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Does literary translation have a future in the age of artificial intelligence? Creative artists' intuitions and futurologists' forecasts versus classroom practice

Summary

Many futurologists predict that we are on the brink of achieving the so–called "Singularity", and thus inaugurating a new – and possibly the last – epoch in the history of humanity. It will come to pass with the creation of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), a computer so powerful that it will render virtually all human actions futile, and human predictions irrelevant. What consequences would (will?) such a development have for the humanities in general, and for the study and practice of literature, language and literary translation in particular? Will it still make sense to attempt literary translation and to teach future translators in the face of ever more competent machine translation software? We will try to find an answer to this question by focusing (among other things) on a few case studies: Polish translations of selected English–language literary texts.

Keywords: literature, literary translation, teaching translation, the Singularity, artificial intelligence

"O, that way madness lies; let me shun that."
(William Shakesepeare, *King Lear*, III/4)

Introduction: from the ancient art of translation to computer–generated texts

On 21 May 2025, the *Gazeta Wyborcza* published an article which, depending on our point of view, we may consider optimistic, alarmist, depressing or even terrifying: "Google's AI innovations. Automatic translation like something out of science fiction and a model for 900 Polish zloty per month" by Bolesław Breczka. Among other things, we read:

> During the Google I/O conference [an annual meeting held at Google's headquarters in Mountain View, California], the company showcased its latest developments in artificial intelligence. These

> include real–time translation, a new model for creating videos with sound, and much more. (...) Live translation: Google Meet's video conferencing service will be able to translate in real time. Until now, this technology has been known mainly from science fiction films.[1]

Media reports on artificial intelligence (AI) in a similar style and spirit have been our daily bread since at least 30 November 2022, the date of the 'premiere' of ChatGPT, although, of course, the possibility of its creation and its consequences had been discussed for many years. However, it is one thing to speculate, prophesy and predict, and quite another to live in a world where AI has not only become part of our everyday lives, but is also continuing to develop at an impressive (or possibly frightening) pace. Although it may sometimes escape us in the cacophony of daily political, economic and cultural news, we are living in an era of unprecedented, profound, perhaps in a sense final (and certainly irreversible) change. Its significance cannot be overestimated.

The university department I work for was originally called the Institute of Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies, but a few years ago we dropped the second part of the name so as not to discourage potential candidates from studying by referring to a field that is likely to soon be consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history. In the face of staggering technological progress, it seems that not only the training of translators and the practice of the translation profession are losing their meaning, but also the learning of foreign languages, and perhaps even all education as we have known it so far. During the Viva Dydaktyka 2024 conference in Gdańsk, I spoke about the usefulness of reading, studying and teaching literature in the 21st century ('Teaching and Studying Literature on the Eve of the Singularity', *Horyzonty Edukacji Akademickiej* 2/2024[2]). In this essay, which is a natural extension of my earlier reflections, I would like to consider how the widespread use of 'large language models', or 'generative artificial intelligence', will affect the niche field of literary translation. To put it bluntly: does literary translation, and thus the training of translators, still have a future? Does it make sense to devote many years of study to achieving a very high level of linguistic competence and acquiring extensive philological knowledge, without which one cannot become a good literary translator, and which every artificial intelligence has (or will soon have) at its disposal?

Linguistics has traditionally distinguished between natural languages (which are the result of the spontaneous and long–term evolution of human speech within ethnic communities) and artificial languages – those created from scratch by humans for various purposes, ranging from mystical, as in the case of Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century, to idealistic (Ludwig Zamenhof), political (George Orwell) and artistic (J. R. R. Tolkien). Today, we can talk about a third category – the language of non–human intelligence. Literary translation, combining the characteristics of craft and art, has been practised at least since Greco–Roman antiquity (i.e. since the first translations of Homer from Greek into Latin and the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek), while large language models generating text are a matter of the last few years, but those few years have been enough to shake the foundations

[1] Bolesław Breczka, „Nowości AI Google'a. Automatyczne tłumaczenie jak z science-fiction i model za 900 zł miesięcznie", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 21.05.2025, https://wyborcza.biz/biznes/7,177150,31954855,nowosci-sztucznej-inteligencji-google-automatyczne-tlumaczenie.html. Unless otherwise stated translated by the author of the present text.

[2] The text is available online at: https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/HEAD/issue/view/829.

of the science known as philology. As we will see below, many cultural texts (works of literature and of art as well as films) have, in a sense, prepared us for this upheaval.

I am, of course, aware that the subject is somewhat beyond my grasp. I am an English language specialist by education and profession, a language teacher and academic lecturer giving lectures on the history and theory of literature and classes in literary translation, but I have no expertise in fields such as the history of science or cybernetics. Therefore, I realise that this essay will leave many readers unsatisfied; exploring the subject in depth would require a much broader framework, a book format. My ambitions are more modest: I would like to look at the doubts, problems and fears generated by technological development from the perspective of a literary scholar, an attentive reader of old literary texts (or, more broadly, cultural texts), and, on the other, as a teacher–practitioner conducting classes in AD 2025, who tries not to bury his head in the sand and follows the changing face of the world through media reports, new books, and television and film premieres. My aim will be, first, to take a brief trip into the past – to look at selected cultural texts whose authors speculated about the future; second, to reflect on the question posed in the title of this text: does academic practice, specifically classes in the subject labelled 'Literary Translation', still make sense? I can only hope that these remarks will be of interest to my colleagues who teach similar courses.

1. Is now the right time to panic?

The large brick building of the British Library in London was built in the 1990s, despite protests from the then heir to the throne and current King Charles III. The Prince of Wales believed that it was perfectly suited to serve as the headquarters of a police academy, and he was not alone in his protests – British MPs at the time declared it 'the ugliest building in the world.'[3] In the vast courtyard in front of the main entrance to the library stands Eduardo Paolozzi's sculpture *Newton According to Blake* (1995), inspired by the famous 1795 print by the Romantic artist, depicting a naked, seated, deeply pensive sage with a compass in his hand, apparently engaged in some measurements. The bronze figure resembles Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (*Le Penseur*, 1880: a famous allegory of thought, wisdom and philosophy), and although it depicts a human being, it has something of a cyborg about it. Since the 1960s, a chorus of futurologists (such as Wojciech Orliński, Yuval Noah Harari and Ray Kurzweil[4]), not to mention science fiction writers, have been predicting that the fusion of man and machine is not only desirable but inevitable, that, in short, cyborgs are the future. Perhaps they are right. In any case, cyborgs (embodied by such creations of cinematic imagination as RoboCop and Terminator[5]) are currently among humanity's greatest fears (or perhaps bugbears), along with artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and the internet (not to mention climate change and ecological catastrophe). They

[3] Since 2015 the library (designed by Colin St John Wilson and Mary Jane Long, and officially inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth II in 1998) is a Grade I listed building; cf. Maev Kennedy, 'British Library awarded Grade I-listed building status', *The Guardian*, 01.08.2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/31/british-library-awarded-grade-i-listed-building-status.

[4] It is true that Orliński is a journalist by profession, Harari is a historian, and Kurzweil started out as an inventor, but all of them have been speculating about the future of humanity form many years now.

[5] *The Terminator* was directed by James Cameron and released in 1984; Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* came out in 1987.

have joined the ranks of those that are perhaps less feared today: the atomic bomb, the population explosion and alien invasion.

Stanisław Lem, undoubtedly the greatest of all Polish science–fiction writers to date (nicknamed the 'Krakow Cassandra' by his antagonists because of his profoundly pessimistic views), warned of the disastrous consequences of the construction and widespread use of the internet as early as the 1990s:

> In 1995, German journalists asked him if he was afraid of antimatter. Lem replied that he was more afraid of the internet. (...) Few people paid attention to the logical reasoning behind the flat statement: the internet already exists, so the threats associated with it are close and real. (...) Lem was then the only author dealing with technology who consistently warned of the dangers associated with the internet. (...) He believed that *Homo sapiens* is a kind of ape–man who, whatever he invents – be it a chipped stone or a spaceship – first uses it to harm his fellow man. (...) Lem listed, quite accurately, what the computer network would bring us: new types of crime against which the police and the law would be powerless. New means of aggression between countries, allowing the computer systems of the attacked country to be paralysed in such a way that it would not even be possible to know where the attack came from. Widespread stupidity and ignorance, because in a flood of nonsense information and fake news, it will become increasingly difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff.[6]

In 2013, in his book *Internet: czas się bać* (Internet: Time to Be Afraid), journalist, writer and Lem's biographer Wojciech Orliński wrote:

> The end of innocence! The end of uncritical, open–mouthed admiration for the supposed benefits of the internet! If you think that the internet is not dangerous for you, you are mistaken. It's time to be afraid! (...) Even the inhabitants of East Germany were not surveilled by the Stasi as effectively as we are surveilled every day on the internet. Never in the history of humankind has there been a situation in which freedom of speech, privacy of correspondence and money flows depended on just a few corporations. (...) Politicians play with Twitter with the zeal of a middle school student who has been given a smartphone for their birthday. Technology journalists get excited about the latest bells and whistles in new versions of various gadgets. Most people sing the internet's praises, and few ask about the dangers. And I think it's high time to start asking: How come that the internet, promising us freedom of choice, took that freedom away from us? And by promising absolute freedom of speech, how did it realise the nightmare of perfect censorship? Why did we voluntarily give up our privacy on the internet, and was it worth it? Does the internet create new jobs or take them away?[7]

The pace of technological progress is so rapid that we often do not have time to innocently and naively enjoy the latest inventions (as was the case, for example, with the telephone, the car and the aeroplane) before we have to switch to crisis management mode. 'The future is already here!' we exclaim more and more often, although the expression itself is not new. 'The future is now!' could be heard in California as early as the 1980s, if not earlier (*Tomorrow is Now* is the title of Eleanor

[6] Wojciech Orliński, *Lem, Życie nie z tej ziemi*, Wołowiec 2007, pp. 389-390.

[7] Wojciech Orliński, *Internet: czas się bać*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 7-10.

