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**Recording an Oral Message.  
Jerzy Ficowski and Papusza's Poetic Project  
in the Postcolonial Perspective**

*Gypsiness, the romance of the forest wanderers' lifestyle, has been made familiar to us from beautiful, but often misleading, works of poetry from around the world. Now for the first time it speaks for itself and about itself with its own voice.* Jerzy Ficowski (Papusza, 1956: 23)

I

Jerzy Ficowski arrived in a Polish Roma (Gypsy) camp of 16 families in the area of Stargard Szczeciński in August 1949. One of these families was that of Dionizy Dyśko Wajs and his wife, Bronisława Wajs, known as “Papusza” within the Roma community. Upon his arrival, Ficowski did not expect that his Romani adventure would lead to discovering Papusza, a poet, whose story and works were to move the hearts and minds of literature lovers. He also did not expect that his discovery would bear tragic consequences for the poet and would reveal a prominent disparity between the two cultures. This disparity stemmed from the Roma requirement of secrecy and mystery, which, when disregarded, was sanctioned by exclusion from the community. Finally, Ficowski did not presume that his translation work would be carefully examined by cultural studies seeking hidden traces of oral messages in the texts he recorded. The poetic project which involved the works of Bronisława Wajs-Papusza, ac-

ording to Jerzy Ficowski, revealed culturally untranslatable elements. Therefore, this analysis is inspired by postcolonial translation strategies. The purpose of these reflections is—apart from indicating major translation aporia in Papusza’s poetry—to elucidate the cultural conditioning of the meeting of the two poets which influenced the shape of the texts and continues to stir up controversy and curiosity.

Jerzy Ficowski, a literary scholar, writer and artist, claimed that he became interested in the fate of Gypsies “out of necessity”—while looking for a refuge from the Security Office which was chasing him in the late 1940s. In 1949, an old friend Edward Czarnecki (also known as “Poruczniko” during his time as a Polish Army officer) wrote to him with an anthropological challenge to join the camp and Ficowski accepted his proposal. Poruczniko allowed the Wajs family to set up a camp on his property, and later on, during the occupation wandered with them around Wołyń. After the war, he found them in Western Pomerania<sup>1</sup> and introduced Ficowski to them as his nephew, a poet from Warsaw, collecting records about the life of Roma people during. “The moment of arrival,” commotion and confusion in the camp connected with the arrival of the “gentleman from Warsaw” was described by Edward Dębicki, a nephew of Papusza:

The rumour that a Great Master [sic!—EK] from Warsaw, a poet and a writer, arrived, caused immense agitation in the camp. Dionizy Wajs (in Romani called Dysko)—being the oldest of the kin—held a council meeting with his compatriots warning them against “saying any foolish things!” (qtd. in Sommer 549)

There is no definite record as to who introduced the 39- or 41-year wife of Dionizy Wajs, Papusza to Jerzy Ficowski. According to Dębicki it was Dionizy’s brother, Toniu Wajs:

“Great Master”—Toniu addressed the Guest—“we also have a poet in our camp. She is the wife of my brother Dysiek. Mister! She composes songs so beautifully from the top of her head that the world seems too small for them!” (qtd. in Sommer 551)

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<sup>1</sup> I am basing on the record of Edward Dębicki, an artistic manager of “Terno” group with whom Ficowski was friends (Ficowski 550-552).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Luise Pratt emphasizes that in a travel novel this is a crucial foothold of the post-colonial deconstruction of a text (Pratt 118).

Magdalena Machowska, the author of the first monograph devoted to Papusza, quotes a fragment of the report by Elżbieta Dziwisz, in which a Roma boy tells Jerzy Ficowski about the poet:

Ficowski was sitting in front of his tent and talking to a teenage boy: “My aunt Papusza writes songs”—the boy said. “It is sirens that compose songs and people hear them and sing”—Papusza said. (qtd. in Machowska 51)

Throughout the acquaintance between Ficowski and Papusza, the author of Romani songs had some reservations about calling them “poetry” and herself being dubbed a “poet.” Although she finally relented and agreed to write them down and send them to the address of the “gentleman from Warsaw,” she emphasized many times that she sang for herself (Ficowski 228) and that her texts were unsuitable for the record. In one of the letters to Ficowski, recalled by the writer in *Demony cudzego strachu*, she convinced:

I sing a song like a tale to a child, and you make me an errant poet like I was a Don Quixote; although Don Quixote was insane he struggled within and now they write books about him. And You admit that I am proud, I don't know why. Indeed I appreciate poetry, even very much appreciate it, but not my own, someone else's. I appreciate my own poetry like a soap bubble. . . . And You will write to Mister Tuwim truth that I am a fairy not a poet. **And I will write that You told me how to write poems.** Please, leave these silly poems of mine, because it is ridiculous [highlighted by EK]. (qtd. in Ficowski 247)

Although neglected by the first commentators of Papusza's poetry, namely: Julian Tuwim, Wisława Szymborska and Julian Przyboś, these circumstances rivet the attention of today's readers. “The first aware Gypsy poet” (Ficowski 209)—as her “discoverer” calls her—was actually interested in education and learning to read and write, despite her parents' protests. She asked “children returning from school,”<sup>3</sup> and a Jewish woman living in the neighbourhood to help her. Although she honed her literacy skills reading newspapers and books borrowed from the library, she never mastered writing. She vividly remembered meeting a non-Roma who praised a little Gypsy for being able to read and tell fortunes. Magdalena Machowska indicated this story as an important

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<sup>3</sup> I am basing of fragments of Papusza's dairy deposited in Ethnographic Museum in Tarnow, and published firstly in the book by Magdalena Machowska (Machowska 34).

element of the autobiographic legend, in which Papusza strengthened herself in the conviction that she followed the right path. However, Papusza was not able to record her poetry herself in the form in which it later appeared in print. Her translator, editor and co-author was the “gentleman from Warsaw” (Machowska 34).

