personal infatuation with these poems³ and the influence they have had on his poetry.

This was completely different in the case of Czesław Miłosz, who, according to Jarniewicz (2001, 50-51), reacted to Larkin's poems very emotionally ('For me, this is repulsive. Disgusting poetry'), which he then tried to justify in an essay published in "Tygodnik Powszechny" in which he tried to rationalise his aversion. Jarniewicz tries to summarise his attitude:

In this essay [Miłosz] places Larkin's poetry on the map of contemporary culture, the direction of which is marked by the erosion of metaphysical sensibility and the disturbing phenomena associated with it: the decline of religiosity, commercialisation, massification, a wave of violence and pornography. (Jarniewicz 2006, 51)

Jarniewicz quips that "Larkin in Miłosz's personal interpretation has little in common with the Larkin that emerges from a careful reading of his poems ..." (2006, 191). But is that all? Doesn't Larkin pose a threat to a certain traditional value model present in poetry or even more broadly: in literature and perhaps even culture in Poland? And how does Polish culture deal in its own language with these new ideas from across the English Channel?

If we wanted to answer this question more fully, we would have to study most of Larkin's poetry and its translations, which is beyond the scope of this article. However, we can try to seek at least a partial answer by focusing on an analysis of one of Larkin's poems that has been translated at least a few times into Polish. We will first focus on the original and its

1 All Polish quotations translated by Krzysztof Puławski unless stated otherwise

2 See Jarniewicz 2006 p. 190.

3 See <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/7028-rozmontowywanie-idealow.html>, DOA 14.04.2024.

implications in the source and target cultures, in order to then see how these implications have been conveyed by subsequent translators. Finally, we will try to formulate general conclusions about how Larkin's poetry and ideas function in Polish.

This Be The Verse

This poem published in 1974 in the volume *High Windows* is perhaps one of Larkin's most recognisable works. This is not only because of its use of profanity, but also because of its general attack on cultural values that are not usually questioned. Just stepping outside tradition probably required a lot of imagination and intellectual courage, and for early readers of this poem must have been shocked. Although first impressions must have been quite familiar:

THIS BE THE VERSE

They fuck you up, your mum and dad
They may not mean to, but they do
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sappy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

First of all, here we have a very poetic, solemn title, which comes from Robert Louis Stevenson's poem entitled "Requiem":

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be (...)

Larkin says that this is what he has to convey to humanity and that this poem is a kind of his epitaph, and therefore of a solemn nature.⁴ Moreover, he does so in a very traditional form, namely the iambic tetrameter so common in English poetry, with exact – which is not at all obvious in his case – rhymes in the abab pattern, as well as an internal rhyme in the second verse (to-do), and ‘calm’ assonances, successively on the m, f and l sounds. In addition, the poem, like much of traditional Anglo-Saxon poetry in general, is accentual-syllabic or simply musical in character.

Into this traditional framework, Larkin puts completely untraditional content. So much so, in fact, that there have even been doubts as to whether this poem should be taken seriously, a view opposed, for example, by Jerzy Jarniewicz (2006, 145–146). On the other hand, it is worth remembering that the notion of seriousness is heavily skewed in Larkin’s work and there is always irony lurking somewhere behind it. If Angela Carter says in *Wise Children* that “Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people”, then Larkin would probably argue that comedy is also tragedy that happens to ourselves.

So what is the poet telling us in his ironic-serious way? What content is so outrageous that it shatters this traditional framework of English verse?

1. Profanity

The first taboo that Larkin violates is linguistic in nature. Namely, it concerns the word ‘fuck’, which appears second in the poem itself and is then repeated in the same form in the first line of the second stanza. Despite the sexual connotations associated with having children, the primary meaning here is expressed by the phrasal verb “fuck somebody up”, or, we could say, “fuck someone up mentally”. At the same time, at the beginning we have the word in the present simple tense, as if this process is unrelentlessly going on, whether the parents are alive or dead. And in the second stanza, the poet is already talking about the past.

Certainly, the use of this vulgarity even in the early 1970s was nothing new. As early as January 1956, Alan Ginsberg wrote in the fifth line of a poem entitled *America*: “Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.” Earlier, in the early 20th century, Ezra Pound cursed heavily in Canto XV, and before him words such as “harlot” or “whore” could be found in the poems of William Blake.

4 Although there are exceptions, as those who have visited Sapanta Cemetery know.

Vulgarisms also appeared in Shakespeare, but rather in plays and usually indicating a lower class background.