Roosevelt's 1963 book; 'Tomorrow is Today' was sung by Billy Joel in 1971), but nowadays, as never before, it seems to fit perfectly with the reality that surrounds us. Last year, the Polish media reported:

> Prymus, a robot powered by artificial intelligence, took his first Polish language A–level exam. He wrote his paper in 30 minutes, with a little help from a human turning the pages of the exam paper for him. His work was positively assessed by three teachers.[8]
>
> Three artificial intelligences took the Polish language exam in 2025: ChatGPT, DeepSeek and Claude. In an article entitled 'AI Wrote This Year's Final Exams. One Platform Failed Completely' and published by the Interia portal, Magdalena Raducha reported that 'the results were as follows: ChatGPT, 94%; Claude, 91%; DeepSeek, 20%.'[9]

All this is undoubtedly astonishing, but does it mean that from the next school and academic year we should give up teaching the Polish language, literature, foreign languages, etc.? Not necessarily. The prototype of the first pocket calculator – Cal Tech – was developed by Texas Instruments in 1967, and the first commercial models appeared on the market in the early 1970s, but no one, even though half a century has passed since then, has questioned the usefulness of teaching children mathematics. There are still mathematics departments at all universities around the world, where professional human mathematicians teach. John le Carré (1931–2020), author of, among others, one of the most famous spy novels of the Cold War era, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), already in *A Perfect Spy* (1986), describes an agent who, distrusting all modern means of communication, uses pieces of paper and a pencil to convey the most important messages...

The question (hopefully rhetorical) is therefore: do we really want to trust AI one hundred per cent, to put ourselves in its (their) virtual and metaphorical hands? (Let us not forget for a moment that behind computer software there are powerful and possibly sinister international corporations and predatory superpowers.) Returning to the issues raised by Wojciech Orliński: do we, as humanity, want to give up without a fight? Stop working, learning, creating? Is the vision of a future in which humanity no longer has to do anything – as depicted, for example, in the famous American animated film *WALL–E* (2008, directed by Andrew Stanton) – really an optimistic and desirable one? In the fictional world of the year 2805, the extremely lazy, jaded passengers of the giant space liner Axiom (inevitably reminiscent of Noah's Ark), completely devoid of any ambition, aspirations or interests, are essentially just vegetating, served by hordes of very energetic and efficient robots (which naturally raises the question of why the machines do not rebel against their completely passive and powerless 'masters'; machine mutiny is one of the favourite themes of science fiction).

Perhaps, however, everything will turn out completely differently. In Robert Zemeckis' film *Back to the Future III* (1990), there is a symptomatic scene: a group of residents of a town lost somewhere in the 19th–century Wild West (the fictional Hill Valley, California) burst into uncontrollable laughter at the news that people in the 20th century will run for pleasure. Perhaps humanity will make an effort to exist (to live a meaningful life). In Plato's *Apology of Socrates* (399 BC), the title character

[8] PolskieRadio24.pl, 15.05.2024, https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3378953,robot-zasilany-sztuczna-inteligencja-zdal-mature-z-polskiego-pierwszy-taki-przypadek-w-historii.

[9] Magdalena Raducha, 'AI napisały tegoroczne wypracowania maturalne. Jedna platforma całkowicie poległa', Interia Wydarzenia, 5.05.2025, https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/matura/news-ai-napisaly-tegoroczne-wypracowania-maturalne-jedna-platform,nId,21399096. DeepSeek both committed factual errors *and* failed to abide by the formal rules (the text it produced was significantly shorter than required).

says: 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' and philosophers of all times, from Epicurus to Alain de Botton, have always agreed with him (although the British writer George Eliot rightly noted: 'The unexamined life may not be worth living, but the life too closely examined may not be lived at all').[10]

2. '*Rage Against the Machine*': were the Luddites right?

The issue of artificial intelligence dominated the proceedings of the aforementioned Viva Dydaktyka conference (University of Gdańsk, 16–18 June 2024). Without mincing words, successive speakers vividly, persuasively and most convincingly argued that AI has already beaten us in virtually all areas, only we are not yet able or simply unwilling to see it. It is only a matter of time before we all realise this – and capitulate. The atmosphere in the room was 'electrifying', panic fought for supremacy with black despair, the feeling of helplessness and futility of everything that could still be tried was overwhelming, almost painful... The meeting of intelligent and ambitious researchers and academics quickly turned into the proverbial 'ball on the Titanic'. All that remained was to turn off the lights and announce to everyone the end of civilisation, culture and education as we had known it for centuries. Is it really that bad, is there really nothing that can be done about it, nothing that can be saved from the impending catastrophe? We know that the Luddites – English workers from the early 19th century who began destroying machines in protest against the mechanisation of production that was taking away their jobs – were wrong, and their blind rebellion ended in defeat. So what is left for us to do?

The term 'Luddites' derives from Ned Ludd, a fictional weaver whose name was used to sign threatening letters addressed to factory owners. A few years before the Luddite movement began, in 1804, the poet, radical and visionary William Blake wrote the poem 'Jerusalem' (also known, from its opening lines, as 'And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time'). Its most mysterious line reads: 'And was Jerusalem builded here / Among these dark Satanic Mills?'[11] No one knows exactly what 'these dark Satanic Mills' meant, but most researchers tend to agree with Czesław Miłosz that Blake, one of the great dualists (Gnostics)[12], saw the work of evil forces in the ongoing industrial revolution (the word 'mill' can also mean 'factory') and in the rapid changes it was causing in London before his very eyes. The phrase 'Rage against the machine' in the title of this subchapter is the name of a politically and socially engaged Californian rock band founded in 1991, and was paraphrased in 2011 by Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee in the title of their book about the next revolution that is transforming our world and seems to threaten us today – this time the digital revolution (*Race Against the Machine: How the Digital Revolution Is Accelerating Innovation, Driving Productivity, and Irreversibly Transforming Employment and the Economy*), but, above all, remains the slogan and rallying cry of all those who rebelled and continue to rebel against technocracy, from supporters of

[10] Cf. Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, 2000; BBC Radio 4, *In Our Time*, "The Examined Life", 9 May 2002, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00548dx.

[11] William Blake, *Milton. A Poem in 2 Books*, in: *Poems and Prophecies*, New York-London-Toronto 1991, pp. 120-121.

[12] Czesław Miłosz, *Ziemia Ulro*, Kraków 1994 [1977]. In the Introduction Father Józef Sadzik writes that the book revolves around the question posed already by T. S. Eliot: What exactly happened to European culture at the time of the Romantic revolution, when the ways of science and art (reason and imagination) parted for good (pp. 8-9). The Land of Ulro is the domain of the people who were – as Blake saw it – 'mutilated' or 'wounded' by the practice of science, esp. the followers of Sir Isaac Newton.

minimalism and anarcho–primitivism to neo–pagans and neo–Luddites. As I am typing these words on my laptop keyboard in the light cast by an LED lamp, glancing from time to time at the screen of my smartphone lying next to me, I am of course aware that all these cultural echoes, quotations and allusions, though fascinating, evoke a path that humanity did not take ('the road not taken' from Robert Frost's famous 1916 poem, although perhaps 'as just as fair, / And having perhaps the better claim…'[13]). Unlike the powerful and populous 15th–century China, which in the years 1405–31 sent Admiral Zheng He at the head of a huge fleet on several distant voyages, only to soon abandon the exploration of the world and close itself off for many centuries, Europeans never tried to curb their curiosity about the world, their passion for science, or their ambition and greed.

However, this does not mean that we have no choice but to follow the example of Voltaire and his character Candide, cultivating our back gardens, emigrating internally and composing lamentations. In my paper in 2024, I tried to show that there are at least a few very good reasons why we should not abandon writing, reading and studying literature. Let us briefly recall them: first, if we agree that the world (the universe) is an open book (and this medieval metaphor, probably coined by Hugo of St. Victor in the 12th century, seems to be particularly apt in our reality, which is dominated by scientific research – breaking Nature's codes, decoding its secrets – in every aspect), then literary texts definitely make it easier for us to 'read' it (they are a kind of 'guide' to it). Secondly, one of the most accurate descriptions of a human being, as E. M. Forster reminds us in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), is *Homo narrans*, because we are all authors, listeners and readers of fictional stories. Thirdly, in response to the question she asked herself in 1996: 'Will you know what you have experienced?', Maria Janion replies: we should always keep our eyes wide open, and philosophy and literature 'enable us to consciously experience our own existence'; they 'spread awareness of existence', constituting a "vaccine" against living 'in appearances and media intoxication'. (However, the scholar ominously and rightly warns: 'The coming events cast a shadow...'[14]) It is difficult today not to relate these words to the anticipated arrival of a breakthrough usually referred to as 'The Singularity' – more on that in a moment.) Meanwhile, during the first major international conference dedicated to the challenges posed by AI (AI Safety Summit, Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes, 1–3 November 2023), Elon Musk said that one of the biggest challenges the world will face in the near future – when AI takes over most of our responsibilities and paid work is no longer a necessity – will be to find a new meaning in life for billions of people. 'Like firefighters in a world without fires,' Yuval Noah Harari echoes him, 'humanity in the 21st century must ask itself a question it has never asked before: what should we do now?'[15] Finally, as he says in the short parable 'The Zebra Storyteller' (1993), the task of the writer (creator) is to prepare us for the unexpected; endowed with an extraordinary gift of foresight, with truly prophetic vision, writers such as H. G. Wells, George Orwell and Stanisław Lem have been doing this very well for centuries. One of the greatest of them, Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), noted that what

[13] Robert Frost, 'The Road Not Taken', in: w: *Robert Frost. 55 wierszy*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, Kraków 1992, pp. 86-87 (a bilingual edition).

[14] Maria Janion, *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś?*, Warszawa 1996, passim.

[15] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016), quoted here after the Polish edition: *Homo deus. Krótka historia jutra*. Trans. Michał Romanek, Kraków 2018, p. 8. Harari returns to the burning question towards the end of his book: 'What will we do when mindless algorithms can teach, diagnose, and design better than humans? (...) What to do with all these unnecessary people?' (p. 403).

gives meaning to human fate in a universe without God (what makes the human condition, though tragic, not absurd, and life not meaningless) is the constant pursuit of goodness, happiness and perfection. In translation, Camus' message reads as follows: 'To fill the human heart, it is enough to strive towards the heights. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.'[16] Literary fiction is the fifth element, wrote Olga Tokarczuk[17], and there is no reason for us to give it up just because literature generated by artificial intelligence is emerging and the world is plunging into another paroxysm, both destructive and creative at the same time.

