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EXPERIMENTAL TRANSLATION: TECHNIQUES, FORMS, METALANGUAGES

Abstract

The aim of the article is to introduce a new series of studies on theoretical, methodological, analytical, and interpretive issues concerning “translation anomalies”. Functioning as a medium of artistic innovation and creative cognition, experimental literary translation can be compared to a laboratory, both for translators as well as literary and cultural scholars. It enables us to highlight the fundamental problems of artistic creation, the theory of literature, the theory of artistic translation and the theory of intercultural communication. On the one hand, experiments in translation confirm the necessity of using interdisciplinary research instruments; on the other hand, they show translation as a fundamental metaphor that describes the innovative and dynamic nature of technology.

Keywords: experimental translation, experimental literature, liberature (total literature), new media translation, self-commentary

1. Experimental translation in the context of changes in contemporary translation studies

The continuous and indispensable expansion of the research area covered by contemporary translation studies, beginning with the cultural turn through to the outward turn (Bassnett, Johnston 2019; Zwischenberger 2019) and on to the transdisciplinary studies of post-translation (Nergaard, Arduini, 2011; Gentzler 2017), results in important revisions regarding the notion of translation with an increasing emphasis on the significance of “difference”, “hybridity”, “displacement”, “innovation”, at the expense of “identity”, “imitation”, “mapping”, and “equivalence”. The so-called creative turn in translatorial reflection has significantly heightened the sensitivity of theorists and critics of translation to the questions of subjective interpretation of art, artistic individuality, inventiveness and the translator’s autonomy (see Lofredo, Perteghella 2006). In turn, the increasingly popular field of “translator studies” (see Chesterman 2009) highlight the role of translators in the broadly understood field of translation, inspiring, on the one hand, new projects on the history of translated literature and studies on translators’ archives, and on the other, research into translators’ biographies and their “ego-documents” (see e.g. Kita-Huber, Makarska 2020). In addition, the subsequent debates occurring in contemporary cultural research, be they translational, performative, reflective, spatial, corporeal, media, iconic, digital, or posthuman (see, among others, Bachmann-Medick 2012; Majdzik 2018), encourage translators to actively criticise established concepts and categorisations, bringing to the fore well-known concepts and problems (language, meaning, equivalence, literariness, text coherence), toppling them from their previously held positions, thus revealing unforeseen dependencies and hidden dimensions of discourse in translation and translation studies. Not only do they contribute to the development of new conceptualisations of experimental translation with regard to changing “technologies of literature” (Maryl 2010), but they also expose often theoretically self-aware (cf. Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2016) and autobiographically slanted “translatorial anomalies”, allowing us to analyse and understand them better.

2. Pink noise

One of the best known anomalies of this kind is *Pink Noise* by Hsia Yü (Lee 2015: 21–22). Residing in Taipei and Paris, this poet, essayist, playwright, and songwriter known as Katie Lee, is one of the most intriguing figures in Taiwan's literary milieu. Seen as a pioneering voice of *écriture féminine* within that cultural zone, she openly tackles such themes as gender and sex, but most of all she experiments with language, utilising colloquial speech, outdated phrases, clichés and advertising slogans, creating her own ideograms. She also experiments with the material form in the spirit of liberature, shaping her poetic volumes in unconventional ways, such as flip-flap books (cf. Fig. 1, *This Zebra* and *That Zebra*) in which the reader can arrange their own versions of the poems (as in Raymond Queneau's *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*).



Figure 1. *That Zebra* (2011) and *This Zebra* (2011) by Taiwanese poet Hsia Yü; photo K. Bazarnik



Figure 2. Hsia Yü *Pink Noise* (2008); photo K. Bazarnik

Pink Noise is a poetic volume generated using Sherlock software, a search engine for Mac OS X, fitted with a plug-in for machine translation (MT) (see Fig. 2). An accidental launching of the programme inspired the poet to carry out a series of translatorial “experiments” on poems by Shakespeare, E.A. Poe, and Pushkin, as well as fragments of texts from blogs and websites linked to spam messages that were coming into her mailbox. In order to increase the verbal noise, she subjected them to several mechanical translations, out of which she created textual collages. The result was a bilingual poetic volume of 33 poems printed on transparent sheets. Using a transparent surface draws our attention to the medium (the channel of communication), which may be interpreted as an ironic commentary on the translator’s invisibility, that is removing him or her from sight, or even “killing them with the use of the machine” (Lee 2011). It was also machine translation, i.e. the Google translator, which was applied to translate three poems from *Pink Noise*, published in issue 36 of *eleWator*, a literary-cultural magazine devoted to experimental literature (those interested will also find other examples of translation experiments there).