The same applies to Polish culture. The father of Polish poetry, Jan Kochanowski, wrote morally daring (though nowadays hard to understand) works, although they were partly censored, but even what remains can shock schoolchildren:

Łaziebnicy a kurwy jednym kształtem żyją,
W tejże wannie i złęgo i dobrego myją.
(Bath attendants and whores live in the same way,
They accept a bad one and a good one in their bath.)

Jan Andrzej Morsztyn was even bolder with his piece *Nagrobek kusiowi*, which began with the words: "Kuś umarł, kpy w sieroctwie" ("Cock died, cunts are in mourning") only that, again, his profanity is already heavily archaic and not always comprehensible. However, even in the days before Larkin, we had poets who, like Julian Tuwim, could swear and used this skill.

Why, then, should we regard Larkin's profanity as exceptional? For two reasons. First, because of the aforementioned classic setting of the poem, in which the word "fuck" suddenly appears. Breaking a taboo is not just about using certain swear words, because that would be very easy, but about using them in a certain situation. As Peter J. Silzer wrote:

Discussion of 'taboo' words must begin with an understanding of the relationship between language and culture. The term originally comes from Polynesian cultures, in which certain objects, actions and words were considered to exert harmful power on people. (...) Thus, speakers of a language had to avoid using certain names or words, just as they had to avoid offending cultural norms and religious beliefs. (Silzer 2005, 1073)

The taboo is not broken by Tony Harrison, who uses vulgarities in his poem "V" in opposition to official, smoothed-out language, but by John Cleese, for example, who used the word "fuck" in his eulogy at Graham Chapman's memorial

service.⁵ In my opinion, this also applies to Larkin, who introduced it into such classic English verse.

Secondly, the use of profanity in contemporary poetry is not unique. As Wit Pietrzak (2015, 57) notes: "Today, no one is very much offended by vulgarisms in poetry anymore. On the contrary, their use can add spice to a verse or open up a completely unexpected interpretative path". They are usually used due to several basic reasons:

- strong emotion (Pound, Ginsberg);
- a desire to offend (Harrison, Tuwim);
- social identification (Harrison);
- a joke (Cleese, Tuwim)
- a desire to shock (Cleese).

What is more, these reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive, in fact they often overlap. In Larkin's case, on the other hand, we have the impression that at least four of the above reasons do not come into play, and the fifth seems highly questionable as well. Admittedly, he does use strong language, but in a very matter-of-fact way, disregarding, of course, the negative overtones of the phrase itself. Philip Larkin does not get angry, offended, aspire to a social group or make a joke – at least not at the informative level of the poem itself. Perhaps he wants to shock us with his choice of vocabulary, although this is not obvious.

2. Ancestors

The second taboo that Larkin addresses in his poem is that of the ancestors and what they have passed on to the next generation. Arguably one of the most deeply ingrained myths in our consciousness is that in the past things used to be better. People were kinder and relationships were more cordial and deepened. We naturally transfer this stereotype to our ancestors, understood as either deceased members of our family or citizens of our country, depending on the situation. The cult of ancestors is firmly rooted in English and Irish culture, but also, perhaps even to a greater extent, in Polish culture, and is of course linked to the idealisation of the dead.

5 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkxCHybM6Ek>. DOA: 04.14.2024.

This is particularly evident in the poetry of Larkin's early master, William Butler Yeats. It was he who wrote of the "great and passionate" in the poem "A Prayer on Going Into My House". For him they were both the family members of the poem "Pardon Old Fathers" and the illustrious Irishmen of Part II of the poem "Three Songs to the Same Tune". It was also Yeats who fascinatingly captured the mechanism of ancestral mythologisation in "Easter 1916", where he wrote:

This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The tendency to idealise ancestors is also evident in Polish poetry, to mention Adam Mickiewicz's "Reduta Ordonia", in which he made dead its alleged commander, who survived the battle. Besides, the past, the lands of the fathers, seemed particularly attractive to poets who left the former Polish lands after the partitions, and then to those who remained abroad after World War II.

Of course, such mythologising tendencies met with resistance in both Anglo-Saxon and Polish culture (the Beatniks, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, Julian Tuwim), but in Larkin's case it was of an unusually matter-of-fact and calm nature:

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sippy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Here, the ancestors are the old-fashioned fools, who, on the one hand, try to live up to some cloying formal requirements, but are unable to tame their own disgusting nature. And this is inherited by:

3. Mum and dad

Even more blunt than the criticism of the ancestors in this poem is the criticism of the parents, with which it begins, even if it is softened slightly in the second line:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.

