

**Untangling the Moomin phenomenon:
A review of *Philosophical and
Translatological Wanderings
in Moominvalley*
by Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska¹**

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1. Introduction

Writing the first Moomin novel during World War II, Tove Jansson would probably never have thought that her characters would not only win the hearts of so many readers all over the world, but also make a brilliant career in popular culture (see e.g. Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2024a), let alone bibliotherapy (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2017).² The Moomin series consists of nine novels:

¹ Dymel-Trzebiatowska, Hanna (2023). *Philosophical and Translatological Wanderings in Moominvalley*. Trans. Patrycja Poniatowska. Lausanne – Berlin – Bruxelles – Chennai – New York – Oxford: Peter Lang. Series *Studien zur Germanistik, Skandinavistik und Übersetzungskultur* 24, edited by Beate Sommerfeld, Stefan H. Kaszyński, Andrzej Kątny and Maria Krzysztofiak. ISBN 978-3-631-89704-1. 228 pages.

² Tove Jansson wrote about herself in *Bildhuggarens Dotter* (1968, English translation 2013). See also the biography of Jansson by Westin (2007, Polish and English translations – 2012 and 2020 respectively) and the collection of her letters (Jansson 2014, Polish and English translations – 2016 and 2020 respectively).

- *Småtrollen och den stora översvämningen* (*The Moomins and the Great Flood*), 1945;
- *Kometjakten/ Kometen kommer* (*Comet in Moominland*), 1946;
- *Trollkarlens hatt* (*Finn Family Moomintroll / The Happy Moomins*), 1948;
- *Muminpappans bravader / Muminpappans memoarer* (*The Exploits of Moominpappa / Moominpappa's Memoirs*), 1950;
- *Farlig midsommar* (*Moominsummer Madness*), 1954;
- *Trollvinter* (*Moominland Midwinter*), 1957;
- *Det osynliga barnet* (*Tales from Moominvalley*), 1962;
- *Pappan och havet* (*Moominpappa at Sea*), 1965;
- *Sent i november* (*Moominvalley in November*), 1970.³

This year the Moomin series is celebrating the 60th anniversary of its presence in Poland. In 1964, the first Polish translation of the third book of the series, *Trollkarlens hatt*, came out. The book, translated by Irena Szuch-Wyszomirska, was published under the title *W Dolinie Muminków* [lit. In the Valley of Moomins] (see e.g. Rogoż 2011). Paradoxically enough, the Polish version of the first book of the series, *Småtrollen och den stora översvämningen*, entitled *Małe trolle i duża powódź*, translated by Teresa Chłapowska, was published as the last one – in 1995, exactly 50 years after the appearance of the original. It is also worth noting that Polish readers – as signalled in footnote 2 above – may learn about Tove Jansson's life from her biography written by Westin (2012) and the collection of her letters (Jansson 2016).

A year before the 60th anniversary of the presence of the Moomins in Poland, Peter Lang released *Philosophical and Translatological Wanderings in Moominvalley* by Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska. This monograph is a translation of her best-

³ See e.g. Westin (1988) and Dymel-Trzebiatowska (2023). It is worth noting that apart from the nine Moomin books, Tove Jansson also published five picture books (including two books with photographs by the author's brother Per Olov Jansson) and numerous comic strips which first came out in a newspaper (see e.g. Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2018, 2024b, Tomas 2017). The comic strips were co-authored by her brother Lars Jansson.

selling monograph entitled *Filozoficzne i translatoryczne wędrówki po Dolinie Muminków*, originally published in Polish by Gdańsk University Press in 2019.

2. Philosophical wanderings in Moominvalley

As the title of the monograph indicates, the author concentrates on two broad thematic areas. One of them is the presence of philosophical ideas in the Moomin series. In the analyzed books, Dymel-Trzebiatowska identifies an array of hypotexts written by two Ancient Greek philosophers, Socrates and Parmenides, as well as by later philosophers and psychologists, including Oswald Spengler, José Ortega y Gasset, Henri Bergson, Edvard Westermarck, Mikhail Bakhtin, Karen Horney, Antoni Kępiński, Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud.

Let us present an example of a “philosophical trip” the reader of the monograph is invited to take. In Chapter Five entitled “Life Is a Dream”, the author discovers traces of the ideas promoted by Parmenides of Elea, considered to be the precursor of ontology. His metaphysical poem “On Nature” initiated a debate about what exists and what seems to exist, encompassing the boundaries between being awake and dreaming (see e.g. Drozdek 2011). Some characters in Jansson’s novels find it difficult to distinguish between reality, dreams and imagination. For instance, in *Moominland Midwinter*, when Moomintroll wakes up while the other members of his family are dormant because it is the time of their hibernation, the reality around him is not what he saw in the other seasons of the year. His thoughts revolve around the unknown world, so unreal to the point that he has doubts about what is real and what is a dream (p. 45).