In the interview included in 4/2021 issue of *Przekładaniec*, Hsia Yü describes a series of experiments aimed at searching for anomalies, divergences, and noise in the corpus of texts that were subjected to this “linguistic murder”. Commenting on the procedure she used, the Taiwanese poet conceptualises her activity as experimentation akin to that typical of scientific, empirical research. On the other hand, she emphasises its affective dimension: while experimenting with Sherlock, she felt curiosity, excitement, and awe. Hence, the process of mechanical translation became a way of creating not only meanings, but also experiences: feelings and emotions. Such a duality of artistic experimentation is mentioned by Krzysztof Hoffmann, Jakub Kornhauser and Barbara Sienkiewicz in their introduction to the collection of essays *Tradycje eksperymentu/ eksperyment jako doświadczenie* (Traditions of Experiment/ Experiment as Experience 2019). Hsia Yü’s experiment is also intended to have a translational dimension. It is not without reason that the poet wonders whether *Pink Noise* should be called “translated poetry” or “poetry of translation”; she describes the poems generated by mechanical translation as the equivalent of the pink noise which appears on electro-acoustic music CDs, which she listened to intensively while working on her book. So her poetic volume may be treated as an intersemiotic translation in which a physical phenomenon is translated into a linguistic one.

Hsia Yü’s radical experiment has been discussed with regard to the relationship between translation and multimodality, digital technology, the prismatic nature of translation, and the creative potential of communicative misunderstandings (Lee 2011; 2015; Rollins 2013, Bruno 2020), providing researchers with ample material with which to consider the nature of poetic experimentation as well as that of translation. Undoubtedly, the author herself treats translation as an inherently experimental activity. In the interview, she mentions her fascination with literature translated from various languages in which she has traced similar “noise” and she emphasises that machine translation has allowed her to discover new tools for testing language plasticity with the hope of broadening its horizons (Yü 2008: n.p.). In her reflections on translation, we can clearly see the shift noted at the beginning of this article: sacrificing “identity”, “imitation”, “mapping”, and “equivalence” in favor of “difference”, “hybridity”, “displacement”, and “innovativeness”.

3. Aberrations of translatorial relations

The fundamental aim of the editors and translators of the present issue is to highlight diverse examples of experimental translations with regard to their material and conceptual forms, as well as probing the latest translatorial reflection focused on translation experiments: recognizing its properties and main vectors of development, reviewing critical and theoretical languages of description of experimental translation, and verifying the capability of theoretical languages within existing translation studies with regard to “translatorial aberrations”.

The articles collected in this issue encompass a wide range of questions: from translating poetic linguistic experiments (Joanna Studzińska), through translating electronic literature (Agnieszka Przybyszewska), including poetry generators (Monika Górska-Olesińska, and Mariusz Pisarski), translation-parodies (Marta Kaźmierczak), to post-translations of canonical world literature into the “language” of internet emojis and artificial artistic languages (Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik). In doing so, the field of innovation and experimentation subjected to scrutiny is constituted by different types of translation (from the interlingual to new-media ones), as well as by different elements of translational communication. Translational experiments may thus comprise the message (in the case of a deliberate, overcharged arrangement of the linguistic layer in translations of poetic linguistic experiments), the code (“creative programming”, i.e. translations from a natural language into ideograms applied by the internet and mobile app users), the channel of communication (audio-visual translations), context (for example, piling up intertextual references in a parodistic translation), the sender (for example, a machine translation of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu the King* “authored” by Google translator (2015) and *Pink Noise* by Hsia Yü (2007; 2008)), the receiver (“translatorial scandals” among Shakespeare scholars¹), and even contact (communicative interferences resulting from the deliberate divergence between opera surtitles and the staged performance). It seems that it is the intentional, conscious “deformation” of elements within the translational system that is crucial to the definition of “experimental translation”.

¹ Discussed by Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik in the current issue.