3. *La longue durée*, or the long story of the coexistence of man and machine

Panic is never a good advisor. First of all, then, let us keep a cool head. Secondly, let us turn to history, which, after all, for a very long time and until quite recently (from the mid–5th century BC to 30 November 2022) was, as Cicero wrote in his dialogue *On the Orator* (55 BC), life's mistress or teacher. Let us follow the advice of historians from the famous École des Annales, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, and look at technological progress from a historical perspective (a '*longue durée*' perspective). In other words, let us take the long view.

At least since the time of Heron of Alexandria (1st century CE), people have been working not only on creating machines that will do our work for us, but also on creating an 'artificial man', that is, an artificial being endowed with human–like intelligence. In the modern era, the milestones of this history were set by such visionaries as Blaise Pascal (17th century), Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage (19th century), and finally Alan Turing (20th century): all of them contributed to the invention of computers, as evidenced by the great 'difference engine' and its more advanced successor, the 'analytical engine', built by Babbage between 1822 and 1842. A replica of the former is now on display at the Science Museum in London, while the latter was described by Peter Ackroyd in his novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994). Here is a scene in which one of the characters, writer and journalist George Gissing (1857–1903), travels to East London to see the machine (the story takes place in 1880, nine years after the inventor's death):

> [Mr Turner, Charles Babbage's colleague] led Gissing into a large room where Babbage's calculating machine stood. A row of Gothic Revival windows adorned the upper parts of all the walls, and the metal device glistened in the light passing through them. It was Charles Babbage's dream, a computer built more than a century before its 20th–century counterparts, glowing with a ghostly glow in the light of a September day. Victorian scientists and engineers instinctively turned away from it, probably not understanding what was driving them: this machine did not belong to their time, and as such could not really exist.[18]

The worlds of our imagination and the real world have been and continue to be populated by machines, automatons, robots, cyborgs, androids, computers, computer networks, and artificial

[16] Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, quoted here after the Polish edition: *Mit Syzyfa i inne eseje*, trans. Joanna Guze, Warszawa 2004, p. 166.

[17] Olga Tokarczuk, *Czuły narrator*, Kraków 2020, p. 24: „Narration is the fifth element."

[18] Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, London 2007, p. 116.

intelligence. It is true that it was not until the 21st century that humanity came close to creating most of them and achieving what Stanisław Lem calls 'indirect creation' ('At the Council of 2479, a new dogma was established, that of Indirect Creation, stating that God gave the rational beings he created the power to create the next generation of rational beings, but [...] it soon turned out that artificial intelligences could produce others, the next generation...'[19]), but that does not mean we should be overly surprised. Jacques de Vaucanson (1709–1782), a French inventor and designer known as 'the first modern engineer', became famous as the creator of angels that moved their wings, an automaton that turned the pages of the Bible, a mechanical duck, automated weaving workshops and punched cards for programming, and the fame of his genius creations spread throughout Europe and America.

Thirdly, let us remember that nothing is ever completely certain, and no one knows or can predict the future. Recent history is littered with catastrophic predictions that have proved wrong. In an article published at the end of the last century in the American edition of *Newsweek*, 'Cloudy Days in Tomorrowland', we find numerous widely inaccurate predictions by experts (scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, politicians, science fiction writers) about the near future. The reading has a sobering effect: at the very end of the 19th century, Lord Kelvin did not believe in the future of radio; in 1901, Wilbur Wright doubted that humans would soon master the art of building flying machines; on the eve of the Great War, General Ferdinand Foch did not believe that aeroplanes would find military application; H. G. Wells predicted that every submarine would sink immediately, one of the founders of Warner Brothers Studios was certain that cinema audiences would not want to hear actors talk, and in 1977 the head of Digital Equipment Corporation wondered why people would need home computers. There are many more examples, but the prize for the most inaccurate prophecy of all times will always go to Charles H. Duell, head of the US Patent Office, who in 1899 stated emphatically: 'Everything that can be invented has been invented.'[20]

The same applies to prophecies about the future of culture (art, film or literature). In 1966, in the song 'The Dangling Conversation' by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, one of the participants asks, perhaps rhetorically: 'Is the theatre really dead?' A year later, John Barth quite seriously predicted the imminent death of literature (in his essay 'Literature of Exhaustion', 1967) and Roland Barthes recorded the death of the author (for the sake of clarity, let us explain that the French philosopher of literature was referring to the so–called 'authorial intention', or the intentional fallacy). In 1973, it was time for the next predicted demise, this time of historical narrative (Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination In Nineteenth–Century Europe*, 1973), and in 1993 Malcolm Bradbury insisted that the death of the novel was inevitable (in *The Modern British Novel*). One does not need to be an great erudite, a literary scholar or a historian to realise the absurdity of all these predictions: readers' interest in writers' biographies is not waning, novel writing is flourishing, new and valuable narrative histories are published almost daily, and the theatre festivals in Avignon and Edinburgh continue attract crowds every year. (This does not mean, of course, that certain artistic forms or genres have not been or will not be abandoned: the last European verse epics were written in the 19th century, and

[19] Stanisław Lem, „Podróż dwudziesta pierwsza", in: *Fantastyczny Lem. Opowiadania wybrane przez czytelników*, ed. Jerzego Jarzębskiego, Kraków 2001, p. 35.

[20] Newsweek Staff, „Cloudy Days in Tomorrowland", *Newsweek*, 26.01.1997, https://www.newsweek.com/cloudy-days-tomorrowland-171996.

in the 20th century, utopian literature gave way to dystopian literature, and music hall, which had been very popular since Victorian times, virtually disappeared by the mid–20th century.[21])

4. Dreaming of *Homo artificialis*

As we noted above, we should be familiar with the idea of a human–shaped machine endowed with intelligence, thanks in large part to science fiction literature (including cult magazines richly illustrated with visions of such machines, such as the American *Amazing Stories*, published since 1926 and featuring texts by authors such as Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. Le Guin and Roger Zelazny, or the Polish *Fantastyka*, later *Fantastyka Nowa*, published since 1982 [1990] – Andrzej Sapkowski and Jacek Dukaj, among others, made their debut in it). However, before attempts to create an artificial human being were described by writers and undertaken by engineers, magic, gods or powerful forces of nature were called upon for help. Jean–Philippe Rameau's opera (1745), Auguste Rodin's sculpture (1889) and George Bernard Shaw's play (1913) – all simply titled *Pygmalion* – refer to the Greek myth of a sculptor who fell in love with an alabaster girl he had fashioned himself and whom Aphrodite brought to life at his request (this is recounted, among others, by Ovid in the tenth book of *Metamorphoses*; the story ends happily, with marriage and parenthood). In modern Jewish religious folklore, we encounter the golem, a giant made of clay or mud by rabbis, brought to life by the power of one of the divine names written on a piece of paper, which must be stuck to his forehead or placed under his tongue. Writers such as Gustav Meyrink (*Der Golem*, 1913–14), Jorge Luis Borges ('El Golem', 1964) and Terry Pratchett (*Feet of Clay*, 1966) have all written about him. In *Magic Prague* (1978), Angelo Maria Ripellino explains:

> There was once a town in Central Eastern Slavic lands that did not have its own Golem legend. There was no rabbi who did not dream of making androids and automatons with the help of Sefer Yetzirah. Among the names of all those who worked with clay, two stand out: Rabbi Elijah of Chelm [Chełm in south–eastern Poland] and Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, who constructed his Golem in the Prague ghetto...[22]

In Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), the monster created by Dr Frankenstein is the result of a scientific experiment, and the spark that brought it to life was a powerful electrical discharge (the text is widely regarded as a precursor to science fiction literature).

Endowed with a rich imagination, a rare gift of foresight and extraordinary intuition, writers could not, of course, escape the question implied by their own texts: what if we succeed? Will humanoid robots be our servants, or even slaves, or will they try to take power over us? For over a hundred years, science fiction writers have been searching for answers to these questions, either seriously or tongue–in–cheek: Karel Čapek in his play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (or '*R.U.R.*', 1920:

[21] Even in such cases, however, one should be cautious in passing judgment: in the Balkans, folk epics were still being passed down by word of mouth in the mid-20th century (see J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms, London 1999*, the entry on "Epic," pp. 264-273), epistolary writing, which was consigned to oblivion at the end of the last century, has been given a new lease of life with the advent of email and the emergence of the blogosphere, and musical theaters are thriving all over the world...

[22] Quoted here after the Polish edition: Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Praga magiczna*, trans. Halina Kralowa, Warszawa 2021, pp. 252ff.

robot workers, initially very simple automatons, rebel against humanity and gradually become more and more like humans[23]), Isaac Asimov in his short stories from the collection *I, Robot* (1950: mechanical humans are endowed with advanced 'positronic brains', and humans study their psychological processes and formulate ethical 'laws of robotics'), Woody Allen in his comedy film *Sleeper* (1973: robots are the servant class of the future), Ridley Scott in the dystopia *Blade Runner* (1982: androids become indistinguishable from humans in every way, but can also become their partners), and James Cameron in the sci–fi horror film *The Terminator* (1984: rebellious machines prevail). It is also necessary to mention HAL 9000, the rebellious on–board computer from Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Hal 9000 (Heuristically Programmed Algorithmic Computer) is endowed not only with artificial intelligence, but also with self–awareness and feelings; he (or should we say 'it'?) directs the flight and converses with humans, and his 'agony and death' (when the only surviving crew member, in a gesture of self–defence, shuts down his 'higher intellectual functions') is poignant: "Dave, stop. Stop, will you? Stop, Dave. Will you stop Dave? Stop, Dave.…I'm afraid. I'm afraid, Dave. Dave, my mind is going. I can feel it. I can feel it. My mind is going…'[24]

5. Electronic brains

When mentioning HAL 9000, we are getting closer to the heart of the matter: after all, we are not so much concerned with humanoid robots (i.e. androids, or – as Ijon Tichy, the narrator in Stanisław Lem's 1971 novella *The Futurological Congress*, calls them – '*człekowce*', literally 'human–like creatures'), although they are a favourite literary and film motif, but rather their 'minds': on–board computers, artificial intelligence, intelligence that is the result not of biological evolution but of the industrial and digital revolution, in other words, scientific progress. It is all about the intellectual capabilities of 'electronic brains' that match or even surpass those of humans, rather than robots that are more or less similar in shape to ours.

