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DOUGLAS ROBINSON, CHARLES BERNSTEIN, VERSATORIUM AND METONYMIC REPETITION: TROPES AS A PRACTICAL TOOL FOR TRANSLATION CRITICISM*

Abstract

The author proposes a new critical model for translation analysis. The method is based on translation tropes, an idea presented by Douglas Robinson in *The Translator's Turn*, which appears here in a much expanded and modified form. Five tropes (irony, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole and metalepsis) describe five types of translator and the respective affective motivations that inform decision-making in translation: the translator's affect towards the Other of the source text and culture. One trope in particular (metonymy) is examined in more detail. The analytical part, which presents practical results achieved with this theoretical tool, is based on the alphabetical translations of Charles Bernstein's poetry by Peter Waterhouse and his VERSATORIUM group.

Keywords: translation theory, literary translation, tropes, rhetoric, translation criticism

* This article was originally published in Polish in *Przekładaniec* 2016, vol. 33, pp. 255–281. The English version was published with the financial support from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (DUN grant).

This article presents selected findings from my research project *Tłumacz wobec Innego – tropy i sygnatury* (The Translator and the Other: Tropes and Signatures) funded by an ETIUDA 1 grant from Poland's National Science Centre (NCN). That project led to a doctoral dissertation which I defended with distinction, on 22 September 2015, at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

Still, lest I defend my division too strenuously and make it seem like I am attached to it, believe in it, let me close this section with an open invitation (once again) to do with these tropes what you will, conflate them, splinter them, whatever. I do not always think they work myself. The only reason I offer them to you is that they seem to work better than anything else I have seen; but they are not perfect, and never will be, and never need to be. They are tools. Use them as you like, or throw them in a drawer and let them collect greasy dust. (Robinson 1991: 181)

This statement, which strikes a somewhat unexpected tone in an academic publication, comes from *The Translator's Turn* (1991), a book by Douglas Robinson outlining his proposed model of translation criticism, which amounts to a descriptive effort focused on the person of the translator (also including translator somatics) in order to make sense of the tropic motivations behind specific translation choices and strategies.

Robinson proposes a turn in process research to focus on the translator, an approach where the somatic dimension (capacity for physical sensation) is viewed as having a significant impact on decisions made in the process of translation. He criticizes the “instrumentalism and perfectionism” of Western translation theory, which builds on a tradition shaped by St. Augustine (cf. Gray 1994: 178–179) – that is to say, on the cultural expectation that the translator should be invisible, his or her humanity reduced to the condition of a tool for producing equivalence. Robinson also brings into question the supermeme of objective equivalence,¹ which he regards as a top-down imposition that demands the impossible: all equivalence being inconclusive, “objective equivalence” cannot serve as a criterion for evaluating translation or its “goals”. In line with his insistence that translators must not be treated as mere tools, Robinson proposes that the focus of translation theory should shift from product to process analysis, and incorporate the translator’s somatic motivations. Unlike the functionalist theories (skopos theory and others), Robinson chooses to concentrate on the unconscious, the subliminal, the idiosyncratic – his approach rules out that any pre-formulated or settled “goals” of translation should guide deliberate strategy.

¹ Although Robinson does not use that concept, his understanding of equivalence is compatible with the idea of the *supermeme* proposed by Andrew Chesterman (cf. Chesterman 1997: 7–14). For a more detailed discussion of the concept of supermemes see my article on the translation duo of Rózewicz and Lachmann (cf. Okulska 2015: 321–322).

Robinson similarly rejects mind-body dualism and emphasizes instead the indelible connection between the two. He proposes in its place a distinction between that which is *internal* and that which is *external*, or that which is *individual* and that which is *collective*, where the demarcation lines trace the contours of the human body. “Idiosomatics” comprises personal experience, emotion and perception, whereas “ideosomatics” is the translator’s response to the surrounding cultural and social norms that condition the translator’s actions and thinking. Like Kenneth Burke, he thinks of translation in performative terms as a form of “dramatism”² (as opposed to the scientific approach, which is purely observational). This dramatism amounts to individual agency: driven by personal, idiosomatic motivations, and playing out as part of a *scene* (the sum total of social or cultural conditioning and ideosomatic motivations) (cf. Robinson 1991: 127; Burke 1962: 44–45).

Robinson follows this line of reasoning to question the category of objective equivalence and replaces it with a proposed concept of “somatic equivalence”, where the translator “feels” that a given phrase is suitable based on idio- and ideosomatic factors. Regrettably, Robinson’s argument is inconsistent, and it leads to conceptual confusion where he makes a sort of crypto-hermeneutic leap from the body of the translator to the “body” of the text, which must be “felt” by the translator:

If you do not feel the body of the SL text, you will have little chance of generating a physically tangible or emotionally alive TL text. The TL text you create will read like computer-generated prose: no life, no feeling. (Robinson 1991: 17).

In addition to somatics, Robinson also deals with the tropics of translation, another major area discussed in *The Translator’s Turn*, to describe the hermeneutic tools relating to the source text (tropes) and the culture/language/reader of the original³ (meaning different “versions”: subversion, diversion, perversion, etc.). His theoretical proposal becomes the starting point for my reflection on the problem. Robinson’s typology of tropes is based on the six

² In this instance the term refers to a method for playing a particular role rather than to a theatrical piece or a conflict situation.

³ Despite its somewhat controversial status in translation studies, I deliberately use the term “the original” to refer to the text being translated, mainly owing to the interestingly fluid border between the textual points of departure and arrival, or between that which is individual (original) and that which is being copied, reconstructed, or appropriated. In this article the “original” is treated as a variable function rather than an ontologically immanent characteristic of a text.

main tropes proposed by Harold Bloom, which Robinson treats as defensive “revisionary ratios” that function as defences against the original⁴ (this is again inconsistent: Robinson variously takes *the original* to mean the original text, or the norms and traditions that inform expectations with regard to the translator’s task, or even the author of the source text). So, how can we apply the different tropes to the problem of translation?