4. Through the lens of experimental translation

Despite the considerable diversity of comparative material subjected to analysis, and ways of problematising experiments in translation and methodological preferences, the articles collected in this current issue clearly reflect broader trends, emblematic of recent discourses within translation studies focused on issues of experimental translation. Specific to this area of translation studies is a particular privileging of translators-experimenters' self-reflexive commentary as being itself a genre of artistic/critical/theoretical expression (see, for example, Scott 2006; 2012a; 2012b; 2014a; 2014b; Grzesiczak 2016; Bartnicki 2012b; 2021). Significantly, three of the articles included here are translatorial self-commentaries. Agnieszka Przybyszewska's article "The Art of (non)experimental Translation of Electronic Literature. On the (Un)repeatable Translation of *Loss of Grasp*" takes the form of a "technical report" (in Nick Montfort's terms) of the translator's struggles with *Déprise/Loss of Grasp* by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert. Monika Górska-Olesińska and Mariusz Pisarski's "Guessing from Textones. Distributed Translation as Exemplified by *Sea and Spar Between Generator* (2010) by Stephanie Strickland and Nick Montfort" is an authorial reflection on a poetry generator. Joanna Studzińska's comparative article "Translating Linguistic Poetry: Mario Martín Gijón's *Rendición* in Polish, English, and French" contains workshop-like remarks on Polish translations of Mario Martín Gijón's "cubist" linguistic poetry, juxtaposed with their versions in other languages (French and English). In turn, in "Translating Parody as a Domain of Experiment?...", Marta Kaźmierczak carries out a meticulous analysis preparatory to translation proper (see Bednarczyk 2019), and identifies the most adequate literary traditions in the target language for "How Bolesław Leśmian would have written the nursery rhyme *A Kitten's Got on a Fence*" from Julian Tuwim's *Jarmark rymów* [The Fair of Rhymes]; in so doing she invites us to a "translatorial experiment" which she herself initiates and then reveals its preliminary results. It is worth adding that, in her capacity as an expert in both Leśmian's poetry and translation studies, Kaźmierczak in her article strongly emphasises the ludic quality of experimental translatorial practices, introducing what Susan Bassnett calls "the missing element" of translation and translation studies discourse (Bassnett 1998: 65). These features are evident in a number of projects of intersemiotic translations by Krzysztof Bartnicki: *Fu wojny* (2012b),

Da Capo al Fine (2012a), *F_NNEGANS_A_E: suite in the Key of μ* (1939) (2014) and *Finnegans Meet* (Bartnicki, Szmandra 2015), inspired by his Polish translation of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (2012), constituting "tie-ins of his Polonised *Finnegans Wake* of the spin-off type", i.e. the literary equivalents of gadgets, which seem to serve both research and artistic as well as marketing purposes (Okulska 2016: 61–65). Accompanied by forewords and commentaries, they themselves are meta-reflections on Joyce's work as well as on (the possibilities and limits of) its translation.

Translators' authorial statements not only reveal "the translator's ever-changing self-projection as 'reader', 'critic', and 'researcher'" (Święch 2013 [1984]: 199), but also "reveal a biography withdrawn from the translated text" (Balcerzan 2007: 5; see also Święch 2013 [1984]:195). However, it is worth bearing in mind that this is evidently an invented biography (see Święch 2013 [1984]: 200). Creative self-commentaries are often not only meta-statements regarding the translation made by their author, but also competing elements of a translation series. They highlight, on the one hand, seriality, non-finality, multivariance and the intertextuality of target texts, and on the other, the provisional, *ad hoc*, idiosyncratic nature of the record of the translator's reading experience, as well as the uniqueness of the current situation of translation creation, the above-mentioned refractions of the Polish translation of *Finnegans Wake* being an excellent case in point.

Self-criticism, revealing a translator's methodology, explaining the "dark" places of the original, pointing out special translation difficulties, arguing for the translator's arbitrary decisions, testifying to their self-awareness with regard to innovativeness and, what is more, justifying their right to creative experimentation (see Święch [1984] 2013: 205; Bartnicki 2012b), highlights the experimental nature of translation activity in general. It makes one realise that its essence is precisely the search for solutions, an exploration of possibilities within the target language, probing its properties, and also, in the case of intermedial translation, discovering affordances between the code and the channel of communication. As a result, such an understanding of translation leads to an emphasis on the creative subjectivity of the translator. The popularity of translators-experimenters' self-reflective comments in the discourse of translation studies, focused on the issues of experimental translation, testifies both to the translators' increasing creative self-awareness, as well as to the autotelicity and self-criticism of the contemporary art of translation. Translators' self-commentaries not only highlight their subjectivity and agency, but also make us convincingly aware that translation

is never a “pure” representation of a foreign work. Krzysztof Bartnicki’s statement is significant in this regard. Proposing a list of *Finnegans Wake* variants, understood as “the set of texts recognisable as *Finnegans Wake*”, the translator singles out “[s]tandalone literary translations of an unabridged original source text. It will be argued that the main author of such a text is the translator; James Joyce is the secondary author; the provider of an additional paratext is another co-author” (see Bartnicki 2021: 24).

