

Free Verse as a Graphic Text – in Translation: Reverdy and Pound

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The free verse is taken here to be a technique of versification which manipulates the arrangement of handwritten or printed characters on the page. In this perspective, the contents of free verse are determined by the relationship between the parts of the page filled with text and empty spaces. In other words, key elements here are the division into verses, their graphic structure, as well as vertical and horizontal relations, which come into being through particular visual components now being brought together, now moved apart.

A free verse thus defined should be referred to as a graphic text rather than a verse. Still, the latter term, alongside “poem”, will be used here, following traditional nomenclature. Markedly, however, a free verse is neither the one that is defined by a lack nor by its derivative nature. It is not a “meter-less poem”, let alone “a parasite on the tradition of versification”. It is something else still, distinct from both poetry and prose. Unlike prose (but similarly to verse), it utilises a secondary, non-syntactic delimitation. That added-on delimitation, through its graphic properties, offers a visual message, thus distancing the free verse from poetry and brings it closer to prose. Just like in the latter genre, the fact that a graphic text is meant for visual reading does not mean that its phonic structure is irrelevant and will not be recorded in the process of reading. It is true, however, that it is not the sound value that constitutes the added-on delimiting factor. As has already been stated, the single aspect influencing the delimitation of a free verse is the distribution of written characters on the page.

Since the concept of a free verse as a graphic text has been extensively theorised in Polish literary studies¹, there is no need to address its main tenets here. This paper focuses on issues of translating graphic texts; a topic which hitherto garnered no scholarly interest. It is hoped that this publication will be a first step in expanding graphic text theory onto all European free verse poetry. The point of departure for the following discussion are three related questions: How does the process of translating a work from one language into another affect the graphic structure of its lines? Is that structure copied mechanically or is it also translated and if so, what are the criteria?

1.

In *Main d'œuvre*, a book of poetry by Pierre Reverdy published in 1949, one can find the poem *Portrait*, which attracted the attention of Polish poet and translator Julia Hartwig. When read as parallel texts, the French and Polish fragments are noticeably different. Those differences are not so much in the lexicon but in verse structure:

Des fleurs de couleurs	Kolorowe kwiaty
Des feux	Ognie
La main ramenait des lignes	Ręka wyrzucała linie
à travers l'eau	Poprzez wodę
L'air	Powietrze
Des lignes vivantes dans la nuit	Linie żyjące wśród nocy
La pire des choses	Najgorsze z wszystkiego
Pierre Reverdy, <i>Portrait</i> ²	<i>Portret</i> (transl. Julia Hartwig) ³

A literal translation of Hartwig's version is as follows:

Colourful flowers
 Fires
 A hand was throwing away lines
 Across the water
 The air
 Lines living in the night
 The worst of all

A Portrait

¹ See Witold Sadowski *Wiersz wolny jako tekst graficzny* [*Free verse as a graphic text*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), *passim*.

² Pierre Reverdy, *Cœuvres complètes*, edited by Étienne-Alain Hubert (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), Vol. 2, 184. Graphic structure of the work is identical to the one in the edition from which Hartwig was working: Reverdy, *Main d'œuvre: poèmes 1913–1949* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1949), 216.

³ Reverdy, *Poezje wybrane* [*Reverdy, Selected poems*], transl. Julia Hartwig (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986), 128.

The French noun *ligne* 'line' appears twice in the poem, which supports Isabelle Chol's remark that this word had a special importance for Reverdy. On the one hand it pointed to ontological issues, pursued in his works, and on the other, it emphasised the semantics of visual representation of verses.⁴ A single glance at the text suffices to notice that Julia Hartwig's translation does not recreate faithfully the original graphic arrangement of Reverdy's verses. While both in the original version and in the translation the verses are typographically aligned, the reference point for this alignment is different for each text, both in visual and semantic terms.

In the Polish translation the noun "lines" is used twice, corresponding to two vertical groupings, one of which links left-justified verses, and the other – brings together the fourth, fifth, and seventh lines in the middle of the poem. These alignments make possible distant syntactic relations⁵ and "transversal relations of meaning"⁶. The latter are frequently achieved through rhyme in numeric poetry⁷; here they arise through visual record. The sixth verse is a continuation of the third one content-wise, but this effect is achieved not only through syntactic relations and the anadiploic "lines", but also because both verses belong to the same visual category. The similarity of poetic devices in left-justified segments suggests that also the middle verses *Poprzez wodę* 'Across the water', *Powietrze* 'The air' and *Najgorsze z wszystkiego* 'The worst of all' belong to a common set, expressive of some shared train of thought.

