Agata BRAJERSKA-MAZUR

NORWID'S SEMANTIC TECHNIQUES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

[...] niech się cholera uczą po polsku, jeśli chcą czytać Norwida! [...] zamiast czytać Twój przekład jako samoistny wiersz angielski, porównują go z wierszem Norwida, co nie jest fair. A no nie jest[1] wrote Bogdan Czaykowski (1995:38) in his commentary to Adam Czerniawski's translation of the poem "W Weronie". In this article I am going to do exactly what is not fair according to Czaykowski and what Czerniawski (1986:12) warned scholars and critics against in his *Afterword* to *Cyprian Kamil Norwid. Poezje/Poems*[2] – I am going to compare various translations of Norwid's works into English with their original texts in order to show how they differ. In the course of analysis I am going to focus only on one problem closely related to Norwid's specific way of writing – the problem of his semantic techniques which are difficult to incorporate in translation.

Most characteristic of such techniques are Norwid's experiments with words (see, for example, Fik (1930), Błoński (1967), Łapiński (1971), Sawicki (1986)) – especially the use of puns, *Silence* and sudden pauses, creating new meanings, reinterpretation of words both through direct and etymological analysis, search for polisemy and the employment of: paradox, semantic contrast, parabole, allegory, symbol and conceit. All of these experiments with words create a new layer of meanings in Norwid's texts hence their proper translation is essential. Unfortunately, they present the greatest difficulty for the majority of translators who nevertheless treat them as the most important distinctive features of Norwid's works (cf. Kirkconnel (1936:58), Peterkiewicz/Singer (1960:146–147), Kliger/Albrecht (1963:80), Czerniawski (1973:5–7, 1994:77–79), Zamojska-

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[1] *[...] If they want to read Norwid, they should damn well learn Polish! [...] instead of reading your translation as an independent English poem they compare it with Norwid's text – which isn't fair. No it isn't* (Translation mine).

[2] Hereafter: *CKNP/Ps*.

Hutchins (1983:30–38), Bosley (1984:308)). Let us see why they are so important and why they are so difficult to translate.

First of all – Norwid's play on various meanings of one word seems to be untranslatable. For example in "Mistycyzm" he uses two different meanings of the word *błądzić* – which can be either understood as "być w błędzie" ("be wrong"), or as "zabłądzić" ("get lost"):

> 1
> *Mistyk? Jest błędnym – pewno!*
> *[...]*
> 2
> *Góral? Na Alpów szczycie*
> *Jeżeli się zabłąka w chmurę –*
> *Czy wątpi o jej bycie*
> * * * * * * * * * * *
> *Błądząc – po wtóre?* [3] (*PWsz*, vol. II, 46)

The translator was able to maintain the semantic link between: *zabłąka*/*błądząc – po wtóre* ("lost"/"lost – again"), but at the same time he lost the direct fonetic and semantic connection between: *jest błędnym* and *błądzić* ("He's wrong"/ "When lost"):

> 1
> *A mystic? He's wrong – for sure!*
> *[...]*
> 2
> *Does a highlander,*
> *Lost in cloud and rain,*
> *Doubt the cloud's there*
> * * * * * * * * * * *
> *When lost – again?* (Czerniawski, A. 1988)

The difficulty of maintaining polisemy is even greater in the translation of "Narcyz" because the structure of this text is not (as it was in the case of "Mistycyzm" based on the play on words. Here polisemy gives additional meaning to the poem but it does not lay the base of its form. Hence the very structure of the text cannot reveal the presence of semantic ambiguity and shades of meanings of its words:

> 1
> *N a r c y z , w siebie wpatrzon przyjemnie:*
> *"Zważ! – wyzywał – wszelki człowiecze:*
> *Cóż? Nad Grecję (bo cóż – nade mnie)."*
> *E c h o jemu przeto odrzecze:*

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[3] All texts by Norwid quoted in this article are taken from: Norwid, C. 1971–1976. *Pisma Wszystkie,* collected and edited by Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki, vol. I-XI. Warszawa: PIW (hereafter: *PWsz*).

[...]

