Burgess Translated Into Polish

by Joanna Wierzbińska

Anthony Burgess is known in Poland mainly as the author of *A Clockwork Orange*. However, it is difficult to estimate whether it is Burgess's book or Kubrick's film that occupies the Polish audience's imagination. Four of his books have been translated into Polish:
One Hand Clapping
(1976),
A Clockwork Orange
(1991 and 1994),
Man of Nazareth
(1995) and
The Wanting Seed
(2003), but only
A Clockwork Orange
,
One Hand Clapping
and
The Wanting Seed
are known to a wider public. This selection contributed to the Polish reception of Burgess as a writer who specialized in creating gloomy visions of the future. His image in Poland is evidently 'off the mainstream'. Such a reception is clearly unjust and Polish readers are offered an immensely impoverished selection of Burgess's oeuvre.

The choice of *A Clockwork Orange* or *The Wanting Seed* for translation should not come up as a shock. The appearance of *One Hand Clapping* in this fine company, a book which, according to Burgess "sank like a stone"

Note 1

both in Britain and in the United States, may seem at least surprising, though.

One Hand Clapping, translated as *Klaskać jedną ręką* by Jadwiga Rutkowska (Burgess, Anthony, *Klaskać jedną ręką*, Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1976), was a huge success in Poland. Burgess wrote it within a month and published it as Joseph Kell in 1961. The book was a result of his observations of major changes in British society. After his return from Malaya and Brunei he discovered a new and alien world of television and youth culture back in Britain. The inspiration for the plot and for the narrator's idiolect was stirred by TV programs that Burgess's first wife, Lynne, enjoyed watching.

The narrator, Janet Shirley, is 'a material girl' who finds pleasure in enumerating objects that she and her husband either posses or lack. Being affluent and living a comfortable life is her only principle. She needs to be perceived as well off and successful. Her husband, Howard, wins one thousand pounds in a Quiz Show on TV and multiplies the amount by gambling. However, money does not bring happiness; how much can one buy, eat or drink? The new luxurious lifestyle leads to sloth, infidelity, madness, suicidal thoughts and ultimate murder.

The book can be easily interpreted as an expression of contempt for a materialistic lifestyle and accumulating goods. It shows the world which endeavours to appeal to the lowest tastes in any sphere of life, be it music or literature. When talking to a journalist, Howard raises some accusations:

'What I mean is that you get so low it stands to reason you'll be appealing to the majority, the majority being stupid for the most part and just like animals.'
'This is a democracy,' said the young man. 'Sort of, that is. People are entitled to have what they want. What would be better, do you think? Us educating them and telling them how to behave and what to think and all that, which is communist or fascist?' **Note 2**

The last clause, containing the words "communist" and "fascist" disappeared from the translation. In the Polish version the journalist does not evoke these two ideologies and Howard is clearly presented as the wiser one, who has certain expectations and does not accept democracy, as it leads the world to degradation.

Burgess was a strong advocate of free will and he showed it in *A Clockwork Orange*, where Alex is clearly a criminal, but Burgess does not allow easy judgment. The borderline between good and evil is never clear-cut.
One Hand Clapping

is similar in this respect. Burgess merely shows people's opinions and behaviour, refraining from praise or condemnation. The Polish translation of the book did not leave that much room for interpretation. Democracy is obviously crooked. The reader is not made to ponder over the fact if the communist methods of imposing opinions, rather than letting people choose for themselves and err, are acceptable.

Russia is mentioned once in the novel, though in a culinary context: "I got our supper ready now and, as we were in the money, I'd brought some tinned Russian Crab, which was very expensive just about then because of the trouble or something, and we had it with vinegar and tinned potato salad." **Note 3.** In the Polish translation 'the trouble' vanishes and the above quoted passage changes into: "I got our supper ready now and, as we were in the money, I'd brought some tinned Russian Crab, very expensive, and we had it with vinegar and tinned potato salad." The semantic change is incurred ideologically; Russian crabs are expensive not because of, as Burgess nicely puts it, 'the trouble', but because they are top quality products, which foreigners can barely afford.