Obviously, none of these are to be found in the original text. This does not mean, however, that the French version lacks graphic alignments altogether. It is just that in the original text these graphic forms were arranged differently to what can be seen in the translation. Apart from the words *des feux* 'fires' and *L'air* 'air', both of which follow a left indent, there is also a diagonal line in the French version. The third, fourth and fifth verses are grouped into a set of expressions which are moving steadily to the right and are optically truncated.

Do these differences matter?

In order to answer this question, one needs to return to the role that the word *ligne* plays in Reverdy's works: one of Reverdy's key terms referring to the brink of death, and, by extension, to the horizon, beyond which people look for answers concerning the durability of existence. According to Michel Collot, for many years after his father's death, Reverdy experienced a feeling of emptiness, which was not only related to the loss of someone close. That sense of emptiness resulted from the poet's realisation that a loved one departed towards a reality which Reverdy saw as a huge vacuum. He translated that vacuum into white spaces which showed in the graphic record of his texts. In the 1920s, having experienced a religious conversion, the poet reworked some of his earlier poems, boldly attempting to remove some of the

⁴ See Isabelle Chol, *Pierre Reverdy. Poésie plastique. Formes composées et dialogue des arts (1913-1960)* (Genève: Droz, 2006), 38–40.

⁵ Different "performative actions in the reception" of a free verse were addressed by Krzysztof Skibski, in "Relacyjność składniowa wersów w wierszu wolnym" ["Syntactic relationality of verses in a free verse poem"], *Poezja jako iteratura. Relacje między elementami języka poetyckiego w wierszu wolnym [Poetry as iterature: relations between elements of poetic language in a free verse poem.]* (Poznań, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2017).

⁶ Adam Dziadek uses this term in describing Henry Meschonnic's theory of rhythm (*Projekt krytyki somatycznej [Somatic criticism project]*) (Warszawa, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2014), 35.

⁷ Cf. Lucylla Pszczołowska, *Rym [Rhyme]* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1972), 52–58.

intra-linear spacing and replace it with text. In a way, this enterprise allowed him to verbalise the semantics of earlier silence, but painful questions remained, only now they became a more visible part of Reverdy's poetic imagery. His core representation of death remained the image of the setting sun, representing the moment when the entire horizon is lit up. In Collot's words, whenever this motif appears, that spot on the horizon into which the red ball descends "turns out to be the abyss, into which the light vanishes"⁸ and "the entire space seems to be drawn in by a gaping hole on the horizon, which raises like "the call of the wind", "sweeping off the landscape."⁹

Importantly, not all the empty slots in Reverdy's poems were filled in the course of his conversion. The boundary between the blackness of words written on the page and the whiteness of the rest of the page remained a central artistic equivalent of the inseparable connection between what seems to belong to the material world (reflected in the scenery of sunset) and fading nature, no longer visible because it has been dragged beyond horizon, with the lengthening shadows of a mystical night.

The poet tried different ways of representing this boundary, while avoiding direct transfers of verse structure from one work to another. Still, Collot was able to identify a number of compositional tendencies in Reverdy's versification. One of these is worth mentioning, i.e., "a gradual transposition to the right with a dramatic truncation of the final verse".¹⁰ It was this type of relation that connected the third, fourth and fifth verses in the French version quoted above. A reversed pyramid effect was achieved thanks to Reverdy's lexical choices: the effect of using a three-letter word *air* cannot be replicated by its Polish equivalent 'powietrze'. Regardless of the translator's motivation for changing the original versification, in the text, with the loss of graphic relations, the semantic suggestion of crossing boundaries was also lost in translation.

If one agrees with Collot's claim that in Reverdy's works "the agony of the sun is a daily repetition of his father's death"¹¹, then it can also be added that this scene is a pretext for more general musings on the condition of every being. For the poet each being can be considered in two ontological perspectives: in its current existence (the one which can be seen and experienced) and in its form as an object absorbed by emptiness. An awareness of that emptiness is not a product of empiricism, materialism or nihilism. Rather, it reflects the subject's unease in seeing all the things attracted by the abyss and not being able to see what happens once the boundary between one state and another has been crossed. In its present existence, the being is existentially sucked in by the abyss, which reveals itself in the act. The poet, in turn, encodes the forces of metaphysical dynamics in black verses, which guide the reader's eyes towards the surrounding whiteness of the page.

⁸ Michel Collot, "L'horizon typographique dans les poèmes de Reverdy", *Littérature* 46 (1982): 51.

⁹ Collot, 52.

¹⁰ Collot, 51.