In proposing the category of “metaphorical translator”,⁵ Robinson quotes Burke’s definition (“[m]etaphor is a device for seeing something *in terms of* something else”, 137), and uses Burke’s notion of device/tool for his own purposes: “The ‘metaphorical’ translator, rather than subordinating him- or herself to an abstract ideal of structural equivalence (...), can instead use metaphorical equivalence as a poetic tool for bending the SL text into the TL, for generating a TL text that will stand in some significant relation to the SL text” (138). Metonymy, Robinson emphasizes, is similarly a trope of equivalence – however, “where metaphor says boldly, ‘this *is* that’, metonymy says more cautiously, ‘this and that are parts of the same thing’” (138). Consequently, the *metonymic* translator acts in full awareness of the fact that the “entirety” being conveyed in translation is not a perfect rendering, but merely a “symbolization”: a symbolic construct that makes it easier to reconstruct the original (140). If synecdoche is a trope of representation, meaning (among other things) a “substitution of a part for a whole”, then *synecdochic* translation, according to Robinson, “isolates a single part of the SL text, treats it as representative of the whole, and renders *that* in the TL” in an attempt to preserve the relationship of quasi-equivalence with the original whole (153). An *ironic* translator, according to Robinson, negates the possibility of translation per se, an attitude that, incidentally, licenses a considerable degree of liberty; an ironic translator does not presume to be able to find a transparent rendering of the original, and therefore feels warranted in taking liberties to come up with a daring interpretation, a distinctive idiom, etc. (167–175). The *hyperbolic* translator takes an even more daring approach with regard to the original (Robinson uses the word “exaggeration”), but the motivation here is different from that of an ironic

⁴ Bloom wrote that “[a] rhetorical critic can regard a defence as a concealed trope”; by contrast, Robinson regards tropes as concealed defences (cf. Bloom 1975: 89).

⁵ Or metaphorical *translation*, since those two terms can be used almost interchangeably. A “metaphorical” translator (or, respectively, an “ironic” or “metonymic” one, etc.) is a translator who takes certain steps in a translation out of inherently metaphorical (or ironic, or metonymic, etc.) motivations, as defined above.

translator – the idea is to improve the SL text in the TL “in order to give it its ‘proper’ fullness” (176). In this respect Robinson’s concept comes closest to the idea of translation as explicitation. The last tropic category proposed by Robinson is metalepsis, though despite his careful reading of Bloom’s *A Map of Misreading*, and for all his own studies on the subject, he freely concedes that he is still not entirely certain what metalepsis might be exactly; he is similarly evasive about the question of what it does as a translation tool – he approaches metalepsis “negatively, by asking what it would *not* be. It would not be a bridge: solid, sturdy, built according to the proper technical specifications, permanently there to carry people safely and unproblematically” (184). Robinson vaguely associates metaleptic translation with “engaging the paradoxes of time” and turns to some loosely connected reflections on modernizing and archaizing techniques in translation (cf. 185).

Regrettably, the main problem with Robinson’s interdisciplinary approach is that he tackles problems for which he has neither the competences nor the required research tools; as a result, his theoretical proposals often fail to move beyond abstraction. Where theory ends, Robinson tends to wheel out a commonsensical empirical approach, often based on his own experience as a translator. His models accordingly seem to be of limited use even to Robinson himself, who prefers instead to roam freely in the realm of anecdote. His examples of translatorial problems are interesting, but his analysis mostly fails to apply his own concepts in the analysis, unless by way of loose association. As a result, the theoretical background of his study is somewhat scattershot; Pawelec describes it as “an umbrella of theory” (Pawelec 2012: 27), a kind of smokescreen serving to deflect or obscure potential criticisms about lack of academic rigour in his theory.

Still, to quote one reviewer of *The Translator’s Turn*, “[d]espite its shortcomings, this is a stimulating book to read” (Stark 1992: 868), and it invites the reader to keep looking for solutions which might ultimately produce a consistent theoretical model. In this spirit, I am taking Robinson up on his suggestion that his study should be treated as an inspiring metaphor: an opening in a dialogue rather than the direct basis for my own analysis. In my proposed model, the focus on the translator as an individual does not mean studying actual thought processes and emotions occurring in the process of translation, those being unavailable to empirical study. Instead, the tropes and their corresponding aspects of translation are yet again treated as theoretical categories, but the kind of translation criticism that gets predicated on their basis is focused on the translator as a person

and their motivations, rather than on the amount of equivalence which may or may not have been achieved in translation. In this sense, I tried to engage with Robinson's suggestion that we need to shift the paradigm in how we look at translation.

I have revised and supplemented Robinson's concepts to propose a model of critical, symptomatic reading where the symptomatic element – meaning that which is being debunked or demystified, that which is being “tracked down” – is the translator's attitude towards the Other, variously meaning the original and its poetics, structure, materiality, authorship, source language, source culture, etc. The key to reconstructing the translator's attitude – done in order to map the “human factor” onto the theoretical categories – is what I call the distinctive “signatures” impressed on the text, which bear traces of the translator's affective reaction to the Other in the process of reading. In the act of translation, the translator comes face to face with the original-as-the-Other. The translator's stance will then result in certain textual operations – or tropes. My proposed model consists of five tropes that indicate different affects or stances towards the Other, and which guide different operations in translation. Such affects are intended to operationalize somatic actions in textual terms, which Robinson believed would amount to a welcome contribution to translation criticism.

I also agree with Robinson's idea that translation should be approached holistically, a situation in its entirety. Accordingly, my analysis “tracks down” the *visible* translator who leaves a distinctive signature in the translation through their decisions, stylistic idiom, biographical notes: a translator who leaves traces of translatorial presence in the paratext, in the translation, and in the culture – especially in the current era marked by easy access to sources and public prominence of authors and translators (meetings with readers, interviews, comments, blogs).

In this sense a theory of tropes is not meant to replace, or to compete with, existing tools in translation criticism – on the contrary, those existing tools can serve a useful descriptive purpose in discussing what happens to a text in the process of translation, and as such they offer a useful and essential point of departure for analysing tropes. This is because tropes correspond to motivations that may guide the choice of translation strategies; however, the effort to identify those motivations should start with an effort to identify the translator's distinctive signatures in the translated text (understood broadly to include the accompanying peri- and epitexts). In other words, my question, which I pose with regard to the translator's attitude towards

the Other, is a question of “Why?”. Accordingly, I do not wish to limit my exploration to, say, stating the fact that foreignization has been used; instead, my aim is to try and investigate the translator’s motivation behind the use of foreignization in that particular instance.

I expand Robinson’s proposed model to include an affective element, but I also narrow it down to a set of five tropes, leaving metaphor out of the list. Translation is itself metaphor, and metaphor is translation – the very mechanism of metaphor as defined by Burke and quoted by Robinson (speaking of one thing in terms of another) is an inherent part of the general definition of translation. Accordingly, I consider metaphor to belong on a higher category level than the other tropes, which puts it outside of the tropic typology we will be relying on to describe particular instances of translation.