At a certain point, Howard commissions Redvers Glass, a young poet, to write a verse about the rottenness and decay of contemporary England:

But we saw England delivered over to the hands of
The sneerers and sniggerers, the thugs and grinners,
England became a feeble-lighted
Moon of America, our very language defiled
And become slick and gum-chewing **Note 4**

This poetry must have appealed to the communist propagandists and in the Polish translation its message is even strengthened by the use of words such as 'paws' (łapy) instead of 'hands', 'our unhappy language' (nieszczęsny język) instead of 'our very language', or 'lies' (kłamstwa) instead of 'slick'.

It is implied that England is deteriorating, because it is influenced by the United States. Such conclusions seem very natural. Strong criticism of the US reappears in the book:

"(…) people from places like Bermondsey and Stoke-on-Trent pretending to be Americans and writing as if they were Americans. I've nothing against Americans, and we've seen them at firsthand for ourselves, but I don't want to see English people turned into second-hand Americans".   **Note 5**

How could a book like that fail to gain popularity in a Communist country? Burgess was aware of his book's success in Poland and even had an explanation ready for it:

But in Eastern Europe it had a late success. It was regarded as a condemnation for money-making, a debased culture, the whole capitalist Western life, than to endure it would be better to be dead. It was adapted for television in Warsaw and turned into a stage musical in Budapest. It was read in Eastern Germany. It was one of the two books for which I was known in the old Soviet block. **Note 6**

I can only agree with Burgess's diagnosis of the factors, which, first of all, brought *One Hand Clapping* to Poland and, second of all, secured the book's popularity. The novel could be easily interpreted in tune with Soviet ideology and the translator managed to emphasize the 'appropriate' passages in the novel and eliminate the 'unwanted' ones; Jadwiga Rutkowska kindly improved Burgess's otherwise ideologically correct work.

A Clockwork Orange is by far the best-known book by Burgess in Poland. It did not, however, have an easy way into the hands of Polish readers. For 15 years censorship had waged an inexorably fervent war against it. The first two chapters, translated by Robert Stiller, were to be published in 1974 in No. 2(34) of *Literatura na Świecie* – a literary magazine. Only Stiller's introductory essay,
Horrorshow! Czyli bój sie pan jeża
, appeared though and the translation was rejected. Rumour has it that the crusade against
A Clockwork Orange
was not aimed at the book itself, but at its title. It is said that, having watched Stanley Kubrick's film, some high official from the Political Bureau,
presumably Zenon Kliszko, could not hide his disdain and announced that it would never be allowed in Poland.

Note 7

Stiller managed to extricate his translation from *Literatura na świecie* and make a few copies. This leaflet got into some libraries and marked the book's otherwise virtual existence in Polish. The translation was ready, but it could be published only underground, so Stiller preferred to wait and maintain the book's illusory existence, rather than sentence
A Clockwork Orange
to non-existence. In 1991
Wema
Published
Mechaniczna Pomarańcza
, but only in ten thousand copies. In 1994

Gebethner i Ska
offered to reissue the book.

A Clockwork Orange constitutes an immensely interesting case in the history of translation as it was translated three times by the same person, Robert Stiller, and its fragments were translated by Cezary Michoński.