<div align="center">3</div>

Postać twoja, zważ, ile? drżąca,
Lubo pozierasz w wody czyste:
– Zwierciadlaność idzie aż z s ł o ń c a
Dno jedynie – stale-o j c z y s t e ! (*PWsz*, vol. II, 34)

The ambiguous word *zważ* appears in the first and second stanza of the poem. It means either "zauważ" ("note") or "zmierz", "wyceń", "wylicz" ("measure, weigh, calculate"), which is supported by the presence of the word *ile?* ("how many") in the third stanza. Czerniawski in his translation used the word *note* ("zauważ"), not rendering in this way the notion of evaluation which could be felt in the original text. He had to choose only one of the two meanings of the Polish word *zważ* and get rid of its ambiguity. The subsequent simplification of the poem was unavoidable.[4]

It seems that the simplification of the translated text was not so obvious and unavoidable as in the above example in the case of the translation of the word *pióro* in Norwid's "Sława". The word here means both: "narzędzie do pisania" ("a tool for writing, a pen") and "ptasie pióro" ("a feather"):

I że poezja jest to nerwów drżenie
W takt namiętnościom – i że piór sumienie
W Eunuka wachlarz składa się, by zwiewać
Z nadobnych liców skwar, lub łatwiej ziewać? [...] (*PWsz*, vol. II, 290)

Neither of the two translators of this poem used the words: *quill*, *quill-feather* or *quill-pen*, which contain both meanings of the original "pióro":

[...] – and that the consience of the pen
folds into a eunuch's fan [...] [5] (*PA*, 199)

[...] – that the pen's conscience swerves
Into a eunuch's fan [...] [6] (Brooke-Rose, Ch., *"BO"*, vol. XXII, 198)

Fortunately, the author of the translation of Norwid's short story "Stygmat" was able to maintain the polisemy. In this text Norwid once again used the two senses of the word *pióro*. First he described some geese which lost white feathers in the grass, then a flower catching the narrator's attention because a big goose feather was attached to it. When a peasant girl helped the narrator to pick the flower with the feather he retained his ability of creative writing:

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[4] I wrote about the translation of "Narcyz" more profoundly in: "Norwid w tłumaczeniach Adama Czerniawskiego". *Studia Norwidiana*, 1991–1992, ed. Stefan Sawicki, No 9–10, Lublin: TN KUL. 273–274.

[5] Michael, M.A. 1944. *A Polish Anthology*, 199. London: Duckworth. Hereafter: *PA*.

[6] Brooke-Rose, Ch. 1958. "Twelve poems". *Botteghe Oscure*, ed. Marguerite Caetani, vol. XXII, 198. Rome: Botteghe Oscure. Hereafter: *"BO"*.

Dopiero więc tej głupiej winien jestem powrócenie mi pióra do ręki, a którego i używanie i użytek obmierzili byli mi literaci (*PWsz*, vol. VI, 129).

In his translation, in the description of geese, Kapolka (1983:66) used the word *feather* whereas in the scenes with the flower and the girl he incorporated the word *quill* which acquires (as in the original) a double meaning, on the one hand relating to the description of geese, on the other – to writers.

The situations when a proper equivalent of an ambiguous Polish word can be found in English are very rare and even if there are any, the translators do not always take advantage of them (as we could see on the example of *pióro* in "Sława"). It seems that they prefer to simplify words from Norwid's texts and choose only one of their many meanings.

