

Interactive Encounters: Sosnowski Translates Ashbery's "A Wave"

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Abstract

This article examines John Ashbery's *A Wave* and its Polish translation by Andrzej Sosnowski as instances of performative poetry and performative translation. Rather than providing a faithful restatement, Sosnowski enacts Ashbery's poetics through deliberate stylistic and conceptual interventions. The analysis focuses on how notions of landscape, time, language, and self are rendered as shifting, fragmentary, and contingent. By attending to literal meaning, disjointed temporality, and philosophical allusion, the essay argues that Sosnowski's translation constitutes a site of interpretive agency and poetic performance.

Introduction: Performative Poetry and Translation

John Ashbery's *A Wave* is a long, loose-verse poem that commingles tropes characteristic of both meditative and conversational poetry. The interplay of these two modes invites interpretative efforts while evading any final elucidation. The poem leaves room for understanding, but enacts it as shifting, uncertain, and perpetually in progress. The reader is not confronted with sheer indeterminacy; instead, the poem opens to provisional interpretation. This essay, though unable to explicate *A Wave* in its richness and complexity, seeks to outline Ashbery's elusive and ambiguous text through the concepts of landscape, time, language, and self.

This reading juxtaposes interpretations of Ashbery's poem with its Polish translation by Andrzej Sosnowski. I argue that the latter is not so much a faithful restatement of Ashbery's ideas in another language as an enactment

of stylistic concepts shared by Ashbery and Sosnowski. *A Wave* is a shifting ground for translators, and conventional models of translation prove to be hardly applicable to its intricate, if not overtly tortuous, sentences. As Sosnowski observes, Ashbery's sentence "at times moves into territories that remain uncharted by the Polish language" (Jankowicz 2010: 43); thus, any Polish response to the "broader breath and greater range of stylistic registers" (12) that characterise Ashbery's poetry must be performative rather than purely constative in nature. This is because it is the *how* – the style – of the poetic practice that becomes the *what* – the message – of *A Wave*. My focus will be on the ways Sosnowski's sentences act or "do things with words", rather than their propositional content. Sosnowski articulates this idea most clearly in his afterword to the seminal collection of Ashbery's poems in Polish translation:

Ashbery seems to find something liberating in the excess of apparent literal meanings and the absence of any fundamental sense: the threads of Ariadne are infinite in number, and there is no help in sight. The poem can no longer strive toward assertion; it is incapable of making declarative claims about the world as a coherent object and must instead retreat into a realm of play between thought and language, where nothing ever solidifies into a message. Its contrary ambition is to do justice to a scattered world and to the equally tangled way in which reality appears in the mind. (Ashbery 1993: 65)¹

In my reading of Sosnowski's translation, I will skim the surface of his sentences for those "apparent literal meanings". While these may form constellations of sense – however provisional, shifting, or dispersed – they also point to Sosnowski's strong performative reading of Ashbery's poetry.

Landscape as Displaced Subjectivity

It is generally accepted that two experiences made Ashbery conceive the poem. "Opposite in quality but equal in strength" are the "personal relationship" and the "spinal infection" which spurred the writing of *A Wave* (Bartczak 2006: 145). However futile it may be to trace the biographical contexts of Ashbery's oeuvre, taking love and pain as concepts employed figuratively may prove illuminating. By displacing subjectivity, the sensations of love and pain open up Ashbery's poetic selves to the unknown; these external forces also invest the Ashberyan selves with temporality (Bartczak 2006: 175–176). Once penetrated – whether by love and desire or by pain and grief – these selves lose their solipsistic autonomy and are set into mo-

¹ If not otherwise indicated, all translations and back-translations from Polish into English have been provided by the author (B.S.).

tion. As a result, they can no longer claim an identity independent of time or of others; they cease to resemble the motionless, transcendental, godlike self (e.g. Cartesian subjectivity) characteristic of modern philosophy. One of these sensations or forces, namely pain and its hazy recollection, initiates the opening verse paragraph of *A Wave*, in which Ashbery introduces the reader to his poetic topography:

To pass through pain and not know it,
A car door slamming in the night.
To emerge on an invisible terrain. (322)²