I will outline the proposed amended model briefly before homing in on a single trope for a more detailed discussion. As presented here, in abridged form, the selection and definitions of my affect-focused expansions of tropes might seem arbitrary and haphazard, however these are based on an extensive research project into possible translation attitudes with regard to the original-as-the-Other.

1. Metonymy – where the love of creative repetition motivates the translator to reduce the original-as-the-Other to its fundamental creative mechanism, and to creatively re-produce the operation of that mechanism in the target language. Examples might include translators working in the OuLiPo or liberature traditions.
2. Syntecdoche – where the translator fetishizes one selected element of the original-as-the-Other and treats it as a legitimate representation of the whole; for instance: form being prioritised at the expense of content, or vice versa. In a sense, this procedure can be treated as part of the translator’s effort to identify what we might call the *semantic dominant* of a translation (cf. Barańczak 1992).
3. Hyperbole – an overprotective translator colonizes the original-as-the-Other and translates it according to their idea of “what’s best” for the original; in doing so the translator also shrinks from claiming merit in the process (cf. Bloom’s concepts of sublimity and grotesque); for instance, the translator might use explicitation, addition, or syntactic airbrushing. This approach often goes hand in hand with a great reverence for the author.
4. Metalepsis – the translator assumes what we might call an abject stance towards the original-as-the-Other. The relationship is characterized

by attraction and repulsion in equal measure, pressing the translator into an awkward in-between space (or time). Examples of metaleptic translations might include the use of archaic diction in modern times. In the case of retranslation, the original-as-the-Other may expand to also include existing previous translations. When that happens, existing translations may be treated as a continuation of the original-as-the-Other, and the metaleptic translator will make an effort to position themselves within that continuum, and to somehow make their own belatedness appear timely.

5. Irony – a translator with a strong and distinctive idiom treats the Other with a mixture of hospitability and hostility: the Other is then simultaneously treated as a guest and as a kind of subordinate expected to conform to the translator’s house rules. Ironic translators are often poets who are well known in their own (target) language, into which they “invite” the poets they translate; in this case “their own language” means the national language in question as well as the poet’s own distinctive poetics.

I do not mean to suggest that the categories proposed here have anything like surgical precision. Moreover, a human translator may be apt to pull the crafty move of combining strategies from two or more tropes in a single translation. However, I believe that a new theoretical model is a justified risk here given that what we stand to gain is the promise of new quality in discussing translations (especially given that the model is an improved iteration). Let us therefore examine, in more detail, the definition and functioning of metonymy as a category of translatorial motivation.

Metonymic translation. In search of the hidden mechanism, or the love of repetition

Don Quixote was so enamoured of chivalric characters with notions such as honour, custom or virtue that, although chivalrous knights were obsolete in his own day, his love of that idea pushed him, willy-nilly, to repeat that experience. He identified the component elements in the idea of an errant knight; he carefully put together the various cogs and wheels from the mechanism that first gave glorious existence to that knight; and he repeated that operation, step by careful step, on his own person. As the wheel of

repetition turned again, all of *Don Quixote*, along with the errant knight's story, underwent another repetition (or at least an attempted repetition) – I am referring here of course to Pierre Menard, a character in a story by Jorge Luis Borges: a madman who, in a flight of romantic fancy, resolves to become the author of *Don Quixote*.

In terms of my proposed tropic typology of translatorial motivations, Menard's resolve (not unlike the resolve of Don Quixote himself) is a perfect example of the metonymic pattern. In the story, Menard is not trying to impose his own dominant idiom on that Spanish tale; he does not fetishize any one of its elements, or presume to improve it from a position of superiority – nor does he position himself within some sort of metaleptic space between the extra- and intradiegetic worlds (significantly, Menard does not choose to preface his *Don Quixote* with an autobiographical note). Instead, his intention is to identify all of the moving parts in the creative mechanism that first put that great novel into existence, and then to launch that mechanism into operation one more time so that the same book could be created anew:

He did not want to compose another Quixote – which is easy – but the Quixote itself. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes. (Borges 2007: 39)

As Søren Kierkegaard would argue, repetition is associated with the copying of an action, situation or condition, mostly in relation to one and the same person – it relies on a desire to relive that which has been experienced before. However, because translation does not involve a repetition of the translator's own experience, but rather it repeats an experience of the Other (mediated though it may be through the translator's emotions), the chief point of interest to us is repetition of that particular kind: based on a borrowing, a *de-facing*⁶ – in the same way as *Don Quixote* resurrects the figure of the errant knight, or as Pierre Menard sets out to write a new-yet-the-same *Don Quixote* – primarily because it involves the associated affect of metonymic translation. Although Kierkegaard does not make this point, it seems that his own distinction essentially reflects that dualism. Kierkegaard uses the concepts of *repetition* and *recollection*:

⁶ I borrow this idea from Paul de Man's *Autobiography as De-Facement* (De Man 1979).

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. (Kierkegaard 2013: 381)

Accordingly, we can regard that movement towards the future as an act of repetition that, unlike passive recollection, is creative and active. Only that kind of repetition, Kierkegaard argues, is worth the effort:

Repetition's love is in truth the only happy love. Like recollection's love, it does not have the relentlessness of hope, the uneasy adventurousness of discovery, but neither does it have the sadness of recollection – it has the blissful security of the moment. Hope is a new garment, stiff and starched and lustrous, but it has never been tried on, and therefore one does not know how becoming it will be or how it will fit. Recollection is a discarded garment that does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it. Repetition is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags. (Kierkegaard 2013: 131–132)

In both instances we are dealing with things being reduced to their basic mechanism, so that its creative power can be harnessed and launched into operation one more time. In a similar context, Bloom writes about a “metonymic regression-to-origins” (Bloom 1975: 90), and points out that metonymy

[is] a change of name or substituting the external aspect of a thing for the thing itself, a displacement by contiguity that repeats what it displaced, but always with a lesser tone. (Bloom 1975: 98–99)⁷

A synecdochic translator, to restate, fetishizes a single element of the original, and treats it as being representative of the whole – that is to say, reduces the original in translation. The metonymic strategy is similarly based on reduction, however in this case the reduction is not the aim of a translation, but merely its intermediary stage. The original-as-the-Other becomes “reduced” to the fundamental mechanism that undergirds the source text (this could be a narrative device, a formal technique, etc.), and that mechanism then becomes “translated” in the etymological sense of the word, i.e. “taken across”, moved in space, relocated from one place to another. In this case, the move takes place

⁷ In the context of translation studies, I would not interpret Bloom's “lesser” tone as a value judgement, but rather as preserving the traditional balance of power between the author and translator.

between two different languages: the mechanism identified in one language gets launched into operation in the other. This operation could be compared to an organ transplant, where the role of the new organ is to resume operation in a new organism.⁸ The task of the translator is not to translate the meaning into the target language (whatever meaning might be), but rather to set the target language in motion in a certain way so that it might reconstruct that meaning afresh (in other words, repeat it in order to recreate it).