The translators' choice is even more limited when Norwid creates semantic tension among words either by the necessity of their association imposed on the reader by context or by their paradoxical juxtaposition. Here the greatest difficulty encountered in the translation is obtaining the same quality of semantic tension among words as in the original. Sometimes the translator is not able to create new meanings by means of association because, first of all, he has to render the basic senses of words, putting aside everything that is additional. For example in the poem "Finis" Norwid writing *śmiertelnik* ("mortal") in the context of words referring to botany (*Flory-badacz* ("Flora researcher"), *zielnik* ("herbarium"), *mech* ("moss"), *liść* ("leaf"), *twory* ("organisms")) makes the Polish reader think of a flower (xeranthemum). The translator into English cannot give the reader such an association because there are no names of flowers in this language which contradict mortality. Thus in the translation of this poem one layer of meanings is lost. Besides, the ambiguity of the word *śmiertelnik* ("mortal") has to be changed as well. *Śmiertelnik* means in Polish "ten, który musi umrzeć" ("the one who must die") and at the same time is the synonym of "każdy, zwykły, przeciętny człowiek" ("an average man"). In English the latter meaning is conveyed by *everyman*. *Mortal* referring to all people contrasts them with everything which is immortal (soul, God), in Polish this opposition is not so vivid because *śmiertelnik* is rather understood as an ordinary, average person. Thus in the English version of the poem the notion of immortality may be achieved, although not by the name of the flower but by the very word *mortal*. The semantic tension between *śmiertelnik* and *nieśmiertelnik* can be retained in the English translation of the poem only in a weaker form than in the original because it lacks the *paradoxical confusion of names* and typical for Norwid *ironic indication of illogicality or irresponsibility of the original meanings of words* (Sawicki 1986:36).

> Tak F l o r y - b a d a c z , dopełniwszy z i e l n i k ,
> Gdy z poziomego mchu najmniejszym liściem
> Szeptał o śmierciach tworów, chce nad wnijściem
> Księgi podpisać się... pisze... ś m i e r t e l n i k !   (*PWsz*, vol. II, 139)

Similarly, a botanist having his herbarium full
(When from the lowly moss the tiniest petal
Whispers about the deaths of creatures) and wanting
To sign the frontispiece... writes... mortal!   (Czerniawski, A. 1986a)

In "Sfinks" Norwid creates semantic tension among words by their paradoxical juxtaposition. A traveller attacked by a beast answers its question about a man:

– C z ł o w i e k ?... – j e s t t o k a p ł a n b e z w i e d n y
I n i e d o j r z a ł y ... –   (*PWsz*, vol. II, 33)

In this brief gnomic definition words of positive and negative connotations have been put together – *kapłan* ("priest") alongside with *niedojrzały* ("immature") and *bezwiedny* ("unaware"). Sawicki (1986:29) noticed that the words with negative connotations which describe a man promise a change into positive meanings in the future: *Each immaturity forecasts maturity, each unawareness may become awareness*. However, the structure of the gnom is based not only on the *presence of the two parallel semantic aspects of the words:* **bezwiedny** *and* **niedojrzały** (Sawicki 1986:29). It is created by the very contrast among the words that are at present perceived as negative or positive. All of these words have to be properly interpreted in relation to the whole of Norwid's poem – in other words they have to be interpreted in the Christian context. Puzynina (1990:10) was right to point out that:

[...] maturity and immaturity are words of unclear meaning, depending on the outlook of the speaker. In order to understand this word properly (i.e. according to the meaning the author of the poem gave to it) one has to know that immaturity is understood here in a Christian interpretation: as not perceiving, not experiencing life as a task, as time given to seek and fulfil God's will. In order to understand this word fully in "Sfinks" one must be able to ascribe negative connotation to it, which is clearly seen in the juxtaposition of **niedojrzałość** *(and also* **bezwiedność***) with highly valued* **kapłaństwo**.

No wonder that a proper juxtaposition of properly understood and properly contrasted words in the English translations of "Sfinks" seems to be too difficult for all its translators:

Man is an ignorant adolescent priest [7]   (Czerniawski, A., *"OP"*, 16)

Man?... he is a priest though unaware
And immature, let's say... [8]   (Karpowicz, T., *"PR"*, vol. 28, 79)

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[7] Czerniawski, A. 1973. *Polish Poetry Supplement No 7*, ed. Czesław & Krystyna Bednarczykowie, 16. London: Oficyna Poetów i Malarzy. Hereafter: *"OP"*.

[8] Karpowicz, T. 1983. "Five poems from Vade-Mecum". *The Polish Review*, ed. Ludwik Krzyżanowski, vol. 28, 79. New York: The Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America, Inc. Hereafter: *"PR"*.

