

Modernist Translation and Time

There are epochs, however, when mankind, not satisfied with the present, yearning like the ploughman for the abyssal strata of time, thirsts for the virgin soil of time.
/Osip Mandelstam, *The Word and Culture*/

In *Dialogue on Vilnius*, Tomas Venclova says that for the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe, divided by totalitarianisms, the zone of possible encounters is not space but time. According to Beata Kalęba's findings, one of the most significant consequences of transferring the intercultural dialogue to the temporal coordinate system was the search for functional translational equivalents in the chronologically surprising resources of poetic systems: Norwid's metre in the syntax of Marina Tsvetaeva, James Joyce's *Ulysses* lexis in the Lithuanian women's prose of the interwar period. The findings of the researcher of Lithuanian modernism reveal the wide possibilities of theorising modernist translation in relation to the category of time – from a Central and Eastern European perspective. Let us therefore ask after Harsha Ram: "What is it about time, modernist time, that once functioned as a cross-cultural encounter?"

The importance of the issue of time for the study of modernist literary translation has not been sufficiently appreciated so far, despite the considerable interest in the issues of the "dynamization of temporality" considered as one of the defining features of modernism. After all, as Doris Bachmann-Medick concludes, "time-oriented understanding" is an essential component of modernism's self-consciousness, in contrast to "the way postmodernism conceives of itself, i.e. from space-oriented understanding". The multifaceted picture of modernist temporal experience consists of brilliantly elaborated issues of experiencing time as "a descent into chaos, fragmentation and loss", problems of "split temporality" or, on the contrary, temporal "abundance" or literary representations of the inter-sensory perception of movement. Yet the relationship between modernity defined as a new temporal experience and translation still awaits in-depth reflection by historians of literary modernism.

The evident scarcity of research reflection on the temporal assumptions of modernist translation work is primarily due to the general state of translation studies on the temporal

aspects of translation, which, as James St. André notes, “remain surprisingly understudied”. In the narrow field of translation studies on literary modernisms itself, however, attempts to define the “Modernist revolution in translation” emphasise above all changes in the interrelations of original and translated literary works, the status of translation in the target literature, the visibility of the translator or the cognitive functions of translation. It seems that an equally effective and authoritative criterion for capturing the specificity of modernist literary translation are the assumptions about the nature of time underlying translation practice, for as Ben Hjorth points out: “Translation is itself always concerned with bridging temporal gaps, and thus with the nature of time itself: any practice of translation entails a corresponding concept of temporality”. What conception of time, then, defines the epistemological framework of modernist literary translation?

As Harsha Ram notes, the boundaries of Western high-modernist theoretical reflection on the temporal aspects of translation have been defined by two great theoretical models of modernism in translation: *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919) by the American orientalist Ernest Fenollosa and *The Task of the Translator* by Walter Benjamin. The former essay, published by Ezra Pound and considered a milestone in the history of Anglo-American modernist poetry, highlights the importance of Chinese ideograms as relics of the original temporality of language, lost to European culture but still recoverable in translation. “The vitalism of Chinese poetry is the translator’s antidote to the accelerating abstraction of European time”, which is evident, among other things, in the Futurist notion of speed and in “the hypertrophy of memory in high modernism”. The compensatory bond between time condensed in Chinese ideograms and “diluted” European time is what Fenollosa calls the temporality of translation. It goes without saying that it was Fenollosa’s insights that inspired the “ideogramic method” of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* and laid the foundations for the concept of literary translation as “an augmented view of the past, coloured by the intervening centuries of experience”. Pound’s translation abolishes the opposition between archaisation (typical, for example, of the Victorian model of translation) and modernisation (characteristic, for example, of the Elizabethan model of translation) in favour of a synchronicity that corresponds to cubist collages, filmic editing techniques and the ideograms studied by Fenollosa.

The other pole of high-modernist theoretical reflection on the temporal aspects of translation – Walter Benjamin’s essay – is “an attempt to theorize translation as an alternative temporality of language”. In Benjamin’s linguistic eschatology, the relationship between translation and the original is defined by “messianic time” understood as the simultaneity of past and future in the present moment. According to this paradigm, translation “is always

belated, a *Fortleben* or life-after-death of the original. (...) The temporal tardiness of translation is, however, also a kind of anticipation: the encounter between languages if finally their consummation into the «one, true language»”.