To a translator, metonymic translation motivated by the love of prospective repetition (i.e. repetition directed at the future) is an opportunity to create a new version of the original text. I use the word “version” advisedly: the paratext in such translations (the copy on the cover, translation criticism, etc.) often uses terms like *version* or *variation*. The problem with “versions”, in this case, is that the boundaries of translation are not delineated clearly enough to distinguish between translation and “versions”, such as rewritings, appropriations or adaptations. Robinson, too, appears to be expecting critique on those terminological grounds: he illustrates the concept of metonymic translation with a hypothetical translation of *The Bells*, a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, where the translator might want to reduce the poem to its creative phonetic mechanism in order to, as it were, “replay” the translation in the target language:

But that, the traditional objection would go, would not be translation. At most it could be called a “variation” (...) This objection derives from the restrictive ideosomatics of Western translation, according to which, as Eugene Nida says in one of his chapter titles in *From One Language to Another*, “Translating Means Translating Meaning”. A specifically *metonymic* (tropic) approach to translation keeps reminding us that sense is not the only element to which an SL text can be reduced. (Robinson 1991: 144)

In an earlier paragraph Robinson suggests that translating word-for-word or sentence-meaning-for-sentence-meaning could likewise be considered as

⁸ This metaphor obviously plays on the traditional, simplified idea of translation as an exercise in “transporting” meaning from A to B. Andrew Chesterman includes that idea on his list of five translation supermemes, and notes correctly that the meaning that is supposedly being moved to B (i.e. into a target language and culture) simultaneously remains, quite safe and sound, in A (the original text). Taken literally, the movement metaphor (with its *sources* and *targets*) might suggest that translation involves destroying the original (cf. Chesterman 1997: 20). To stick to medical metaphors, a stem cell transplant might be a more apt comparison in this instance.

examples of metonymic translation, extending the basic unit of translation further and further. Later on, he cites radical instances of modification, such as Celia and Louis Zukofsky's translation of Catullus' songs, in which they "followed" – as they explain in the preface – "the sound, rhythm and syntax of his Latin", trying to convey not so much the literal sense as the "sound of the Latin words" (Robinson 1991: 145).

I believe that this kind of thinking of translation as a reductive recreation of the basic creative mechanism is a useful and noteworthy tool for translation analysis. I would perhaps raise one quibble about including word-for-word translation under this definition, since that kind of exercise relies not on some singular textual mechanism, but rather on the ontology of (any) natural language. As such, this category might be too general to throw light on literature and its vagaries – instead of producing clarity, the inclusion of word-for-word translation under this heading merely bolts another confusing tier onto that metaphor. Finally, Robinson's approach runs the risk of legitimizing a translation that bears no relationship to the original at the level of either the signifier or the signified, since the simple fact that a "mechanism" of the signifying/signified exists in language might be argued to provide "coherence" to any pairing of texts.

In summary: according to my proposed model of translation tropes, metonymic translation is motivated by a love of prospective, or re-creative, repetition. Such repetition involves a return to the sources, a reduction of the original text to its fundamental creative mechanism, which then gets set in motion again within the target language (or, in the case of intersemiotic translation, within some other medium). That creative mechanism need not be understood as "meaning", in the sense of an arbitrary relationship between the *signifiant* and the *signifié*.

Beyond the principle of meaning – alphabetical translation by the VERSATORIUM group

VERSATORIUM is a group of young researchers at the Institute of Comparative Studies, University of Vienna. The group was established in 2011 around a course on poetry and translation taught by the Austrian poet and writer Peter Waterhouse. The idea of the course was to work on the theory and practice of poetry in translation by spending 30-40 hours per week on theoretical

and critical work associated with American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry.⁹ This kind of intensive immersion is part of the group's programme, since "new things may also arise out of tiredness and exhaustion" ("Auch aus Müdigkeit und Erschöpfung können neue Sachen erwachsen", Grillmayr 2013). The range of poetic material was similarly ambitious:

We translated anything we could get hold of, everything which was around and on the book, not just the poetry – any kind of symbols and signs were also translated. We were interested in material that cannot be translated. (Zhou 2014)

The resulting publication, produced by VERSATORIUM over a series of trip and meetings,¹⁰ fits into the framework of liberature (although the term itself is not used by the group): meaning is generated not only by text, but also by cover design, layout and font choices. The back cover foregoes such traditional elements as critical praise or editorial paratexts to include instead a one-sentence poem that amounts to a commentary on the book in the digital age: the familiar phrase, "This page is intentionally left blank" (appearing in electronic books to remove doubt about a possible scanning error) is paraphrased here as *This Poem Intentionally Left Blank*.

The punning name of VERSATORIUM points to the group's commitment to wordplay. The group grew out of a discussion class (German: *Konversatorium*) devoted to poetry and verse. On top of that, the group's members insist, the name also contains an echo of the English adjective *versatile*, referring to the group's translatorial ambitions. Among other things, that versatility means an openness to unconventional methods, exchange of ideas, and inclusivity in translation:

⁹ The group comprised, among others, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, Bruce Andrews, Susan Howe and Charles Bernstein. At the MLA conference in 1983 Bernstein gave a talk on *The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA*, criticizing consumerism and the critical propensity to favour safe, respectful literature over the radical avant-garde. Members of the group used different poetics – ranging from abstract to allegorical poetry – but what they had in common, as Marcinkiewicz argues, was the fact that "they engaged with the world not as a location with its varied nature and culture, but rather as a tension between contexts; to them, language was not a tool for describing reality, but rather the outcome of the exchange of meanings" (cf. Marcinkiewicz 2011: 52).

¹⁰ The idea for the translation group was to organise trips to what Waterhouse calls Europe's "thresholds" (*Schwellen*): zones at risk from political and armed conflict. The aim was to discover the sources and mechanisms of misunderstanding, or communicative situations where the primacy of meaning has been negated because it fails to fulfil its proper function.

