

Translating Cyprian Kamil Norwid's "Generalities"

A Case Study of Cooperation

Norwid is a notoriously difficult poet to translate. The following is the first part of a record of the dialogue between the translator, a native speaker of English, and a Polish Norwidologist who is an experienced analyst of Polish-English literary translation. First, an attempt is made to emulate Norwid's rhyme scheme, then the translation strategy evolves through cooperative dialogue and a definitive version emerges, to appear in the January 2015 issue of *Sarmatian Review*.

| Cyprian Norwid, <i>Vade-mecum</i> | Cyprian Norwid, <i>Vade mecum</i> |
|---|--|
| Za Wstęp (Ogólniki) | By Way of an Introduction (Universalities) |
| Gdy, z wiosną życia duch Artysta Poi się jej tchem jak motyle, Wolno mu mówić tylko tyle: „Ziemia jest krągła – jest kulista!” | The Artist's soul draws breath in its life's spring Just like a butterfly that's on the wing. To speak but these few words he's duty bound: “The Earth is spherical, the Earth is round!” |
| Lecz gdy późniejszych chłódów dreszcze Drzewem wzruszą – i kwiatki zlecą – Wtedy dodawać trzeba jeszcze: „U biegunów – spłaszczona nieco...” | But when we shiver, chills have come to stay, Treetops are swaying, blooms have flit away, There's something more to tell, one must admit: “Well, at its poles – it's flattened out a bit...” |
| Ponad wszystkie wasze uroki – Ty! poezjo, i ty, wymowo – Jeden – wiecznie będzie wysoki: Odpowiednie dać rzeczy – słowo! | Of many wonders that you work so well – You, poetry, and all that you do spell – There's one that always will be chief by far: The words must tell things as they really are! |

Translated by Patrick Corness

Cyprian Norwid. *Vade-mecum*, edited by Józef Fert (2nd corrected and enlarged edition). Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2003. In the April 2014 issue of *SR* we published a literal translation of this poem.

On Patrick Corness' translation of Cyprian Norwid's *Ogólniki*

Agata Brajerska-Mazur

Cyprian Norwid's poem *Ogólniki* opens the *Vade-mecum* cycle, the most important volume of his poetic works and the milestone in modern Polish diction. The poem expresses Norwid's poetic credo that consists of perceiving the process of artistic creation as the task to formulate more and more precise and significant literary utterances. The text is very Norwidian in that it is replete with semantic difficulties that in my view Patrick Corness oversimplifies in his translation. The poem's ending—*Odpowiednie dać rzeczy – słowo!*—is ambiguous and polysemous. It may appear that it “only” charges artists with the task of precision in naming or identifying the nature of things. However, it is not a mere repetition of the French realists' *mot juste* postulate, demanding from writers a clear and precise style matching the real world. As Polish critic Michał Głowiński has noted, it also means that an artist has to express all that is human and significant. Norwid's aphorism contains three words that are among the most meaningful in the poet's vocabulary: *dać* (give), *rzeczy* (to a thing) and *słowo* (word). *Dać* signifies the creative and causative aspect of the poet's work. *Rzecz*, derived by Norwid from the Polish *rzec* (to utter), means not only an “object” but also a literary utterance and everything that is human and important. For Norwid *słowo* is an echo of the Logos used in the Christian sense: wielding the power of naming and creating. Thus the adjective *odpowiednie* (proper) referring to *słowo* may be interpreted as: “real, true, matching

reality and the artist's understanding of it," as well as "dignified, significant, creative." Patrick Corness's translation of *Odpowiednie dać rzeczy – słowo!* as *The words must tell things as they really are!* conveys only the basic meaning of the maxim and loses the nuances of the original. It also appears inferior to some of the previous translations:

Tymoteusz Karpowicz (1983): *To give the proper word – to thing!*

Adam Czerniawski (1986): *A proper word each thing to name!*

Michael Mikoś (2002): *To give each thing – a proper name!*

Adam Czerniawski (2004): *Granting objects proper names!*

Danuta Borchardt (2011): *To name each matter by its rightful – word!*

Patrick Corness (2014): *The words must tell things as they really are!*

Corness's version of Norwid's poem also loses the distinction between *Poezja* (Poetry) and *Wymowa* (Eloquence, Rhetoric) that the Polish poet linked respectively to *Naród* (Nation, hence history/tradition/spirit) and *Państwo* (Country, hence institution/law/reason). For Norwid, both *poezja* and *wymowa* (irrational and rational, heart and mind) must be grasped and combined by an artist in his endeavor to name/create reality/literature. Corness's translation does not render these meanings to the full extent; it turns it into a fairly simple and smooth text that reads well.