Firstly, as I wrote, Larkin uses the present tense here, as if to say that whether or not parents are alive, they still have a destructive effect on us. And that this is the essence of the family, which admittedly plays a lesser role in the English tradition than in Poland (or in some other countries).

Secondly, his criticism extends to both parents, including the mother, who occupies an ample place in poetry in general, and especially in Polish poetry. One may resent the father, but rather not the mother. Even in the well-known religious song "Serdeczna matka" we can read:

Lecz kiedy Ojciec rozgniewany siecze
Szczęśliwy kto się do Matki uciecze.
(But when the angry Father waves the rod,
Lucky is the one who seeks protection of his Mother.)

The anonymous author of this song is obviously referring to the human experience, although here he speaks of God and the Mother Mary, which leads to another taboo that Larkin breaks in his poem, as the world he presents is...

4. A world without God

Although Larkin speaks in his poem of unhappiness and a death that (may it be as soon as possible) terminates it, and even seems to encourage suicide, the world he presents is a world completely devoid of God. Here, there is not even a shadow of the doubt that lingered in the minds of poets of earlier generations, especially the Romantics. And since there is no question of God's existence, neither are there doubts about whether H/he is good or evil, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Larkin seems to be saying: this is our world, and we ourselves are entirely responsible for it and for being so fucked up. And that the only way to break this chain of ever-increasing misery is the....

5. Lack of children

The motif of life as a source of suffering appears in some religions, for example in Hinduism or Buddhism, but it does not seem probable that the author of "The Winter Palace" would refer to them:

I spent my second quarter-century
Losing what I had learnt at university

No, Larkin does not seek consolation in religions, either exotic or Christian, but on the basis of his own experience contradicts the basic injunction of the latter: "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it" (The Bible 1978, 5). He is not only areligious but also antisocial. Thus, he breaks another taboo of equating population growth with development.

Larkin in translation

As I have already mentioned, we have two major collections of translations Larkin's poems in Polish, namely Stanisław Barańczak's and Jacek Dehnel's. It may be surprising to see Larkin absent from the third volume of *Poeci języka angielskiego (Poets of English)* anthology, published in 1974, since he already had an established poetic reputation at that time, but we had to wait until 1991 for 44 poems.

What is Barańczak's Larkin like? The translator has stressed several times how important Larkin's formal side is, the artistry with which he constructs his poems and the fact that "the very phenomenon of poetry under his pen has reached absolute perfection" (1992, 326). Whereas a little further on he wrote:

Torn from within by a sense of the meaninglessness of the world,
Larkin at the same time seals this hole in himself with the glue
of poetic meaning and fastens his own splits with the metal brack-
ets of self-imposed formal rules. Larkin's despair does not appear

to be a pose precisely because it is incessantly muted, suppressed, toned down by self-irony restrained by syntax, fenced off by the barrier of regular verse or the lattice of a complicated stanza from the abyss of an uncontrollable howl (...) (Barańczak 1992, 326)

Interestingly, the formal side of Larkin's poetry was also strongly emphasised by Jacek Dehnel, who said the following in an interview for the *Tygodnik Powszechny*:

Larkin wrote in a very artful way and this, of course, creates great difficulties for the translator, because, at the same time, there is no cotton wool, no "poeticism" that can be translated freely, added here, taken away there. These poems are as precise as Swiss watches. I have retained the rhymes with their incredibly intricate arrangements, because I believe that translating rhyming poetry without rhymes makes no sense - but I have often abandoned exact rhymes in favour of assonances. For a couple of reasons. Larkin himself sometimes used inaccurate rhymes or rhymes "for the sake of rhyming", which happens in English but not in our poetry: the endings of rhymed words look the same but sound completely different. In Polish, inaccurate metre sounds much worse than in English, we have stronger accents and a different literary tradition, so I kept a stricter metre than in the originals, so the rhyme skeleton didn't have to be so precise. Above all, I was concerned with the precision of the lecture: Larkin's poems are like very small tractates, and if I had to lose something, I preferred to dispense with exact rhyme and be closer to what Larkin is lecturing the reader.⁶