We allow everything. Also every kind of activity in the room. If somebody wants to go to sleep or change the order of the furniture, or read a different poem, or point (...) to something completely different, we're not thinking about "It is permitted". This way we don't exclude any suggestions or versions. It's highly inclusive, to the point that we don't produce any [conclusive] results. We produce inclusions but no results. (Waterhouse 2014: 00:26:28)¹¹

Such inconclusive nature of translation, or a deliberate lack of conclusive results in translation (or reading), is very much part of the VERSATORIUM programme. The translators in the group assume that meaning, like thinking, does not yield conclusive results. Translation thus becomes an open-ended activity given to constant reconfiguration, association and continuity. This reading stance, a radical version of Derrida's concept of iterability, made it possible for the group to tackle Bernstein's poetry, where meaning (in the sense of a definite "message") is often put to the test by the materiality of the language. The Viennese translation group first met with the American poet over *Johnny Cake Hollow (With Strings: Poems, 2001)*, a poem that amounts to a record (one of many, Waterhouse would insist) of the potential of language – the poem demonstrates the creative potential of sorting letters and sounds into configurations, free of the imperative of meaning that gets imposed by any given national language:

Johnny Cake Hollow
 Xo quwollen swacked unt myrry flooped
 Sardone to fligrunt's swarm, ort
 Jirmy plaight org garvey swait ib
 Giben durrs urk klurpf. Sheb
 Boughtie bloor de dazzy dule dun
 Fruppi's ghigo's gly, jud
 Chyllrophane jed jimmsy's cack –
 Exenst aerodole fump glire. Eb
 Horray bloot, ig orry sluit neb
 Nist neb ot neb gwon. Shleb
 Atsum imba outsey burft allappie
 Merp av ords. Een ainsey swish
 Ien ansley sploop ughalls dep dulster
 Flooge, ig ahrs unt nimbet twool
 Begroob, ig ooburs quwate ag blurg.

¹¹ This is a transcript of Peter Waterhouse's comments at a seminar held at Harvard University on 9 April 2014.

The point of departure for the members of VERSATORIUM was a fascination with the poem's untranslatability (in terms of sound-meaning equivalence), and they quickly realised that in principle the poem was highly active (in the same sense that thinking is an activity), and was therefore "actually highly translatable because the poem itself was suggesting meaning at every point of every line. Thus, it was not only very translatable but also necessary to translate" (Zhou 2014).¹² Which is not to say that the translators decided to provide the reader with ready-made meanings – as they point out, "Translation is a type of commentary. We don't introduce meaning. If you want meaning, you have to add it" (Zhou 2014).

In *Charles Bernstein: Gedichte Und Übersetzen* (Vienna 2013), VERSATORIUM's first and only book publication to date, original texts by Bernstein (and, as we are about to see, by others) are placed side by side with translations, original-translations (as explained later in the article), translator's comments, and texts that could be regarded as records of intermediary stages of translation, between the rough draft and the finished version. The book has no less than four versions of *Johnny Cake Hollow* in translation. One of the translators, Julia Degg, shares her own system for translatorial reading in a text:

I read the poem *Johnny Cake Hollow*. And in the middle of the poem I see – for I can't unlearn German – the word *Jude* (Jew) in the word *jud*. And from that *Jude* I make a leap – for I can't unlearn those leaps of thought either – to Hebrew. I look it up – I speak no Hebrew – and I come across that word in the dictionary, יָדָב, transcribed as *ke'ev*. And I think – for I can't unlearn English – that *ke'ev* sounds like *cave*, *Höhle* [in German]. I see that this is the Hebrew word for *pain*. And then it springs to my mind that *Höhle* is also *hollow* in English. (...) As I read on, I hear the English word for *pain* appear later in the poem in the word *Chryllophane*, which the author pronounces as *crylo-pain*. I am glad to have unlearned to jump to logical, warranted conclusions. (...) Borders fracture. And reading turns into wandering. (Degg 2013: 10–11)

Waterhouse calls this *alphabetical translation*.¹³ This is distinct from literal translation: instead of focusing on literal meaning, alphabetical translation looks at the meaning of letters as audiovisual elements which can be sorted into sequences. This approach (found in almost every translation in the book,

¹² This again invokes Derrida's idea that "The more untranslatable a text, the more insistently it begs and demands to be translated" (Hermans 2009: 303).

¹³ Waterhouse used that term in a lecture delivered at the Mahindra Humanities Center, Harvard University, on 3 November 2014. The lecture was part of the *Rethinking Translation* series.

and in every dimension) is based on Walter Benjamin's idea of the translator's task (which, incidentally, is a metonymic concept). Benjamin believed that the translator's task is not to transmit meaning, but to achieve a kind of supplementary re-creation, unbound by the imperative of equivalence at the semantic level (as in the linguistic approaches, where translation is treated as an extension of the process of message transmission): in translating we need to go back to an original language (*Ursprache*), which is none other than our fundamental creative mechanism. Benjamin's idea offers a useful commentary on the notion of alphabetical translation (i.e. metonymic translation) of Bernstein's linguistic poetry as practised by the VERSATORIUM group:

For what does a literary work "say"? What does it communicate? It "tells" very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information – hence, something inessential. (Benjamin 2004b: 15)

The poem remains within the range of sensory perception (sight and, when reading aloud, also hearing),¹⁴ and though it may be difficult to "understand" (in the sense of being able to decode its meanings), the point in this kind of translation is no longer "meaning" (the message) – just as it is not the message that propels a reading of the original. In this instance, the translator engages in a metonymic gesture: she returns to the sources in order to repeat the operation of the mechanism that governs the poem. This matters in Bernstein's poetry: a poem should not be "like a road, where the reader is being led along, but more like a garden or a primeval forest, where every reader can keep finding new paths of their own".¹⁵ Again, what is at

¹⁴ The concept of sensory-based translation theory (with a typology that maps onto the different senses that get activated in the process of translation) focuses almost exclusively on transmission (sensory inputs and outputs) and overlooks the role of the senses in the generation of meaning. Thus, literary translation is regarded *a priori* as an instance of the visual mode, since written translation has an essentially visual nature; even where the text is read out loud, that duality is no more than a tool for (literally) *reading the meanings* contained in the text. In the example shown above, the senses operate as a medium in the sense of Marshall McLuhan's idea that *the medium is the message*, as their function replaces meaning in a purely logocentric sense. Cf. M. Kaźmierczak, „Zmysły w procesie i odbiorze tłumaczenia” [The senses in the process and reception of translation], an article in the project “Sensualność w literaturze polskiej” (The sensory dimension of Polish literature) led by Prof. W. Bolecki at the Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences.