Jerzy Ficowski translated and published several dozen of Papusza’s poems, most of which were written after 1950. This year was a breakthrough for the Wajs camp and for other Romani families in Poland. The state’s action of settling the Roma people and making them a productive part of society was about to be launched. This program would eventually lead to the removal of the last Roma camp in the 1980s. Following the orders of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration of the Republic of Poland, the Wajs family started looking for a place to settle down. In December of the same year, the monthly *Problemy* published an interview of Julian Tuwim by Jerzy Ficowski. Tuwim had exchanged a few letters with Papusza and sympathized with her. He encouraged her to write poems and supported her in difficult moments. In turn, Papusza dedicated the poetic autobiography entitled: “Cygańska pieśń z głowy Papuszy ułożona” to Tuwim and suffered a nervous breakdown when she found out about his death. Because Tuwim was interested in Romani themes, he helped Ficowski to collect materials for his monograph and decided to address the issue of Gypsy camps in the paper edited by Ficowski. The interview’s publishing marked the beginning of the conflict between Papusza and the Romani community which accused her of breaking the Romani code of conduct and led to her wandering together with her old husband and step-son in search of care and support. The situation was made worse by the publication of Jerzy Ficowski’s monograph entitled *Cyganie polscy* in 1953, which contained a detailed description of Romani customs and a Romani-Polish dictionary. Machowska wrote that Papusza was supposed to be brought to the Romani court for breaking the code but her “constantly deteriorating health condition protected her” (Machowska 200).

Those “mysteries” about which Ficowski supposedly questioned Papusza and other Roma people about refer mostly to the code of honor, or *romanipen*, which defines the cultural sphere of defilements. Many books have been written on the subject since the research conducted by Ficowski. These subsequent books have usually been accepted with reluctance by the orthodox part of the

Roma community. The biggest offences against *romanipen* are actions such as killing or betrayal of another Rom, a marriage with a non-Rom and publicising Romani language (Mróz and Mirga; Kowarska; Bartosz). Papusza was accused of the last of those offences, and of the betrayal of rules and rituals related to them. The loyalty conflict of Papusza may have been one of the reasons for her later mental breakdown.<sup>4</sup>

After many years, Ficowski emphasized that pressing the charges of betrayal against Papusza was unjust. He quoted as evidence the answer, which the poet gave to his question about those “mysterious issues,” recorded by him. She was to say as follows:

This is wonderful that You are interested in Romani Codes. And me, a genuine Gypsy, flesh and blood, I do not get into it and I am not interested in it. Mister, [sic!] on one hand it is wrong that I am so indifferent to it. To tell the truth, this whole Szero Rom and Jonkaro, are all Romani Academy, the University. It makes me laugh, but I have to admit that the life of Roma people would be much worse without it. (qtd. in Ficowski 230)

The translator sketched a portrait of a woman who did not match her cultural surroundings and had thus been unhappy for many years and was thereby destined for the infamy awaiting her: “Her distinction and exceptionality were so significant that she had to arouse almost instinctive anxiety among her compatriots, and their natural suspiciousness led to unstoppable accusative fantasizing” (Ficowski 209). Then, it was the violation of rules by the ethnologist (his right and duty towards the majority group is to lead possibly exact observation and publicizing its effects), but the individual character of the poet and inherent cultural model of the Romani community that led to her exclusion. Ficowski emphasized the confession made by the poet at one time: “If I had not learned to write and read, I silly, would be happy now” (Ficowski 213). It was her will to learn writing and her oversensitivity, typical for a poet, that led her to disaster. Papusza in his narration is not so much a poet but *signum temporis*: her example shows that Romani community was not ready for openness and

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<sup>4</sup> Magdalena Machowska writes: “Paradoxically, it seems that this culture exceeded European one as regards isolation of the insane, which considered insanity as part of human personality and a natural phenomenon . . .” (184).

changes yet. He looks for confirmation of his theory about “inherent Gypsy features” in the words of Papusza:

She said—“I never deny my own kin neither my being wild because I will never shake it off, because it must be like that till I die, for if I lost my wildness I think I would not be a Gypsy anymore, and I would not tell the fortune, but for our wildness.” So—wildness, as an inborn and indispensable feature. (Ficowski 222)

After many years, Ficowski apologized to Papusza and accepted the responsibility for her tragedy. In her letter from 1979, Papusza forgave him the consequences which she had to bear after he published the above mentioned interview and *Cyganów polskich*:

. . . myśmy pana Bardzo lubieli i mężem i dzis widze pana i wszystkich jasnych panuw w Warszawie i ja niegdy pana niezapomnię proszę wieżec mi choc pan duzo czegoś [sentence crossed out] dla mnie z działań dobrego i niedobrego Bożeś pan wszystko zniszał zło i dobro pot moj Adres wszystkie teksty pan pozbiarał otroznnych warstw i wlepił pan wmoją ksążeczkę. ilie ja ucierpiałam ot niemo-drech cyganów. . . . Bardziej pan niech się pan niepszejmoje to wszystko pszeszło proszę pana . . . <sup>5</sup> (qtd. in Machowska 216-217)

## II

Considering the situation of Ficowski as an ethnologist in comparison with other researchers of “primeval communities,” we notice that his narration is not rich in drama and full of the frustrating twists and turns of culture shock which can be seen in the work of Bronisław Malinowski when he described his adventures in the Trobriand Islands (cf. Tokarska-Bakir). The writer is composed—sometimes amused sometimes surprised—but he does not allow himself violent emotions. However, these adventures with “barbarians” seem

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<sup>5</sup> Papusza uses non-standard Polish. The following translation seeks to be accurate, but it does not fully express her language: “We liked you very much and husband and I see you and all light men in Warsaw and I will never forget you believe me although you have done many good and evil things for me. Because you have mixed the good and the evil under my address you have collected all my texts from many levels and put in my little book. I’ve suffered so much from silly gypsies . . . do not mind it any more it is all gone, sir . . .”

to be quite similar. Maria Tymoczko, a researcher of postcolonial translations, advises caution about the metaphors used by translators in the context of literary texts which were created among “peoples that experienced colonialism” (Tymoczko 20). Ficowski succumbs to colonial metaphor, casting himself as an explorer-observer and pioneer in the Romani *terra incognita*. In this role, he still wants very much to present the Roma in a possibly intact manner, undisturbed by subjectivism. I assume this intention includes the whole poetic project by Papusza, involving not only the poetry by Bronisława Wajs, but also the legend of the “first Romani poet” which surrounds her and the observations that Ficowski makes when meeting the Wajs. The “stranger” in the camp notices, for instance, that learning about the Romani culture was for him like “exploring unknown tribes from South American jungle” (Ficowski 8). He uses a metaphor of a “noble barbarian” when writing about the “childlike manner” of Papusza (Papusza, 1956: 21), he mentions her “emotional inclinations.” The picture of a poet who crafts her texts, makes corrections and deletes some parts of the text is on the opposite end. Papusza is not capable of crafting her poetry in this way because she is the first (with the help of the translator but perhaps against her will) to overcome the oral paradigm of the Romani songs.