In his comments published together with his second translation of the book, Stiller highlights the fact that there is no comparable satisfaction, as the one enjoyed by the readers of both versions. It is so on account of the fact that there is no other case, where one translator created two completely distinct and separate idiolects in order to translate the same novel twice and in entirely different ways. **Note 8**

The first translation of *A Clockwork Orange* by Robert Stiller appeared in 1991 as *Mechaniczna Pomarańcza*
and it was marked as ‘Version R’, where ‘R’ stands for ‘rosyjski’ or Russian. The idiolect of the droogs was rendered into Polish as a mixture of Polish and Russian. In 1994 his second translation appeared, this time entitled
Nakręcana Pomarańcza
. Stiller kindly explained why he undertook his second attempt; "When history made a sudden turn and it appeared that Polish language would no longer be influenced by Russian, ‘Version R’ of the novel lost its validity. It became more probable that our language would be Americanised. This process is equally deadly to our language, however, for historical reasons, less unpleasant. This version of Polish language is not made up.
Our mother tongue is indeed heading in this direction".
Note 9

Thus, ‘Version A’ (where ‘A’ stands for ‘angielski’ – English) was created and it used an idiolect being a mixture of Polish and English. In ‘Version A’ Stiller announces his third attempt at translating *A Clockwork Orange*. This time he is working on a dialect combining Polish with German and it will be entitled *Sprężynowa Pomarańcza*. The readers are still waiting for it.

The idiolect devised by Stiller in ‘Version A’ is very clumsy. He employs unfortunate borrowings, which sound ridiculous, for example, he "Polonizes" the word ‘shop’ as ‘szop’(which signifies ‘a raccoon’ in Polish) and the expression ‘in a shop’ as ‘w szopie’, (which signifies ‘in a hut’ in

Polish). Thus, his decision to use Polish spelling for English loanwords sometimes results in unintentionally funny solutions.

Some of the neologisms used by Stiller either function in Polish in their original spelling (e.g. shop (not ‘szop’), TV (not ‘ti wi’), or fair (not ‘fer’)) or would be read correctly by Polish readers, even if the original spelling was maintained (e.g. come back, very, or never rendered as ‘kom bek’, ‘wery’, or ‘newer’). Stiller’s neologisms are more foreign than the foreign language itself! Even if it was Stiller’s idea that the teenage dialect should reflect contemporary developments in Polish, he seems to ignore the fact that we tend to adapt loanwords to our pronunciation. Therefore, the spelling, which reflects English pronunciation, does not seem natural. For instance, the word ‘especially’ cannot be pronounced as ‘yspeszli’ by Polish language speakers, as Stiller implies. It is rather pronounced as ‘espeszyli’, as we tend to pronounce all the syllables. This tendency prevails even if Poles acquire the language via television or radio – our speech organs are used to different phonetics.

Another doubtful idea is the fact that in Stiller’s translation not only Alex and his droogs use NADSAT. The old women at the bar or the priest are acquainted with the slang as well and they are capable of speaking it fluently.

Moreover, Stiller employs many vulgarities, which are absent from Burgess’s original. Burgess made Alex use Russian loanwords instead of Standard English ‘dirty words’. Stiller often translates Russian borrowings employed by Burgess as Polish vulgar lexical items or as non-standard words from very low registers (cf. ‘litso’ rendered as ‘ryj’, ‘I’d peeted’ – ‘wydoiłem’, ‘nogas’ – ‘giry’ or the use of words such as ‘kudły’, ‘morda’, ‘łeb’, ‘łachy’, or ‘dziadu’). Thus, Stiller changes the register and makes Alex’s dialect very low, actually much lower than in the original. Alex’s mother is always referred to as ‘mum’, whereas Stiller utilizes pejorative words such as ‘maciora’, ‘macica’, ‘maciocha’, or ‘mać’.