Another feature of translatorial discourse focused on the questions of experimental translation, which emerges from the present collection, is a clear domination of case studies over theoretical approaches. All the articles featured in this issue are analyses of specific examples of experimental literature (either original or in translation), which give preference to an idiosyncratic, individual translatorial experience over generalising categories. Putting special emphasis on the empirical and the practical, the authors focus on reasons for specific artistic decisions and their consequences for the overall message of the target text. The common denominator of all their statements is their weak theorising (moderate anti-theorism), underlined by the conviction that there is insufficient theoretical vocabulary available for translation studies with regard to an increasing number of translatorial “anomalies”.

So how do the translation scholars and experimental translators who have contributed to this issue understand the subject of their research? How do they describe criteria for defining experimental translation? Does the translation of experimental literature (including linguistic, logo-visual, conceptual, new-media, and electronic variations), inevitably amount to experimental translation by definition? The contributors are not unanimous in reaching this conclusion. Agnieszka Przybyszewska, for example, emphasises the use of “conventional”, “analog” procedures in the translation of digital literature. Joanna Studzińska, on the other hand, is inclined to make a case for the essentially experimental nature of translations of linguistic poetry. Elsewhere, the main criterion determining the specificity of the translatorial experiment and its distinctiveness from other practices of artistic translation is the differentiation of the medium, the material in which the translation is realised. The translatorial experiment is thus tantamount to the gesture of combining the art of the word with the visual arts. According to Marta Kaźmierczak, the translatorial experiment is first and foremost an important part of the didactic process – not only aimed at students of translation studies, but also at literary scholars: comparatists tracing convergences of literary traditions, and poetologists exploring intricacies of comparative metrics or discovering

the historical-literary liveliness of stylisation. Joanna Studzińska and Marta Kaźmierczak examine experimental translation with regard to the relation of the target text within an intertextual network of cultural discourses.

However, could we not say that experimentation is inevitably inscribed in every act of translation (i.e. interlingual/intercultural communication)? Such an argument is put forward by Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik in her article “taH pagh taHbe: a Shakespearean experiment in translation,” stressing that “experiment” (Latin: *experimentum*) entails not only the meanings of (repeated) “experience”, “trying out”, “testing”, “learning”, but also encompasses risk, danger, with a move towards the uncanny:

It is translation, then – whose cultural existence goes beyond the boundaries of one language, as it is absorbed and disseminated through a series of repetitions, reiterations, and refractions in the crucible of international cultures – which can be understood as a risky experiment rooted in the Proto-Indo-European *per-; its experimental nature concerns not only any movement in the *periphery* or outside the centre, but also contains an element of *pernicious* risk which is somewhat more visible in the Latin *periculum*, ‘threat.’ By venturing outside, beyond the boundaries of the *vernacular* (*verba vernacula*; the pure language of the fathers that binds us to home), we run the risk of coming into contact with the *foraneus*: *the dissimilar*, the *im-pure*, the *uncanny*.

(Kowalcze-Pawlik: p. 99–100²).

This diversity of ideas pertaining to (the difficulty of unequivocally defining) the content and scope of the concept of “experimental translation” and its typical exemplifications, the constantly deepening internal differentiation of the field of “experimental translation”, a considerable diversification of its defining criteria, and a constantly changing variety of exemplifications of translatorial practices considered “translation anomalies”, are by no means an expression of the methodological immaturity of translation studies focused on the questions of experimental translation; rather, they are its inherent properties, and determine its internal dynamics. One could say that this discourse is driven (shaped and evolved) during the course of the continuous differentiation of the criteria for defining the translatorial experiment and, consequently, testing its definition and pushing the boundaries of artistic translation. Conceptual ambiguity and the instability of the “translatorial experiment” is another fundamental feature of the discourse of translation

² If not indicated otherwise, all further quotes translated by Katarzyna Bazarnik.