As Harsha Ram concludes, both manifestos of modernist linguistic sensitivity – those of Fenollosa and Benjamin – “succeed in yoking a translator’s radical intuition of the foreign to an experience of time that we can no longer call our own. (...) [T]he foreignness of interlinguistic crossing is meditated upon as the *temporality* of translation”.

The recognition of the strongly temporalising rhetoric of modernism, in particular the dominance of the category of temporality in defining modernist translation, led the American translation scholar to formulate a rival concept of the transcultural spatialisation of translation. What “remained untheorized (...) in the idiom of modernist time was the intransigence, the refractory nature, of transcultural space”. The researcher argues that the distance that separates contemporary readers from European modernism can be measured by the new translation imperative of discovering “the timeliness of a poem as its space”.

Comparative studies on Central and Eastern European literary modernisms from the perspective of historical poetics confirm that a decisive movement towards the spatialisation of time has already taken place within the modernist formation. According to Joseph Frank’s findings, the literature of modernism is essentially spatial in its disruption of temporal continuity. The same concept of “spatialised time” defines the epistemological framework of modernist literary translation.

One of the most active areas of crystallisation and expression of the concept of time in modernist translation is stylisation understood as “a particular artistic and semiotic method of (re)interpreting literary heritage and establishing a current tradition”. The importance of stylisation for the issue under consideration here stems from its special abilities to diachronically dynamise the target text. Stylisation is “a phenomenon (...) somewhat artificially brought to life; ostentatiously and experimentally. It violates (or even deforms or bends) the “natural” bonds and affiliations of literary facts, and thus the “natural” course of the historical-literary process, especially the course of the actualisation of tradition. It imitates and artificially stimulates this process in an artistic and as if “laboratory” way; artificially, because in ostentatious inverted commas, “for show”. As Stanisław Balbus shows, it is modernism that is the period of an unprecedented expansion of stylistic strategies which are in fact “attempts[s] to «jump» beyond the «linguistic» boundaries of its own time...”. This proliferation of “interstylistic dialogues” can be observed both in original literary works and in translated literature. The variety of forms and varieties of stylisation in modernist literary

translation confirms Edward Balcerzan's thesis that "whatever appeared in original literature as its systemic property has a chance to appear in translated literature".

A clear example of a translatorial temporal experiment, drawing its impetus from stylisation, is the Polish translation of Velimir Khlebnikov's lyrical miniature "Smertich', Smertich', ne smeshi!..." offered by Adam Pomorski:

Smertich', Smertich', ne smeshi!
Deve iuna pokazhi!
Mladu zhizn', nu zadui!
Devu v gubki pocelui!...
– Ja materi ispolnit' gotov prikazanie.
O, deva, nie boisia utekhi lobzaniia.
Bez slov – gotov.
Priniala. Umerla.

Nie śmiesz, nie śmiesz, śmiertniczeńko!
Młodej męża daj, serdeńko!
Młody świat zdmuchnij, nie żałuj!
W usteczka młodą pocałuj!
– Pani matki gotówem usłuchać rozkazania.
O, nie lękaj się panna uciechy całowania
Bez słów – gotów.
Przywarła. Umarła.

The work deals with the theme of marriage with death. The poem begins with an apostrophe of the mother – Death to her son Smertich, followed by his answer, addressed to the mother and the girl respectively. The work closes with the words of the observer of the ceremony. The change of speech subjects (dialogicity) is highlighted by the use of different metrical measures. Each of the three lyrical figures corresponds to a different metre: Death's words are rendered in a catalectic and amphimacric trocheic rhythm. The trocheic metre (with an abrupt change of rhythm in the amphimacric interval) brings up to date the topos of the dance of death particularly prevalent in late medieval and Baroque literature and art. The unhurried words of Smertich are rendered by a four-octave dolnik. The words of the observer of the ceremony, which conclude the piece, are examples of iambic and anapestic dipody respectively. Thus, following Bohdan Łazarczyk, one could say that different systems of verse, equally entitled as main characters in a drama, play their own roles in the theatre of speech. Khlebnikov's miniature is a kind of "metre theatre" in which "a line is a passage or a dance". The piece is a polymetric composition typical of Khlebnikov's early work, involving the interweaving not only of different syllabotonic metres, but also elements of other metric systems. The transitions between different metric measures are softened both by rhymes (even, inaccurate) and by lexical and syntactic repetitions.