¹⁵ “Das Gedicht soll nicht wie ein Weg sein, den entlang der Leser gelenkt wird, sondern eher wie ein Garten oder Urwald, in dem jeder Leser seinen eigenen Weg immer wieder neu suchen kann”. This quote appears in the publicity materials prepared by Korrespondenzen to accompany the book publication.

stake here is activity, an unrelenting quest for meaning with no guarantee of success, but also no penalties for failure; a process which is being handled, to use a grammatical metaphor, in an eternally imperfect mode.

The translator allows herself to get carried away by words and contingent meanings: here, all meaning is interchangeable, provisional, competing, especially given that it is also open to interlingual connotations. Dengg views those potential relations as a mechanism that deserves to be set in motion again in her translation. This is an assumption that fits right into Bernstein's thinking of his own poetry, where poems are viewed as "linguistic time capsules, linguistic dioramas, where every phrase is a hyperlink leading to further exposition" (cf. Marcinkiewicz 2011: 52).

Metonymic repetition of repetition, or translating translation

The book published by VERSATORIUM features not only original poems by Charles Bernstein, but also originals of his poems. The distinction in this apparent tautology is made possible by the fact that some of the pieces have a translational nature and are clearly marked as such. As I point out above, the paratext in *Gedichte und Übersetzen* has the unmistakable character of a piece of liberature – semantically autonomous, intentional, and in many ways deliberately non-normative. The titles appear at the top of each page (if we accept the dominant top-to-bottom direction of linear reading), with the exception of one translation of *Cover Me Up for I Cannot Myself Cover* (142), where the German title, *Verstecke denn mich finde ich selbst mir nich Deckung* (143), appears below the translation. That single exception aside, titles as paratext receive a standard treatment in the book.

On the other hand, the way the authors and the translators are identified in the text amounts to a performative reaction to the recurring complaint, in translation discourse, that translators are routinely belittled because their names appear in a smaller font size than those of authors, who traditionally take pride of place in publications. In this particular book, all the names appear as two- or three-letter lowercase abbreviations printed in the same font type and size. Next to the initials "cb" (Charles Bernstein), an extra system of icons appears, explained at the end of the book, to identify the source of each original poem. A suitable icon also appears next to translations whose originals are not published in the book, and an index at the end of the book supplies the relevant Bernstein poems, including the sources.

This paratextual concept interacts with reader expectations and the norms that govern how translations should be presented – norms which are based on the traditional hierarchies of author vs. translator or original vs. translation. Page 154 contains a text entitled *der und die*, with another (*dew and die*) appearing on the facing page, and another one (*tau und tod*) on the page that follows. All three are very similar in form: each is made up of three-letter words arranged into a 13 x 26 grid or matrix (ej [Ernst Jandl], in: Bernstein 2013: 154):

der und die

kam	der	und	die	kam	und	die	kam	vor	ihm	ins	tal	und
das	war	der	ort	und	die	sah	hin	und	der	und	tat	das
oft	und	war	müd	und	bös	und	wie	eis	und	sah	hin	und
her	bis	der	kam	der	ins	tal	kam	und	nun	los	und	das
eis	weg	und	der	kam	und	der	kam	nah	und	kam	ihr	nah
und	war	bei	ihr	und	war	nah	bei	ihr	und	sah	auf	ihr
hin	und	her	und	die	war	wie	für	ihn	war	für	ihn	ist
was	für	ihn	ist	muß	mit	und	den	hut	und	wie	der	den
zog	und	zog	aug	bei	aug	auf	ihr	hin	und	her	und	ihr
kam	der	ist	wie	ein	ist	was	das	ist	was	das	ist	für
uns	nun	los	und	gib	wie	das	eis	weg	süß	und	küß	bis
ans	end	der	uhr	und	tag	aus	aug	und	ohr	weg	nur	gut
und	naß	und	süß	tau	mit	rum	und	nun	los	bot	den	arm
und	gab	ihm	den	und	das	ohr	und	das	auf	und	süd	und
ost	und	zog	mit	ihr	mit	ihm	mit	und	das	tor	war	los
und	die	tür	und	der	tag	weg	mit	eis	und	müd	und	wut
und	hut	und	der	ihr	und	die	ihm	und	sog	kuß	aus	kuß
und	hob	und	lud	sie	auf	das	ist	gut	ist	für	uns	und
los	und	ihn	biß	und	der	riß	und	zog	und	die	ihn	und
bot	ihm	naß	und	süß	tau	mit	rum	und	sog	was	der	und
der	lag	auf	ihr	und	zog	und	tat	und	riß	und	biß	und
sog	und	ihr	arm	und	das	auf	süd	und	das	ohr	die	tür
zur	see	und	das	amt	aus	und	tot	und	wer	vor	mir	ist
weg	ost	weg	nur	ich	auf	hin	und	her	hin	und	hun	her
hin	her	hin	her	bis	rot	und	süß	und	wut	die	see	ins
tal	riß	und	goß	und	den	ort	naß	und	müd	lag	auf	Uns

The signatures appearing alongside the poems are, respectively, *ej*, *cb* and *mr*. People familiar with concrete poetry will recognise this as a poem by Ernst Jandl. It tells a love story, but in doing so it relies on an untypical *staccato* form, generated by an aggregation of monosyllables, and further heightened by repetition in imagery and syntactic patterns (e.g. “and [he] was with her, and was close to her, and looked at her”) (cf. Kunnisch 1969: 71–79). The eponymous couple (he and she, *der und die*) meet in a valley (she arrives first and waits for him); then the story gathers pace: from the first “breaking of the ice” (*eis weg*) to a physical encounter that leaves the lovers covered in dew that descends on the valley. Bernstein’s metonymic motivation primarily involves repeating the poem’s mechanism, which is one of formal constraint. This is the opening line of the poem in German and in English translation:

kam der und die kam und die kam vor ihm ins tal und
(ej [Ernst Jandl in: Bernstein 2013: 154])

can dew and die can and die can tie his sin tap and
(cb [Charles Bernstein], in: Bernstein 2013: 155)

Bernstein’s translation involves recreating the same number of three-letter words arranged into an identical grid. The same letters are actually retained where this can be done without losing English words in the process – meaning that the same letters can appear in the same sequence (interlingual homonyms, such as *war – war* or *die – die*) or as anagrams (*ins – sin*). Some of the words (*kam*, *ihm* and others) are replaced by semantic equivalents. In the translation, however, the focus of attention shifts to dew and its apocalyptic dimension – the dew becomes a symbol of ending or death (presumably referring to the death of the love between the two characters). Adeena Karasick describes Bernstein’s translation as a “homophonic” one, and detects a “cabalistic” motivation where the creative mechanism is based on Hebrew numerology:

According to the laws of *Gematria*, the numerical equivalence of two words reveals an internal connection between the creative potential of each one. In Bernstein’s homophonic translation of Ernst Jandl’s *Der und Die*, we are forced to see the connection between each of the 338, three-letter syntagms. Through its twenty-six lines (of thirteen words per line), through a somewhat perverted Abulafian process of *Hokhmah ha-Tseruf* (The Science of the Combination of Letters) or Darkhei Tseruf ha-Otiyyot (The Ways of the Permutations of the

Letters), Bernstein performs a sacred ritual of combination. (Karasick 2010: 403–404)

Marjorie Perloff emphasizes the context in which Bernstein’s “translation” was done (Perloff’s inverted commas), which, incidentally, was also not without some indirect cabalistic touches: the text of *dew and die* is part of *Shadow Time*, a libretto for an opera on the life and work of Walter Benjamin (cf. Perloff 2009: 705). More specifically, it belongs in a section on *The Doctrine of the Similiar*, which references Benjamin’s 1933 essay with the same title (*Lehre vom Ähnlichen*). In that essay Benjamin examines the problem of the capacity for noticing similarities: sensory (somatic) and non-sensory (linguistic). The emergence of arbitrarily coded linguistic mimesis, of which writing was one product, had led to a point where “the perceptual world [*Merkwelt*] of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies” (Benjamin 2004a: 721) – those correspondences and analogies being the subject of the Kabbalah, among other things. These days the mimetic aspect of language requires a medium in its own right – what we might describe as an arbitrary, non-sensory semiotic aspect:

[E]verything mimetic in language is an intention with an established basis which can only appear at all in connection with something alien, the semiotic or communicative element of language. Thus the literal text of writing is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle can form itself. Thus the nexus of meaning implicit in the sounds of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can become apparent instantaneously, in a flash. (cf. Benjamin 1979: 68)

Bernstein illustrates his reflections with a poem by Jandl, where the translation involves a metonymic repetition of its creative mechanism: which in this context appears to indicate an effort to spark off those instantaneous internal similitudes, which are essentially Kabbalistic in nature.

Tau und tod, a translation of the translation by Bernstein done by Miriam Rainer, is a repetition of repetition in that it retains the principle of alternating alphabetical and semantic contiguities that amount to Benjamin’s combination of mimetic and semantic aspects:

käm tau und tod käm und tod käm fad hiß ins tob und
(mr [Miriam Rainer], in: Bernstein 2013: 156).

where *hiß* is a quasi-phonetic equivalent for *his* – the word has no meaning in German (it only occurs in surnames) – and *tod* (“death”) belongs in the same semantic grouping as Bernstein’s English *die*. In Jandl’s poem this is,

respectively, *ihm* (masculine personal pronoun in the dative case), and *die*, the feminine definite article; this means that Rainer takes Bernstein's text as its source, but the metonymic gesture of repetition that involves a reconstruction of the creative mechanism operating in the original references Bernstein's strategy in translating Jandl.

Original-translation, or repetition in the nascent state

In my discussion of translation motivated by metonymic willingness to achieve re-creative repetition I used examples of autonomous translations where the text becomes a separate entity, demarcated by typographic means, and the only indication of its (translational) relationship with the original can be found in the paratext. By contrast, the Vienna translators, working in collaboration with Bernstein, proposed a dualistic form that combines the original and the translation into a single entity. By illustrating the process of translation, this kind of "original-translation" is an attempt to achieve the main programmatic aim of VERSATORIUM (and Bernstein) – which is a negative aim of refraining from producing anything conclusive. Although one half of the text is a kind of translation – which might seem like a conclusive, finished product – the formal device where the two texts appear as a closely intertwined duet brings to mind something like an interlinear translation scribbled in pencil, entered on the margins or between the lines of the source text: an early draft translation, a literal philological translation, an imperfect translation – in other words, something inconclusive. This approach fits the theoretical framework of metonymic translation. As pointed out by Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz,

Metonymic translation involves obligatory juxtaposition where the translation and the original are read in parallel, and engage in lively inter-textual dialogue. In doing so, metonymic translation goes beyond the discourse of probability and substitution (mimesis) to position itself in the discourse of contiguity and combination. This confrontation with the original turns out to be a necessary precondition for a full understanding of translation as an artistic experiment. The source text is both the first mover, the pre-text for the translation, but also its contiguous complement. (Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2012: 65)¹⁶

¹⁶ My understanding of metonymic translation is not always in full agreement with that of Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz, not least because she tends to muddy the lines separating

VERSATORIUM proposed two methods for such metonymic, dualistic presentation of an original-translation. In the first approach, some of the elements are repeated (copied directly), and only sections of lines are translated; the second approach imitates almost literally the “rough draft” approach discussed above, with a line-for-line transcript of the earliest draft of the translation. The former could be described in formal terms as a contamination of the original and the translation, equal in length to the original. In this approach, the resulting text is signed in keeping with the codification system used in the book, with the initials of the author (*cb*) and those of the translator (*pw*). In the second approach, the original text doubles in size.

VERSATORIUM was not the only group to translate Bernstein’s poetry into German – another group of translators working in Germany pursued a similar project.¹⁷ The two publications came out at roughly the same time, and both were awarded a prestigious prize in literary translation (Poesiepreis der Stadt Münster).¹⁸ Though both groups enjoyed similar success, VERSATORIUM seems to be regarded by translation critics as a pioneering and highly ambitious project, implicitly relegating the German publication to the problematic status of an “ordinary” or “traditional” project. A reviewer writing about both publications actually felt the need to point out that the translations by the German team, though “highly literary”, nonetheless find a “no less consistent” expression for the original (Kuhlbrodt 2015), making it sound as if literariness in a translation was synonymous with compromise, or indeed with failure.

The poem *A Test of Poetry* has been translated both by Waterhouse and by the German translators (Amslinger, Lange, Lupette, Traxler). For the sake of comparison, here are the opening stanzas of the original and of the two translations (my emphases):

A Test of Poetry (Charles Bernstein)

What do you mean by **rashes of ash**? Is **industry** systematic work, assiduous activity, or ownership of factories? Is **ripple** agitate lightly? Are we **tossed in**

different tropes (she includes fetishization and excessive hyperbole in the definition of metonymic translation, solutions which I argue properly belong to synecdoche and hyperbole), but this particular comment is fully compatible with my position in this article.

¹⁷ For the product of that project see Bernstein 2014.