¹¹ Collot.

neath that verse, there is an empty line, raising questions about the invisible force which recalls the above-mentioned beings from behind a threshold, which can be variously interpreted.

Theo Hermans notices that in Reverdy's poetry "the poem itself is built on a constant interplay between conceptual fragmentation and cohesion, and relies on the interaction between, on the one hand, a necessary degree of semantic disparity between a number of relatively isolated syntagms, and, on the other, the perception of the whole as a unity held together by contiguity relations and in which each element has its proper place."¹⁴ Hermans' views seem to align with Isabelle Chol's interpretation of the same poem. She points to the co-occurrence of two opposing tendencies (advertised in the title). While "the final isolated word, exposed in the middle of the page, repeats the features suggested by the work, which in itself is a volatile point of balance"¹⁵, in the work as a whole one can discern the oval shape, which in the verbal dimension corresponds with "the meaning of roundness suggested by *goutte* 'a drop' and *soleil* 'the sun'".¹⁶ Chol's analysis of tension, produced by antagonistic forces, leads her to the following conclusion: "Writing the space is thus driven by two opposing desires: a search for stability turning into symmetry and lack of completeness, both in the concrete and abstract senses. These desires meet in the centre of balance and in everything which assumes fragility".¹⁷

Let us now turn to the translation, to see how many elements of the original version were successfully rendered in Polish. Where Chol was able to discern an oval shape in the graphic arrangement of the original lines, the same cannot be said about the graphic structure of the Polish version. The word *południe* 'noon' is indeed suspended in the air, just like its French equivalent *midi*, but the fact that it was moved away from the left margin and now occupied the same spot as the line containing "diamonds" seems to suggest an entirely different ordering than the one that was intended in the original version. The French "des diamants" line, moved to the right, was an expression of tendencies, referred to by Chol as "the desire to decentralise and unload graphic segments". The middle of the French text was thus emptied of words, whereas the surrounding plural nouns were meant to show the multiplicity of phenomena which exude brightness. Drops, stars, diamonds, sparkling eyes – through associating written words with observable phenomena the reader was able to consider the analogy between the distance that their eyes cover in search of letters and the infinite, towards which the light described in the work escapes. Here one is reminded of Collot's interpretation of Riverdy's use of whiteness: "To depart in the direction of the horizon is to join the death of the setting sun." In this context, filling the poem with whiteness multiplies the "effects of remoteness"¹⁸.

"Filling the work with air" was practiced by a large number of modernist poets; Riverdy was no exception here. Paul Claudel devoted long fragments of his 1925 essay [The philosophy of book] to this issue.

¹⁴Theo Hermans, *The Structure of Modernist Poetry* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 161.

¹⁵Chol, *Pierre Reverdy. Poésie plastique. Formes composées et dialogue des arts (1913-1960)*, 52.

¹⁶Chol.

¹⁷Chol.

¹⁸Collot, "L'horizon typographique dans les poèmes de Reverdy", 53.

ale to powietrze wyniosło ją na brzeg a la marina
 z wielką muszlą toczoną przez fale
 nautilus biancastra
 W żadnym razie nie regularne dantejskie podejście
 ale jak róża wiatrów
 tira libeccio
 a teraz Genji w Suma , tira libeccio
 jak wir wiatrów i dryf tratwy na fali
 i głosy , Tyro, Alkmena

(transl. Andrzej Sosnowski)²⁴

In the center of the fragment quoted above – where the Polish translation mentions the wind rose ('róża wiatrów') in translating the English 'the winds veer' and the Libyan wind (*libeccio*) – there is a rugged belt of empty space, which disturbs the continuity of the text and does not help the reader, whose eyes roam around the text trying to figure what order of reading was intended for these dispersed fragments. Sosnowski first uses the phrase 'tira libeccio' in the middle of the verse so that it encroaches on all neighbouring fragments, thus introducing a linear order. By doing that, the translator calmed down the reading and got rid of the problem.

2.