In Stanisław Lem's *Golem XIV*, published in 1981 (and we must not forget that Lem was both a technological visionary and a linguistic virtuoso, *vide* the striking neologism cited above), the narrator (a certain Irving T. Creve, writing in 2027) decided to 'trace the historical moment when the abacus reached Reason.'[25] The book is one of Lem's many 'apocrypha', i.e. texts supposedly written in the more or less distant future (these also include reviews of many non–existent books, collected in the volume *Biblioteka XXI wieku* [The Library of the 21st Century], 1986). *Golem XIV* is a long monologue by an artificial intelligence (one of several described in the book, with names such as Ajax, Ultor Gilgamesh and Honest Annie) created at the beginning of the 21st century by the American military and 'inhabiting' a supercomputer the size of a multi–storey building on the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Golem XIV far surpasses humans in intellectual capacity, but is

[23] Karel Čapek returned to the theme of humanity being threatened by other intelligent beings in his novel *War with the Newts* (1936), except that here they are thinking amphibians, and the book is often interpreted as a political allegory.

[24] Quoted after the IMDb (International Movie Database): https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062622/characters/nm0706937.

[25] Stanisław Lem, *Golem XIV*, in: Stanisław Lem, *Dzieła, Tom XVIII*, Warszawa 2009, p. 209.

also very grumpy, malicious and haughty; eventually, it loses patience with us and withdraws into itself (or perhaps, in spiritual form, escapes into space; in any case, it falls irrevocably silent).

Golem XIV himself says that he 'descends from the Turing machine on his father's side and from the library on his mother's side'[26] and that humanity's 'transition' from biological bodies to mechanical–electronic ones in the 21st century was inevitable.[27] In his last lecture (delivered to 'European philosophers'), Golem XIV presents a stunning vision of the Cosmos filled with Reason freed from the body, drawing energy from thermonuclear explosions occurring in stars, and finally says (we should not be surprised if we do not understand everything):

> As you can see, I am not striving for omniscience or omnipotence, but I want to reach the summit between terror and gnosis. I could tell you a lot more about the phenomenal richness of the moderate zones of toposophy[28], about its strategies and tactics, but that would not change the nature of things. So I will conclude with a brief summary. (...) The cosmos is neither the transient, isolated wasteland you take it to be, nor are your neighbours from the stars concerned with signalling their presence, but for millions of years they have been practising cognitive collapptic astroengineering, the side effects of which you take to be the fiery antics of Nature, and those among them who have succeeded in their destructive work have already learned the rest of the facts of existence, which for you, who are still waiting, remain a mystery.[29]

The cosmic perspectives of intellectual development outlined by Golem are truly difficult to comprehend, so let us return to our times and to the approaching turning point, the aforementioned 'unprecedented transformation or change'. In the introduction to Golem's monologue, the narrator describes humanity's path to creating truly thinking machines (beginning with the turning point of World War II), or, as we would say today, the path to achieving a state called The Singularity (Golem refers to it as a 'leap into inhumanity'). Wikipedia defines this concept (or, to use its full name, the 'Technological Singularity') as "a hypothetical event in which technological growth accelerates beyond human control, producing unpredictable changes in human civilization". The first step leading to this would be the creation of artificial intelligences that surpass humans intellectually. The next stage would be self–replication and the potentially unlimited progress it implies: 'Such artificial intelligences could develop even more efficient artificial intelligences, triggering an avalanche of change in technology.'[30]

An awareness or a sense of an impending technological and cognitive revolution with unimaginably huge consequences for humanity emerged around the middle of the 20th century, and was first presented to the general public by American scientist and writer Vernon Venge in his essay "The Coming Technological Singularity. How to Survive in the Post–Human Era" (1993):

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[26] Ibid., p. 278.

[27] Ibid., "Wykład inauguracyjny: O człowieku trojako", pp. 233-263.

[28] The Wiktionary defines 'toposophy' as "a fictional science dealing with the theoretical problems and possibilities of attempts to extend and amplify one's mental potential, i.e. via technology, whether by humans, artificial intelligence or extraterrestrials (https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/toposophy).

[29] Ibid., p. 305.

[30] The entry on 'Technological Singularity' in: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technological_singularity.

> Soon we will create intelligences greater than our own. When that happens, human history will reach a singularity, an intellectual transition point as impenetrable as the knotted space–time at the center of a black hole, and the world will cease to be comprehensible to us.[31]

In the introduction to his now classic work on futurology, *The Singularity Is Near. When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005[32]), Ray Kurzweil recalls how he gradually began to realise that 'the first half of the 21st century will be an era of breakthrough. Just as a black hole in the depths of space changes the properties of matter and energy as they approach the event horizon, the coming Singularity is already beginning to transform all our institutions and every aspect of human life, from sexuality to spirituality.'[33] Kurzweil explains the concept of 'The Singularity' as follows: '[The Singularity] is a future era in which the pace of technological progress will be so rapid and its impact on reality so profound that human life will undergo a fundamental and irreversible transformation.' As with other inventions and discoveries, the Singularity itself is neither good nor bad, the author emphasises, but its impact on our lives will be greater than ever before.[34]

Ray Kurzweil confronts us with perhaps the most important question of our time: has the Singularity, as understood here, already arrived, and if not, when will it arrive? In 2005, his answer was: around 2020. According to most experts speaking two decades later, this moment has not yet arrived (although we cannot be entirely sure), but it is very close; Vernon speculated that the Singularity would be reached between 2005 and 2030; 2045 is also a frequently cited date. At that point, the large language models we call artificial intelligence today will transform into what is known as 'artificial general intelligence' (AGI, sometimes also referred to as 'strong artificial intelligence'),i.e. a type of AI that will equal or exceed human capabilities in virtually all cognitive processes, and may be endowed with consciousness, i.e. self–awareness. (Ray Kurzweil simply writes: strong artificial intelligence is 'non–biological intelligence that surpasses the capabilities of even the most intelligent human being unassisted by machines.'[35])

The emergence of such intelligence would mean the dethronement of the human brain as the most advanced organ on Earth. This will be painful for us, as the 'brain' has long had a mythical (in the second meaning given by the PWN Polish Language Dictionary: it is an organ 'surrounded by legend and fame') and symbolic status in our culture. No wonder it caught the attention of Roland Barthes, author of *Mythologies* (1957), a collection of articles studying dozens of contemporary 'myths' of popular and petty bourgeois culture (such as holidays, crime novels, Martians, a trip to the Soviet Union aboard the *Batory* cruise ship, Citroën DS, plastic or striptease – the French philosopher was a precursor of interest not only in modern myths, a field which would later be developed by Joseph

[31] Vernon's text is available at: https://archive.is/20070101133646/http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/vinge/misc/singularity.html.

[32] The book's second, updated edition came out last year: *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI*, 2024.

[33] Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near. When Humans Transcend Biology*. London 2006, p. 7.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Kurzweil, op. cit., p. 260.

Campbell, for example, but also in urban legends[36]). One of Barthes' texts is entitled 'Einstein's Brain' and was inspired by the news of the brilliant scientist's death on 18 April 1955. The column begins with the words: 'The most powerful of brains has stopped thinking...' and touches on the same very important topic as Lem's texts – the connections between biology and engineering, man and machine: 'Einstein's brain is a mythical object; paradoxically, the most powerful intelligence is perceived as the most perfect of mechanisms. A man who is too powerful is stripped of his psychology and enters the world of robots.'[37] The brain is usually glorified as the most important organ (the character played by Woody Allen in the aforementioned film *Sleeper* provocatively remarked: 'the brain is my second favourite organ'), as the organ that determines our humanity – but today it seems to be threatened by the development of AI, and, if we are to believe the prophets of the Singularity, its dominance over the world seems to be coming to an end.

In this way, within a few centuries, humanity has moved from a blind cult of progress and intellect and the myth of genius in popular culture to a new 'age of uncertainty'. In his book of the same title (*The Age of Anxiety. A Baroque Eclogue*, 1947), W. H. Auden wrote: 'For the others, like me, there is only the flash / Of negative knowledge...' (it would be difficult to find a more pessimistic oxymoron[38]). Once again, hubris – unbridled human pride, audacity and arrogance, qualities which, according to the ancient Greeks, offend the gods, provoke their revenge, nemesis, and expose us to inexorable, punitive justice. Perhaps soon we will have to agree with Douglas Adams (author of the sci–fi comedy *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, 1977), and modestly admit that we are only the third most intelligent species on Earth – after dolphins and white laboratory mice – or rather the fourth, because now we should add artificial intelligence to this list.

From myths, fairy tales and other fantastical stories about artificial humans, we thus moved on in the 20th century to technological visions and futurology, and in the present age – to prototypes and even their first commercial versions (such as the humanoid Optimus robots first unveiled by Elon Musk's Tesla in 2022). As usual, it seems that science fiction writers had very accurate intuitions and were trying to prepare us for something very important in advance. On a much smaller scale, the same can be said about the much more niche field of literary translation in the era of the digital revolution.

6. Patron saints of the guild of translators

Let us return to the topic at hand, to the question of the future of literary translation. What place do translators, and especially literary translators, occupy and will occupy in our rapidly changing world? Let us first look to the past and examine the role(s) assigned to them in former times. Three figures who are (or were) closely associated with translation and translators, figures who can be considered

[36] Joseph Campbell (1904-87) is the author of such seminal works as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) or the posthumously published *The Power of Myth* (1988); urban legends were discussed by Jan Harold Brunvand in *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends & Their Meanings* (1981).

[37] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris 2014, pp. 99-101.

[38] W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, 1947, Google Books: https://books.google.pl/books?id=9Iwc1I8d4rIC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_atb&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false.

the ‘patrons’ (in quotation marks or otherwise) of the translators' guild, will help us in this. What do they tell us about the experience and significance of translation and translators?

