



Ferens praises Maria Skibniewska's beautiful translation of *The Ambassadors* and claims that, while reading it, one may *forget that the original text was written in a foreign language* (Ferens 1960:975), he points out the mistaken arrangement of Chapters XXVIII and XXIX in the Polish translation, which was thoughtlessly copied from the American edition. The reviewer regrets that Skibniewska did not notice the mistake (which was first discovered by the American scholar R.E. Young), and that she did not consult the correct English edition of the novel (Ferens 1960:975–976).

Far from attempting to belittle Skibniewska's unquestionable effort and achievement, this paper seeks to explore subconscious projection of Skibniewska's idea of gender roles on James's protagonist. While Frank Königs mentions in his theoretical study the translator's experience (*die Erfahrung des Übersetzers*) as an important factor of the translation process (Königs 1979:9), I would like to address more specifically the experience of being a Polish woman at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, which comes into relief in the way Skibniewska fashioned her Strether. Hailed for its (more or less) consistent technique of filtering all images and events through the central consciousness of Lambert Strether (Davis 1965:250–252, Blackmur 1983:42), the novel forces the translator to be constantly on the alert because the complexity of Strether's mind is reflected not only in his explicit statements but also on the level of narration. *The Ambassadors* is a third-person narrative, which gives, nevertheless, an insight into the protagonist's mental and emotional progress, but in a far more subtle way than *The American* and *Washington Square*, in which the narrators have access to the minds of some characters, or *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the governess speaks her mind in the first person. Since the narrator and Strether often coalesce, as if the latter aimed at an objective self-analysis, the translator, who takes on the narrator's task, also becomes one with the central consciousness, even though the distancing use of the pronoun *he* obliterates this truth. It is hence easier to catch the translator of *The Ambassadors* unawares than the translators of *The American*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Washington Square*. This paper aims to show that Skibniewska on the one hand bows to the patriarchal ideology and emphasizes Strether's masculinity, while on the other hand she endows him occasionally (perhaps subconsciously) with feminine traits.

Skibniewska's Strether is more masculine than James's hero in the sense of being active rather than meditative, outgoing rather than self-centered. A handful of examples can help to prove this point. James's novel begins with a significant nominal phrase which emphasizes Strether's inquisitive disposition, while at the same time signalling his leisurely attitude. The translator, who from the beginning fashions Strether as a manly figure, emphasizes Strether's activity by replacing the noun *question* with the verb *asked* (*przede wszystkim spytał*), and by removing the subordinate clause, which in the source text impends the flow of

the main sentence: *Strether's first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend [...] (James 1986:55)*. In the target text, the sentence reads: *W hotelu Strether przede wszystkim spytał o swego przyjaciela [...] (James 1963:7)*. In the scene of Strether's escapade with Maria to a theater, James once again implies the protagonist's passivity and meditative disposition (especially in the underlined clauses): *It came over him that never before – no, literally never – had a lady dined with him at a public place before going to the play (James 1986:91)*. In the original sentence a lady, presumably the wealthy widow Mrs. Newsome, and not Strether, is the subject of the subordinate clause. In fact, Strether is the subject of neither the main nor the subordinate clause. By contrast, Skibniewska accepts the traditional division of gender roles and reinstates Strether in his male domination; he becomes the subject of both main and subordinate clauses: *Pomyślał również, że nigdy dotychczas – dosłownie: nigdy! – nie jadł kolacji przed pójściem do teatru w publicznym lokalu i w towarzystwie kobiety (James 1963:50)*.

Skibniewska overlooks Strether's feminine ability to empathize, as well as his hesitant manner of speaking and acting. She endows him with a set of features that James's Strether does not have. When Maria Gostrey begins to guide and protect him, the friendly female receptionist fades out. The ambiguous expression *to see oneself superseded (It was as if this personage had seen herself instantly superseded (James 1986:58))* is replaced in the target text with the plain, straightforward *zostać zdetronizowanym*. In addition, Strether becomes again the subject of the sentence in Skibniewska's translation: *Miał wrażenie, jakby ta godna osoba została zdetronizowana (James 1963:11)*. While James's Strether looks at the receptionist and wonders how she perceives herself, the hero of Skibniewska's translation merely offers his own impression of the woman. In another case, the judgment of Skibniewska's Strether is less tentative than that of James's hero; the latter *might have marked [Maria's readiness] as the model [of behavior] (James 1986:59)*, whereas the former *uznał ją za wzór (James 1963:11)*. Quite often Strether's questions are turned into statements in the target text; whereas James's Strether formulates his opinion about Waymarsh as an interrogation: *Ain't you about up to your usual average? (James 1986:72)*. Skibniewska's Strether makes a statement with male decisiveness: *Nie wyglądasz ani gorzej, ani lepiej niż zwykle (James 1963:28)*. Similarly, when James's Strether ponders on the cosiness of his dinner with Maria, he poses the rhetorical question: *had anything to his mere sense ever been so soft? (James 1986:89)*. By contrast, Skibniewska's more manly Strether is specific in naming his impression and self-confident in formulating it as a statement: *równie przyjemnych perfum nie spotkał w życiu (James 1963:48)*. Unlike James's Strether, who guesses who Maria has in mind, the intonation rising, as in a question: *Waymarsh? (James 1986:206)*, the hero of Skibniewska's translation supposes more assertively: *Waymarsh (James 1963:182)*. Fashioning Strether as a manly, self-confident