As the passage through pain unfolds, the self experiencing it adopts a sceptical stance, one that is all the more powerful and ambiguous as it is impersonally uttered. Devoid of a subject or agent, this stance is nonetheless a point of departure for the fragmentary meditation presented in *A Wave*; it asserts that one neither knows that one suffers pain, nor knows what pain one suffers. Moreover, in its oscillation between uncertainties, Ashbery's depersonalised statement fundamentally shapes the setting of the poem. For the topography Ashbery sketches is, at its core, epistemological. The invisible terrain upon which the poem's speaker emerges might best be described as a land of unknowing. As Costello persuasively argues, the setting itself should be understood as a trope of knowledge and subjectivity (Costello 2003: 175); one that, in Ashbery's work, is particularly unstable, and as uncharted as subjectivity itself:

So the luck of speaking out
A little too late came to be worshipped in various guises:
A mute actor, a future saint intoxicated with the idea of martyrdom;
And our landscape came to be as it is today:
Partially out of focus, some of it too near, the middle distance
A haven of serenity and unreachable, with all kinds of nice
People and plants waking and stretching, calling
Attention to themselves with every artifice of which the human
Genre is capable. And they called it our home.
No one came to take advantage of these early
Reverses, no doorbell rang. (322)

Thus, the landscape of knowledge appears to be an artificial and deceptive setting, one that obstructs any epistemological certainty. The elements of the panorama, though eventually brought into view, are either too close or

² All quotations from Ashbery's *A Wave* and Sosnowski's translation are cited by page number only. Full bibliographic details for both texts are provided in the Works Cited.

too distant to be clearly perceived; as such, they distort the image and render it unstable. Since the “middle distance”, that is, complete visibility, remains beyond the reach of the beholder, the only vision available is obscure and ambiguous. Sosnowski’s re-enactment of the passage takes this obscurity as a point of departure for an exploration of uncharted literal meanings that emerge in the Polish version:

A więc szczęście mówienia bez ogródek
Trochę późno otoczono wciąż w tak różnych postaciach:
Niemy aktor, odurzony ideą męczeństwa przyszły święty;
I nasz pejzaż zaczął wyglądać tak jak dziś:
Częściowo nieostry, tu i tam nazbyt bliski, w średnim planie
Przystań spokoju, nieosiągalna, ze wszystkimi typami miłych
Ludzi i roślin, co budzą się i przeciągają, zwracając
Na siebie uwagę z wszelkim kunsztem, do jakiego ludzki
Gatunek bywa zdolny. I powiedzieli, że to jest nasz dom.
Nikt nie przyszedł skorzystać z tych wczesnych
Odmian, dzwonek nigdy nie zadzwonił do drzwi. (197)³

The distortions and deceptions that permeate Sosnowski’s locution transform “the happiness of speaking out” into *mówienie bez ogródek*: both speaking “plainly” and speaking without “restrictions or enclosures”. In his reading, however, the “invisible terrain” becomes a space that is at once boundless and encircled. More speculative or fantastical interpretations may further reframe this unknown territory as a fully domesticated space: indeed, a garden (with *ogródek* in the nominative meaning “little garden”). These superficial or literal meanings, which effectively cancel one another out, are reinforced by other allusive and equally antithetical lexical choices. *Ludzki gatunek* and *wczesne odmiany* conflate seemingly incommensurable categories: nature (*gatunek* as “species”) with the man-made (*gatunek* as “genre”); space (*odmiany* as “plant varieties”, implicitly rooted in the ground) with time (*odmiany* as “changes” or “transformations”); permanence with mutability.

³ So the happiness of speaking plainly [without any restrictions, enclosures or bounds; even “garden” in the nominative] / Was rather late in being revered [encircled] in such varied forms [figures]: / A mute actor, a future saint intoxicated by the idea of martyrdom; And our landscape began to look as it does today: / Partly blurry, here and there too close, in the middle distance / A haven of peace, unattainable, with all kinds of pleasant / People and plants, waking and stretching, / Drawing attention to themselves with all the skill / The human species is capable of. And they said this was our home. / No one came to make use of those early / Varieties, the bell never rang at the door (197).