This draws attention to yet another questionable feature of Stiller’s idiolect, where one neologism in Burgess’s original is replaced by more than one lexical item in Stiller’s translation. For instance, the word ‘droog’ is rendered as ‘frendzik’, ‘paluczek’, ‘drug’ (sic! Russian creeping into ‘Version A"), ‘budek’, or ‘brajdaszek’. The amount of lexis is overwhelming. Burgess sometimes explains certain elements of NADSAT, e.g. "the twittwittwittering in the bare or nagoy branches",
Note 10
while Stiller misinterprets this stylistic device and clarifies Polish lexical items using…
other Polish words: “ćwir ćwir ćwirkania w gołych (czyli łysych) gałęziach”
Note 11

– "the twittwittwittering in the bare (or naked) branches" (JW)

Instead of incorporating single lexical items, Stiller decided on entire phrases or indeed clauses, which makes the idiolect indecipherable. Stiller maintains that he endeavoured to present the Polish language of the future, basing on the processes he was witnessing. If it was so, he should have either employed those English loanwords which had really entered Polish, or refrained from incorporating too implausible neologisms, such as ‘ołdy tajm’ signifying ‘all the time’ or ‘na elitł’ signifying ‘for a little’.

One more perplexing characteristic of ‘Version A’ idiolect is the fact that it does not merely incorporate English loanwords, but also Russian (horror szoł, czaj, da, Bog) and German ones (wunder bar, fertyk, frojda, szmucyk, kwacz, natyrilig, rychtyk). It makes the idiolect inconsistent and deprives ‘subliminal penetration’ of a possible coherent agent.

In 1987, Cezary Michoński published his translation of one of the chapters of *A Clockwork Orange* in No 2(28) of *Akcenty*. Michoński was then a young student and did not suggest any innovative ideas. He merely repeated Stiller’s idea from ‘Version A’, (which was approved by Burgess himself) and used a combination of Polish and English. At the same time, though, he did not manage to avoid certain doubtful ideas, such as the use of NADSAT by characters other than Alex and his droogs. Stiller criticizes Michoński’s translation severely in his edition of *Mechaniczna Pomarańcza*. I have to admit, though, that Michoński was much more successful as far as the choice and *realm* of borrowings is concerned and he managed to follow Burgess’s principle of inserting single lexical items, rather than clusters, into Polish.

‘Version R’ might be referred to as the most faithful one for it incorporates Russian (the language chosen by Burgess) into Polish. Inspiration for *A Clockwork Orange* idiolect came when Burgess was about to go on a cruise to Russia: "The vocabulary of my space-age hooligans could be a mixture of Russian and demotic English, seasoned with rhyming slang and the gypsy’s bolo.
The Russian suffix for –teen was *nadsat* and that would be the name of the teenage dialect"
Note 12

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Burgess, however, did not incorporate Russian into Polish, but into English, so the issue of translation's faithfulness, which is a vague, subjective and disputable notion anyhow, should not be applied in this case. Not all levels of meaning are attainable in any translation. Burgess created NADSAT out of a mixture of English and Russian, as they seemed to him very distant and mutually 'exotic': "Russian loanwords fit better into English than those from German, French, or Italian.
English anyway is a mélange of French and German".

Note 13

Polish is already a mélange of different Slavic roots. Thus, if the faithfulness of a translation was to be judged by the faithfulness to the author's intentions, whatever they are and whether we are capable of stating them, 'Version R' fails. It does not rely on a clash between two very different languages. Russian and Polish have been interacting and borrowing lexis from each other since time immemorial. Therefore, the effects of their confrontation are not blatant. Stiller uses far fewer Russian loanwords than Burgess. Many of them, such as *noga*, *litso*, *chellovek*, *slovo*
,
yahzick
,
starry
are simply 'too Polish' to be approached as foreign (cf. Polish
noga
,
lico
,
człowiek
,
słowo
,
język
,
stary
). Therefore, Stiller was forced to introduce other Russian lexis that was not employed by Burgess in the original.

Moreover, Burgess enjoyed the fact that Alex mixes languages of two opposing countries, which were then in the period of Cold War. The use of strange, enigmatic and apparently hostile Russian made the teenage dialect all the more perverted and condemnable: "And there was fine irony in the notion of teenage race untouched by politics, using totalitarian brutality as an end in itself, equipped with a dialect which drew on the two chief political languages of the age"

Note 14

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This level of irony is lost in the Polish translation. Other meanings proliferate, though. Since Poland belonged to the old Soviet block, the infiltration of Polish language by Russian acquired new meanings, unintended by Burgess. Cultural references and the political situation of the audience altered the book's reception completely.