Ficowski is familiar with the temptation described in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to take power over the community whose rules and language he learned. Despite this awareness, Ficowski does not write about it (like Marlowe) in the perspective of the struggle that he experiences with himself. He feels proud of the honours which he received from the Roma and feels the responsibility which rests on him.<sup>6</sup> For some time, he thinks about choosing a form which he could use to record his discoveries although finally he acknowledges that ethical issues leave him no choice. In his conversation with Malwina Wapińska he remarks that, despite his poetic passion, he would like to create a documentary:

I was gathering materials, putting them in order and interpreting them and so the books were created which have nothing to do with literary texts. I considered it my duty to convey the knowledge about Roma people in this very form. A genre which would balance between literary fiction and documentary would always

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<sup>6</sup> “I boast myself about being acclaimed a Gypsy king by my people, romano thagar. . . . It obliges.” (Ficowski 22-23)

raise doubts as regards which of it is true and which was glamorized and added. (qtd. in Sommer 755)

Following Maria Tymoczko's typology, one may assume that Ficowski had a choice between a postcolonial text and a translation. He chose the latter. The first three chapters of the novel entitled *Wygaste ogniska* will always remain an unfinished fragment (they appeared in a fragment of the German anthology *Zigeunergeschichte*). The writer commented his decision as follows:

I had to give it up. Since it turned out that there was an empty spot in Polish ethnography records and there was an opportunity to fill it in. In the 1950s in the middle of Europe I discovered nooks and crannies of realms, customs, beliefs and exotic language which none of my compatriots had looked into for five hundred years—since swarthy newcomers from India arrived in our land, since Romani Ganges has flown through Mazowsze! (Ficowski 11)

Ficowski realised that by recording the Romani customs he would break the Romani taboo. However, he took on the role of the ethnographer whose aim was to collect as much information about Roma life as possible and publicize it—even at the expense of betrayal and profanation. Recalling the emotions which he experienced during his first encounter with the Wajs camp, he writes:

I already knew a lot about their customs and laws of other Roma people, I was to find out much more from others later on. It required endeavours and evasions on my side, but most of all intimacy without which one cannot see anything and find out anything. Anyway, being endowed so kindly with the privileges of a visitor I could not and I did not want to be too inquisitive. (Ficowski 230)

“I preferred not to go deeper into the secrets of writing—he records, reminiscing the conversation in which the Roma asked him about the details of his profession—being afraid that nothing good will result for them from it” (Ficowski 18). And earlier: “Gypsies do not tolerate being described, they assume it may lead to betraying their secrets” (ibid.).



## III

But did Ficowski remain loyal not only as an ethnologist, but also as a translator? Already in the 1960s, the commentators indicated that this is questionable (cf. Waśkiewicz). Jerzy Ficowski considered himself as a diligent translator, aware of the limitations of his activity and inclined to reflect on himself. In his interview with Magdalena Lebecka he spoke about the dilemmas of translation, but he also claimed that he did not need to know the language very well to do the translation and also (in a postmodern manner) that the translation is not subsidiary to the original text:

When I translate poetry I always have an impression of missing out on something, so I am obliged to provide certain equivalents—such as putting a flower in an empty place because I had to delete one in another. Basically, poetry is impossible to translate. And if someone creates the work which is better than the original . . . let him be blessed. And I see such aberration as rightful. However, usually something is lost. Basing on my own experience, I claim that it is not necessary to know the language you are translating from, but it is necessary to have someone next to you who knows this language thoroughly. (qtd. in Sommer 709)

The author would probably disagree with the thesis by Gayatri Spivak that the measure of translation quality is the ability to speak “of intimate matters in the language of the original” (Spivak 404). However, the philological conscientiousness of the author cannot be denied. The evidence for this conscientiousness may be found in the edition of *Pieśni Papuszy* from 1956 including “poetic translations,” literary translations and original texts, preceded by an introduction and supplemented with an extensive cultural and fact-collecting commentary. However, the translator was convinced that he translates relatively easy poetry, additionally treating it as a “flagship” of Romani artistic creation, although, according to the author, it was dominated by an individual and almost intimate character. Paradoxically, this “simplicity” is often, as we will see below, the effect of covering intercultural incompatibilities, papering over and simplifying figurativeness of the Roma idioms and metaphors. Lending a hand to Papusza and other translated subalterns, Gayatri Spivak argues that an interesting literary text does not have to follow the voice of majority, even if this is an excluded majority (Spivak 405). Ficowski and the reality of the

epoch decided otherwise. It is not the point to reproach Ficowski nowadays for negligence and translatory nonchalance. The model of poetry which the author wanted to apply to present Papisza's writing to non-Roma readers was very different from the native context of its creation. Unfortunate *falorykta* (folk issues) which brought the poet infamy in the Roma community were a direct result of this "misreading" (Ficowski 208). Accusing Ficowski of a lack of postcolonial sensitivity would be anachronistic. However, it is worth pointing out the basic "flaws" that his translations reveal when compared with original texts. This was conducted, to a large extent, by Magdalena Machowska.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I will try to particularize certain issues and illustrate them with examples.

Enumerating the differences between postcolonial novel and translation, Maria Tymoczko emphasizes that the author has a wider choice, "it is easier to keep the text balanced, to manage the information load, and to avoid mystifying or repelling elements of the receiving audience with a different cultural framework" (Tymoczko 21). The features of oral creation were important qualities of Papisza's poetry. As a literary translator, Jerzy Ficowski made it a point to put it in a "written" form, "devoid of music." In order to settle a classic dispute between the cultural content, foreign for the public, and overburdening the text with an excessive number of commentaries, Ficowski chose the third option. He blurred many distinctive qualities of oral Romani works that could be difficult to receive and created a collage of incompatible cultural orders based on stereotypes with a metatextual commentary. Had the Romani culture enjoyed higher esteem, probably its mentor (Tymoczko writes about "patrons") could have allowed the text to be less transparent.