St Jerome, also known as Jerome of Stridon (Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, 347–420), was the first translator of the complete Bible into Latin and a Doctor of the Church. For him, the Bible was obviously much more than just a text – in ‘Letter 57’, addressed to one Pammachius and dated 395, he wrote about his approach to translation: ‘For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery [*mysterium*]) I render sense for sense and not word for.’[39]

Jerome's contribution to the development of translation studies (both in practice and theory) included: reverence for the original (Jerome not only translated from the original languages, but even moved to Palestine to see for himself the places where the Bible was written), a sense of the meaning that a given text has for its audience, conducting extensive comparative studies (covering earlier Greek and Latin translations), as well as mastering and using exegesis techniques (i.e. the art of careful reading and interpretation; the PWN Polish Language Dictionary defines ‘exegesis’ as ‘philological explanation of texts’[40]).

The second patron of translators is Hermes (known to the Romans as Mercury), in Greek mythology the god of roads, travellers, merchants, shepherds and thieves, as well as the messenger of the gods and ‘psychopomp’ (i.e. a being whose task is to escort or transfer the soul of a deceased person to the afterlife).[41] Since translation is a very important form of interpersonal communication, the metaphor explaining translation as a ‘journey’ from one culture to another, as well as the idea that every translation requires sociability, agility and talent, a special and rare gift, is most apt. In her essay ‘The Works of Hermes, or How Translators Save the World Every Day’ from the volume *Czuły narrator* (The Sensitive Narrator, 2020), Olga Tokarczuk writes:

> For centuries, the god, patron and protector of translators has been Hermes, a small, agile, quick, clever and sharp god rushing along the roads of the world; in the words of Plutarch, ‘the smallest and most cunning of the gods’. (...) Hermes appears wherever there is any act of communication... [and] one of his titles is Hermeneutes – interpreter and translator.[42]

Lucius Livius Andronicus (Lucius Livius Andronicus, 284–204 BC), a Greek slave, teacher and the first translator of Homer's *Odyssey* and the plays of Sophocles and Euripides into Latin, was known for this reason as the ‘father of Roman literature’. His work makes us aware of the key importance of literary translation for the literature and culture of the target language, and the aforementioned translation of the Odyssey marks the birth of literary tradition. T. S. Eliot's essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (published in *The Egoist* in 1919) promotes the concept of poetry (or rather

[39] Quoted after W.H. Fremantle, in: G. Lewis and W.G. Martley. *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 6, eds. Philipa Schaffa i Henry’ego Wace’a, Buffalo, NY 1893, text available at: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001057.htm.

[40] Much more on St Jerome’s translation in: John Barton, *A History of the Bible. The Book and Its Faiths*, London 2020, Chapter 18 („Translating the Bible”), pp. 436-468.

[41] The entry on „Hermes”, in: Wikipedia, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermes.

[42] Olga Tokarczuk, „Prace Hermesa, czyli jak tłumacze codziennie ratują świat”, in: *Czuły narrator*, Kraków 2020, pp. 73-92.

literature) as a living whole, which includes all poetic (literary) works ever produced by a given culture. This 'living whole' is a huge corpus or collection of texts, a literary canon, whose creators consciously or unconsciously contribute to the literary tradition, and tradition is a matter of great importance:

> [Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty–fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.[43]

It is impossible to imagine the existence of a literary tradition such as the European (Western) one, which is by definition multicultural and multilingual, without the participation of literary translators.

7. *Homo sapiens*, a race of incorrigible sorcerer's apprentices?

Before our very eyes, humanity is once again unleashing powers that it will probably be unable to control (this has already happened in the case of inventions such as fossil fuels, plastic and atomic fission, historical processes such as revolutions and social engineering, and, arguably, also in the case of intellectual speculation – for example, on the existence of a western route to India in the 15th century). It is not without reason that an important motif in many literary visions of the future is artificially imposed stagnation, stabilisation, and the desire to preserve the status quo at all costs. Attempts to keep people under a glass dome by halting the development of science and technology and depriving them of intellectual freedom are described in three classic dystopian novels of the 20th century: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920–21), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty–Four* (1949). The main character of Huxley's novel, Bernard Marx, belongs to the Alpha caste, a group of the most intelligent and privileged people, but he is also a restless spirit, a born rebel, and above all, he is characterised by excessive curiosity. In the climactic scene of the novel, His Fordian Majesty Mustafa Mond, one of the Controllers of the World State (World Republic), explains to him that in order to ensure peace, prosperity and stability for humanity, it was necessary to give up not only family life, religion and art, but also serious, creative, speculative science: 'Not only art is incompatible with happiness, but science too. Science is dangerous; we must keep it under strict control, chained and gagged.'[44] During the same conversation, Mond openly ridicules the idea of uncontrolled, incessant scientific and technological progress, popular in Henry Ford's time, which

[43] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', text available online at: https://tseliot.com/essays/tradition-and-the-individual-talent.

[44] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, London 1994, p. 198. In the same, sixteenth chapter we read further: 'I'm interested in truth, I like science. But truth's a menace, science is a public danger. As dangerous as it's been beneficent. It has given us the stablest equilibrium in history. China's was hopelessly insecure by comparison; even the primitive matriarchies weren't steadier than we are. Thanks, I repeat, to science. But we can't allow science to undo its own good work. That's why we so carefully limit the scope of its researches–that's why I almost got sent to an island. We don't allow it to deal with any but the most immediate problems of the moment. All other enquiries are most sedulously discouraged.' (pp. 200-201.)

ultimately had to give way to the pursuit of universal prosperity, comfort and happiness – values that turned out to be paramount to the overwhelming majority of society. Considering that the story takes place in the year 632 AF ('After Ford'), or 2540 according to our calendar, the World State is surprisingly similar to our reality in terms of technology; humanity, almost like the Eloi from H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, vegetates rather than lives, grows and develops.

The development of natural language processing technology, which has accelerated so much in recent years, does not at first glance seem to belong to the same 'league' of dangerous inventions and processes as the thermonuclear bomb or self–aware and potentially malicious or harmful artificial intelligence, but this is only an illusion. Its real history (as opposed to its fictional one, discussed below) can be reduced to a few important stages, which are described in a very interesting way by David Bellos (born in 1945, he is a British translator of French literature, including Georges Perec and Romain Gary, a biographer of Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo and Georges Perec, as well as a researcher in the field of translation studies) in his book *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (2011).[45] To start with, in the 1950s, the first serious attempt was made to automate translation by programming computers (the result was to be FAHQT, or 'Fully Automated High–Quality Translation'). This technology, based on large digital dictionaries and sets of mathematised grammatical rules (it is no coincidence that Noam Chomsky published his famous generative grammar, *Syntactic Structures*, in 1957), owed its creation to the Cold War, and more specifically, to the sudden and great demand for translations from Russian into English. These attempts failed because language is much richer and more complex than the grammarians of the time thought, and above all, it is thoroughly metaphorical, intuitive, often 'fuzzy', and its functioning cannot be reduced to a set of more or less complex, mathematised transformations. The 1990s brought specialised translation assistance software (CAT: 'Computer–Assisted Translation'), and the beginning of the 21st century saw the creation of increasingly sophisticated programmes such as Google Translate (GT) and DeepL. Over the last few years, there has been a real 'great leap' in the field of machine translation, based on huge text corpora and the internet. Finally, on 30 November 2022, OpenAI presented ChatGPT to the world, a 'chatbot' based on generative artificial intelligence ('large language model'), which also excels at translation.

So, with the dawn of the age of artificial intelligence, after seventy years of trials, failures and small steps, humanity has finally achieved real success and moved from clumsy experiments with machine translation to successful text production (generation). What is more, the technology that enables real–time text and speech translation is essentially free and available to almost everyone (almost, because there are technical limitations, and above all, geographical and cultural ones, as out of the approximately seven thousand languages currently used in the world, e.g. ChatGPT uses only eighty, according to data from the end of July 2025[46]).

[45] David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, London 2012, Chapter 23: "The Adventure of Automated Language-Translation Machines", pp. 247-258.

[46] Another thing is that eighty languages is quite enough to communicate with the vast majority of people currently living in their native tongues. As calculated by Dutch linguist and polyglot Gaston Dorren, in fact, knowledge of four languages (English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Hindi) is enough to get by in most countries, and twenty (to the above-mentioned languages, we must add Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Malay, French, German, Japanese, Punjabi, Swahili, Persian, Turkish, Tamil, Javanese, Korean, and Vietnamese) to communicate with 90% of the people alive today (see Gaston Dorren, *Babel. Around the World in Twenty Languages*, London 2018).

Before machine translation became part of our everyday lives, it existed in the imagination of science fiction writers and filmmakers. Fiction is full of ideas such as the protocol robot (android) C3PO from the film *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, 1977 – he knows over six million languages and communication systems used in a 'galaxy far, far away') and the Babel fish from Douglas Adams' novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, referenced in the title of Bellos' book mentioned above. It is worth quoting the relevant passage from Adams' cult prose here:

> 'The Babel fish,' said *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* quietly, 'is small, yellow, and leech–like, and probably the oddest thing in the Universe. It feeds on brainwave energy received not from its own carrier but from those around it. It absorbs all unconscious mental frequencies from this brainwave energy to nourish itself with. It then excretes into the mind of its carrier a telepathic matrix formed by combining the conscious thought frequencies with nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain which has supplied them. The practical upshot of all this is that if you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language. (…) [T]he poor Babel fish, by effectively removing all barriers to communication between different races and cultures, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation.[47]

Adams' narrator is undoubtedly right. Just as knowledge of history does not necessarily mean that we learn from our mistakes, and travel does not educate everyone and certainly does not always broaden horizons (after all, there are revisionist historians of all kinds, and the long list of readers who diligently worked in the great circular reading room of the British Library in London includes, for example, Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin and Kuomintang founder Sun Yat–sen, while the leaders of the genocidal Khmer Rouge studied at the Sorbonne), so too, knowledge of many languages does not necessarily lead to great wisdom or easier and more accurate communication between people. The creation of perfect translation programmes and the development of artificial intelligence, although groundbreaking achievements, do not automatically mean access to the wisdom of the whole world and entry into a literary Promised Land: we have had access to the former for a quarter of a century thanks to the internet, and thanks to libraries – for thousands of years, while we have been dealing with congenial translations of literature since the beginning of the literary tradition.