The idiolect devised by Burgess is the more striking and innovative if we consider the fact that such a language does not exist; Burgess did not copy or mime any other register or slang. It was not Burgess's intention to show factual processes occurring in the language. On the contrary, he made English undergo an infiltration, which it has never experienced. Stiller's second attempt – 'Version A' – is crooked as it relies on the principle that Alex's dialect is a possible dialect of the future and he depends on the Americanised slang that is indeed used by Polish teenagers, only exaggerating it.

Did Burgess presume that English would resemble Russian one day? I would not venture such an assumption. On the contrary, the combination of English and Russian seems so implausible as to be doubly shocking and striking. For Stiller, Alex's dialect is a prophecy. First he believed that Polish would undergo Russification, then that it would be (and indeed is) Americanised. Therefore, Stiller transports the novel into our culture and environment, treating both the language and the plot of *A Clockwork Orange* (increasing criminality and growing brutality and bravado of adolescent hooligans) as genuine prophecies about contemporary Poland.

Burgess looms as a demanding author for both his translators and readers. Because of his linguistic innovativeness he is perceived as a difficult writer, which entails that he is not widely read. The innovative language both of the original and four (sic!) translations cause that Burgess remains undiscovered, appreciated by a few. Fortunately, his book was adapted for the cinema by Stanley Kubrick. The film, being a less demanding medium, popularised *A Clockwork Orange* and thus made Anthony Burgess a cult writer in some circles - among those who were encouraged to read the book after they had seen the film.

Burgess started writing *The Wanting Seed* in 1961 and published it in 1962. As he had spent several years in the over-populated East, he got interested in the theme and started to develop a fantasy about the possible effects of demographic disasters. The book was translated into Polish in 2003 by Robert Stiller (Burgess, Anthony, *Rozpustne Nasienie*, Krakow: Vis-à-vis etiuda, 2003).

Burgess was not very happy about his novel and he was aware that it "had little chance of becoming a bestseller"

Note 15
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He agreed with critics accusations of half-bakedness: "The novel needed a longer gestation, but I needed money (…) Reworking does no good, though I have spent the last twenty-five years thinking that it might, and that
The Wanting Seed
could,
in my leisurely old age, be expanded to a length worthy of the subject."

Note 16
The book depicts a world divided into three superpowers: ENSPUN, RUSPUN and CHINSPUN, which implement various methods of demographic control. The plot is set in ENSPUN, which is quite liberal. The protagonist, Tristram Foxe, is a history teacher, who lectures his students on three phases, which constitute a never-ending historical cycle: Gusphase, Pelphase and Interphase. The world is strictly secular and priests function underground. Homosexual relationships are promoted and begetting offspring is shameful. Cannibalism is the only solution to the problem of overpopulation.

Was this vision of the world valid in 1962? The Polish translation appeared two years ago and the domination of two superpowers, which might have inspired Burgess to create the three superpowers of the future – the USA and Soviet Union – had ended. The translation comes too late to be treated as a plausible vision of the future and, obviously enough, it can only be read as sheer fantasy. Then, why was it chosen for translation now and by Robert Stiller, who sees Burgess as a prophet? I believe that it was Stiller's personal choice to work on *The Wanting Seed* in order to build a coherent image of "alternative" or "futuristic" Burgess.

As *The Wanting Seed* is not easily accessible (it is hard to encounter a copy of it in the original in any bookshop, because it has not been reissued either in England or in the US for quite a while), it has the flavour of a cult book available to a few "initiated". It reinforces the image of Burgess as an underground writer, as an alternative to the easily accessible mainstream literature, an author, who only an inquisitive reader can discover for himself and feel the pleasure of belonging to a closed circle of comparatively few Burgess devotees.