figure, Skibniewska not only gives the interrogative mode of his musings and speculations the form of affirmative sentences (James 1986:455, S473), but also replaces Strether's use of the subjunctive mode (*it wouldn't give me*, James 1986:508) with the future tense *nie będę mógł* (James 1963:537).

Empathizing with Mrs Newsome, James's Strether resorts in a conversation with Maria concerning Chad's misdemeanor to the language of excess (*exaggeration, intensity, verbosity, loquacity, illogic*, Nettels 1997:84), which is characteristic of comic female characters in James's fiction: *He has darkened her admirable life. He spoke with austerity. He has worried her half to death* (James 1986:93). Skibniewska tones down the effect of Strether's histrionic loquacity by skipping the reference to austerity, and by replacing the pronoun *he* [Chad] with the noun *matka* [Mrs Newsome], which amounts to presenting her as an overprotective mother: *Chad rzuca cień na jej wspaniałe życie. Matka się zamartwia o niego* (James 1963:53). James's Strether feels insecure and dependent on other characters' mercy. When speculating about Chad's and Bilham's course of action, he uses the conditional sentence in answer to Miss Barrace's question, and suspects that Chad will come *when Bilham has had time to write him, and hear from him, about me* (James 1986:143). The hero of Skibniewska's translation, however, is more definite and self-confident. He knows that Bilham will write the letter: *Bilham napisze do niego donosząc o moim przyjeździe, zobaczymy, co mu na to Chad odpowie* (James 1963:110). The self-conscious *me* at the end of the original sentence is gone. In other cases, Skibniewska's Strether is likewise less inclined to introspection than James's hero; while the latter is *even conscious of a foolish laugh* (James 1986:230), Skibniewska's Strether merely laughs in a silly way (*zaśmiał się gupkowato*, James 1963:211).

Wherever James's narrator speaks condescendingly of Strether as *our friend*, Skibniewska prefers the high-sounding expression *nasz bohater* [our hero] (James 1986:82, 163, 173, 177, 181, 185, 187, 199, 202, 205, 229, 235, 251, 262, 287, 295, 340, 351, 375, 377, 379, 387, 396, 425, 455, 462, 466, 498; James 1963:40, 136, 143, 148, 152, 157, 159, 174, 177, 181, 210, 215, 235, 248, 278, 288, 338, 351, 380, 383, 384, 395, 406, 456, 475, 482, 486, 526, respectively). In some cases she replaces *our friend* with the name Strether (James 1986:171, 256, 289; James 1963:140, 240, 280, respectively). When the compassion and condescension of James's narrator reaches its height in the phrase *our poor friend* (James 1986:209), Skibniewska seizes the opportunity to elevate Strether to the status of heroic martyrdom, and calls him: *nasz nieszczęśny bohater* (James 1963:185). When James's narrator begins to refer to Strether by using the pronouns *he* or *him*, Skibniewska still privileges the high-flown expression *nasz bohater* (James 1986:286, 458, 464, 475, 488, 499, 501; James 1963:277, 477, 483, 498, 513, 526, 529, respectively). Complementing the narrator's patronizing attitude, James's Maria treats Strether with motherly protectiveness and implies

his senile childishness in a sentence which is paradoxically meant as a reassurance: *you [...] can toddle alone* (James 1986:296). Skibniewska overlooks the descriptive verb *toddle* (*to walk with short tottering steps in the manner of a young child*, Woolf 1973:1226), and prefers the image of a marching soldier: *Może pan maszerować o własnych siłach* (James 1963:290). Maria repeats this claim later: *It is clear you can toddle alone!* (James 1986:299). This time, however, Skibniewska chooses a different collocation: *Jasne, że pan potrafi sobie sam poradzić* (James 1963:293). When Strether internalizes Maria's belief and becomes aware that he can *toddle alone* (James 1986:303), Skibniewska uses again the expression that evokes the image of a marching soldier, *maszerować naprzód o własnych siłach* (James 1963:298).