The trocheic foot, the dolnik combining syllabotonic verse with folk tonic, and the lexical and syntactic parallelisms are clear signals of references to folklore. The folk stylisation is reinforced by lexical archaisms, diminutivum and abbreviated adjectives characteristic of the Orthodox Slavic language.

Pomorski respects the polymetric composition of the original, interweaving syllabotonic metres (trocheic, dactylic, iambic and amphibrachic) with pentatonic ones. The source of the archaisms is both sixteenth-century Polish (the Bible translated by Jakub Wujek) and nineteenth-century borderland Polish. Significant strengthening of the rhythm and striving for ideal harmony of sound (replacing inaccurate even rhymes with even, feminine, deep rhymes) allows us to notice in the translation the evocation of Józef Baka's poetic model. The final rhyme pair "przywarła – umarła" resembles Baka's sound-rhyme doublets from *Uwagi o śmierci niechybnej* [Remarks of Inescapable Death], such as "spłynął i zginął", "mdlejesz, truchlejesz" or "zemdlejesz, strupiejesz". In the finale of Baka's whole poems there is always a trace of Death's direct and violent intervention. In the case of the final distich of the translation, with its characteristic thickening of the rhythm and a distinct drop in intonation, we can also speak of rhythmic quotation – a reminiscence of Baka's syllabic rhythmic. The changing, dancing rhythm with a clearly marked final moment of "pointing" or "catching" is reminiscent of Baka's poetics of children's counting out, which is accomplished in those moments of the text when death enters the action. The presence of Baka's poetic pattern (a sudden shortening of the metre, strengthening of the rhythm and rhymes in the final two lines) allows to bring out and emphasise the semantics of haste. Baka's poetics is also referred to by a much stronger accumulation of diminutives than in the original. As in *Uwagi o śmierci niechybnej* and the late Baroque poetry of ultimate things, the juxtaposition of caressing apostrophes with the theme of ultimate things strengthens the ludic character of the work. A careful reading of the translation of Khlebnikov's poem in the context of late Baroque Jesuit poetry reveals such peculiarities of the linguistic structure of Baka's poems as versificational dynamics and variability appealing to the listener's auditory and kinesthetic senses, the shortness of the verse and the density of the rhythm conveying the moment of the triumph of "inescapable death" (the meeting of the syntactic finale with the semantic finale), a strong intonation-sentence caesura, even, deep rhymes, and the domination of the noun. In view of such an accumulation of stylistic reminiscences, even the apostrophic character of the poem (identical to the original) strengthens the reference to Baka's model. Unexpectedly, the poetry of the Russian avant-gardist intensifies the features of Baka's poetics. At the same time, the stylistic reminiscences from Baka highlight the mode of Khlebnikov's early poetic practice, which is distinguished by its ludic and archaic character, manifested, among other things, in the reference to the diction of the Baroque-grotesque ode with its hybrid of elevated and low style.

The Polish translator of Khlebnikov pursues a strategy of incrustative-evocative stylistic reminiscence that deepens the historical-cultural plane of the target text. Pomorski explains:

“The basic tradition, the consideration of which is, in my opinion, indispensable in Poland when translating Russian literature, already with a (...) modernist blemish, is the tradition of plebeian Sarmatism and its derivatives (the tradition not only of the various Mister Paseks, but also of the poetry of ultimate things, of Baka and so on)”.

The strategy of stylistic reminiscence allows the translator to highlight the common historical-cultural, ideological-world-view, and artistic trunk of two seemingly radically different historical-literary phenomena: the early avant-garde work of Velimir Khlebnikov and the late Baroque religious poetry of Józef Baka. Unexpectedly, it turns out that the lyrical miniature “Smertich’, Smertich’, ne smeshi!” and *Uwagi o śmierci niechybnej* are linked not only by ludicism, roots in folklore, the dialogisation of poetic speech, a predilection for the mechanisms of children’s speech, conceptualism, the approximation of the semantics of death and laughter, but also by calling death a mother, the motif of death entering the body through the mouth, the clash of disconnected semantic fields, and (typical of avant-garde art) an active attitude to all the actualised and potential meanings of the words used.