Also in Chapter Five, Dymel-Trzebiatowska enumerates a number of questions Jansson apparently asks her readers in relation to the performance of *The Lion’s Brides* in *Moominsummer Madness*, recalling the concept of *theatrum mundi* whose roots are found in Plato’s dialogue *Laws*: “When reading about

the events at the floating theatre, do we not take part in a play titled *On Those Reading about the Events at the Floating Theatre*? Or are we a dream dreamt by the inhabitants of Moominvalley? Or perhaps characters in the books they read?” (p. 47).

On another trip, in Chapter Nine entitled “Crisis”, the reader will follow the intricate paths of Jungian psychoanalysis (see e.g. Dudek 2010). In *Moominpappa at Sea*, Moominmamma, having tried – unsuccessfully – to create her new garden on the island where the Moomin family wants to start a new life, descends into the unconscious. The unconscious happens to be the island itself, behaving like a living organism, “[a] locus where [...] one can [...] reintegrate one’s psyche” (p. 89). Eventually, “Moominmamma accepts the island/unconscious, stops trying to impose her principles on it and no longer runs away from it” (p. 88), coming to understand that wild flowers may be more beautiful than her garden flowers.

Searching the Moomin novels for the inspirational ideas initially put forward by the philosophers and psychologists mentioned above, the author of the monograph proves that Tove Jansson deliberately wrote them both for children and adults, crossing the traditional boundaries between books for younger and older readers (see also Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2015). It is worth recalling here that a recently published anniversary edition of *W Dolinie Muminków* contains a preface by the Nobel-prize winning writer Olga Tokarczuk (2024⁴) who admits that the Moomin books happened to be the fairy tale of her adulthood – which obviously confirms their double address. Tokarczuk (2024: 8) clearly states that some passages are excellent in depicting the human need to search for the meaning of one’s own life and the meaning of the existence of the world. Tokarczuk appreciates the wisdom and depth of the books; moreover, she

⁴ The introduction to the 2024 edition of *W Dolinie Muminków* is part of the essay entitled “Psychologia według Muminków [Psychology according to the Moomins]” by Tokarczuk originally published in the magazine *Charaktery* in 1997.

observes that their characters are psychologically convincing, despite their fantastic disguise.

3. Translatological wanderings in Moominvalley

The second part of the monograph explores the Polish translations of the Moomin series (see also Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2020). The series has been translated into fifty-one languages, including English (see e.g. Berry 2014, Strandberg 2018), Finnish (see Strandberg 2018) and Portuguese (see Sainio 2016). As regards the Polish versions of the series, four volumes were translated into Polish by Irena Szuch-Wyszomirska and the remaining five by Teresa Chłapowska:

- *Małe trolle i duża powódź*, trans. Chłapowska, 1995;
- *Kometa nad Doliną Muminków*, trans. Chłapowska, 1977;
- *W Dolinie Muminków*, trans. Szuch-Wyszomirska, 1964;
- *Pamiętniki Tatusia Muminka*, trans. Chłapowska, 1978;
- *Lato Muminków*, trans. Szuch-Wyszomirska, 1967;
- *Zima Muminków*, trans. Szuch-Wyszomirska, 1969;
- *Opowiadania z Doliny Muminków*, trans. Szuch-Wyszomirska, 1970;
- *Tatuś Muminka i morze*, trans. Chłapowska, 1977;
- *Dolina Muminków w listopadzie*, trans. Chłapowska, 1980.

Although in many parts of our planet, children – and adults – have the opportunity to read about the adventures of the Moomins in their native languages, the translations, as Dymel-Trzebiatowska notes, “have not been either thoroughly or extensively researched. Neither have they been examined in-depth in terms of any particular translatory issue or any single volume” (p. 99). The monograph largely fills in this gap – as regards the Polish versions of the novels by Jansson. Its author concentrates on selected, albeit crucial, aspects of translating the series from Swedish into Polish.