Hitherto quoted examples point to the translators' (or their publishers') tendency to ignore the graphic composition of a free verse poem, even if sometimes following the original version seemed to be the easiest option, dependent on a mechanical transposition of textual distances from the English to the Polish version. One of the causes for this lack of precision could be the poets' rather than the translators' awareness of versification. The translators may well have been deceived by the title *The Cantos*, and its reference to melic poetry, only to take Pound's declaration concerning the musicality of a free verse poem at face value²⁵ (this idea had been in circulation since the time of the French symbolists). At the end of the 19th c. this concept of musicality acquired theoretical underpinnings, which largely influenced future views on the problem:

Gustave Kahn, who always introduced himself as the inventor of the French free verse (he surely was its first theorist) wrote that "the poet speaks and writes for the ears, not for the eyes". The new poem was for him "the shortest possible piece which reflects the arresting of voice and sense": *voix* and *sens*, sound and meaning are two defining criteria of a free verse poem. *Vers libre* of symbolism thus becomes a rhythmical, logical unity, regardless of visual or graphic aspects. Symbolist poetry, propelled by musical aspirations, is characterised by a sophisticated rhythmic and phonic, which was to allow the poets to create the real and appropriate "verbal music".²⁶

²⁴Pound, *Pieśni*, 97.

²⁵See Chris Beyers, *A History of Free Verse* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 20.

²⁶Elena Coppo, "Pour l'oreille o pour l'oeil. Il verso libero di Laforgue e Claudel", in: *Oralità e scrittura: i due volti delle parole*, ed. by Teresa Cancro, Chiara De Paoli, Francesco Roncen, Valeria Russo (Padova, Padova University Press, 2019), 144.

Among the first theorists of free verse one can also enumerate Édouard Dujardin, who accounted for the emergence of this phenomenon in the following manner: “if the musical phrase has won the freedom of rhythm, one should also strive for a similar rhythmic freedom for the poem”²⁷. What he meant by this was not freedom of thought. T. Navarro Tomás, a Spanish versologist from mid-20th c., emphasised the fact that “in a free verse poem the factor which artistically arranges words into specific groups depends on the sequence of psychosemantic bases, which the poet applies – consciously or not – as a result of inner harmony, which directs him in the creation of the work”²⁸. It was, then, freedom from metric principles, rather than from one’s individual impulses, which were responsible for the creator’s mental rhythmic compulsions.²⁹

The work’s graphic record was supposed to play a secondary role. Robert Pinsky defined this role briefly: “the line is vocal, a sound; the typographical arrangement is a notation for that sound”³⁰. Regardless, poets tended to have too high expectations of printed versions of their work. Paul Claudel’s versification aimed at “recreating linguistic rhythm, dependent on the physiological rhythm – that of heart and breath – which is an expression of a universal vital rhythm”³¹. It is worth pointing out that even before Claudel, a Polish theorist of poetry, Stanisław Młeczko, believed the Greek hexameter to be the perfect tool for reflecting physiological rhythms. In his opinion, it suffices to recite to the contemporary reader the *Illiad* or the *Odyssey* correctly in order to hear “the heartbeats of forty generations of the Greek nation. We can hear the heartbeats of people living three thousand years ago.”³² Bolesław Leśmian, wrote in his theoretical essays an oft quoted sentence that “any proces of creation is accompanied by a rhythmical movement”³³. In his own literary practice, he attempted to reflect this movement in the rigid structures of syllabic and accentual-syllabic verses. The creators of free verse had a similar aim: to submit the versification to a “pure expression of a personal rhythm”³⁴. At the same time, they preferred “to compose in

²⁷Édouard Dujardin, *Les premiers poètes du vers libre* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1922), 63.

²⁸T. Navarro Tomás, *Métrica española, Reseña histórica y descriptiva* (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1956), 454.

²⁹This view is supported by numerous statements from poets, referring the experience of being possessed by self-imposing internal rhythms. Some of these statements (from Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, Julian Przyboś, Czesław Miłosz) are quoted by Joanna Dembińska-Pawelec in “*Poezja jest sztuką rytmu*”. *O świadomości rytmu w poezji polskiej dwudziestego wieku* (Miłosz — Rymkiewicz — Barańczak) [*Poetry is the art of rhythm. On the consciousness of rhythm in Polish poetry of the 20th c.* (Miłosz — Rymkiewicz — Barańczak)]. (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010), 22, 39–40, 131, 208–209. Some of these statements are related to the belief that the free verse poem – from the author’s point of view – has a pre-textual state of existence, which was perhaps named in the title of Urszula Koziol’s text “Przedwiersze” [“Pre-poem-ness”] in her *Stany nieoczywistości* [*States of non-obviousness*] Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1999), 90. This state is frequently experienced in the sphere of inner touch rather than hearing, which in the poetry of Krystyna Miłobędzka is sometimes compared to the way a mother feels the embryo in her womb. Cf. Sadowski “«Potyczka we wsi Wiersze», czyli wersyfikacja jako temat poezji najnowszej” [“A duel in the village of Poems”, or versification as the topic of modern poetry] in *Nowy autotematyzm? Metarefleksja we współczesnej humanistyce* [*New authoritarianism? Metareflexion in contemporary humanities*] ed. by Agnieszka Waligóra (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2021), 55–57. On the somatic basis of versification, see Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej, passim*.