Although both translators agree on the technicalities concerning Larkin's poetry, their translations are different:

In Barańczak's selection and translation, however, Larkin's despair is toned down (...) a certain specific feature of Larkin's poetry is also

6 <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/te-wiersze-sa-precyzyjne-jak-szwajcarskie-zegarki-131109>, DOA 04.15.2024.

softened, consisting of a bluntness bordering on the obscene, a provocative unceremoniousness, perhaps even squirtish. These tones are also present in the poetry of The Hermit of Hull - and it is this Larkin that Jacek Dehnel brings back to us. Barańczak's translations are artfully refined. Sometimes his Larkin moves in a higher stylistic register than the original; Dehnel's Larkin can be rough - sometimes even perhaps too rough (...) (Rajewska, 2008)

We could probably observe these discrepancies when analysing "This Be The Verse", except that... it is missing from Barańczak's selection. We can guess that it could have been for censorial reasons, although the selection includes two other iconoclastic poems by Larkin, namely "High Windows" and "Annus Mirabilis". Besides, this poem had already appeared in print a few years earlier in a translation by Jerzy Jarniewicz, although not in a separate volume, but in the fourth issue of *Pismo literacko-artystyczne* in 1988. And it is from this, chronologically the first translation, that we will begin our analysis. Later, this poem appeared in various translations, often poor ones, on the Internet, so I propose to use only the versions printed in books or magazines, which will limit our selection to Jerzy Jarniewicz, Jacek Dehnel and Maciej Froński.

1. Jarniewicz and his multiple versions

Jarniewicz's translation of "This Be The Verse" has appeared in three different versions in several different sources, but originally the whole poem read as follows:

TAKI NIECH BĘDZIE WIERSZ
Tatuniek z mamcią ciebie spieprzyli.
Może nie chcieli, lecz tak było.
Wady ci swoje przekazali,
Dodając kilka nowych siłą.

Ale ich także spierdolili
Głupcy w niemodnych kapeluszach,
Pół dnia się sztywno roztkliwiając,
A drugie pół się wzajem dusząc.

Człek biedę daje człowiekowi,
 Głębszą niż osad stuleci.
 Wynieś się prędzej, pókiś zdrowy,
 I sam nie majstruj żadnych dzieci.

So we have here the formal title, but a clearly softened initial vulgarity that only gains strength in the second stanza. The present tense in the first stanza has been replaced by the past tense, and although one can understand this choice (saying “pieprzą cię” in Polish would have a clearly sexual character), it does not seem the best, as it weakens the force of the message. There is also the suggestion, out of a need for rhyme (było-siłą), that the transmission of old vices took place peacefully, which again softens the meaning of the original. Doubts are also raised by the Polish diminutives, which in English are also diminutive (“mum and dad” – written against Anglo-Saxon tradition with a lower case letters), but different from Polish “tatuniek z mamcią”, which, due to their exaggeratedly diminutive character, signal strong irony (in the case of “pure” diminutives we would have “mamusia i tatuś” – “mummy and daddy”).

In the second stanza, we understand that the division of the daytime is metaphorical and this is not objectionable, whereas one may have doubts about the construction of the whole of this stanza, which in Polish implies that the “fucking up” of the parents and the ancestors’ musings and disagreements are connected. But in Larkin the looks and behaviour of the characters are simply a part of their description.

The first line of the third stanza contains information similar to the original, but the word “człek”, rare in Polish, changes its register to a more poetic an archaic one. Later, we can already see the differences in meaning: in Polish, poverty is deeper than the sediment of centuries, but probably constant in some way, while in English it deepens, then in the next verse the addition of the phrase “pókiś zdrowy”, necessary because of the rhyme, makes us think generally of some kind of escape, not death (remember that the poem is meant to be an epitaph). The changes in register also occur in the last line when “majstrowanie dzieci” (“tinkering” i.e. making children) is mentioned, again indicating strong irony.

New version of this piece with a slightly altered title subsequently appeared in the *Tygodnik Powszechny* from the year 2000 and in the books *Larkin*.

Odstuchiwanie wierszy and, with minor changes, *100 wierszy wypisanych z języka angielskiego*. So let's take a look at this latest one:

TAKI NIECH BĘDZIE WIERSZ

Tatko cię z mamcią spierdolili.

Może nie chcieli, lecz tak było.

Wady ci swoje przekazali,

Dodając kilka nowych – siłą.