In Chapter One of the second part of the monograph, entitled “Not Only about the Muskrat, Who Is (Not) a Musk Deer: Translating Anthroponyms”, the author analyzes the translation of anthroponyms. The choice of this object of study is obvious: “anthroponyms have an especially relevant part in narratives if they are meaningful and intentional names, which is a frequent device in comic writings and children’s literature” and the microcosm created in the Moomin novels is “inhabited by an impressive array of untypical figures, whose species-names and proper names quite frequently reference their appearance, personality and/or origin” (p. 105, see also Bertills 2002, 2003). The author concentrates on the following translation techniques: transfer/copying, transcription/transfer with modified spelling, literal translation, substitution (frequently with a nonce word) and (partial) reduction. While discussing the Polish versions of the proper names used by Jansson, the author not only identifies the employed translation techniques, but also looks at the names from the point of view of the reader, which is related to the double address of the series. For instance, the Polish equivalent of *Moomintrollet* ‘Moomintroll’ is *Muminek*, the translation of this name involved transfer, reduction and substitution, and the effect is more child-oriented (p. 117). The author identifies cases of the loss of meaning, e.g. the transfer of the dog’s name *Ynk*, meaning commiseration or lamenting (p. 114); the loss of the allusion implied by the original name, e.g. *Gafsa*, referring to a quarrelsome woman in Fenno-Swedish, rendered as *Gapsa* in the Polish text (p. 120); and errors, e.g. *Bisamrättan* translated as *Piżmowiec* ‘musk deer’ instead of *Piżmak* ‘muskrat’ (pp. 110–111). Also, the author observes an unusual translation practice: the Polish name of a character may be a substitution basing not on the source language material, but on the illustrations made by Tove Jansson. This is the case of *Paszczak* whose original name is *Hemulen*. Swedish *hemul* (indefinite form of *hemulen*) is an archaic word which means ‘(legal) warrant’ and is used in legal contexts, whereas Polish *Paszczak* is derived from *paszcza* ‘maw’. In the

illustrations, this character is depicted as a creature with a long maw, which inspired one of the translators of the Moomin series to coin his Polish name (pp. 129–130).

In Chapter Two, the author delves into translating the humour of the Moomin books (see also Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2016), whereas Chapter Three concentrates on the translation of the names of dishes and beverages. Again, the author identifies the employed translation techniques and evaluates the effect taking into consideration the double address of the novels. As regards humour, the author remarks that “some episodes are equally amusing to both adults and children, while the comic appeal of other scenes is more geared to only one of these reader groups” (p. 155). Having carefully analyzed the translations of a number of passages replete with humour, the author of the monograph arrives at the conclusion that “[t]he translation of the comic in the Moomin books defies any easy evaluation, especially if it is to be appraised in conjunction with the double-address mode of the source texts” (p. 180). As regards the translation of the words for dishes and beverages, the author states that in view of the double address of the Moomin series, the analysis she carries out “does not suggest any obvious prioritisation of one reader group” because “some choices made by the translators stand as an indisputable testament to their acknowledgement of an adult readership” (p. 208), whereas other choices indicate that the translators were aware of the limited competencies of younger readers.

Although the second part of the monograph concentrates only on selected translation problems, they belong to the most frequent difficulties faced by translators. The author demonstrates that meaningful names, humour and (culinary) culture – coupled with the double address of the Moomin novels by Jansson – presented an enormous challenge to the translators. Nonetheless, the Polish translations are evaluated positively: “For the most part they convey the stylistic qualities of the series and preserve a range of elements that were potentially vulnerable to purification” (p. 215).

4. A final word

As Dymel-Trzebiatowska remarks in the “Brief Conclusion”,

The reading of the nine Moomin volumes is an extraordinary adventure that knows no end and never makes one bored. The series is like a magic Chinese box in which one discovers new secret spaces, and then secret spaces within secret spaces – new and unexpected vistas and sites that come as a surprise in books which have for years been traditionally classified as children’s literature (p. 211).

This passage – aptly using a comparison of the Moomin book series to “a magic Chinese box” – actually reflects the author’s fascination with its complexity. The readers of *Philosophical and Translatological Wanderings in Moominvalley* are invited to embark on a journey into this magic Chinese box during which they will have an opportunity to experience a wealth of intellectual discoveries, meeting the characters created by Tove Jansson, as well as – indirectly – the prominent philosophers and psychologists whose ideas gave great depth and colour to the adventures of the Moomins.

Finally, it should be noted that on the 60th anniversary of the presence of the Moomins in Poland, Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska (2024b) published her second monograph on the series by Tove Jansson, entitled *Przechadzki po Dolinie Muminków: Perspektywa filozoficzno-literacka* [Strolling through Moominvalley: A Philosophical and Literary Perspective]. Let us cherish the hope that this monograph will also be translated into English so that it can reach a wider audience.

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