The translator makes an effort to maintain the regular structure of the original, though he modifies the very regularities. The pattern of rhymes changes in his version from abba or abab to aabb, the short nine-syllable lines extended to ten-syllable verses. It must be stressed that Polish words are longer (usually consisting of two or more syllables) than the English ones and the standard length of lines in Polish poems is eleven or thirteen syllables. Norwid's poem is shorter, purposely concise and precise. While extending it, Corness had to add phrases that did not exist in the original (e.g., "that's on the wing" or "that you work so well"). In this way his translation turns into an easy and somewhat diluted poem that roughly expresses the ideas of the original but has little of the rough, jagged, and obscure quality so characteristic of Norwid's style.

Perhaps because it is simpler, easier and smoother than the prototype, it might be a good way of introducing Norwid to readers who have just begun their adventure with this most profound of Polish poets.

Response by Patrick John Corness

Dear Agata,

Thank you for your remarks about my translation of Norwid's "Ogólniki," to which I am responding in the hope that you will wish to continue the discussion.

One principle I try to apply in translation is that its readers should have a similar range of opportunities for interpretation of the work as enjoyed by readers of the original, and that excessive explication and gratuitous interpretation preempting the reader's perceptions should be avoided. First of all, therefore, I am grateful for your point about the significance of *wymowa* as *rhetoric* distinct from *poezja*, *poetry* (*rhetoric* or *oratory* could connote *państwo*, though familiarity with Norwid's thinking is needed to appreciate that; with *eloquence* the association is more tenuous). I had taken *wymowa* in a different dictionary definition, as 2. (*sposób oddziaływania*) *force* <*suggestiveness, meaning*> (*of a literary work etc.*), rather than: 3. (*krasnomówstwo*) *oratory; eloquence* (Jan Stanisławski, *Wielki Słownik polsko-angielski*). This distinction can easily and explicitly be made in the translation by a slight adjustment.

As we know, Norwid's poetry carries many associations, connotations and allusions to his own works and to Polish literature and world culture in general. For example, Tadeusz Filip points out that

w wielu wypadkach poszczególne jego wypowiedzi . . . odczytane bez związku z innymi, będą wręcz niezrozumiałe dla czytelnika nie obznajomionego z całością dzieła poetyckiego Norwida i— poniekąd rzecz można—z arcydziełami poezji polskiej. (Tadeusz Filip, *Cypriana Norwida Fortepian Szopena ze stanowiska twórczości poety odczytany*. Kraków, Kot, 1949, p. 9)

It is a problem for the translator to recognize all such allusions and no less difficult to somehow allow the reader of the translation access to such cultural undercurrents. What the translator cannot do is to provide a running commentary in the form of explicitation of underlying meanings; the latter must somehow be present in the choice of vocabulary, phraseology, and artistic structure in the target language.

If *slowo* can be associated with *logos* (λογος) in the way you point out, why can similar implications of *the embodiment of an idea* not be said to apply to *word*?

You mention that *rzecz* is to be associated with *rzec* to imply a creative utterance, however that implication is not rendered by *thing*, *object*, or *matter* in the quoted earlier translations.

In my own version of the last line *The words must tell things as they really are* (I am altering it to *Your words must tell things as they really are*), it must be considered that it renders the concept of presenting something important in the real world in a true manner. Please note also the use of *spell*, a verb that concisely expresses the powerful significance of the words.

Political scientists are fond of saying that a situation or relationship under analysis must be—to use the deliberately colloquial expression—*told like it is*. This is a very meaningful statement, powerful in its simplicity, pointing out a universal truth about interpretation of the real world. My last line expresses a similar idea in a more literary form.

Now *slowo* and *rzecz* are basic (very generalized) words, and “basic” words acquire deeper meaning in a context. The same applies to *word* and *thing*. *Words* means not just individual lexical units but any utterance, up to an entire creative text. In my final line *tell* means not just *say*, but *render truly*; *things* means more than just objects, i.e., *things* can have connotations like those of *rzecz*, and *really* incorporates the concept of *trueness to reality*, so there are mutually reinforcing nuances in the phrase *tell things as they really are* that carry strong connotations for the English reader, actually also incorporating the concept of *odpowiedni* (*proper, appropriate, corresponding*). By the way, there may be a difficulty with *proper* in that it is a subjective concept denoting what *should be* rather than objective *truth* or *reality*. You describe the last line in Polish as a maxim; my last line is virtually the same maxim.

In view of the above considerations, I believe it may be claimed that *Odpowiednie dać rzeczy – słowo* is rendered quite closely by *tell things as they really are*.