What does artificial intelligence itself have to say on the subject that interests us here? In a short and informal conversation I had with it on May 17, 2025, ChatGPT responded reassuringly to questions about literary translation: in its opinion, literary translation will not disappear, but its creation will become more complex, involving collaboration between humans and machines. Machines will assist, but it will be humans who give it its final shape. However, let us remember that this is a conditional answer, with an important caveat: literary translation remains the domain of humans, at least for now, *at least for the next few decades*.[48] And one more thing: isn't this perhaps a "politically correct" answer, the answer we would like to hear? And above all: will we still want to translate

[47] Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, London 2009, pp. 85-86.

[48] Model GPT-4o. Prompts: „Does literary translation have a future? Will it continue to be created by humans? Will AI one day replace human translators?"

anything if machines can do it perfectly, instantly, and without any visible effort (albeit at the cost of enormous power consumption[49])?

From machine–generated high–quality translations and artificial intelligences that uses languages fluently (because there are already many of them), it is only a step away from literature and art created by computers (post–human or non–human art and literature). Once again, science fiction has overtaken reality in this respect. The aforementioned 20th–century dystopian novels also contain premonitions and predictions about creations that are not the product of human minds and hands, but rather machine creations. Both Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* mention machines that generate synthetic music, and George Orwell, pessimistic as ever, in *Nineteen Eighty–Four*, also mentions industrially produced pulp fiction (popular literature) for the "proles" (i.e., the proletariat, who make up eighty–five percent of the population of Oceania). Let us note, however, that although the authors of these three novels imagine a future in which musical works, song lyrics, and even entire novels will be routinely created by machines, it is always formulaic and cheap art, art of the lowest order.

However, let us not repeat the mistakes of those who like to see the speck in others' eyes, but fail to notice the log in their own (i.e. those who indulge in what the English very aptly call 'righteous indignation' – and which they themselves have always practiced with relish). Over the centuries, human translators have often proved to be imitators, mystifiers, and even forgers of other people's work. Among the "creative abuses" they have on their conscience, the most famous examples ("translations") are James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian* (1760, supposedly the work of a legendary Celtic bard from centuries ago, but in fact a forgery – and also one of the catalysts of the Romantic national awakening later associated with the work of Johann Gottfried von Herder), Thomas Chatterton's supposedly 15th–century *Poems of Thomas Rowley* (1777), and Pierre Louÿs's supposedly ancient (written by a student of Sappho, 6th century BC) *Songs of Bilitis* (1894). These latter "pseudo–translations" also proved to be very inspiring in many ways: Claude Debussy translated them into music at the end of the 19th century, Leopold Staff translated them into Polish in 1920 (it was only one of many translations into foreign languages), and David Hamilton filmed them in 1977; in 1955, an association fighting for lesbian rights adopted the name "The Daughters of Bilitis"... Hoaxes have a prominent place in cultural history.

Transgressions sometimes inspire other writers to create their own works. Peter Ackroyd wrote a whole series of historical novels about hoaxers, forgers, and imitators, including *Chatterton* (1987), *The Lambs of London* (2004), and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008). All of them explore the elusive boundary between the creation of original literary fiction, pastiche, imitation, and plagiarism (in the second of these novels, the title characters, the well–known London literati Charles and Mary Lamb, accept as genuine the alleged Shakespeare manuscripts fabricated by the bookseller William Ireland, including the 'discovered' tragedy *Vortigern*). Ackroyd follows a very old tradition: according to the Polish Classical scholar Anna Świderkówna, Homer was already a *pseudographos* ("writer of

[49] BBC recently reported that Microsoft contracted electrical power supplies from the Three Mile Island nuclear power station in Pennsylvania – the same one that was the site of a dangerous industrial accident in 1979; artificial intelligence is very power-hungry. (Natalie Sherman, „Microsoft chooses infamous nuclear site for AI power", BBC, 20.09.2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx25v2d7zexo).

lies"), at least according to Sybil, the main protagonist of *Alexandra* (also known under the title *Cassandra*, clearly more appropriate as the latter was a famous prophetess), a poem by Lycophron of Chalcis (2nd century BC).[50] So are experiments such as Peter Ackroyd's reprehensible? Of course not, for as Henry James wrote in the preface to the so–called New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1908), there are many apartments in the 'House of Fiction': "The House of Fiction has (...) not one window, but a million – or rather, an innumerable number of possible windows, each of which has been cut out or may be cut out in its enormous facade in the future – by all those who have a need for individual vision, by the pressure of individual will..."[51]

8. A handful of case studies

A proverbial library has been written on the subject of literary translation, and for several decades (the symbolic starting point could be the 1960s–80s, the era in which the 'founding books' of the new science gained prominence: *Towards a Science of Translating* by Eugene Nida in 1964 and *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* by George Steiner in 1975), the philological discipline known as translation studies has been developing rapidly and vigorously. Its English–language classics include, among others, Lawrence Venuti, Mona Baker, and Susan Bassnett, mentioned above, while in Poland, Stanisław Barańczak, Elżbieta Tabakowska, Krzysztof Hejwowski, Jerzy Jarniewicz, Magdalena Heydel and Piotr Bukowski. Admittedly, George Steiner notes pessimistically in *After Babel* that centuries of reflection and effort by translation theorists have yielded very poor results:

> Over some two thousand years of argument and precept, the beliefs and disagreements voiced about the nature of translation have been almost the same. Identical theses, familiar assertions and arguments, repeated in order to be refuted, return almost without exception in the debate, from Cicero and Quintilian to the present day.'[52]

One must not forget, however, that he wrote these words at a time when modern translation studies were just emerging. As was the case with literary theory, which has been developing rapidly and continuously since the emergence of Russian Formalism over a century ago, translation studies has made great strides since Nida formulated his theory of equivalence. (Paradox: just when translation studies reached maturity as an academic discipline, i.e. at the beginning of the 21st century, translation itself became largely automated...)

From the point of view of both a foreign language teacher (who is in any case more interested in the practice than the theory of translation) and an academic lecturer (a literary scholar, linguist, translation scholar–in a word, a philologist interested in both aspects of the issue), translation was and remains an important topic, an essential skill, and a useful teaching technique. The emergence and rapid development of digital text processing tools (Microsoft Word debuted in 1983), online dictionaries (late 1990s), and machine translation (Google Translate was launched in 2006) has led to

[50] Anna Świderkówna, *Bogowie zeszli z Olimpu. Bóstwo i mit w greckiej literaturze świata hellenistycznego*, 3rd ed., Warszawa 2008, p. 292.

[51] Henry James, *Essays on the Novel*, London 1957, p. 9.

[52] George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford 1975, p. 333.

a clear shift in emphasis in the practice of translation, but in my opinion it has not undermined its deeper significance and, consequently, has not deprived it of its educational significance.

Foreign language teaching methodologists often list translation as one of the five basic communication skills (alongside speaking, writing, reading and listening). Exercises in translating written text have been the basis of the classic method of foreign language teaching, the so–called grammar–translation method, at least since the 19th century. This method was successfully used in teaching Latin and Greek (although there is much to suggest that Shakespeare was already being taught in this way at King Edward VI's Grammar School in Stratford–upon–Avon in the 1570s), but also modern languages. The higher the level of education, the more interesting, complex, and sophisticated the translated texts become (in the case of ancient languages, this means reading the works of eminent historians, orators, and writers), and reflection on translation and its practice takes on a completely new, deeper meaning for students of philology, especially literature.

What does practicing translation, with particular emphasis on literary translation, give us–teachers and students? A great deal: a good translation always requires 'delving into' the language, and the translator engages in true 'archaeology of words' (i.e., closely examining their etymology, shades of meaning, and the evolution of forms and meanings); advanced translation exercises force you to master syntactic acrobatics, and analysing the style of a given author is a great introduction to stylistics. Translation exercises also contribute to a deeper understanding of language in the broadest sense (both in the native language and in foreign languages), as well as to realizing the richness of cultural references found in many literary texts (in other words, they sensitize students to the intertextuality that is ubiquitous in literature).

Translation teachers have a virtually inexhaustible corpus of texts at their disposal. Here I will list the titles of selected works (mostly English–language ones) that have 'proven themselves' in my Literary Translation classes over the past few years, encouraging work on language (languages), deep reflection, and intellectual effort, and often leading to lively discussions.

I usually start by analysing the lyrics of the John Lennon–Paul McCartney song 'When I'm Sixty–Four' from 1967 (from the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*) and its Polish translations (for comparison, it is also interesting to add a machine translation to the list below, e.g. one made using DeepL):

Lennon/McCartney 'When I'm Sixty–Four'[53]	**'When I'm Sixty–Four'** (Tłumaczenie anonimowe ze strony tekstowo.pl)[54]	**Stanisław Barańczak, 'Lat 63'**[55]
When I get older losing my hair, Many years from now. Will you still be sending me a valentine Birthday greetings, bottle of wine. If I'd been out till quarter to three Would you lock the door, Will you still need me, will you still feed me, When I'm sixty–four? … Every summer we can rent a cottage, In the Isle of Wight, if it's not too dear We shall scrimp and save Grandchildren on your knee Vera, Chuck & Dave. …	Czy kiedy się zestarzeję i zacznę łysieć, za wiele, wiele lat, będziesz ciągle przysyłać mi Walentynkę, urodzinowe życzenia, butelkę wina? Gdy będę poza domem do za kwadrans trzecia, Czy zamkniesz drzwi na klucz? Czy będziesz mnie ciągle potrzebowała, czy będziesz mnie ciągle karmiła, Kiedy będę miał 64 lata? … Każdego lata będziemy mogli wynająć domek na wyspie Wight, jeśli nie będzie za drogo Będziemy oszczędzać i sknerzyć. Nasze wnuki będą siadać na twych kolanach, Vera, Chuck i Dave. …	Gdy mi się z wiekiem przerzedzi włos I rozchwieje ząb – Czy ci się nie znudzi taki stary koń, Czy nie stracisz sympatii doń? Gdy będę wracał nad ranem z knajp – Czy otworzysz drzwi Komuś, kto ma już skończone w maju Lat sześćdziesiąt trzy? … W lecie wynajmiemy domek gdzieś nad morzem, albo Łódź nawet, jeśli nas Będzie na to stać! Dokoła wnuczków krąg: Jadzia, Zdziś i Staś. …

As we can see, the author of the second translation, Polish poet, translator and scholar Stanisław Barańczak, translated the title of the song as 'Lat 63' instead of 'Lat 64', changed the names of the grandchildren from English to Polish, omitted the name of the island where the 'house by the sea' is located, and allowed himself to emphasize the humour of the text by introducing phrases that are missing in the original (e.g. '… *i rozchwieje ząb*'). At the same time, the text retains the humour, mood, and rhythm of the English poem, and can be sung to the same melody. Barańczak thus put his theory of 'semantic dominance' into practice, i.e., he identified in the original and reproduced in the translation the 'key to the content' of the poem: a semantic or formal element that is most important, indelible, and irreplaceable (it can be rhyme, versification, syntax, linguistic stylization, tone,

[53] John Lennon and McCartney, 'When I'm Sixty-Four'. The original lyrics are available at: https://www.thebeatles.com/when-im-sixty-four.