³⁰Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry. A Brief Guide* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 109

³¹Coppo, “Pour l’oreille o pour l’oeil. Il verso libero di Laforgue e Claudel”, 153. Cf. Joanna Dembińska-Pawelec, “*Poezja jest sztuką rytmu*”. *O świadomości rytmu w poezji polskiej dwudziestego wieku* (Miłosz — Rymkiewicz — Barańczak), 21–22.

³²Stanisław Młeczko, *Serce a heksametr, czyli geneza metryki poetyckiej w związku z estetycznym kształceniem się języków, szczególnie polskiego* [*Heart and the hexameter, or the genesis of poetic meter in relation to the aesthetic development of languages, especially Polish*] (Warszawa: Wende, 1901), 44. Cf. the discussion of the theory in Dembińska-Pawelec, “*Poezja jest sztuką rytmu*”. *O świadomości rytmu w poezji polskiej dwudziestego wieku* (Miłosz — Rymkiewicz — Barańczak), 111–113; Sadowski, “Psychofizjologia rytmu Stanisława Młeczki” [*The psychophysiology of Stanisław Młeczko’s rhythm*], published March 14th 2012, *Sensualność w kulturze polskiej* [*Sensuality in Polish culture*], accessed June 24th 2021, <http://sensualnosc.bn.org.pl>; Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej*, 24–26.

³³Bolesław Leśmian, *Szkice literackie* [*Literary sketches*] (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1959), 84.

³⁴Victoria Utrera Torremocha, “Tipografía y verso libre”, *Rhythmica* 2, issue 2 (2004): 257.

the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome”³⁵. “The poem’s appearance on the page” was supposed “to make this rhythm visible”³⁶. This is the origin of the view that “in a free verse poem the graphic composition is something like musical notation, which allows one to figure out what the meters are and thus notice rhythmical values”³⁷.

The subordinate role which was assigned to the graphic record proved to be problematic for two reasons. The first one was voiced by Mikhail Gasparov: “This trend effaced the difference between verse creation and verse recitation. Verse dissolved into recitation; it became merely one of the elements of declamation”.³⁸ Secondly, rejecting meter was a consequence of its inadequacy for whatever the artists dreamt of achieving through their work. Free verse was supposed to expose those rhythms which were unpronounceable in regular versification and subdued by its metric uniformisation³⁹.

Therefore, particularly in the period influenced by Marinetti and Apollinaire, poets striving to convey to the reader the musical fluctuations of speech and its changing amplitude bent over backwards to somehow influence typography, to squeeze out of it, to yank out of it the ability to emanate with the kind of sound “the poet would have wanted”⁴⁰. Literary theory proved helpful in exerting pressure on the audience. In his 1945 essay Kazimierz Wyka wrote:

The graphic form is like a musical notation, pointing to logical senses and voice cadences, intended by the author. That is why we are not talking about prose, because the appearance of notation is governed by a purposeful artistic directive. This directive has to be discovered; one has to read it in order to find out which rhythmic tension governs the layout.⁴¹

Repeating the words “directive” and “has to” in the quotation above establishes a kind of a rescue mission, initiated on a conviction that anything the reader was not induced to by poetry can be enforced by theory. The very risk that the graphic arrangement can evoke in the reader other phonic connotations than the ones intended by the poet needs to be mitigated, it *must* be mitigated by a scholar’s rebuking voice, which makes the science of verse the last stand of normative poetry. The target of these interventions was, however, the readers rather than the poets. Paradoxically, any indication of that difference between what the audience actually read and what they were meant to have discerned in the text exposed the problem of graphic record even further. In order to make communication with the recipient more efficient, and transfer to their imagination a more nuanced, idiomatic “music of poetry”, “different for each work”⁴², the modernists unintentionally locked themselves up in a fairly rigid convention, dictated by the technology of print (less normalised than the meter but still schematic), and even more so – by

³⁵Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 130.

³⁶Coppo, “Pour l’oreille o pour l’oeil. Il verso libero di Laforgue e Claudel”, 148.

³⁷Pietro G. Beltrami, *La metrica italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 16.

³⁸Mikhail L. Gasparov, *A History of European Versification*, trans. G.S. Smith and Marina Tarlinskaja (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 289.

³⁹Cf. Dziadek, *Projekt krytyki somatycznej*, 32–34.