Contemporary translation schools appreciate coarseness and lack of transparency of intercultural translation, and warn the translator against the practice of making the text more culturally "familiar" (Jarniewicz 34). Thus, the author's idiom of a translator should be examined in terms of interpretation. The rhetorical character of speech is called translation aporia (Spivak 398).

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<sup>7</sup> As Machowska writes: "Papisza's works should be situated in between the oral and the written. The oral character is supported by many distinctive features such as realism of this poetry, using rhetorical questions which are a great way to achieve the effect of rhythm using exclamation marks, imperatives and listing which make the work more dynamic, which leads to the impression of redundancy" (Machowska 227).

This postmodernist voice in defence of the rights of translation is limited by the particular conditioning of postcolonial literature. In this case, the relations of incompatibility between the discourses and the responsibility of the dominating (colonizer) for the voice of the dominated (colonized, subordinated, excluded) become crucially important. In *Demony cudzego strachu* we find a fragment in which Ficowski may seem very close to contemporary theories of translation, enunciating the very essence of understanding someone else's text in a conversation with a Romani inhabitant of the forest:

He said—"Can you hear Mister writer? This is music. Romani women went to the village, instruments hidden in the cabs and there is music, still . . . Did You write down the lyrics of our songs? . . ."

—"Yes, a bit but I do not quite understand it."

—"You do not have to understand. Do You understand these birds? You take such music, both Romani and bird's, within yourself and You do not need to understand it fully. I am telling You the truth." (Ficowski 15)

The work of Jerzy Ficowski cannot be assessed in the categories of modernist translation, not solely because of the incompatibility of the two discourses: Romani and Polish, caused by the prolonged social exclusion of the Roma. An equally important factor is the relation between the oral character of the Romani culture and the "dictatorship of writing," together with the visual character of European poetry since the times of Mallarmé. Finally, there is also the problem of reception modes.

Why did the writer ignore the advice of a Rom and blurred the idiom of Papisza in her texts, simultaneously leaving the traces of Papisza-emancipationist, which led to her personal tragedy? To answer this question, we must first examine the issue of the incompatibility of the reception modes. The poet had only one answer to the question: Who did Papisza create for?—for herself. Jerzy Ficowski reminisces the beginning of his acquaintance with the poet as follows:

[Papisza] said . . . later on . . . that she is singing to herself and she does not write down these poetic songs. I started to convince her to try to record them on paper and send to me by post. (Ficowski 228)

This is not a case of a post-romantic "outsider," so characteristic for literary bohemians, *nomen omen*, but rather a conviction about the incompatibility of

reception modes of her poetry in Polish and Romani community, which was so many times uttered by the poet. Making her debut on the publishing market, becoming a member of the Polish Writers' Union, taking part in a complex literary life at the onset of the Republic of Poland, Papusza began to create for a recipient educated in the culture of a written word, familiar with written poetry and enthusiasts of seemingly exotic folk culture.<sup>8</sup> The reception modes relevant to this poetry seem to differ substantially in the original, postcolonial context of its functioning. In the "natural" Romani environment, songs had expressive and aesthetic style, whereas the new non-Romani reception was paradoxically dominated by an instrumental mode. Thus, the translation by Ficowski requires an analysis which would take into consideration the discourse incompatibility between cultural circles in which the text functions. Such a "suspicious" perspective allows indicating what was "lost in translation" and why it had to happen this way.

Another problem concerns the oral character of Papusza's poetry. Despite being aware of this quality, Ficowski wrote in the introduction to *Lesie, ojciec mój* in 1990 in the spirit of "modernisation discourse" (cf. Chakrabarty, 2007):

The possibility to write them down had its drawbacks, it caused that the first version of the poem was at the same time the last one, because Papusza does not use any corrections or deletions in her manuscripts. Hence the tedious parts, erroneous repetitions, verbosity, places which are "empty" as regards the content or artistic value . . . So the translator took on the responsibility for the selection of verses. He omitted in the translation what he considered an irrelevant burden and made his own choices. (qtd. in Papusza, 1990: 19)

The translator shook off this "unnecessary burden" by applying a characteristic range of measures which gave the text qualities of a "poem" or metrical language which were called by Jerzy Jarniewicz a stereotype of poetry (Jarniewicz 34-51). In some instances, the translator changed the order of a noun and a modifier defining it. In the translation of the poem "Na stepie zabyty," Ficowski has written "the wind sways grass green" although in original

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<sup>8</sup> Such evidence of a reception mode can be found in the opinions of Wisława Szymborska and Julian Przyboś (cf. Machowska 222, Sommer 383-390), J. Ficowski, *Wstęp* (in Papusza, 1990: 19).

we can read: “the wind sways green grass” (85).<sup>9</sup> Using archaic and dialectal forms is a measure applied by the translator: in “Pieśń cygańska z Papuszy głowy ułożona.” In this instance, Ficowski translates “and sliver moon, / father of fathers from Indyja” (50) instead of “father of fathers from India.” This is also an example of the Romani mimicry. In the commentary to *Pieśni Papuszy* we read that Papusza found out about the presumed genealogy of the Roma not from her companions but from non-Roma people (Papusza, 1956: 151). In yet another work, Ficowski uses dialectal forms in the title “Jest zima bielutka” (“White winter is here”) we read “Przyszła zima bieluśka” (“White winter has come”; 39).

Jarniewicz notices that the most essential thing for poeticizing in translation is to establish a distance between poetic language and everyday language. Ficowski seems to be particularly reluctant about Papusza’s “prose diction” which he is trying to make less colloquial and more elevated. For instance, he translates the title of her poem, “My nie chcemy żadnych bogactw” (“We do not want any riches”) as “Nie pragniemy żadnych bogactw” (“We do not crave any riches”). However, the assumption that the style of the Romani language is similar to Polish (the artistic language *versus* everyday language) is off the mark. Linguistic research demonstrates that the Roma language does not have stylistic variations, which leads to an array of intercultural communicative clashes.<sup>10</sup> A similar intention to “poeticize” lies behind using the shortened forms of possessive pronouns (*me, swel* “my,” “her”): instead of *do mojego ojca staruszka* (“for the old father of mine”), Ficowski writes *do mego ojca staruszka*—“for my old father” (“Na stepie zabity,” 42).

The translator’s interventions go as far as to create new metaphors and semantic shifts. In the literary version of the poem quoted above, “Przyszła zima bieluśka,” we find the following tetrastich:

The forest stands like a wise man  
And it does not sing songs with winds.