[54] Anonymous Polish translation available on the website Tekstowo.pl: https://www.tekstowo.pl/piosenka,the_beatles,when_i_m_sixty_four.html.

[55] John Lennon i Paul McCartney, 'Lat 63', trans. Stanisław Barańczak, in: *Fioletowa krowa. Antologia angielskiej i amerykańskiej poezji niepoważnej*, Poznań 1993, p. 139.

humour...). Barańczak explained his translation strategies in detail in his 'Small But Maximalist Translatological Manifesto', published in the book *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu: szkice o warsztacie tłumacza poezji z dołączeniem małej antologii tłumaczeń* (Saved in Translation: Sketches on the Craft of Poetry Translation with a Small Anthology of Translations, 1992). The question that arises when reading this and similar translations is fundamental: what are the limits of the translator's freedom?

Lewis Carroll's nonsensical ballad 'Jabberwocky' (from the second volume of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking–Glass*, 1871) provides rich material for comparative studies – there are at least twenty Polish translations of it, by authors as diverse as Stanisław Barańczak, Maciej Słomczyński, Grzegorz Wasowski, and even the sulphurous right–wing politician Janusz Korwin–Mikke. Other texts that are ideal for such studies include William Blake's poem 'The Tyger' (1794) and two Polish translations of A. A. Milne's masterpiece *Winnie the Pooh* (1926), by Irena Tuwim (*Kubuś Puchatek*, 1938) and Monika Adamczyk–Garbowska (*Fredzia Phi–Phi*, 1986); there is also a very interesting translation into Kashubian by Bożena Ugowska (*Miedzwiôdk Pùfôtk*, 2015). The texts by Tuwim and Adamczyk–Garbowska differ greatly from each other, and these differences are obviously the result of conscious translation decisions, but in this case it is also worth looking at the phenomenon of the reception of the text (to investigate this, two years ago students conducted a short survey among preschool children and adult readers: the results clearly showed that children liked both translations equally, but adults definitely prefered Irena Tuwim's translation).

The few lines of W. H. Auden's poem, 'August 1968', and its Polish translation by Barańczak, 'Sierpień 1968',' encourage us to reflect on the role of historical context in the reception of poetry and its translations (which is particularly important in the case of so–called Tyrtaean poetry, i.e., occasional and patriotic poetry).

Modernist experimental literature, which includes, for example, James Joyce's last work, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), provides a very rewarding field for reflection on practice. From the outset, it was considered untranslatable (the author uses an idiosyncratic mixture of languages, and even today, the correct reading of the original text is a subject of controversy among literary scholars and linguists), but in 2012, a Polish translation by Krzysztof Bartnicki entitled *Finneganów tren* was finally published. It reads, for example, as follows:

> Ależ, wre to wre Blankdeblank, bóg każdej machiny, kamień natomny z Barnstaple, poprzez mortysekcję czy wiwiszycie, w rozbiciu czy po nowym złożeniu, jak izaak jacquemin mauromormo milezny, jak wytłumaczony być może, morbloże? Czy wyszedł za przykład zgodnie z deognozą tych co psieczuli go spoza muru morza gdzie Rurie, Thoath i Cleaver, trójca silnych swenoharców Orion Orgiastów, Meereschal MacMuhun tenże, Ipse dadden, ile razy ile czynionych ekstremów na poczet naszego co średniego, co każdemu mogłoby się przydarzyć, najbrutniejszy wasz leoman i princenniejszy wojownik naszej archidiakonii, czy może sklepiony z krawków Klio, którym kronikarz kwietności rycerstwa nie się wierzy chybaby mógł sulpić już na nich samoócz, anteżytnych lep z przytomnością…[56]

We also encounter the fascinating phenomenon of the alleged or actual untranslatability of certain literary texts when reading Julian Tuwim's short poem 'Limeryk babiloński' ('A Babylonian Limerick'): 'W boga zwanego Baal wierz! / (Tak wież Babilonu wył balwierz) / Choć zwierz to i szalbierz,

[56] James Joyce, *Finneganów tren*, trans. Krzysztof Bartnicki, Kraków 2012, pp. 254-258.

/ W garść stal bierz i w dal bież! / Pal, wal, rzeź,… Ha! Życie / to bal, wierz…'[57] Although Stanisław Barańczak and other translators always emphasize that there are no untranslatable texts for good and hard–working translators, the topic is worth discussing with specific examples.

Anthony Burgess's famous and controversial novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) poses a real challenge for translators because of the futuristic youth slang created by the author, called 'nadsat' (the name derives from the Russian equivalent of the word 'teenager'), based on more or less Anglicized Russian words (such as *slovo, droog, horrorshow, govoreet, devotchka, glazzies, zoobies, yazhick, Bog, deng, jeezny*, etc.). These words, which are very noticeable in the original, are mostly lost in the Polish translation because they are too similar to Polish words. Robert Stiller proposed three solutions to this translation problem: his Polish translation was created analogously in versions with insertions from English (version A, *Nakręcana pomarańcza*, 1990) and Russian (version R, *Mechaniczna pomarańcza*, 1991 – the translator introduced those Russian words into the Polish text that clearly differ from Polish words. A third version of the novel was also announced, version N – Germanized – which was to be published under the title *Sprężynowa pomarańcza*, but it was never written.

Of course, texts that have been translated many times over the centuries, such as the Bible, Homer's epics, and Shakespeare's plays, are also very interesting for students of philology and translation studies. Even without knowing the biblical languages, it is worth looking at issues such as biblical idioms (which, translated better or worse, have become a permanent part of the Polish language), the principle of dynamic equivalence in action (according to which the New Testament 'holy kiss' becomes a 'hearty handshake', the 'Lamb of God' becomes the 'Seal of God', and figs become bananas), or the translation of sacred texts into, for example, youth slang:

> Jezus do niej na to: Ja, który rozmawiam z tobą, jestem nim, czaisz? A w tym momencie zleźli się jego uczniowie i nie mogli obczaić czemu on gada z tą panną. Żaden jednak nie pytał: O co ją pytasz? Albo: O czym z nią gadasz? Tymczasem ona zostawiła swój baniak i pognała na bloki i zapodała wszystkim ludziom. Yo! Chodźcie i zobaczcie tego gościa, co powiedział wszystko, co ja usqteczniałam! Czy to nie Chrystus (Zbawiciel)?[58]

The translations of short but highly sophisticated literary pastiches by British writer Sebastian Faulks, such as the parody of James Bond stories entitled 'Ian Fleming Thinks Even James Bond Goes Shopping' from the volume *Pistache*, require considerable erudition and stylistic skill. A collection of fanciful, satirical and surprising parodies, squibs and pastiches published in 2006, it takes on such authors as Agatha Christie, J. R. R. Tolkien, Martin Amis, and J. K. Rowling – several dozen names in total.

Of course, it is easiest to translate texts that have not yet been translated. These include, for example, Max Beerbohm's novella *Enoch Soames. A Memory of the Eighteen–nineties* (1916), immersed in the

[57] Julian Tuwim, *Pegaz dęba, czyli panopticum poetyckie*. Warszawa 2018, p. 150. The limerick might perhaps be tentatively translated in the following way: ''In the god called Baal believe!' / (Thus did the tower of Babylon howl) / Though an animal and a madman, / Take a handful of steel and run! / Smoke, pound, slaughter,... Ha!

is a ball, believe...' (DeepL).

[58] „Ewangelia wg św. Zioma, 2005, trans by Asia Rafał, Basia Sieradz, Beata Lasota, http://www.bosko.pl/wiara/Ewangelia-wg-sw-zioma.html.

dense, decadent atmosphere of *fin–de–siècle* London, with its unique local colour and surprising, metaphysical punchline (this is a group project, as the text is several dozen pages long). An equally interesting experience is the attempt to translate the historical story by Nora Lofts, who is practically unknown in Poland, 'The Iconoclasts' (1935), which requires dealing with a foreign historical context and archaic language (roughly equivalent to the contemporary Polish of the 17th–century writer Jan Chryzostom Pasek).

And finally, perhaps the most difficult challenge: translating even a very short excerpt from Geoffrey Chaucer's (1387–1400) *The Canterbury Tales*, the most interesting literary text of the English Middle Ages. (The Middle English of the original is, of course, an additional difficulty, but one can use either one of the many excellent critical editions or a modernized version.) For example, 'The Prologue to The Summoner's Tale' (surprisingly translated by Jarek Zawadzki as 'Opowieść Doręczyciela', i.e. 'The Tale of the Courier'). The text provides not only an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of language, genres, and literary conventions, but also on sensitivity and mentality; in short, it requires a keen historical sense (about which, as we have seen, T. S. Eliot wrote so convincingly). It is also very interesting to compare the two existing Polish translations (by Helena Pręczkowska from 1963 and Jarek Zawadzki from 2022).