Explication as Violence

The protagonist of *A Wave* nonetheless manages “to scratch around and maybe come up with something” in this unstable and mutable setting (323). The condition for this tentative and provisional insight is “sinking in oneself”, a form of self-reflection that “redirects the maze, and where “the mesmerizing plan of the landscape becomes, at last, apparent” (324):

[...] And as it
Focuses itself, it is the backward part of a life that is
Partially coming into view. It's there, like a limb. And the issue
Of making sense becomes such a far-off one. Isn't this “sense”—
This little of my life that I can see—that answers me
Like a dog, and wags its tail, though excitement and fidelity are
About all that ever gets expressed? (324)

The landscape of knowledge might just as well be described as the scenery of self-understanding or recollection, for it is one's identity that is dreamt of in Ashbery's epistemological reverie. This vision offers no resolution, only a fragmentary recognition that takes place in its stead. A limb, a fragment of the body that comes into view, may suffice for a moment of self-recognition. Yet that fragment ultimately proves inadequate for full self-identification. As a result, attaining knowledge of the self seems unlikely, since making sense of one's life turns out to mean very little; no more, perhaps, than self-expression reduced to simple, albeit vivid, gestures, such as a dog wagging its tail.

Sosnowski studies the Ashbery “mesmerizing plan of the landscape” as though it were a book or manuscript. Accordingly, the “apparent” (“visible”) setting becomes *czytelny* (“legible”) (200): a prelude to a series of textual manipulations in which acts of seeing are transformed into acts of reading. These, in turn, take on the character of a scholarly inquiry, where “explanation” (324) shifts into the more philological *eksplikacja* (“explication”) (200). Sosnowski's reader often engages with Ashbery “confounding” (324) phenomena that begin to function like misleading (*zbijająca z tropu*) traces or figures of speech (200). In *Fala*, Ashbery's conversational and offhand “Are comments like ours really needed?” (328) gravitates towards a more exegetic: *Czy komentarze, takie jak nasz, są rzeczywiście potrzebne?* (“Are commentaries like ours really necessary?”) (205), a question likely posed by a researcher who lost faith in their work. This is because the *nadmiernie gładka eksplikacja wszystkiego* (“excessively smooth explication of everything”) (205) drains life from the landscape: it flattens a once vivid setting into mere “heaps of slag” (328). For Sosnowski, *eksplikacja* is peril, almost like a thug encountered in a dark alleyway:

[...] jedynie brak pamięci
 Nas ożywia, gdy spacerujemy dziarsko tam i sam
 Stanowiąc jedno z bezdusznym, niespokojnym tłumem w ponurej alei.
 Czy jest coś nowego do zobaczenia, do namysłu? Błatego pojęcia, lepiej
 Się odsunąć i zaczekać, aż pojawi się coś, co go wyjaśni,
 Ów zastanawiający brak niepokoju, który zaczyna już człowieka
 Gryźć. (206–207)⁴

Sosnowski departs from Ashbery's juxtaposition of verbs and nouns sharing similar etymologies: "the absence of memory that *animates* us" and "*soulless*, restless crowd" (329), to create a new network of literal signification. As Sosnowski's slightly archaic *tam i sam* ("back and forth" and "there and all alone") merges with the crowd, singularity dissolves in multiplicity, and the course of the particular inescapably gravitates towards the general. Ashbery's colloquial "dunno" is given a new guise: *bladego pojęcia* ("not the palest idea"), equally colloquial yet densely allusive. By painting ideas in insipid colours, Sosnowski recasts generalisations as lifeless and dull; by giving them a pallid, wan complexion, he equates explanation with a depletion of vitality: "less life". Simultaneously, anything conclusive is hinted at as dangerous, even violent; it may, quite literally, straighten one out, as suggested by the Polish phrase *ale go wyjaśnił* ("he straightened him out" or, literally, "he explained him").

Language or Contingency

What generalisations yield is the eternal return of the same, nothing but a "sequence of events acknowledged in advance" and rounded with a "primitive statement" (324). The opposite of this predictable reality, evened out and explained, is language:

By so many systems
 As we are involved in, by just so many
 Are we set free on an ocean of language that comes to be
 Part of us, as though we would ever get away.
 The sky is bright and very wide, and the waves talk to us,
 Preparing dreams we'll have to live with and use. The day will come
 When we'll have to. But for now
 They're useless, more trees in a landscape of trees. (325)

⁴ [...] only the absence of memory / animates us as we walk boldly there, alone [back and forth], / becoming one among the soulless, restless crowd in the gloomy alley. / Is there anything new to see, to reflect upon? Not the palest idea – better step aside and wait until something appears that explains it [straightens it out], / that bewildering lack of anxiety which is already beginning to bite at one.