studies focused on this particular domain of interlingual artistic creation. It is thus justifiable to venture a hypothesis that it is the very theory of translation that becomes the object of experimentation, which searches, tests and constantly verifies fluid and undefined tools for the study of experimental translation, and which can itself take radically experimental forms, such as *Fu wojny* written by the Polish translator of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (Bartnicki 2012b), posing as a translation of a Chinese treatise on translation, while in fact being the translator's self-commentary, or the translation of the video performance *The Unfinished Dream* by Sally-Shakti Willow and Joe Evans, rendered as *Niedokończony sen* by Maria Nova,³ which is in fact the creative component of a doctoral dissertation inspired by the life and work of Korean-American avant-garde artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

The examples of experimental translation discussed in the current issue encourage reflections not only on the liminal conditions of artistic translation (i.e. the limits of translatorial inventiveness), and on the multimodality of translatorial creative work, but also on the descriptive possibilities of contemporary translation studies. One more distinctive feature of translation studies focused on experimental translation is its exploratory and transdisciplinary orientation – the opening up of translation and of critical-theoretical translation studies “towards the outside”, in search of translation methods and critical-theoretical languages for describing translatorial practices in the fields of art theory and art history, museum studies, architecture, urban studies, performance studies, musicology, computer science (research on creative programming), media studies, sociology, and bibliography, among others.

³ During the performance, Sally-Shiakti Willow inscribes on her naked body fragments of Hak Kyung Cha's experimental novel *Dictée*, quoted in her poetic treatise *The Unfinished Dream* (2006). In the Polish version Maria Nova repeats her gesture, inscribing on her body her own translation of the text. The Polish performance artist is also the author of the remaining passages from *The Unfinished Dream* published in issue 36 of *eleWator* devoted to literary experiments. Links to the performances in the Youtube channel of the magazine: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScSmA5enacQ> (English performance) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbJOZFfLyIs> (Polish version of the performance).

5. Translating the text, transforming the book

The history and theory of the book, textual studies and genetic criticism are central to the translation of liberature, a multimodal literary genre in which text and material form of writing constitute an integral message (Bazarnik 2016). That's why translational studies of such works should include, for example, issues regarding typography or technology. Indeed, such reflections feature in the self-commentary offered in the Polish translation of Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* (*Podwójna wygrana jak nic*, 2010), "rendered/rearranged" by Jerzy Kutnik, its original first edition being a facsimile of the (authorial) typescript, "a visible and palpable trace of the writer's toil"⁴ (Kutnik 2010: III; transl. by KB), a meticulous record of an experiment in which the basic narrative unit is the surface of the page (see Fig. 3). In the afterword, the translator justifies his choice of the word editor rather than the typewriter as his writing tool, pointing to important technological differences that forced him to inventively overcome the challenge of technological limitations, with the view to achieving a layout comparable to the original one. So, on the one hand, the translatorial experiment consisted in working with the linguistic material, which had to be contained within a precisely delimited space, and on the other, on exploring the affordances of the software and discovering technological solutions not mentioned in standard manuals.

Federman's point was that "[t]he layout of the page should open up reading options for the potential reader" (Federman in Kutnik 2010: VII) upwards, downwards, from the right to the left, diagonally, and even backwards. Just as in Stéphane Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice*, in his novel the textual component functions "as a musical score, a sketch, a calligram made of words, a rebus from which a text can be created, arbitrarily dependent on the spiritual setup of the reader, generated in his or her mind" (Różycki 2005: 117). Thus "spacified" text (cf. Slotte 1999: 140), composed of crossing textual paths, which Jerzy Kutnik, Tomasz Różycki (the translator of the French poem), and Katarzyna Bazarnik in Zenon Fajfer's poem "7 Letters"⁵ (2010) have encountered, is, linguistically, a similar challenge to the one taken up by

⁴ „[będące] widocznym i namacalnym śladem ciężkiej pracy pisarza”.

⁵ Both English translations: of the poem "7 Letters", and of the whole volume: *dwadzieścia jeden liter* rendered as *Ten Letters* (Fajfer 2010), can be seen as a kind of experiment favouring the formal equivalence over the linguistic one.