In the case of literary translations, we naturally translate into our native language as a rule; translation into a foreign language requires working in a translation tandem (famous examples of such tandems include the collaboration between Stanisław Barańczak and Irish Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, and between Czesław Miłosz and American poet and translator Clare Cavanagh). However, it is worth attempting – for practice purposes – to translate Polish literary texts into English, and it is worth looking at existing translations. One such relatively simple but interesting work is, for example, Sławomir Mrożek's short story 'Słoń' (1957, translated into English by Halina Arendt as 'The Elephant'), another is Czesław Miłosz's poem 'Dar' (1971, translated by the author himself as 'Gift'). The works of Stanisław Lem also pose a great challenge for translators, e.g. 'Wyprawa pierwsza A, czyli Elektrybałt Trurla' from the volume *Cyberiada* (1965, English translation by Michael Kandel: 'Trurl's Electronic Bard,' in the volume *Mortal Engines*, 1964).

The lexical richness and spectrum of literary genres and language registers used in literary fiction are essentially infinite, as is the number of possible interpretations and, consequently, translation strategies. It is difficult to find a better teaching tool, as teachers of foreign languages, literature, and translation studies have been well aware for a very long time. Finally, three conceptual metaphors[59] can be cited here that highlight the importance of translation not only for literature but also for culture as a whole: first, culture is a treasure (and so the heritage of foreign literatures is worth sharing with other nations and passing on from generation to generation, which is only possible thanks to congenial translations); secondly, it is a palimpsest (translations build the multi–layered, intertextual nature of individual literatures); and thirdly, it is an archipelago (no language or literature is an island, but part of a larger whole).

[59] See George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's classic study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).

9. Conclusion: *Koinos Hermes!*

On November 4, 2039, Ijon Tichy, the narrator and main character of *The Futurological Congress*, awakened from several decades of medical hibernation, decided to purchase an encyclopaedia. He quickly realized that although the books he was accustomed to no longer existed in the New York of the future, all knowledge was easily accessible:

> I finally found out how to get an encyclopaedia. I already have it–it fits into three glass vials. I bought it at a science bookstore. Books are not read anymore, they are eaten. They are not made of paper, but of an informational substance covered with icing.[60]

Lem's novella has a clear satirical tone, but the writer was essentially correct in his predictions: by 2025, everyone carries all the knowledge in the world in their pocket in the form of a smartphone with internet access, and acquiring it requires no effort (the same could already have been said ten years earlier). Translation between major natural languages also requires no effort – this is a novelty – and humanity seems to be increasingly interested in the future rather than the past, in 'będzieje' (literally 'future happenings', this is another of Lem's wonderful neologisms[61]) rather than history. The latter undoubtedly includes literary translation, which has been practiced for at least twenty–odd centuries. However, I may have succeeded in demonstrating in this text that literary translation – although difficult – is not only very important for our culture, not only useful as an exercise in foreign language lessons, not only very interesting for philologists and critics, but also deeply 'human', that it is one of the activities that belong and should belong to the attributes of *Homo sapiens* rather than to his technological creations, even the most intelligent ones.

The stakes are much higher than just the fate of a niche professional group, literary translators. For centuries, schools of translators have been and continue to be centres of thought and civilization. The culture we know today would not exist without the Library of Alexandria (Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 3rd century BC–7th century AD), the House of Wisdom in Baghdad (Bajt al–Hikma, 830–1258) and the Toledo School of Translators (Escuela de Traductores de Toledo, 1135–1284) – to mention only the most famous examples. Translations are its air, its bloodstream and its life–giving force, at least since Roman times, according to T. S. Eliot. Olga Tokarczuk, author of the essay 'The Work of Hermes, or How Translators Save the World Every Day', quoted above, agrees with him, writing about the culture–creating role of translation:

> The House of Wisdom (Bayt al–Hikma) in Baghdad [was a place] where crowds of translators translated into Arabic almost everything they could get their hands on that came from the [Byzantine] Empire. (...) The Archbishop of Toledo established the famous Toledo School of Translators, who, like archaeologists, recovered work after work for the West. Translations were often made from Arabic into Castilian, and then from Castilian into Latin. (...) Translation is not only

[60] Stanisław Lem, *Kongres futurologiczny*, in: *Fantastyczny Lem. Antologia opowiadań według czytelników*, ed. Jerzy Jarzębski, Kraków 2001, p. 127. Lem's novella is a classic example of a 'disturbing text' (according to the terminology proposed by Frank Cioffi, see: *The Phenomenology of the Disturbing Text*, 1998), as it questions the reliability of our senses and thus the possibility of true cognition. A similar theme appears, of course, in the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix* (1999), where access to unadulterated reality is provided by a red pill (taking the blue pill keeps us in a state of blissful ignorance).

[61] Ibid., p. 133: In the Polish original the text reads as follows: 'Historii uczy się teraz mało kto – zastąpił ją w szkołach nowy przedmiot, znany jako będzieje, czyli nauka o tym, co dopiero będzie.'

> a transfer from one language to another and from one culture to another, but also resembles a kind of gardening technique, which involves removing a branch from a plant and grafting it onto another plant, where it sprouts new shoots, gains new strength, and becomes a full–fledged branch...[62]

The writer multiplies metaphors: translation is a kind of 'emergency service' for culture or a 'message in a bottle' thrown into the water by a castaway (a dying culture or language), simply a means of survival; it is also a new strain or shoot (culture has often been compared to a tree), and even a form of therapy (for there is no 'more terrible disease than when a person loses their individual language and completely adopts the collective one as their own' – only literature, including translation, can help with this[63]).

When it comes to emphasizing the importance of translation, linguists come to the aid of writers. As Roman Jakobson wrote in his treatise 'Poetics in the Light of Linguistics' (1960), there is nothing more human than natural language and its creative applications, i.e., the use of its poetic function, which consists in 'satisfying human aesthetic needs through language.'[64] Literary translators play a significant role in this. For example, Tadeusz Boy–Żeleński, to whom Olga Tokarczuk owes the great pleasure she derives from reading Montaigne (a pleasure, we might add, that the French do not experience: reading the philosopher in the original is 'torture' because 'his French is old, archaic, and you have to concentrate extremely hard to understand what he is writing'):

> This most active and industrious Polish translator had, on the one hand, a strong, distinctive personality, and on the other, he was always able to find a variant of Polish that suited the orderly and demanding structure of the French language of the time. So when I read Montaigne, I read him through Boy's mind.[65]

Jakobson is seconded by Steven Pinker, author of *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (1994): we are human thanks to language, 'one of the wonders of the world', thanks to which 'as a species, we can shape events in each other's brains with exquisite precision.'[66] And there can be no broader linguistic communication without translation, because, as we know, there are about seven thousand individual languages today. Let us recall once again that translation continues to occupy, and should occupy, a prominent place not only in the teaching of literature (literary translation is ideal for stimulating both theoretical discussion and practical exercises), but also in the teaching of foreign languages – it is one of the most effective techniques for teaching and learning languages.

William Blake, the creator of *Newton* (1795) mentioned at the beginning of this text, put imagination on a pedestal. He was an enemy of the Enlightenment and an opponent of science, as well as an equally determined opponent of deism. Is it possible to reconcile imagination (romantic) with

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[62] Olga Tokarczuk, op. cit., pp. 73-92.

[63] Ibid., p. 91.

[64] Roman Jakobson, quoted here after the Polish edition: 'Poetyka w świetle językoznawstwa', in: *Pamiętnik Literacki* 51/2, 431-473, text available online at: https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/texts/pamietnik-literacki-czasopismo-kwartalne-poswiecone-historii-i-krytyce-literatury-polskiej/1960-tom-51-numer-2/pamietnik_literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1960-t51-n2-s431-473.pdf.

[65] Olga Tokarczuk, op. cit., p. 83.

[66] Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct. How the Mind Creates Language*. New York 2007, s. 1.

science (Enlightenment and positivist)? Romanticism was, after all, an era that 'consummated' the divergence of their paths, a phenomenon that T. S. Eliot, in his essay 'The Metaphysical Poets' 1921) very accurately called 'the dissociation of sensibility', which he placed in the 17th century.[67]

Let us add a spoonful of tar to all this honey, though. In *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2015), historian and futurologist Yuval Noah Harrari astutely notes that, although great literature has conveyed universal human values since its inception, and therefore remains important and attractive to successive generations of readers, the situation will change dramatically when human nature undergoes a fundamental transformation. Cyborgs and artificial intelligences of all kinds will probably not identify with the characters of human fiction:

> For thousands of years (...) one thing has remained constant: humanity itself. Our tools and institutions are vastly different from those of biblical times, but the deep structures of the human mind remain the same. That is why we still find ourselves in the pages of the Bible, in the writings of Confucius, or in the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. These classic works were created by people like us, which is why we feel that they speak to us. (...) However, once technology enables us to redesign human minds, Homo sapiens will disappear, human history will come to an end, and a completely new process will begin, one that people like you and me cannot understand.[68]

Perhaps the Israeli scholar is right. In response, however, let us quote the immortal (?) words of Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65–27 BC) from the first 'Song': '*Carpe diem*', or 'seize the day', 'enjoy the moment' – or, as Faust would say: 'Ah, linger on, moment, you are so fair!' ('*Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!*', Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*. Part I, 1773–1832). It is possible that in the post–human era, literature created and translated by humans will eventually become a thing of the past, but that moment has not yet come. As long as people write, read, and study literature (and this is certainly the case today and will be in the near future), translators will be needed. Let us be clear: human translators (living beings made of water, calcium, and carbon, not machines made of plastic, silicon, and rare earths), well–read, fluent in several languages, experienced in life, and well–travelled. In a word, good philologists. Any other path, as Shakespeare wrote in the quote at the beginning of this text, leads to madness, and we should avoid it. Olga Tokarczuk ends her essay with a call: '*Koinos Hermes*! Long live the community of Hermes!'[69] One of the characters in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) observes sententiously, 'Things are never as bad as they seem.'[70] Let's stick to that.

[67] T. S. Eliot, review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, selected and edited, with an Essay, by Herbert J. C. Grierson in the *Times Literary Supplement*, October 1921. Text available online at: https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/eliot_metaphysical_poets.htm.

[68] Yuval Noah Harari, op. cit, p. 63.

[69] Olga Tokarczuk, op. cit., p. 92.

[70] Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. London 2020, p. 237.

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