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<sup>9</sup> All the examples come from *Pieśni Papuszy* by Papusza, 1956 and were translated into English by Katarzyna Turska, unless specified otherwise.

<sup>10</sup> According to Eliza Grzelak and Joanna Grzelak-Piaskowska, these clashes arise particularly in connection with the so called “language politeness” demonstrated in the official, or high, variety of Polish language (cf. Grzelak and Grzelak-Piaskowska).

Small fires like stars of the frost  
Are reflected in the eyes. (81)

This was poeticized by Jerzy Ficowski by means of an ocularcentric metaphor, one of the key figures of the west European discourse (Kledzik, 2012):

The forest stands like a wise man  
And it does not sing songs with winds.  
Small fires like tiny stars of frost around  
Are reflected in your eye by the forest.

In light of these changes, the fragment from the introduction to the volume *Pieśni Papuszy*, in which the translator asserts that the value of this poetry lies in its freshness “devoid of any imitation” (Papusza, 1956: 15), seems rather paradoxical.

The above mentioned “verbosity,” “tediousness” (Papusza, 1956: 18) and “cliches,”<sup>11</sup> stemming from an oral character of this poetry can be found often in invocations to Papusza’s works, such as the poem “Moja noga nie postanie, gdzie niegdys jeździli Cyganie.” In the literary translation we read: *Ja wiem, że temu wy nie wierzycie, / ale proszę was tę pieśń zrozumcie / i wiezcie, że śpiewam prawdziwą pieśń cygańską* (“I know you do not believe it / but I ask you to understand this song / and remember I sing a truly Gypsy song”; 107), whereas in the poetic translation: *Ja wiem, że nie uwierzycie, / ale was proszę – wysłuchajcie tej pieśni / i wiezcie, żem w tej piosence słowa nie skłamała* (“I know you will not believe it / but I ask you—listen to this song / and remember I have not lied a word in this song”; 57). Another example of removing a tautology from the same poem: *mała wieś, nie duża* (“a small village, not big”) Ficowski translates as “tam jest wioska, chodźmy do wsi” (“there is a village over there, let us go to the village”). An additional typical stylistic measure used by the translator is also the “completion” of simple sentences by imposing a syntactic continuity on them so that they seem more complex on paper. Jarniewicz looks for the grounds of such translation measures in a peculiar *horror vacui*. Afraid to leave empty space or use less-than-elaborate phrases, translators face this fear

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<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to *Pieśni Papuszy* Ficowski wrote about the “drawn-out and empty parts” abandoned by him in translation (Papusza, 1956: 5).

by deciding to opt for the “poetics of excess” (Jarniewicz 52). For example, in the original version of a poem entitled “Piosenka,” we find two verbs “you will recall and think” which Ficowski develops into “You are recalling and starting to think about me” (41). Further on, he translates the original phrase “a fairy tale or truth?” into “was it a fairy tale or truth?” This intriguing “semantic void” of the original verses stems also from the oral qualities of language that is dominated by the informative function.<sup>12</sup> A similar example of “poetics of excess” is a fragment of the work entitled “Patrzę tu, patrzę tam” devoted to the Milky Way. The literary translation is as follows: *ta droga szczęśliwa / prowadzi ludzi / do dobrego życia* (“this happy road / leads people / to good life”; 89), whereas Ficowski expands a poetic image changing the meaning of the original: *oto droga szczęśliwa, bezpieczna, / ona, ta droga daleka, / do szczęścia prowadzi człowieka* (“here is a happy, safe road / this road, distant road / leads people to happiness”; 45).

Metaphors which cannot be rendered by the translator without any detriment to their semantic interaction are particularly interesting from the point of view of intercultural translation. Apart from a descriptive strategy, a method of equivalence is used in translating such metaphors. This usually happens at the expense of their cultural content, as in the fragment of “Pieśń cygańska z Papuszy głowy ułożona” quoted below:

Literary translation:

W lesie wyrosłam jak złoty krzak,  
w namiocie cygańskim jak prawdziwy grzyb

Poetic translation:

W lesie jak złoty krzak wyrosłam  
w namiocie cygańskim, co miał prawdziwka postać (48)

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<sup>12</sup> “Lack of a written form of language causes that the Roma do not have normative of their language, the users of oral language do not feel need of its formalization, also in the case of using a foreign language. Basic informative function assumes that the message must be clear and sufficient. Pragmatism limits not only an artistic function but also simplifies and limits communication techniques of the Roma.” (Grzelak and Grzelak-Piaskowska, 2012)

Ficowski seems to have wanted to hide the negative connotations which might be evoked in non-Roma readers by a vision of “a mushroom growing in a tent,” therefore he replaced it with “a king bolete” calling up the associations with nobility. Simultaneously, he changed the topic of the metaphor from a lyrical “I” to a “Gypsy tent,” destroying its initial meaning. A similar instance in reverse cultural order can be found in the poem “Na stepie zabity.” In the poetic translation, there is a metaphor of “a wandering heart,” a metaphor deeply-rooted in the history of Polish literature, whereas in the original text we find only the phrase: “young heart dies quickly.” Blurring idioms which would give the readers a chance to taste a peculiar figurative manner of the Roma language is observable in the poem “Piosenka”:

Literary translation:

twe ręce podniosą me pieśni  
[your hands will elevate my songs]

Poetic translation:

twe ręce moją pieśń odnajdą (41)  
[your hands will discover my song]

As we can also see—“elevating songs,” projected by Papusza (or their promotion—as we would say nowadays), was replaced by the translator with “discovering”—this also illustrates how Ficowski perceived his own work with Papusza’s texts. On the other hand, in the poem “Krwawe łązy. Co za Niemców przeszliśmy na Wołyniu 43 i 44 roku,” the metaphor *na ludziach ciało drży, trzęsie się* (“body on people shakes and trembles”; 127) was translated with the use of transmission, which is simpler in reception and almost transparent in terms of poetic means: “people shake and tremble with anxiety.”