Not even on the metaphorical level does Skibniewska's Strether ever lose control. While in the source text *Strether seem[s] to bump against him [Waymarsh] as a sinking swimmer might brush a submarine object* (James 1986:181), in the target text Strether is compared to *nurek ocierający się o jakieś podwodne rafy* (James 1963:153). Thus, metaphorically described mutual relations of Strether and Waymarsh are noticeably altered. First of all, in the target text, Strether remains in control because the modifier *sinking* is removed. Second, instead of the *submarine object*, which is threatening in its vagueness, Skibniewska refers to reefs, which do not necessarily evoke unpleasant connotations. Far from being afraid, Skibniewska's Strether feels anger and resentment. When the noun *violence* appears three times in quick succession as a dissonance in the idyllic picture of the French countryside, Skibniewska does not hesitate to ascribe it to Strether, even though in the source text Strether seems to recognize it as the motive of Chad's action (the relevant phrases are underlined):

*Chad dropped afresh to his paddles and the boat headed round, amazement and pleasantry filling the air meanwhile, and relief, as Strether continued to fancy, superseding mere violence. Our friend went down to the water under this odd impression as of violence averted – the violence of their having 'cut' him, out there in the eye of nature, on the assumption that he wouldn't know it.* (James 1986:462)

*Chad z powrotem chwycił za wiosła i łódź zbliżyła się do brzegu w atmosferze niespodzianki, uciechy, a także – jak w dalszym ciągu poskramiając gniew wyczuwał Strether – ulgi. Nasz bohater zszedł nad rzekę pod dziwnym wrażeniem, jakby udało się zazęgnąć gwałtowny wybuch – oburzający fakt, że tamci chcieli uniknąć spotkania z nim, wyprzeć się go tu, wobec całej przyrody, w nadziei, że on nigdy się o tym nie dowie.* (James 1963:482)

Even though Skibniewska fashions Strether as an active, assertive, male figure, her own femininity occasionally comes to the surface. While James's Strether speaks ironically and in negative terms (*little fear, shouldn't*) of the many opportunities he is likely to have of seeing Waymarsh (*[...] there was little fear that in the sequel they shouldn't see enough of each other [...]* (James 1986:55)), Skibniewska's hero is affectionate and genuinely hopeful, and thus

resembles Maria Gostrey's sociability: *Strether był spokojny, że w dalszym rozwoju zdarzeń nacieszą się wzajemnie swoim towarzystwem do syta* (James 1963:7). When Maria Gostrey mentions on meeting Strether that she knows Waymarsh, James's Strether calls him ironically *my very-well known friend* (James 1986:57). By contrast, Skibniewska sees affection and not sarcasm in Strether's words, and she translates the phrase as follows: *To mój stary przyjaciel* (James 1963:9). Skibniewska's decision to replace Strether's manner of addressing Waymarsh as *my dear man* (James 1986:74) by *mój kochany* (James 1963:30) may suggest in its effeminacy a homosexual relationship. The expression *my dear man* and especially the image of Strether brushing a *submarine object* (i.e. Waymarsh) justify the suspicion of Strether's subconscious suppressed homosexuality. In the source text, Strether's fear of homosexuality is quite noticeable, especially when he realizes the danger of a too close relationship with Chad, and the ensuing *lubrication of their intercourse by levity* (James 1986:174). Skibniewska's wording is less sexually charged: *zacieśnienie między nimi stosunków na zasadzie wspólnej płochości* (James 1963:144). Soon enough James's narrator again indulges in a sexual innuendo while enlarging upon Chad's *appetite for Strether, insatiable and, when all was said, flattering* (James 1986:176), but Skibniewska once again removes the indecorous undertone. Thus Chad's *appetite for Strether* is explained away as eagerness in seeking Strether's company: *skwapliwość w poszukiwaniu towarzystwa Strethera – nienasycona wręcz i bądź co bądź pochlebna dla naszego bohatera* (James 1963:147).

One may argue that Strether's fear of homosexuality leads to his desperate flight from an active life to an existence of critical and scholarly pursuits. Skibniewska seems to be unaware of both Strether's suppressed homosexuality and his scholarly distance to people and events. In the target text, Strether's more affectionate and respectful toward little Bilham and Maria than James's hero: *He [Strether] wanted to be able to like his specimen with a clear good conscience, and this [Maria's remark] fully permitted it* (James 1986:146). The verb *want* is replaced in the target text by the more intense expression of desire, and the scientifically emotionless noun *specimen* by a reference to *this boy*. Reifying both Bilham and Maria, James's Strether calls the former *his specimen*, and reduces the latter to the demonstrative pronoun *this*. In both cases, Skibniewska rectifies these lapses in courtesy. While James's introverted Strether thinks of his ability to like Bilham, the hero of Skibniewska's translation considers some abstract external right to like him: *Nasz bohater bardzo pragnął zyskać prawo lubienia tego chłopca z czystym sumieniem, a odkrycie panny Gostrey w pełni go do tego upoważniało* (James 1963:113). Strether's tendency to treat people as abstract concepts comes to the surface again when on seeing Chad for the first time, Strether regards him as a *phenomenon* (James 1986:154). Skibniewska again "improves", and endows the object of Strether's studies with human

qualities by calling him *człowiek* [man] (James 1963:122). While James's narrator rightly calls Strether a *critic*, Skibniewska prefers to use his name, Strether, instead (James 1986:166, James 1963:135). Furthermore, the translator repeatedly tones down the possessiveness characteristic of Strether's vicarious living by removing the pronoun *his* in the phrase *his specimen* quoted above, or in the claim that Chad and Madame de Vionnet [*a*]re mine (James 1986:305–306, James 1963:300).