⁴⁰Julian Przyboś, *Linia i gwar. Szkice [The line and the noise. Sketches]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1959), vol. 2, 261.

⁴¹Kazimierz Wyka, “Wola wymiernego kształtu” [“The will of a measurable shape”], in: *Rzecz wyobraźni [A matter of imagination]* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977), 233.

⁴²T.S. Eliot, “Muzyka poezji” [“The music of poetry”], in: *Szkice krytyczne, przeł. Maria Niemojowska [Critical sketches, translated by Maria Niemojowska]* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1972), 49.

the typewriter. Richard Andrews points to the non-coincidental emergence of this new invention and the popularisation of free verse:

The advent of the typewriter in the late 19th century gave poets the opportunity to score words on a page in closer proximity to musical compositional principles and thus to express and represent different rhythms from the conventional, regular ones that had dominated poetry. The typewriter afforded exact calculations of spaces between letters, words and lines thus suggesting more exact timing in terms of composition and delivery.⁴³

One of the poets, who used spaces between words to indicate intended manners of recital was Pound.⁴⁴ If that was his intention, then the task of the translator is not so much to copy precisely the graphic layout, as to enforce that same suggestion in the reader of a poem. In Polish versology the strong influence of the Romantic tradition, which emphasised the key role of the poet, was a factor additionally reinforcing the idea that the graphic notation played a subsidiary role.⁴⁵ This is why it took so long for the poets to realise that against all hopes for preserving melodic uniqueness of the free verse poem, the only aspect of versification a typewriter was able to convey was the layout of the text on the page. The first attempt to describe free verse as a poetry for the eye was published abroad in 1980⁴⁶, whereas in Poland similar works started appearing at the turn of the 21st century⁴⁷ – when the typewriter was already becoming a thing of the past.

3.

Let us then ask ourselves whether translating a free verse poem, understood not as a musical or melodic text but as a graphic form, necessitates an exact reproduction of the original version's appearance.

Before answering this question, let us consider an interesting point. Regardless of the fact that it is impossible to make notation perform the task of a phonograph, i.e., to record the idiomatic melodic intended by the poet, the incidental nature of structure – not acoustic but visual – can be achieved in the text. In print one is thus able to achieve a result similar to the one which in the sphere of language was defined years ago by Edward Balcerzan, describing the communicative situation in Julian Przyboś's poetry:

The whole point is to make the signs of language, yanked from vernacular speech, “ambush one another”, “stick with one another”, lock them in thus “arranged” network of co-references, which Przyboś calls a “linguistic policondesate”, so that *every ingredient of the text* becomes a *non-substi-*

⁴³Richard Andrews, *A Prosody of Free Verse: Explorations in Rhythm* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 25. Emphasis original.

⁴⁴Cf. Beyers, *A History of Free Verse*, 31.

⁴⁵It is not irrelevant that the founders of Polish versology were the tutors of the Romantics: Józef Elsner (Frederick Chopin's teacher) and Józef Franciszek Królikowski. The longevity of their ideas in the 20th c. was upheld, regardless of accompanying polemics, reflections of the most renowned Polish scholar of poetry – Maria Dłuska, in *Studia z historii i teorii wersyfikacji polskiej* [*Studies in history and theory of Polish versification*] (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1978), vol. 1, 299–306.

⁴⁶Por. Otto Lorenz, *Poesie fürs Auge* w Hans-Jost Frey, Otto Lorenz, *Kritik des freien Verses* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider 1980).

⁴⁷Cf. Artur Grabowski, “Czemuż to wiersze pisze się wierszem?” [*Why are verses written in verse?*] *Pamiętnik Literacki* 86, issue 3 (1995); Sadowski, *Tekst graficzny Białoszewskiego* [*Białoszewski's graphic text*] (Warszawa: Wydział Polonistyki UW, 1999), *passim*.

tutable element. The non-substitutability of words is guarantee of the inimitability of the model. To repeat a given communicative model would mean to *copy* “word for word” the entire text of a poem. And that is no longer imitation. This is vulgar, “criminal” plagiarism.⁴⁸

In a graphic text this communicative model engages not so much a singer and a listener as two partners in communication, whose gaze was arrested on the same page of a book. The author and the reader may well have never met and they may never have had a chance to pass by one another because one of them was working, say, a hundred years ago and the other one is alive today. But they are both connected in their perception of the same space, as if they were construing a joint event which they attend from two different periods in time. Like in any literary event, the structure of this space, when copied onto another work, would have been an element of plagiarism. Things look differently, however, when it comes to translation. A precise transposition of the structure of a graphic text onto the translation process is not a criminal procedure. It is an invitation, sent to a foreign reader, to join the same event, in the course of which a specific free verse poem is viewed by both the poet and its translator.