Additionally, the beginning of the poem entitled “Ziemio moja, jestem córką twoją,” raises doubts as regards its translation. *Phív miri i vešéngri* means literary *ziemio moja i lasów* (“the land of mine and of forests,” not as Ficowski translates *ziemio moja i leśna* (“my and forest land”; 60). This apostrophe hides a metaphor crucial for the Romani outlook on the world about sharing the land with the element of nature. As it is commonly known, the Roma do not construct their identity *vis-à-vis* a category of “place” as in the perception of



settled people (sociology calls them “service nomads” [Mróz and Mirga 29ff.]). They cherish a belief that the world is governed by natural forces which are responsible for measuring out justice. Therefore, the “land” belongs simultaneously to Papusza (lyrical subject) and to the forest as an embodiment of this natural realm of reality.

Another measure associated with the translation of figurative words is deleting repetitions, which also results in deleting the oral character of the poetry. For example, in a fragment of “Leśna pieśń” the word “stone” (rom. *barâ*), repeated several times, was removed.

Literary translation:

A moje góry kamienne  
i koło wody kamienie  
droższe niż drogie kamienie,  
które robią światła

Poetic translation:

A moje kamienne góry  
i głazy nad strumieniem  
droższe są, gdy w blasku stoją,  
niż drogie kamienie (37)

In the same poem, Ficowski also omits other consonances, including internal rhymes:

Original:

čy trošalé čy bokhałé  
chtén i khełén, po veš lén  
[czy spragnione, czy głodne  
skaczą i tańczą, bo las je]

Translation:

choć spragnione i o głodzie  
skaczą i tańczą pięknie  
las je tego uczył co dzień. (38)

Often, we find in Papisza's poetry four or five grammatical rhymes at the end of consecutive verses. Ficowski usually limits them to two verses, uses even rhymes, whereas in original texts there are often enclosing rhymes. To explain this measure he writes: ". . . each kind of prose in this language, i.e. Gypsy everyday language, is inadvertently rhymed, dotted with consonances which do not stem from any decorative poetry design" (qtd. in Papisza, 1990: 17).

The translator cannot also preserve euphonic effects, such as in the work "Przyszła zima bieluška":

Original:

Jaf ki mé, me ki tú  
[Chodź do mnie, ja do ciebie]

Translation:

Wyjdę do ciebie, przyjdź do mojej ręki. (40)

Sometimes he seems to resign from rhyme in the translated text for the sake of "visual" measures, as in "Patrzę tu, patrzę tam":

Original:

Dikháv dáj, dikháv dój –  
saró zdrál, svéto sál.  
[Patrzę tu, patrzę tam –  
wszystko drży, świat śmieje się]

Translation:

Patrzę tu, patrzę tam –  
wszystko się chwieje. (45)

Interestingly, the translator often makes his translations rhythmical by introducing a prosodic metre, as if succumbing to a stereotype of folk poetry. The example of the imposed trochaic tetrameter in the translation of "Nie pragniemy żadnych bogactw," a poem with original intonation-syntactic construction, is shown below:

Literary translation:

My nie chcemy żadnych bogactw  
my chcemy żyć  
deszcz wiatr i łzy –  
to są cygańskie szczęścia  
Bo w tym się urodziła,  
serce krwią zaszło,  
prawdziwa cygańszczyzna.

Poetic translation:

Nie pragniemy żadnych bogactw,  
chcemy żyć na naszych drogach  
deszcze, wichry i płkanie –  
oto są szczęścia nasze, Cyganie  
Bo w tym wszystkim się zrodziła  
i krwią serce napełniła  
cygańszczyzna nasza szczerą  
co łzami i śmiechem wzbiera. (46)

In the ethnological narrations included in the work *Demony cudzego strachu*, the author also allows himself to introduce some stylistic measures. When recollecting events that happened several decades earlier, he quotes the Roma conversations, he preserves the convention of a dialogue and adapts the text to a folk tale style, using archaic language and inversion:

“Oj, to, to, to!” – przytaknęli brodacze z entuzjazmem – “trzeba umieć, nie kaźden by potrafił! Bo i dobrze się składa, żeśmy na pana pisarza trafili, od razu coś nas tknęło, jak kum nam powiedział, że pan pisze książki . . .”<sup>13</sup> (Ficowski 19)

Sometimes he incorporates a Romani phrase into text, which gives the story a more exotic undertone. Sometimes he also feigns literary translation in order to achieve the effect of imitation of the Romani language that sounds “incorrect” for a Polish reader. Indeed limited knowledge of the Polish language

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<sup>13</sup> The following translation does not fully express the folk style of the quotation: “Yes, yes, yes—nodded all the bearded men with enthusiasm.—One has to be able [to do it] and not everyone is! It’s just as well, that we came across you, something has touched us at once, when you told us, you were writing books . . .”

is regarded as a main component of the Romani stereotype: *Przepraszam, że się tak wciekawiam we wszystko* (“I apologize for being so **inquisitive** about everything” [highlighted—EK]; Ficowski 19)—says his Romani interlocutor.

After publishing the above-mentioned interview with Tuwim, Ficowski tried to defend himself from the attacks of Gypsies, “who never met him” (Ficowski 24). Although Ficowski resorts to arguments of civilization superiority: “travelling, unwritten fame attributed a lot of hostile intentions to me, but it also enriched my life with threads I had not dreamt of” (Ficowski 24-25), he, too, balances on the edge of irony; “How a treacherous perpetrator could have committed such deeds, he sneaked into Gypsy’s favor, what hostile purpose lies behind his actions?” (Ficowski 25). The construction of the quoted chapter of *Demony* . . . is a peculiar manipulation: although Ficowski realizes what rules of the Romani code he violated, he explains them to more confused readers (for these people even publishing a dictionary of their language must be perceived as a collective threat, as an assault on their most vested interest (cf. Ficowski 26), but he emphasizes that “he feels honored” to be promoted to be included in the catalogue of “villains” of the Romani mythology. He calls the tales about the “Golden King,” created to heal the trauma after betraying the Romani secrets, “not-quite-legends.” This is a part of an ethnological experiment which lasts even when the studied group ceases to evoke sympathy and respect. Even Ficowski’s “excommunication” from the Roma is subject to observation and is explained by him scientifically: “being a visitor from outside I am not touched by moral sanctions” (Ficowski 31); “the not-quite-legends’ tell a lot of truth about Gypsies” (Ficowski 32). Sometimes Jerzy Ficowski very much resembles Bronisław Malinowski, the founder of the premier department of anthropology could also have issued the following warning:

If you research customs of nations that are considered exotic, be patient, do not reveal your trophies too early; show them somewhere far away, in the other hemisphere, and do it at the end of the last adventure, after walking the last path. Then, even if you are followed by sinister tales, they will not be able to deprive you of anything, and will not disturb you in any way: you will have gathered your yield. (Ficowski 33)

## IV

Jerzy Ficowski did not manage to escape from the political reality of his time in a Gypsy camp. Ficowski's presence also made a significant impact on the poetic legend of Papusza and left its stamp on her poetry. The beginning of the career of Bronisława Wajs overlaps with the beginning of the changes during which "democracy [was] imposed on the Gypsy people." The Romani poetess became their advocate and hostage—unaware of what the consequences would be and seemingly against her will. Applying postcolonial categories to this situation, we acknowledge that Papusza's poems, maintained in the poetics of social realism, are evidence of the mimicry which makes the colonized use the language of the colonizer/dominating discourse. The colonized twist it and takes it in the brackets of an ironic quotation, thereby deconstructing the model of subordination. Let us take a closer look at the two poems that were recognized by Magdalena Machowska as an example of propaganda lyrics:

### Moja pieśń

Dźwięczy dziś żelazo z wielkich hal fabrycznych  
Plan musimy wykonać do końca.  
Już zbierają zboże z pola kółchoźnicy  
W dniu upalnym i jasnym od słońca.

Dłoń od pracy płonie. A serce rozkwita:  
Robotniczy kraj rośnie i żyje.  
A w innych krainach czarny dziś kapitał

Dusi życie jak śmiertelna żmija.  
Ojczyzna jest wielka, bogatą się staje.  
Jakże rośnie pośród fabryk jasnych!  
Moją pieśń o młodym robotniczym kraju,  
Moją pieśń oświetlają jej gwiazdy.<sup>14</sup>  
(qtd in. Machowska 347)

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<sup>14</sup> "My song // Iron clings in huge factory halls / We need to meet our targets / Kolkhozniks gather crops from fields / On a hot day, bright from the sun. // Hand strives for work. And heart grows / Worker's land develops and lives / And in other countries we have capital / It strangles life like a deadly viper. // Fatherland is becoming big and rich. / Oh, how it grows

### Na dobrej drodze

Na dobrej jesteśmy drodze,  
wielkim panom składamy dzięki,  
a największe – Złotej Głowie  
naszemu Jerzemu Ficowskiemu,  
ojcu cygańskiemu!  
On do stolicy nas przywołał.  
I ludziom przedstawił dokoła.  
Na dobrej jesteśmy drodze,  
jak nam rzekli, tak czynimy.  
Niech dzieci uczą się w szkołach,  
kiedy się już osiedlimy.

Opadnie z nas ciemność  
i nieczystość serc.  
I żyć będziemy pięknie  
jak ludzie.  
Ale zapłaczą Cyganie starzy  
i dawny czas im się zamarzy –  
i lasy, i rzeki,  
i góry, i ognie.

Ich stare serca jak kamienie  
w lesie wyrosły  
i skamieniały.

To niegdysiejsi panowie  
do tego ich przyuczyli  
i daleko od siebie, daleko  
biednych Cyganów moich  
do lasów wypędzili.

Aż się cygańskie serca  
obróciły w kamień,

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among bright factories! / My song about a young workers' country, / My song is brightened  
by its stars."

aż nas ludzie nazwali  
 złodziejami i psami.<sup>15</sup>  
 (Papusza, 1990: 46)

The above poems, next to an array of others (e.g. “Aj, Cyganie, co robicie”), could be a proof of Papusza’s personal involvement in the action of enforcing “settlement and productivity,” and her acceptance of the rules of the socialist realism poetics which made surprisingly a good collage with the traditional imagery of Romani songs. The early 1950s, the trying period of the new state’s policy towards the Roma, coincided in the Polish artistic life with a proclamation of socialist realism, which assumed involvement of artists into propaganda for the development of the new state. As a self-taught person from a community of mostly illiterate people—which was expected to oppose the settlement action planned by the authorities of the People’s Poland<sup>16</sup>—Papusza was a precious acquisition for the public sphere. Her works (or at least the examples quoted above) justified the oppressive attitude towards the Roma. It cannot be forgotten that this “discovery” also definitely helped Jerzy Ficowski who had been considered politically suspect. As the translator of Papusza’s poetry, the writer realized the rules set by the utilitarian doctrine. After many years, he wrote in the introduction to the volume *Lesie, ojczyzna moja*: “Those were, at least in their declarative parts, her weakest poems . . . the representative of nomads wrote them against herself in order to win favours of the authorities deciding about the fate of Gypsy community in Poland” (Papusza, 1990: 7). And so in both works quoted above there is a collective lyrical subject, which rarely occurs in the other texts by Papusza. In “Moja pieśń” there are few references to the “Gypsy”

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<sup>15</sup> “**On a good road** // We are on a good road / we thank great masters / most of all—the Golden Head / our Jerzy Ficowski / Gypsy father! / He called us to the capital city / And introduced to people around / We are on a good road / we do as we have been told / May children learn in schools / when we settle down. // We will shake off the darkness / and impurity of hearts / We will live beautifully / like people / But old Gypsies will cry / and dream about old days / and forests and rivers / and mountains and fires. / Their old hearts like stones / grew in the forest / and turned into stone. // The by-gone masters / taught them to do so / and they banished my poor Gypsies / far far away from them / To the forests. // Until Gypsy hearts / turned into stone. / until people called us / thieves and dogs.”

<sup>16</sup> The action was finally fulfilled by the Act of the Government Presidium no 452/52 from 24 May 1952.

life, only the “stars” indicate the Romani origin of the author, although they are also included in the classic repertoire of socialist realism imagery. The lyrical subject is perfectly integrated with the mono-ethnic work surroundings. In the work “Na dobrej drodze” on the other hand, we find a variety of the elements of propaganda and traditional Romani culture. The “good road” in the title may be considered a metaphor in the context of the nomadic way of life that the Roma led so far. At the beginning of the 1950s, they found themselves, in the opinion of the lyrical subject, on the right road towards settlement. Jerzy Ficowski, their Gypsy father, was supposed to convince the Roma to make this decision, as—according to him—it was only the right thing to do. However, there are two reservations about the planned future idyll of the settled life. First, a longing for wandering (European literary topos *ubi sunt* sounds in the verses referring to it, certainly strengthened by an adverb *niegdysiejsi* “by-gone ones” imposed by the translator—a quote calls up associations with “by-gone snows” from a famous explication of the topos written by François Villon entitled “Ballad of the Ladies of Times Past”) expressed by the beautiful metaphor of stone hearts growing in the woods. Secondly, the aversion of the social majority towards the Roma experienced by Papusza many times, including during her unsuccessful attempt to settle down near Elbląg.