It is typical of James's Strether to use the pronouns *she* or *her* while referring to Maria Gostrey. Skibniewska's aim in replacing these pronouns with the character's proper name, Maria, is not only to disambiguate the pronoun, but also to render Strether more courteous (James 1986:150, 154, 188, 303, 367, 368, 373, 438, 448, 487, 487, 488, 490, 491, 507, 509, 510, 511, 512; James 1963:118, 123, 160, 298, 371, 371, 378, 439, 452, 512, 513, 513, 515, 517, 536, 539, 540, 542, 542, respectively). Apparently, while overlooking homoerotic innuendo, Skibniewska suggests, at least in the early chapters, Strether's romantic involvement with Miss Gostrey. For this purpose, she replaces the stiff *Miss Gostrey* with the more intimate *Maria* long before James's Strether chooses to do so (James 1986:177, James 1963:148). Later on, however, she changes her strategy, and intimates distance by replacing Maria with Maria Gostrey (James 1986:303, 351, 398, 441, 468, 473; James 1963:298, 351, 409, 443, 488, 496, respectively). In Skibniewska's translation, Strether – though not much of a lover after all – is at least a paragon of good manners. Unlike James's Strether, who uses swear words *confound it* or *hang it* while talking to Maria, Skibniewska's hero utters merely the polite and effeminate *ach, doprawdy*, or *ależ tak* (James 1986:178, 456; James 1963:149, 476, respectively). When, however, at the very end of the story Strether exclaims to Chad: *Oh damn the money in it!* (James 1986:505) Skibniewska faithfully renders his statement: *Do diabła z możliwościami pieniężnymi!* (James 1963:534).

Skibniewska's project of civilizing James's characters applies not only to Strether, but also to Chad and Miss Barrace. In the target text, the cynical Miss Barrace is more feminine than James's character. Thus, the translator replaces the violent image Miss Barrace uses in conversation with Strether (*I don't want to turn the knife in your vitals*, James 1986:402) by the more polite: *Nie chciałabym rozdrapywać pańskich ran* (James 1963:412), which is in keeping with Skibniewska's project of fashioning Strether as a hero and a martyr. Skibniewska does not allow either Chad or Strether to swear as much as they do in the source text. Out of Chad's three swearing expressions which appear in quick succession in the source text (*hang it, confound her, damnable*, James 1986:228), she retains and modifies only the middle one (*do licha*, James 1963:209). Chad's exclamation, *Jim is a damned dose!* (James 1986:435) turns into a polite statement in the Polish version: *Jim to pigułka nie do przelknięcia* (James 1963:468). It is only the uncouth American Jim who in Skibniewska's translation

can swear without any limit; his *hanged* (James 1986:331) is indeed translated as *niech to diabli* (James 1963:327).

*The Ambassadors* in Skibniewska's translation illustrates quite well Katharina Reiss's claim that no matter how eagerly the translator seeks to attain objectivity, s/he cannot help being subjective (Reiss 2000:52). A close comparative analysis of the source text and the target text provides sufficient evidence to prove that Skibniewska's Strether differs in his speech manner and behavior from James's hero. While all generalized statements concerning the ideological and socio-cultural underpinnings of Skibniewska's text must remain speculative, it seems safe to argue that Skibniewska reconstructs Strether as a masculine figure. Whether this strategy is guided by her own beliefs about gender roles in general or by her knowledge of gender relations in James's times is, however, a mystery. Occasionally, Skibniewska endows Strether with feminine politeness, but the translation critic who tries to explain this maneuver is again at a loss. While it seems doubtful that Skibniewska comes to identify with James's hero, the critic cannot be sure if Skibniewska's effort to civilize not only Strether but also other European or Europeanized characters reflects the implied juxtaposition of American masculinity and European femininity. If the latter explanation is to be believed, Skibniewska's decision to polish the rough edges of Strether's and Chad's personalities is aimed at highlighting their metamorphosis into polite Europeans. Although these mysteries are not likely to be resolved (the translators of those days hardly ever expatiated on their efforts and dilemmas), at least Skibniewska's text is there to be cherished and pondered on.

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