Ale ich także spierdolili

Głupcy w niemodnych kapeluszach,

Pół dnia tkwiąc w kliwej surowości,

A drugie pół – wzajem się dusząc.

Człowiek swą nędzę odziedzicza,

Głębszą niż osad tysiącleci.

Wynoś się prędzej, pókiś zdrowy,

I sam nie majstruj żadnych dzieci.

Despite the similarity, we see a few differences here. The positions of several words have been changed, new punctuation marks have appeared and, above all, the lighter vulgarity has been replaced by a stronger one and both have become the same as in the original. Also slightly stronger are, firstly, the command "wynoś się" and, secondly, "osad tysiącleci" (the sediment of millennia) corresponding to the history of mankind (centuries tended to encompass Western civilisation). Jarniewicz has also replaced "tatuniek" with "tatko", which is slightly less marked for irony, and added the oxymoronic term 'cloying severity'. However, we still have the past tense here in the first stanza, as well as the encouragement to leave the world while we are healthy.

It seems that in the first translation Jarniewicz weakens the iconoclastic force of the poem, but we must remember that this was its first presentation in Poland and hence the changes. At the same time, the translator here makes Larkin more ironic than in the original, as if he did not believe in the intelligence of his readers. Perhaps rightly so, since English humour based on understatements (and overstatements) was not popular in Poland at the time, and is not always or fully recognised today either.

2. Jacek Dehnel's dialogue

As Ewa Rajewska wrote, Jacek Dehnel's translation enters into a polemic with Stanisław Barańczak's translations. However, since Barańczak did not translate this particular poem, let us see if he tries in some way to dialogue with Jarniewicz's translation.

TO MOŻE TAKI WIERSZYK

Jebią ci życie mamcia z tatkiem,
Może i nie chcą, ale jebią,
Oprócz win własnych na dokładkę
Jeszcze ci kilka ekstra wrzepią.

Lecz im zjebali życie inni,
Głupcy w cylindrach i pelisach,
Co albo byli mdławo-sztywni,
Albo się chcieli pozagryzać.

Człowiek drugiemu przekazuje
Rozpacz, wciąż głębszą, jak dno rzeki.
Zwiewaj stąd, póki możesz uciec -
I nigdy nie miej własnych dzieci.

The Polish title with the diminutive "wierszyk" is different, but in combination with the forms "mamcia z tatkiem" it fulfils exactly the same, ironic, role as in Jarniewicz's work. Similarly, there is the term "nauseatingly stiff", although here we can doubt whether it was not Jarniewicz who decided on the amendment under the influence of Dehnel's reading, because in his version of the poem from 2006, he writes: "Half a day lingering in cloying severity" (2006, 145). What is new, however, is the use of the present tense in line with the original first stanza, which in turn has enabled a very imaginative use of the verb "jebać" (fuck), repeated three times rather than twice as in Larkin's, which adds to its power. Also new is the encouragement to leave the world while we can still do so and the already neutral plea not to have children.

The whole poem is written in colloquial Polish and seems stronger than Jarniewicz's version. The only misunderstanding in it is the statement that

despair is becoming deeper, like the bottom of a river. Dehnel meant here geological deepening of the river but even in such case we have to remember that this process can be stopped or reversed. What Larkin is referring to is the ocean shelf, which simply gets deeper and deeper. This image can, of course, change (or get neutralised) in translation, but we need something that will obviously increase or deepen.

3. Maciej Froński and affront

There could hardly be a better magazine to publish just this poem by Larkin than "Afront", and it was there that Maciej Froński's translation appeared in issue 1-2 (16-17) of 2022:

A NIECH TO IDZIE TAK
Rzną ci psychikę rodziciele,
Chcący, niechcący – rzną, aż kwili;
Nie dość, że po nich wad masz wiele,
Jeszcze by coś ci dołożyli.

Lecz ich też kiedyś przeczolgali
Durnie od fedor i od pelis,
Co albo byli zdziecinniali,
Albo się prawie pogryźć mieli.

Pałeczka udręczenia coraz
Cięższa przez pokolenia leci;
Zwijaj się, póki jeszcze pora,
I mieć nie próbuj własnych dzieci.

So let's see what an affront this new translation is. First of all, one is struck by the ambiguity of the title, which loses its direct reference to poetry and can refer, for example, to a speech or even a piece of music. Another novelty is the marked softening of the vulgarity, which, while it retains its ambiguous connotations, is also a common verb and sounds much weaker than the Polish "pierdolić" or "jebać". It goes on similarly; the person addressed by the lyrical subject is simply flawed by his parents, who **perhaps** add something to them.