The epistemological reverie Ashbery sketches is deeply immersed in language. Pure epiphany, governed solely by the faculty of sight, does not exist. As the dreamwork of language guides the movement of self-understanding, there can be no unmediated vision; it exists only when conveyed, filtered, and diluted through words. The linguistic dimension inherent in the processes of understanding opens Ashbery's subjectivity to the realm of contingency: the risk of ambiguity and the freedom of choice. As Bartczak aptly puts it: "The accidental systems produce living selves" (Bartczak 2006: 59). In other words, Ashbery's explorations of the strictures and liberties of locution and perception involve more than epistemology alone; they also invite creativity, however useless it may seem.

The process of understanding oneself and others is fundamentally shaped by the twists and turns of language. The subjectivity that emerges cannot be embodied by a detached, contemplative observer, but rather by someone absorbed in and shaped by both the world and language. Bartczak further develops the idea of contingent constellations of speech in relation to metaphor and time: "for Ashbery, the metaphor does not have a content of its own, but imitates the unknowability of the transforming experience, the blankness of the new terrain. A new metaphor's vector can only point to the future" (Bartczak 2006: 148). Being set adrift on "an ocean of language" thus entails a movement of anticipation. Metaphorical exchange, a conversation gliding across the surface of words, strives towards the revelation of meaning. Yet, by virtue of its figurative nature, this very conversation defers resolution and never reaches the heart of the matter.

Startlingly, although unable to discern the meaningful pattern of the wood for the impenetrable tangle of trees, Ashbery appears to relish rather than decry the vagaries of perception and communication. Just as an itinerary can only be inferred when one is diverted from the path, the rules governing communication become visible only when communication is disrupted: "Much later on / You thought you perceived a purpose in the game at the moment / Another player broke one of the rules" (325). As Altieri suggests, Ashbery's poetry abandons the Romantic expressivist ideal, or the ideal of the isolated writer (1988: 824). Since no preconceived, coherent structure underpins the model of communication enacted in "A Wave", the meanings that emerge are necessarily provisional and evanescent. It is no surprise, then, that *A Wave* contains moments reminiscent of Celan, who saw no difference between a poem and a handshake (as cited in Levinas 1996: 41):

In the end only a handshake
Remains, something like a kiss, but fainter. Were we

Making sense? Well, that thirst will account for some
But not all of the marvellous graffiti. (323)

Poetry as human interaction rather than individual expression assumes a surprising quality in Sosnowski's reading, in which human exchange involves other actors, also inanimate:

W końcu jedynie uścisk dłoni
Pozostaje, jakby pocałunek, tylko słabszy. Czy byliśmy
Dorzeczni? Cóż, tamto pragnienie uzasadni część,
Ale nie wszystkie z tych fenomenalnych graffiti. (198-199)⁵

This passage draws on several of Ashbery's references to "the thing", as in "moving on we approached the top / of the thing, only it was dark and no one could see", where "the thing" becomes a receding horizon of perception and self-understanding. Ashbery's "thing" is deeply rooted in the American poetic tradition, particularly Stevens's "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" (Stevens 1997: 451) and his notion of the sublime as a form of "luminous traversing". This perpetual movement through the uncertainties of perception and self-awareness transcends the boundaries of past experience and resembles the shedding of former selves (Gutorow 2012: 178).

In his rendition, however, Sosnowski introduces references to continental philosophy, notably Immanuel Kant. Kant's analytic of the sublime is also a theory of representation. Put simply, it posits the existence of "the thing" in the mind; yet, the boundless and formless "thing" transcends the limits of human perception. It cannot, therefore, be imagined, pictured, or represented. In other words, "the thing" of the sublime is that which no one has seen. What can be seen are only the phenomena it leaves behind: the world and its marvellous representations (Doran 2015: 209-220).