Regarding the structure of the poem, issues of rhyme and line length are the principal headache for the translator from Polish into English. Rhyming in English is notoriously difficult. As Czesław Miłosz writes in the Afterword to a bilingual edition of his selected poetry: “What to do with rhymed poems? The English language is rather poor in rhymes and its poetry has been living without them quite well, while imitating the rhymed originals in their English versions has been rarely successful.” Nevertheless, I have found it possible to rhyme my translation of “Ogólniki.” To imitate pedantically the line length or syllable count of Norwid's original would make the English lines look and sound simply unnatural, however. It cannot be ignored that Polish and English have different versification systems and that English verse is not based on syllable count in the same way as Polish. It was not possible to achieve both a similar rhyme scheme and a shorter line length here; certain expansions were necessary to facilitate the rhyme scheme in translation. It is the reader's privilege to judge whether they are perceived as mere padding or whether they contribute organically to the style and atmosphere of the poem. It is probably easier to render the “rough, jagged, obscure” style of Norwid than to emulate the rhyme structure, but it is difficult to see how one could simultaneously satisfy diametrically opposed requirements for a more explicit rendering of nuances on the one hand and obscurity on the other.

I accept that my translation is perhaps “smoother” than the original; this results from my decision to emulate the rhyme pattern, and the impossibility of copying it exactly dictated by language-systemic restrictions. The rhyme pattern aabb is perhaps “smoother” than abba. Whether the translation is “easier” or “simpler” than the original (in what sense?), even “diluted,” is again a matter for the perception of the reader. Both the original work and the translation may be oversimplified in the minds of some readers. I believe this translation reads well in English, following principles of English versification and, crucially, that it conveys the sense of Norwid's original. I have revised my translation to reflect the *poezja/wymowa* distinction:

| Cyprian Norwid, <i>Vade-mecum</i> | Cyprian Norwid, <i>Vade mecum</i> |
|--|---|
| Za Wstęp (Ogólniki) | By Way of an Introduction (Universalities) |
| | Version 2 |
| Gdy, z wiosną życia duch Artysta | The Artist's soul draws breath in its life's spring |
| Poi się jej tchem jak motyle, | Just like a butterfly that's on the wing. |
| Wolno mu mówić tylko tyle: | To speak but these few words he's duty bound: |
| „Ziemia jest krągła – jest kulista!” | “The Earth is spherical, the Earth is round!” |
| | |
| Lecz gdy późniejszych chłódów dreszcze | But when we shiver, chills have come to stay, |
| Drzewem wzruszą – i kwiatki zlecą – | Treetops are swaying, blooms have flit away, |
| Wtedy dodawać trzeba jeszcze: | There's something more to tell, one must admit: |
| „U biegunów – spłaszczona nieco...” | “Well, at its poles – it's flattened out a bit...” |
| | |
| Ponad wszystkie wasze uroki – | Above the wonders that you work so well – |
| Ty! poezjo, i ty, wymowo – | What poetry and oratory both spell – |
| Jeden – wiecznie będzie wysoki: | There's one that always will surpass by far: |
| Odpowiednie dać rzeczy – słowo! | Your words must tell things as they really are! |

I think the above translation “works” as a poem, but I am ready to agree that success with the rhyming produces a different work, not sufficiently Norwidian in structure, so the adjustments to accommodate rhyming are counter-productive as an attempt to emulate the structure. The rhymed version has to follow an English versification pattern, which results in what Ewa Thompson has called a romantic style. If it is accepted that rhyme is not essential, the translation could be more “rough, jagged” (“obscure” only in the sense of “open to interpretation,” however). An alternative, free-verse version, arguably more *Norwidian*, could perhaps be as follows:

| Cyprian Norwid, <i>Vade-mecum</i> | Cyprian Norwid, <i>Vade mecum</i> |
|--|--|
| | Version 3 |
| Za Wstęp (Ogólniki) | By Way of an Introduction (Universalities) |
| | |
| Gdy, z wiosną życia duch Artysta | When in spring of life the Artist's spirit |
| Poi się jej tchem jak motyle, | Breathes in its air as would a butterfly, |
| Wolno mu mówić tylko tyle: | All he's allowed to say is this: |
| „Ziemia jest krągła – jest kulista!” | The Earth is round – it's spherical! |
| | |
| Lecz gdy późniejszych chłódów dreszcze | But later when shivery frosts make |
| Drzewem wzruszą – i kwiatki zlecą – | Trees tremble and flower petals fall, |
| Wtedy dodawać trzeba jeszcze: | Then he must further add: |
| „U biegunów – spłaszczona nieco...” | At the poles it's somewhat flattened. |
| | |
| Ponad wszystkie wasze uroki – | Surpassing all your other charms – |
| Ty! poezjo, i ty, wymowo – | Yours, poetry! and yours, oratory! – |
| Jeden – wiecznie będzie wysoki: | One of them will ever be supreme: |
| Odpowiednie dać rzeczy – słowo! | Your words shall tell things as they really are. |

Your view of this version would be welcome.

(to be continued in the next issue)