The act of translating a graphic text need not proceed in distinct steps (whereby the author provides the reader with a form, and the reader – in the next step – creates another form, i.e., a translation for a foreigner). Still, as far as versification is concerned, all of the above can occur within a single communicative event. A meeting of two subjects is simply joined by a third party: the recipient of the translation. In that case, the free verse, whenever it is in its power to do so, incites hopes for a pre-Babel situation. While translating a numerical verse often begins by finding semantic or functional equivalents in another language (e.g., the Polish thirteener is taken to be equivalent to the French alexandrine), a graphic text requires no such equivalence. In literatures of European civilisation such text constitutes an important element of an international language of poetry and it need not be escorted over the border by professional translators.

Let us come back to an earlier question and rephrase it: does any departure from the original composition of the graphic text become an error of versification, just like omitting a syllable required by the meter was a problem (intended or accidental) in the syllable-accentuated verse?

Unfortunately, one must conclude that such errors are quite frequent. This happens for a variety of reasons: often the translators are to blame; frequently it is the publishers’ indifferent attitude to the nuances of typography; sometimes versologists tolerate in their academic and didactic practices deeply entrenched yet inadequate ideas about the free verse. Nonetheless, the answer provided here is definitely not universal and perhaps does not even explain half the graphic differences between the original and its translation. One can point to at least three circumstances complicating this relationship.

First, as far as the message of versification is concerned, the international readability of a free poem makes the translator a superfluous participant of the communicative circuit. In the graphic text the space acknowledged while reading the text creates conditions for a direct understanding between the poet and the foreign reader, even if the latter does not understand the language of the text.

⁴⁸Edward Balcerzan, *Przez znaki. Granice autonomii sztuki poetyckiej. Na materiale polskiej poezji współczesnej* [Through signs. Limits of the autonomy of poetic art. On the basis of Polish contemporary poetry] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1972), 191. Emphases original.

The fulfillment of a longing for a perfectly transparent translation proves to spell the death of the translator, for whom the only way to regain their agency is to reveal cracks in this perfect image.

Secondly, one has to remember that there is hardly any unity of typographic norms in the world of Latin or Cyrillic alphabets. For instance, emphasis, which in Polish prints is indicated by means of spacing, in English publications tends to be signalled by means of italics. The translator is then faced with a decision which to choose: form or content.

This leads us to the third cause: just like there is no pure, independent versification in traditional poetry, because a numeric poem is a phonic organisation of an utterance (or at least one that is based on glossolalia, neologisms or onomatopoeia), likewise wordless graphic texts, which only rely on punctuation, are a minority. A free verse poem is therefore always a result of cooperation between the appearance and the message. This is not a simple relationship, however, between the visual aspect of print versus verbal message. This is a multilayered interdependence, which takes into account the variability of the verbal message (its genre, syntax or phonetics), and of the appearance of print (its semantic contents). Finally, the syntax of a language need not always allow a graphic segmentation in *loci* acceptable in another language. It is the complex character of such references that can be responsible for the translators' purposeful and conscious decision to disregard the appearance of the original text.

We can analyse this context by considering two competing solutions adopted by Sosnowski and Niemojowski in their translations of a short fragment from the first song of *The Cantos*.

“Stand from the fosse, leave me my bloody bever

“For soothsay.”

And I stepped back,

I⁴⁹

Odstąp od tego dołu, daj mi mój krwawy trunek,

Bym wieszczyl.”

I odstąpiłem,

(transl. Andrzej Sosnowski)⁵⁰

Odstąp od fosy, pozwól mi napić się krwi,

A przepowiem.”

Odszedłem tedy,

(transl. Jerzy Niemojowski)⁵¹

Sosnowski's versification is faithful to the original source: in the first two lines the translator seeks out words which have a similar number of syllables to those which were used in the original ver-

⁴⁹Pound, *The Cantos* (1998), 4. Structure identical to Pound, *The Cantos* (1975), 4. The structure of quoted lines analogous to Pound, *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, 6. “Canto IV” and “Canto I” by Ezra Pound, from THE CANTOS OF EZRA POUND, copyright ©1934 by Ezra Pound. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

⁵⁰Pound, *Pieśni*, 7.