Another argument in favour of my supposition that Stiller wanted to create Burgess's image as a "fantastic" writer are the covers of both novels. The cover of *A Clockwork Orange* represents Alex during Ludovico treatment. A special cap is put on his head, his eyes are wide open and

his mouth is screaming. The same face can be recognized multiplied on the cover of *The Wanting Seed*. The 'helmet' is eliminated and merely the terrified eyes and mouths open in horror remain. (The cover of *A Clockwork Orange* was designed by Marek Piwko, the cover of *The Wanting Seed* was designed by Robert Stiller himself, based on Marek Piwko's drawing). This builds an unavoidable link between the two books. Not merely the persons of the author and translator connect them; the visual association created by the front covers builds a connection on another, subconscious level. The editions seem to convey a convoluted message that the presented world in *The Wanting Seed* can fascinate the reader as much as the one depicted in the widely successful *A Clockwork Orange*. The implication is that both books are complementary and representative of the same underlying ideas. Whether it is true or not remains to be pondered over.

Already at the beginning of his career, in 1962, Burgess was recognized as "having periods"   **Note 17**: "The first period was exotic, the second repatriate, the third fantastic, meaning *A Clockwork Orange* and the new book (*The Wanting Seed* – J.W.)"   **Note 18**

Merely the 'fantastic period' is commonly known in Poland. The limited selection of his works which were published in Polish gives a misleading impression about his literary output. Indeed, the majority of his translators' efforts concentrated on *one* novel, neglecting other works by Burgess. Since only a fraction of his oeuvre has been translated into Polish, he is unjustly perceived as the author of one book – *A Clockwork Orange*. Sadly enough, Burgess's rich oeuvre is either ignored by Polish translators or translated badly:

One Hand Clapping was subject to ideological manipulation, *A Clockwork Orange* underwent sometimes questionable linguistic experiments.

Moreover, Burgess is seen as an alternative author: *A Clockwork Orange* has the flavour of a forbidden fruit as Communist censorship did not allow it to be published and as it daringly presents the usually hidden world of ultra-violence;
The Wanting Seed
is not easily accessible and presents a very controversial view of the future;
One Hand Clapping
is a relic of old propagandist literature and attracts those who are interested in discovering the manipulation tools of the past. All of these factors contribute to the image of Burgess as the author of experimental fiction, who created outside the mainstream.



Notes:

1. Burgess, Anthony, *You've Had Your Time*, London: Vintage, 1990, p. 29.   Return to article

2. Burgess, Anthony, *One Hand Clapping*, London: Peter Davies, 1974, p. 83. Return to article

3. Ibid., p. 108. Return to article

4. Ibid., p. 165.   Return to article

5. Ibid., p. 180.   Return to article

6. Burgess, Anthony, *You've Had Your Time*, London: Vintage, 1990, p. 29. Return to article

7. Stiller, Robert, *Burgess a sprawa polska*, in: Burgess, Anthony, *Mechaniczna pomarańcza*, Kraków: Etiuda, 1999, p. 222.
Return to article

8. Burgess, Anthony, *Mechaniczne Pomarańcza*, Kraków: Etiuda, 1999, p. 217. Return to article

9. Ibid., p. 217. Return to article

10. Burgess, Anthony, *A Clockwork Orange*, London: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 118. Return to article

11. Burgess, Anthony, *Nakręcana Pomarańcza*, Kraków: Etiuda, 1999, p. 154. Return to article

12. Burgess, Anthony, *You've Had Your Time*, London: Vintage, 1990, pp. 37-38. Return to article

13. Ibid., p. 38. Return to article

14. Ibid., p. 38. Return to article

15. Ibid., p. 35. Return to article

16. Ibid., p. 63-64. Return to article

17. Ibid., p. 62. Return to article

18. Ibid., p. 62. Return to article