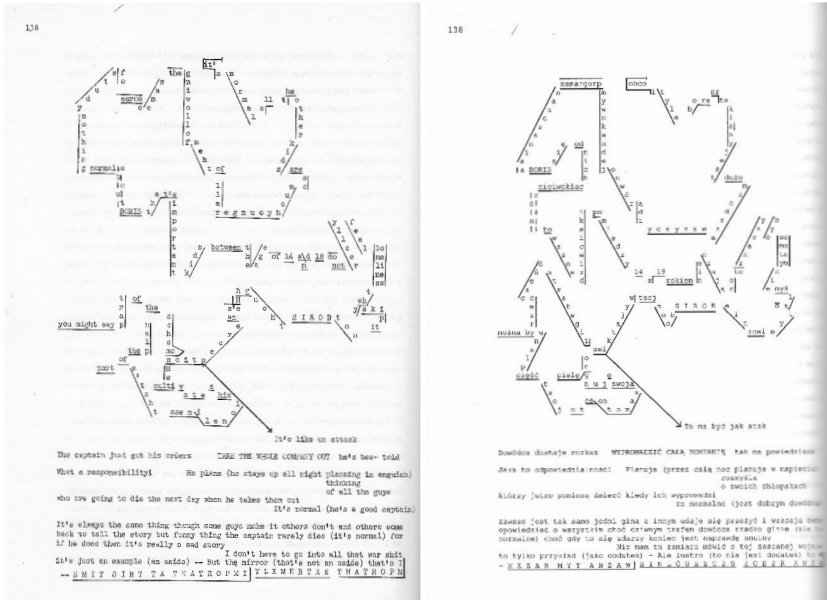


Figure 3. Raymond Federman *Double or Nothing*, page 138 of the original (1973) and its Polish translation (2010)

Monika Górska-Olesińska, Mariusz Pisarski, and Agnieszka Przybyszewska, who have translated text generators (see their respective articles in the current issue). Both types of translation inspire further questions about the platform itself (the materiality of the printed book or screen, type and size of font, or code, etc.). This is only one step away from the statement that transdisciplinary translation studies and studies on experimental translation function as a lens, focusing the most significant questions regarding transformations of the art of translation towards interactive and generative multimedia projects (see, among others, Okulska 2016). A good example of such a work, in which the digital medium is closely interlinked with liberature, is Nick Montfort's *The World Clock*, translated by Piotr Marecki (2014). Both the author and the translator are scholars researching platforms and text carriers, as well experimenters in the field of electronic literature, and Marecki is also renowned for his significant achievements in electronic literature translation (Marecki 2016). Inspired by a fictional review of an imaginary novel entitled *One Human Minute*, included by Stanisław Lem in his *Library of the 21st*

Century (Biblioteka XXI wieku), Montfort created a generator with which he generated text included in the printed book. The translator decided to follow the analogous procedure, translating the code – that is, the invisible layer of the text.

On the other hand, a kind of analog algorithm can be found in Zenon Fajfer's emanative poems, also containing "invisible" texts, such as "Ars Poetica" (2016 [2005]; 2016), "Primum Mobile" (2010b), and the volume *Powieki* (Eyelids, 2013b). Most of them come in two forms: the analog (printed) one, and the digital (electronic) one. Their experimental form: a multi-layered acrostic in which one reads initials of all words, lines, and stanzas, and in the case of "Ostrygi" [Oysters] and "Sonetrix" cycles (Fajfer 2013c: 49–55, 11–28) also the first letters of their particular poems, simply enforces experimentation in search for solutions optimal for a given (plat)form of their presentation. In the case of their kinetic electronic versions, the translator worked closely with the author to recreate in the English language versions the emanational form that offers the possibility of movement, i.e. the folding and unfolding of the text on the screen, for example in "Ars Poetica" (Fajfer 2016). In this context, it is Biserka Rajčić, the Serbian translator of Fajfer's "Ostrygi", who has offered us an experiment of sorts (Fajfer 2013a: 221–224). Her translation of the cycle, published in a (printed) anthology of contemporary Polish poetry, renders only the surface layers of the original poems, without the "invisible" ones.

As is clearly evident, this handful of examples demonstrates that for scholars of translation, literature, and cultural studies, experimental translation, regarded as the medium for artistic innovation and creative epistemology, has an almost laboratorial significance: it allows us to foreground fundamental questions on the theory of literature, the theory of artistic translation, and the theory of intercultural communication. On the one hand, the cases discussed here confirm the above-mentioned argument regarding the necessity of an interdisciplinary research toolkit; on the other, they indicate the vitality of translation as a fundamental metaphor describing the innovative and dynamic nature of technology and the material carriers of information. Thus, researching experimental translation ultimately means exploring the creative capabilities of culture.

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