¹⁸ This prize is awarded to a poet and their translator(s) for what the jury describes as an “independent and accurate” translation; this is an interesting precedent given the widely different translations by the two translation groups.

tune when we write poems? And what or who **emboss with gloss insignias of air?**

(Bernstein 1999: 52)

Ein Test der Poesie (Norbert Lange)

Was meinen Sie mit **Ausschlägen aus Asche**? Ist **Industrie** ein Wirtschaftszweig, Massenfabrikation oder Eigentum von Fabriken? Ist **Kräuseln** leicht schütteln? Sind wir Dichter dann **in Harmonie geschleudert**? Und wer oder was trägt **Lackinsignien aus Luft**?

(Bernstein 2014: 15)

B Test of Poetry (cb, pw)

What do you mean by überallen Wipfeln? Is Industrie industriousness **or** dust **or** a river? And *Rüpel* a Russian word? **Are we tossed in tune** by *Tunesische Gedichte*? **And** why and when *geht dann und wann ein weißer Elefant*?

(Bernstein 2013: 114)

The passages appearing here in bold type are kept unchanged from the original – those are the locations where the source text literally “shows through” in the target text, making the seams of literary contamination stand out. At the same time, this is a record of an intermediary stage in the translation process – one in which the translator has not yet come up with all the solutions for the translation – and as such it raises a significant question about the translator’s task. This double record of a translation-original might suggest that translation involves a repositioning of the original-as-the-Other, into the context of a new language and culture, through metonymic substitution of the context (which in this case would mean the literal words and sentences that flank the transposed fragments). At the same time, the title of that translation – *B Test of Poetry* – indicates that other, equally warranted (interchangeable) texts might exist: the original functions as Version A, and the translation is a Version B. The letter B, incidentally, is also a homonym for the imperative form of the verb *to be*, so the title of the translated poem (*Be!*) becomes a demand that the poetry should be tested in translation – in line with Robert Frost’s famous dictum that poetry is what gets lost in translation.

The second way to present an original-translation is, as I mentioned before, a formal doubling, where both versions, the source and the translation, are presented in a kind of interlinear notation. At first glance, the poem *Azoot d’Puund* suggests that a foreign (artificial) language might be

in use (one reviewer compares it to a hybrid of Chaucerian English and Afrikaans – cf. Pohl 2000), which requires a special, as it were translatorial, mode of reading:

“Azoot d’Puund”, a poem from Bernstein’s *Poetic Justice*, provides an evocative example of intentional effacement of meaning and contamination with noise of normative poetic discourse. (...) Heeding our intuitive interpretive drive, we can still recognise that, behind the noise of inarticulate letter groupings, once existed meaningful words and verses. (...) Whenever, however, we succeed in tracing back the **original** [my emphasis], meaningful word (...) we are reminded that this tampering with the word was deliberate. (Lutzkanova-Vassileva 2015: 143)

The opening lines of the original are as follows:

iz wurry ray aZoOt de puund in reducey ap crrRisLe ehk nugkinj sJuxYY senshl. Ig si heh hahpae uvd r fahbe haht si gidrid. (Bernstein 1979: 25–26)

Those appear unchanged in the translation, where the original lines are separated by a translation, which also forms the very kind of back translation suggested by Lutkanova-Vassileva – a reverse repetition (one directed backwards, which Kierkegaard would have viewed as a “recollection of what has been”):

Iz wurry ray aZoOt de puund in reducey ap crrRisLe ehk nugkinj sJuxYY senshl. I would say Ezra Pound in reduced form as Chris Lee / grizzly is nothing but Jux and senselessness. **Ig si heh hahpae uvd r fahbe haht si gidrid.** Ich sehe Hahpae auf der Fahrbahn, Acht sie gibt. / Is she happy? (cb, aen [Charles Bernstein, Astrid Nischkauer], in: Bernstein 2013: 45)

This is what happens in the first line; the second is only a creative (aberrant) recreation of that mechanism’s functionality, since the German line only appears to be a decoding of the original anagram: upon closer inspection, it turns out that the letter *c* (which appears in the word *ich*) does not in fact feature in Bernstein’s original, and so on. In other words, we are dealing yet again with a reduction of the original to its fundamental creative element, which then becomes implemented in translation in such a way as to turn repetition into creation.

Afterword/aftertext

Positioned within the framework of tropical categories, the translatorial situation as described above is an attempt to demonstrate, in practical terms, an application of this analysis of transitorial motivations. In this kind of exercise, the translation strategy (“what” happens in a translation) is treated as a tool for answering a different question, namely “why” it happened that way. In the case of metonymic translation, the question “why” reveals the translator’s affective stance towards the Other, in this case a love of repetition (as defined by Kierkegaard) expressed here in a process of recreating the creative mechanism of the original text. For obvious reasons this article only discusses a single trope, however my findings show that each of the five tropes can be potentially operationalized for the purposes of such analysis.

A word of warning: tropes should not be treated in a hermeneutic fashion. A tropical critic will seek to reconstruct the translator’s motivation, and not the possible strategies that a given text appears to be imposing. Otherwise we can easily fall into the trap of meta-levels: if, say, a text is highly ironic, the translator might render that original irony into a target language without being ironic themselves. Even if we get to the bottom of the affective character of various tropical stances (say, the fact that metonymic translation reduces the text to its creative mechanism, and tries to set the same mechanism in motion using means available in the target language and culture in order to re-create the translation), that still does not mean that every text with a recognisable mechanism will be so translated. For instance, the collages of Herta Mueller would seem like an ideal candidate for this kind of translation – the creative mechanism in this case would be formal, both at the textual level (rhymes, alliteration), and at the level of visual representation (the original is published as facsimiles of elements torn out and pasted by hand). And yet the strategy adopted by Leszek Szaruga (Herta Mueller’s Polish translator) is evidently motivated by synecdoche, as his translation fetishizes a single element of her poetry (in this case the narrative or anecdote). All of the formal characteristics – rhymes, alliteration, font shapes and sizes, page layout – are ignored in Szaruga’s translation as anecdote gets promoted to the status of a part representing the whole. The task of the tropical critic is to identify motivation by analysing an existing act of translation; in this sense, no hermeneutic of the original is available to supply ready-made solutions. Indeed, the translator – and this is where we run into the “human factor” that might include personal experience, mood, but also the various

expectations or interventions on the part of the publisher or the author – may present different strategies driven by different motivations. No tropic label can or should be affixed conclusively, once and for all.

Translated from Polish by Piotr Szymczak

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