Man?... he's a priest ignorant
And green....   (Czerniawski, A. *CKNP/Ps*, 43)

Man?... he is an un-knowing
And immature priest...   (Barańczak, S. 1988, 138)

None of the translations is in accordance with the original. *Ignorant* and *un-knowing* do not fully correspond with Polish *bezwiedny*, *adolescent* and *immature* in Czerniawski's and Barańczak's texts are not the best equivalents of *niedojrzały*. *Ignorant* and *un-knowing* too weakly express the lack of awareness of the priest,[9] *adolescent* and *immature* are too bound with physical growth to refer to the spirit. Apart from that, the English language does not differentiate between *ksiądz* and *kapłan* hence another difficulty arises: how to render the particularly high positive value of the word *kapłan* which in Norwid's poem dignifies the man despite his unawareness and immaturity (see Sawicki (1986:67))?

In addition to the difficulties with finding proper equivalents of ambiguous words and creating similar semantic relations in the texts, there emerges yet another problem in translating Norwid's works into English which is chiefly bound with his passion for reinterpretation. Amongst classical examples of words that were given new meanings by Norwid (e.g. *zgon* meaning "skon /skonanie/ dokonanie" or *wy-słowa* understood as *mowa pełna istotnych słów* (Sawicki 1986:35)) only one has been translated. This was *od-począć* ("relax") from "Promethidion" which, according to Norwid's footnote, means: "p o c z ą ł n a n o w o, począł w drugiej potędze..." ("did again, started afresh"), although the very context of the poem stresses the basic meaning of this word:

O! gdybym jedną kaplicę zobaczył,
[...]
Gdzie by kamieniarz, cieśla, murarz, snycerz,
Poeta – wreszcie Męczennik i rycerz
O d p o c z ą ł w pracy, czynie i w modlitwie...   (*Bogumił*, v. 286, 290–92, *PWsz*, vol. III, 444)

Both translators of "Promethidion" considered the new meaning of the word as more important and they translated it either as: *re-create* or *start afresh*:

But just to see a chapel like this room
[...]
There the stone-cutter, mason, carpenter,
Poet, and finally the knight and martyr

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[9] *Bezwiedny* means according to the 19th-century dictionary: *Słownik języka polskiego, 1900–1927,* ed. J. Karłowicz, A. Kryński, W. Niedźwiecki, vol. I–VIII. Warszawa: E. Lubowski i S-ka: "bezświadomy" ("not conscious"), "nieświadomy" ("not aware"), "nie zdający sobie sprawy" ("not realizing").

Could re-create with pleasure, work and prayer[10] (Peterkiewicz, J./Singer, B. *FC*, 80)

Oh, were I to see one chapel [...]
[...]
Where the mason, carpenter, wood-carver,
Poet – eventually Martyr and knight
Would start afresh in work, prayer and deed –   (Laskowski, J.A., *"OP"*, 13)

Putting aside the unaccountable change of *czyn* ("deed") into *pleasure*, Peterkiewicz/Singer in their translation at least tried to show Norwid's innovative way of word formation. They maintained the original hyphenated compound translating *od-począć* as *re-create*. Let us bear in mind, however, that this method of translation does not render the stylistic idiosyncrasy of the Polish poet. Norwid's innovations, as far as neologisms are concerned, are a departure from the norms of the source language but at the same time amount to a move in the direction of the target language, and therefore cannot be perceived as a break with convention in translation. In other words: the coinage of compounds, which is alien to Polish, is only natural in English so Norwid's originality in word formation is lost in this language (see, for example, Peterkiewicz (1948/49:244), Łuczak-Wild (1988)).

So far we have been tracing some difficulties caused in the translation of Norwid's texts by his experiments with words. We can clearly see that when the translators had to deal with ambiguous words or phrases they were almost always forced to choose only one of their many meanings, thereby simplifying the translated texts. Now I would like to focus my attention on those of Norwid's works whose meaning is so vague and obscure that their interpretation is problematic even for Polish Norwidologists. I do not mean here those of Norwid's poems in which the poet used structural omissions in denoting silence[11] because such omissions are easy to show by various graphic devices in almost every target language.[12] I mean such texts whose very structures are full of ambiguity, semantic understatements and anacoluthons. In many cases they are not just mere linguistic mistakes but they present Norwid's *conscious approach to the language of literary works* (Puzynina 1990:114).