Although based on the rules of the “new art” introduced by the new socialist state, the poem below contains one more important ideological element, which could allow Papusza to appear on the map of Polish poetry as a rightful and declared member of the community:

**Ziemia moja, jestem córką twoją**

Ziemia moja i leśna,  
jestem córką twoją.  
Lasy śpiewają, ziemia śpiewa pięknie.  
Śpiewanie rzeka i ja składamy  
w jedną cygańską piosenkę.

Pójdę ja w góry,  
góry wysokie,  
włożę spódnicę piękną, bogatą,  
uszytą z kwiatów  
i zawołam, co sił będę miała –



ziemio polska, czerwona i biała.

.....

Ziemio, twoje pola żżęte  
w słońcu złotem się stają  
ziemio, gdzie grzmoty  
walczą z wichurą  
jak pieśń w moim sercu,  
gdzie młot uderza w kamień  
i ogień wielki się staje.<sup>17</sup>  
(Papusza, 1990: 62-63)

This poem quickly became one of the most recognizable works by Papusza and has been presented as a political declaration of a poet-representative from the Romani community in Polish school literature coursebooks (cf. Garsztka, Grabowska and Olszowska). It was “the price” that Papusza (and other Roma) had to pay to become a spokeswoman of the reforming Roma people. Contrary to the two poems quoted above, the poem is recounted by a prominent lyrical “I.” The femininity of this “I,” as marked by her classical Romani attributes: a skirt, joyful character and singing, is very important. These are the elements of a stereotypical perception of the Romani women by the mainstream society so as such do not evoke a dissonance but rather prevent the lyrical subject from arousing any cultural controversy among non-Roma people.

## V

The work of a translator-ethnologist whose passion and diligence resulted in the first monographs about the Roma living in Poland deserves admiration, reminiscence and repeated reflection. By providing critical commentary on the Romani texts and the translations of Papusza’s songs, I do not intend to depreciate their value. However, this commentary may provoke readers to con-

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<sup>17</sup> “Oh, my land I am your daughter / Oh, my and forest land / I am your daughter / Forests sing and the land sings beautifully / The river and me make the singing / one Gypsy song // I will go to the mountains / high mountains / I will put on a beautiful, rich skirt / made of flowers / and call from all my heart / Polish land, red and white / . . . / Oh land, your fields reaped / become gold in the sun / Oh land, where thunders / fight with gale / like the song in my heart / where a hammer hits a stone / and big fire appears.”

sider the reasons of failure of the project which was supposed to “reform” the Roma in the mid-20th century. The biography of Papusza created by Ficowski became an exemplum aiming at changing the traditional Romani lifestyle by emphasizing the heroic and pioneering strive for education, the struggle between “the old” and “the new” reflected in Papusza’s poetry. Further, in the biography, Ficowski expresses the conviction that a settled lifestyle will bring a change for the “better”—a better life for Papusza and her stepson, as well as the social promotion of the Roma. Today, we know that the action of enforcing “settlement” and “productivity” did not bring the desired effects but quite the contrary: it led to the pauperization and accumulation of mechanisms of social seclusion of the Roma. The postcolonial awareness gained in the 21st century by the representatives of mainstream societies should be an inspiration for renewing efforts to open a dialogue with the community of the Romani, who often fear that the integrative projects addressed at them are supposed to lead to their assimilation. Preserving their individuality, although it is a utopian idea to a large extent, is indispensable to fostering future interaction and cooperation with this community. Jerzy Ficowski, with his sensitive insight into Papusza’s works and fate, understood this very well. To my mind, Papusza will become a lonely idiom of the Polish “aware Gypsy poet.”

*Trans. Katarzyna Turska*

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## Summary

The article analyzes Jerzy Ficowski's translations of poems by Papusza—a Romani poet who was "discovered" by the author of *Demons of Somebody Else's Fears* for the non-Romani reading audience in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The comparison of literal and poetical translations leads to the following conclusions: Ficowski's translation consistently blurred the oral characteristics of this poetry, gave it a more dialectal character and eliminated some of its content linked to the Romani culture. The research methodology is based on the latest translation theories and postcolonial studies, which allows the author to extend the reflection to comprise other types of contexts, namely: biographical (Papusza's and Ficowski's meeting and its memory), social (the communist

program of: “productiveness” and its impact on Papusza’s career), and anthropological (the consequences of the alleged “betrayal the secrets of Roma” by Papusza, and Ficowski’s ethical responsibility as anthropologist).

**Key words:** Romani culture, Polish Roma, translation studies, postcolonial studies, Papusza, Jerzy Ficowski

### Zapisać oralność.

#### Jerzy Ficowski i poetycki projekt Papuszy w optyce postkolonialnej

#### Streszczenie

Celem tekstu jest analiza translatorskiej pracy Jerzego Ficowskiego na wierszach romskiej poetki, Papuszy, którą autor *Demonów cudzego strachu* „odkrył” dla nieromskiej publiczności na przełomie lat czterdziestych i pięćdziesiątych XX wieku. Porównanie przekładów literalnych i poetyckich prowadzi do wniosków o konsekwentnym zacieraniu oralnego charakteru tej poezji, jej dialektyzowaniu i wymazywaniu treści związanych z kulturą romską. Instrumentarium metodologicznego dostarczają autorce najnowsze teorie przekładu oraz studia postkolonialne, które pozwalają na poszerzenie rozważań o kontekst biograficzny (spotkanie Papuszy z Ficowskim i jego obraz we wspomnieniach obojga poetów), społeczny (komunistyczna akcja „produktywizacji” Romów i jej wpływ na karierę Papuszy) oraz antropologiczny (konsekwencje domniemanej „zdrady tajemnic romskich” przez Papuszę i etyczna odpowiedzialność Ficowskiego-etnologa).

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura romska, Polska Roma, studia przekładoznawcze, studia postkolonialne, Papusza, Jerzy Ficowski