In this context, particularly significant are the translator’s explanations about the “poetics of ultimate things” of the Sarmatian Low Baroque, transposed to seventeenth-century Poland from the Latin poetry of the Silesian Germans, transplanted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the Ruthenian land, crossed there with the local rogue folklore, then developed by the Belarusian Jesuits and transferred back to the Polish literature. Writing about Lavon Barshcheŭski’s translation of Józef Baka’s poem *Starym uwaga* [Appeal to the Old Ones] into Belarusian, Pomorski traces the genealogy of Baka’s poetic grotesque to the Eastern European Jesuit Baroque: “Baka has returned to the source, that is, to the Belarusian nativity scene, the so-called *batlejka*. He is straight from there, from the tradition of burlesque, grotesque, and humorous macabre, which was then consciously cultivated in Belarus for two centuries”. Late Baroque Polish poetry of the “black carnival”, as the Baka’s tradition was described by Aleksander Nawarecki, is fully legible on the ground of Belarusian folklore, ethnography and versification. It reveals its meanings also in the context of Russian modernist poetic creativity.

The use of stylistic reminiscence in translation allows us to situate both poetics – Baka’s and Khlebnikov’s – in the perspective of a certain semiotic historical community. Khlebnikov’s poetic language, seen in the concurrent but distinctly separate perspective of Baka’s poetic semantics, expands its boundaries. The dramatised character of the poem “Smertich’, Smertich’, ne smeshi!...”, emphasised by the dialogism and versification, as well as the variable, dancing rhythm of the original seem unexpectedly to refer to the tradition of the

grotesque, nativity play characteristic of Eastern European Jesuit Baroque art. The translator exposes the position and active complicity of the partners of the inter-stylistic dialogue in the “common world” of Eastern European culture. The stylistic reminiscences of late Baroque Jesuit poetry in the Polish translation of Khlebnikov’s poem serve as a creative updating of that part of the cultural heritage, which at the time of the emergence of Russian post-symbolist groups was outside the boundaries of the operational memory of culture due to the «moderation» and «provinciality» of the Russian official Baroque, which had not exhausted all its transformative potential and was dependent on Polish and Western European models.

But the affinities of the Baroque and the avant-garde, brought out through stylistic reminiscence, go much deeper: they concern the particular correlation of the Baroque and the Futurist concept of time. As Igor Smirnov writes, one of the most significant consequences of the confusion of things and signs, characteristic for the Baroque and Futurism, was the concept of “spatialised time”, taking the form of a pan-synchronous or asynchronous understanding of reality. In the models of the world created by the writers of the Baroque and Futurism, no matter how contradictory, “time inevitably loses its characteristic of irreversibility, events combine in time as if they were organised in space”. The topological conception of time presupposes not only the saturation of the category of time with spatial meanings, but also the temporal colouring of topological meanings and the shaping of the image of reality from the perspective of a moving observer. According to the findings of the Russian literary scholar, the spatialisation of time finds its expression in rhythmic asymmetry (polymetry), the use of dissonant rhymes, the dialogisation of the text, and the accumulation of lexical anachronisms that are characteristic of Baroque and Futurist literary works. The realisation of the concept of “spatialised time” is found by the researcher both in Khlebnikov’s “unmotivated anachronisms” and in Vladimir Mayakovski’s poetics of “condensing historical time in the passing flicker of the present”, “merging different spatial plans with the present”. He also provides other evidence that Baroque and avant-garde artists clearly felt the “temporal multiplanarity of the present”.

Time in modernist literary translation is most closely related to Dante’s type of intense, condensed “vertical space-time”. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the vertical chronotope of *The Divine Comedy* as a world “in which everything that on earth was divided by time coalesced into pure simultaneous coexistence”. It can be said that the principle of the vertical space-time of modernist translation is a similar synchronicity of coexistence of different historical and literary epochs, languages, traditions, poetics, styles, literary conventions. This “sheer simultaneity of everything” is largely due to the unprecedented expansion of stylistic strategies in modernist translation. They aim “to synchronize diachrony, to replace all temporal and

historical divisions and linkages with purely interpretative, extra-temporal and hierarchicised ones”. It must be strongly emphasised, however, that – as with the images and ideas that populate Dante’s vertical world – the styles and poetics that populate modernist literary translation are profoundly historical: they bear clear signs of the times, traces of their eras.

The vertical space-time of modernist literary translation is capable of accommodating both archaising and modernising translational tricks, both the Benjaminian “eternity” of translation parallel to the present and the “condensed” time of ideograms in Fenollosa’s recognitions. Translators-modernists return from inter-literary journeys like Ulysses from Mandelstam’s poem: “filled with space and time”.

Translated from the Polish by Aleksandra Kalaga