Dealing with texts of this type translators usually get rid of their vagueness by correction of their structure and explicit interpretation of their meaning. For

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[10] Peterkiewicz, J./Singer, B. 1960. *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry,* 80. London: Secker & Warburg. Hereafter: *FC*.

[11] Norwid, *nota bene*, was the first of Polish writers to recognize Silence as a fundamental part of speech. See: *Milczenie*, *PWsz*, vol. VIII, 219–248.

[12] Norwid's publishers (e.g. Przesmycki, Sowiński, Gomulicki) used for this purpose asterisks or dots.

example, while reading "Klaskaniem mając obrzękłe prawice" from *Vade-mecum* in Polish the reader does not know whether Norwid is describing a memoir or an artist:

> *Piszę – ot! czasem... piszę n a   B a b i l o n*
> *D o   J e r u z a l e m ! – i dochodzą listy,*
> *To zaś mi mniejsza, czy bywam omylon*
> *Albo nie?... piszę – pamiętnik artysty,*
> *Ogryzmolony i w siebie pochylon –*
> *Obłędny!... ależ – wielce rzeczywisty!*
> ....   (*PWsz,* vol. II, 17)

It is not clear whether all the adjectives: *ogryzmolony*, *w sobie pochylon*, *obłędny* and *wielce rzeczywisty* refer to the memoir (as Adamiec (1986:63–73) claimed) or the first two to the memoir and the remaining ones to the artist (as Trznadel (1978:44) stated)? Or maybe Puzynina (1990:102) was right writing that: *as a matter of fact all four words [...] can describe both: the memoir and the artist*? Let us see how this problem was solved by the translator of the poem:

> *I write – well, sometimes – to Jerusalem*
> *Via Babylon, and my letters arrive.*
> *It matters little if my views are then*
> *Proved right or wrong. An artist's memoirs thrive*
> *Through scribbles that turn inwards, loose again*
> *To something messy, crazy! But alive.*   (Brooke-Rose, Ch., *"BO"*, 142)

Here *omylon* is the artist, *pochylon w siebie*, *obłędny* and *wielce rzeczywisty* – the memoir. The fact that Brooke-Rose left out *ogryzmolony* in her translation, changed rzeczywisty into *alive* ("żywy"), and used amplification in verse 45 may be ignored, but her decision to unriddle the vagueness of the poem and give its interpretation cannot be disregarded. She also did not maintain the polisemy of the words: *omylon* and *obłędny* which could be understood in Polish at least in two ways (Sawicki 1986:29).

In the poem "Stolica" we come across a lot of modifications in its syntax (*gestem wypocząć*, *iść z ruszeniem głowy*, *utonąć wzwyż*, *ożałobionych czarno*), vocabulary (*ożałobionych*, *niedobliźnionych*) and phraseology (*fabryczna ekstaza*, *chmurny tłok*). They are, according to Puzynina (1990:97), innovative in relation to the Polish language system and serve to create new meanings in Norwid's text. In other words incorrect constructions perform here important semantic functions. Thus one may doubt whether translators have the right to correct Norwid's "mistakes".