⁵¹Pound, *Poezje*, 158.

sion. The third line overlaps visually with the second one. Lexical equivalents of the words used in the third line also seem to be accurate: Polish *i* is basically synonymous with ‘and’, and *odstąpiłem* is indeed the closest equivalent to ‘I stepped back’. Apart from communicating the basic meaning of withdrawing towards restraint, it is also linked etymologically with the word *stopa* (‘foot’), emphasising the short distance (a foot away), just like in the English version “stepped” suggests a single step.

Niemojowski was not so meticulous, which does not mean his is an inferior translation. Still, in line three alone one can point to at least a few divergences from the English version (the equivalent of “And” used here, i.e. the word *tedy*, finishes the clause, rather than opens it; *Odszedłem*, even though synonymous with some of the meanings of “I stepped back”, has lost a number of other elements of the original, like the etymological reference to a step, the meaning of a short distance, and the sense of restraining one’s emotions (“departure”, which is the closest synonym of *odszedłem* does not reflect spatial relations depicted in Pound’s poem). One could say it would be hard to be more imprecise in such a short verse. Paradoxically, this range of incongruities creates a coherent, although not immediately obvious and readily accessible, combination of equivalence with the original poem.

Let us begin by stating that the minimal spacing before the third line aims at regaining visually the verbally absent meaning of ‘a small step’. The verb *odszedłem*, in turn, creates the opposite effect: it verbalises distance, communicated in the original version by empty space. Where is then the equivalent of the English “back”? Perhaps it can be found in the inversion, moving *tedy* to the end of the line? Considering all of Niemojowski’s decisions, one reaches the conclusion that the translator not only transposes the text from English into Polish but also translates words into images and vice versa, working towards a combination of things isolated and juxtaposed by Sosnowski (while *odstąpiłem* was suggestive of a minor movement, the indentation just before the line actually suggested something different).

A similar decision was taken by Julia Hartwig with some of the elements in Reverdy’s *Réclame* (*Advertisement*):

Hangar monté	Gotowy hangar
la porte ouverte	drzwi otwarte na oścież
Le ciel	Niebo
En haut deux mains se sont offertes	Dwie dłonie uściśniły się na wysokości
Les yeux levés	Podniosły się oczy
Une voix monte	Głos biegnie w przestrzeń
Les toits se sont mis à trembler	Dachy ogarnia drżenie
Le vent lance des feuilles mortes	Zeschłe liście lecą na wietrze
Et les nuages retardés	I spóźnione chmury
Marchent vers l’autre bout du monde	Suną na inny koniec świata

Pierre Reverdy, *Réclame*⁵²

Reklama (transl. Julia Hartwig)⁵³

⁵²Reverdy, *Œuvres complètes*, tom 1, 159. Graphic structure identical to the edition used by Hartwig: Reverdy, *Plupart du temps*, tom 1, 165.

⁵³Reverdy, *Poezje wybrane*, 115.

should not). All they need to do is make the original version *available* to the reader. However, if the translator decides to translate the versification as well, then the translation will be not only from one language to another, but also from one image to another, from language to image or from image to language.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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KEYWORDS

graphic text

free verse

misunderstanding

Ezra Pound

ABSTRACT:

The free verse is taken here to be a graphic text, i.e. a technique operating the layout of signs on a page. The problem of translating thus understood versification into foreign languages is considered here on the basis of Reverdy's and Pound's poems. This article puts forward a hypothesis, that misunderstandings resulting from differences between the original structure and the one appearing in the translation are caused by culturally embedded beliefs about the melodic nature of a free verse poem. At the same time, considerations of the specific role of the translator of a graphic text lead to conclusions as to why that translator sometimes decides to verbalise the semantics of versification and translate the words of the original by means of the graphic layout.

visual poetry

PIERRE REVERDY

TRANSLATION

versification

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Witold Sadowski – born 1974 is a professor at the University of Warsaw, literary scholar, author of publications on the history and theory of the poem, relations between literature and plastic arts, religious forms in European poetry, works of (contemporary and earlier) Polish poets and genology. He published, *inter alia* *Tekst graficzny Białoszewskiego* [*Białoszewski's graphic text*] (1999), *Wiersz wolny jako tekst graficzny* [*Free verse as a graphic text*] (2004), *Litania i poezja. Na materiale literatury polskiej od XI do XXI wieku* [*Litany and poetry. On the basis of Polish literature from the 11th to the 21st century*] (2011), *Europejski wiersz litanijny. W innej czasoprzestrzeni* [*European litany verse. In another time and space*] (2018). His 2011 and 2018 monographs are devoted to analyses of the litany as a numeric poem genre, operating on syntagmatic structures and stress alignments. His 1999 and 2004 books propose a theory of free verse, which takes into consideration its graphic form.