Sosnowski weaves Kantian ideas into Ashbery's phrasing in two key passages. "The thing" appears in "making sense", which in Polish becomes *dorzeczni*, both "reasonable" and "whose speech strives towards things". Sensual representations, in turn, are rendered as "graffiti" paintings, now not only marvellous but *fenomenalne*. This term carries both the philosophical sense of "phenomenal" and the aesthetic sense of "marvellous". Sosnowski performs a similar operation in another passage in which Ashbery refers to "scenes lifted from 'real life,' [...] things or moments of which one / finds oneself an enthusiast, a promoter [...]" (326):

⁵ In the end, only a handshake / Remains, like a kiss, only weaker. Were we / Reasonable [also: talking about things]. Well, that thirst [desire] will justify some / But not all of those phenomenal [wonderful] graffiti (198-199);

Sceny wyjęte z „prawdziwego życia” [...].
Prawda, że takich chwil i spraw, których entuzjastą
Staje się człowiek, i rzecznikiem, nie ma wiele [...]. (202)⁶

One could argue that Sosnowski draws on concepts from the Kantian analytic of the sublime only to subvert them. When he renders Ashbery's "promoter" as *rzecznik*, a term that can mean a "spokesperson", "someone who defends a particular idea", or even "someone whose speech is suffused with things" or "whose speech is things", he may come across as someone who believes in the unity of words and things, or at least as one striving to bring these two orders together through poetry. However, Sosnowski could just as easily be enacting a linguistic play that destabilises meaning and infuses everything with irony and uncertainty. The words he scatters throughout *Fala* may have an immersive effect on the mind. Rather than immersing itself in things, this mind is drawn into a disorienting interplay of language: an open invitation to a mode of reading that engages with the phenomenal world rather than its essence, and resists any binding or definitive conclusions.

Final Remarks: Contingent Agency

Ashbery's departure from Romantic rhetoric leads Altieri to the following conclusions regarding the nature of subjectivity in *A Wave*. Although the expressivist insistence on the purity of the medium is openly challenged, an intending agency is still present in the poem. However, the producer of meaning can no longer be conceived as one who "took the substantial form [...] of the first person pronoun" (Altieri 1988: 822). Hence Altieri's proposal of the "aspectual self": an identity characterised by radical impersonality or transpersonality (Altieri 1988: 824). Subjectivity, so conceived, is linked to the agency of the "evasive 'as'", a notion present in Stevens's understanding of metaphor and in Wittgenstein's language games (Wittgenstein 1967: 5). These contribute to the emergence of a "lyrical plenitude capable of competing with those that shaped Romanticism" (Altieri 1988: 830). This equivocal ultimately comes to "fit the world exactly, mixing the 'as' with the 'is' on the deepest psychological levels" (Altieri 1988: 830).

A Wave thus embarks on a lyrical quest for understanding, marked by unexpected detours, digressions, and excursions. As the poem not only represents an epistemological pursuit but also enacts it, following the twisted trail of Ashbery sentences becomes an existential adventure. It is not only the

⁶ Scenes taken from "real life" [...] / True, there are not many such moments and matters / of which one becomes an enthusiast, and a spokesperson (one whose speech imparts things) [...].

elusive persona sketched by the poet, but also the reader, who is immersed in the ocean of language. The constellations of words that shimmer on the surface of the poem are fluid, shifting, and perpetually out of reach, just like the nature of Ashbery's elusive meditation.

In his remarks on the difficulties of translating Ashbery, Sosnowski compares Ashbery's sentences to a screw pulling together the fractured bones of a wrist: a device that "compresses the most distant regions of writing's speech" (Jankowicz 2010: 43). Interestingly, this paradoxical remark escaped the editors of the interview collection in which Sosnowski shared his insight; they restated his observation as referring to "the most distant regions of writing and speech" (Jankowicz 2010: 7). Whereas expressivist theories tend to regard writing as a distorting medium that compromises the immediacy of speech and authorial intent, Sosnowski's reading of Ashbery treats the two as inseparable. Not only do writing and speech coexist as parts of an additive whole (as the editors of the interview collection would like to see), they blend into a single, interactive organism.

This interactive mode informs Sosnowski's choices in his translation of *A Wave*, which he enacts as a process of "losing oneself in language" and "traversing it in every direction" (Sosnowski 2007: 67). According to Sosnowski, however, this nomadic immersion unfolds in "the time of language just after its beginning, as though the origin of language were both the beginning and the end of all utterance" (Sosnowski 2007: 67). He chooses to perform this "single, shared present time of language" through a series of premeditated juxtapositions of antithetical concepts: boundlessness and restriction, virginity and decline, East and West, things and words, abundance and scarcity. This is perhaps the most distinctive mark Sosnowski leaves on *A Wave* as its translator, and a tentative indication that the contingent terrain of Ashbery's sentences has, after all, been charted by a deliberate authorial agency.

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