<div style="text-align:center">1</div>

O! ulico, ulico...   "This street–a street

Miast, nad którymi krzyż;	In any city: over them all the *cross.*
Szyby twoje skrzą się i świecą	Window-panes, juggling sunlight, sometimes cheat:
Jak źrenice kota, łowiąc mysz.	Twinkling like cat's eyes but no mouse to toss.
2	
Przechodniów tłum, ożałobionych czarno	Pedestrians, in mournful black, go by:
(W barwie stoików),	*The stoic's colour,* but
ale wydąża każdy, że aż parno	They shout, rush, crush, stifle each other, cry,
wśród omijań i krzyków.	Each in his jostled rut.
3	
Ruchy dwa, i gesty dwa tylko:	Two forces only, and two gestures here:
Fabrykantów, ścigających coś z rozpaczą,	Factory owners search despair – (*for fun?*) –
I pokwitowanych z prac, przed chwilką,	Then those who work, and fifty times a year
Co – tryumfem się raczą...	Gloat over what they've won.
4	
Konwulsje dwie, i dwa obrazy:	Two tremors and two images, just two:
Zakupionego z góry nieba,	Buy property in heaven before you're dead
Lub – fabrycznej ekstazy	Or manufacture *ecstas*y, with a few
O – kęs chleba.	Crusts of stale bread.
5	
Idzie Arab, z kapłańskim ruszeniem głowy,	An Arab, in his priestly clothes, goes by,
Wśród chmurnego promieniejąc tłoku;	A ray of stillness in the rush of clouds.
Biały, jak statua z kości słoniowéj:	He is carved ivory.
Pojrzę nań... wytchnę oku!	My eye can rest. Let its repose be proud.
6	
Idzie pogrzeb, w ulice spływa boczne	And then a funeral. At last no rush.
Nie-pogwałconym krokiem;	The side-street crowd respects death's dignity.
W ślad mu pójdę, gestem wypocznę,	I follow it. My fretful gestures hush.
Wypocznę – okiem!...	Here let me rest my eye.
7	
Lub – nie patrząc na niedobliźnionych bliźnich lica,	O fellow creatures with no fellows, I
Utonę myślą wzwyż:	Plunge through my thoughts above you – no great loss.
Na lazurze balon się rozświéca;	A small balloon glints in the blue sky.
W obłokach?... krzyż!	And through the clouds? Yes. Yes. It *is* the cross."
(*PWsz*, vol. II, 38)	(*FC*, 82)

It is obvious that Norwid's linguistic "mistakes" were corrected by Peterkiewicz/Singer. The translators for example solved Norwidologists' questions about verses 3 and 4 of the first stanza, where it is unclear whether the present participle *łowiąc mysz* ("chasing a mouse") refers to the window panes (which is indicated by the syntax of the poem (Trznadel 1978:73)) or rather (which is more logical) to the cat (Jastrun 1970:6–16). The participle was changed in the English text by the expression: *no mouse to toss* and describes window panes which cheat by reflecting the sun light and look like the eyes of the cat. Other "mistakes" were also corrected by Peterkiewicz/Singer, e.g.: *kapłańskie ruszenie głowy* ("priestly

movement of the head") of the Arab was changed into *priestly clothes* or *gestem wypocznę* ("I'll rest with my gesture") into *My fretful gestures hush*.

On the basis of just a handful of examples[13] it could be seen that Norwid's various experiments with words were almost always simplified by his translators. Only some of his morphological innovations were rendered by them, but even this aspect of Norwid's poetic diction loses its originality in the English language in which the coinage of compounds is perceived as natural. Thus Norwid's texts have been constantly corrected, simplified and deprived of originality.

Why? Because the translation of his works involves not only coping with general difficulties encountered by all translators from Polish into English,[14] but also with peculiarities of Norwid's poetic style in which everything matters and everything contributes to the multitude of levels of meanings. A good translation of Norwid's works (by "a good translation" I mean one that is faithful to the original – especially to its semantics) requires from the translators not only the knowledge of a given text but also of most of its interpretations. The translators should also be familiar with Norwid's other literary works, his idiosyncratic language, and aesthetic postulates. Without this kind of knowledge they are not aware of many new meanings which words, phrases, clauses or sometimes the whole poems gain in the world of Norwid's texts (where even his linguistic "mistakes" are deliberate and important) thus they are not able to find their proper equivalents.

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[13] The reader may find many more examples of Norwid's semantic techniques that are difficult to translate in my article on a similar subject ("O nieprzetłumaczalności niektórych technik semantycznych Norwida na język angielski". *Workshop on translations I*, ed. H. Duda, R. Sokoloski, 95–110. Lublin – Ottawa 2001: TN KUL.) and in my Ph D dissertation ("O angielskich tłumaczeniach utworów Norwida") (in print) by TN KUL.

[14] I analyse them in greater depth in my Ph D thesis.

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