In the next stanza, the word “fuck” appears in the version “przeciółgali” (to crawl), i.e., according to the online WSJP: “to bring about a situation in which someone feels humiliated or demeaned”,⁷ but not, after all, damaged for life. Also questionable is the phrase “Durnie od fedor i od pelis”, which would be more indicative of people who have something to do with those garments rather than simply wearing them. Froński goes on to divide these fools into two groups: those who are childish and those with inclinations towards violence, disregarding the fact that in Larkin’s poem they are exactly the same group of people.

This view of the world is decidedly softer than Larkin’s, and it is no wonder that in the final stanza we get the impression that when the lyrical subject says “Zwijaj się, póki jeszcze pora”, it is more about getting out of the situation rather than leaving life as such. That’s because misfortune here is a baton – admittedly an increasingly heavy one – passed on in the relay of generations. And, as we know, the baton can be dropped, thrown away or refused altogether. The inevitability so obvious in Larkin’s work disappears here.

Conclusions

At the outset, I would like to add that all the translations are accentual-syllabic and, although their rhymes are not always as regular as Larkin’s, they still fit into the Polish poetic tradition, just as Larkin verses fit into the English one. The translators thus create the perfect backdrop for the semantic displays of iconoclasm. It is precisely such a traditional framework that is needed to shatter the taboos mentioned in the article, namely:

- use of profanity;
- ancestors;
- parents;
- divine presence in the world;
- social development.

So how do successive translators manage to do this? Jacek Dehnel is probably the best here, hitting yet another taboo with his colloquial Polish. Slightly milder is Jerzy Jarniewicz, who, let us remember, was a pioneer in this field. The mildest

7 <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/50667/przeciologac/5150603/slownie>, DOA 04.15.2024.

is Maciej Froński with the latest of the translations discussed here. Froński only gently nudges taboos, perhaps trying to irritate them, but certainly not to break them. He also creates, to a certain extent, an alternative version to the original and one that is more acceptable to a large proportion of poetry readers, as it confirms their "poetic" intuitions, about which Jerzy Jarniewicz (2012, 37) wrote with certain irony:

In Poland there is still a smouldering belief in the special role of poetry, which is supposed to perform a soothsayer, almost religious function. (...) Even if these assumptions are no longer formulated explicitly today, they are often hidden in the form of other beliefs, for example, concerning the supposedly natural and obvious relationship of poetry - or more broadly: art - with metaphysics.

The translators of "This Be The Verse" thus face a choice. Either they will, at the very least, bend their translation to those implicit canons of poeticism that, we should add, accompany classical poets, and Larkin is already a classic. Or they will look for something new in the work, absent from the classic Polish poems, and try to highlight and emphasise it.

The former seems to be the case with Maciej Froński, and the latter to a greater extent with Jacek Dehnel, but also undoubtedly with Jerzy Jarniewicz.

Apart from this, all these translations have another important function, namely to constitute a translator's series, in the sense Edward Balcerzan (1968, 23-26) gave to the term, and at the same time to encourage further attempts to translate the poem. Two already existing ones are worth mentioning, namely those by Marcei Szpak⁸ and Wioletta Grzegorzewska,⁹ to which I would like to add, without comment, my own translation:

NIECH TO BĘDZIE WIERSZ
Jebią cię równo tata z mamą,
Może i nie chcą, tak wychodzi,
Do tych wad, które mieli sami
Dodają kilka wyjątkowych.

8 <https://www.facebook.com/vogulepoland/posts/philip-larkin-to-mo%C5%BCe-taki-wierszykmamusia-z-tat%C4%85-zjebali-ci-w-g%C5%82owiemo%C5%BCe-nie-ch/1026696290760834>. DOA 06.08.2024.

9 <http://www.literackie.pl/przeklady.asp?idtekstu=3389&idautora=60&lang=>. DOA 06.08.2024.

Ale ich także rozjebali
 Głupcy w tużurku czy surducie,
 Tacy na co dzień czułości, kowi,
 Ale gotowi cię udusić.

Niedolę dają jedni drugim,
 A ta rozlewa się po świecie,
 Więc przerwij wreszcie ciąg ten długi
 I sam najlepiej nie miej dzieci.

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