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Siding with Things or Parting with Things?
The Ambiguities of Francis Ponge's Prose Poems
in Selected Polish and English Translations

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Abstract

The basic controversy of Ponge's prose poems is whether they are the expression of things in themselves or mere linguistic games with no anchoring in the world. This controversy may be indicative of a feature that is fundamental to Ponge's writing, namely, ambiguity. In the paper I will examine whether the ambiguity inherent in Ponge's carefully crafted literary explorations is something (in)expressible beyond French.

Ponge often heightens the impression of ambiguity with puns and false etymologies which, in some cases at least, find their direct equivalents in the English lexicon. Polish translators have no such vocabulary at hand that would easily mirror French or English intricate etymologies and pseudo-etymologies. I am discussing in detail three Polish translations from Ponge: *Chleb* by Kozak, *Ślimaki* by Gondowicz, and *Skrzynka* by Wasilewska & Kurek. English translations were used as a backdrop for presenting the challenges of translating Ponge into Polish. The issue at stake in these three Polish translation projects is whether Ponge in Polish is able to transcend the solipsistic cognitive bubble and bridge the gap between language and the world, the subject and the object, or the human and the thing.

Multilingual perspectives on contemporary translation and theory of literature

1 Introduction

1.1 Ambiguities of Ponge

The author predominantly known for his *Le Parti pris de choses* and associated with the Surrealist movement, Francis Ponge (1899–1988) was preoccupied with minute depictions of everyday objects and phenomena which he shaped into intricate prose poems. These complexities pose mounting challenges to their translators, regardless of the language these translators work with, be it Polish (Swoboda 2014), English, or Italian (Laurenti 2011). Therefore, it may be fitting to start this paper with an insight from one of the pioneering translators of Francis Ponge's oeuvre in the Anglophone world and the first to have published the full rendition of *Le Parti pris des choses* into English. "There would seem to be no way out of ambiguity," says Beth Archer in her concluding remarks on the challenges inherent in the reading, interpretation, and translation of Ponge's work (Ponge 1972: 24). Archer develops her argument accordingly, adding a number of mutually exclusive depictions to this profile. A materialist and a follower of Lucretius, but one indebted to the idealist tradition of Rimbaud and Mallarmé; a practitioner of "thingliness" which is nonetheless crafted into abstract fables and allegories; a self-proclaimed writer of *prôemes*, or more aptly, one who never accepted the label of a poet, yet whose pieces are unquestionably poetic; finally and most pertinently, a man shy of ideas who produced something that can easily be described as "poetry of thought" (Ponge 1972: 24). So much so, one could add, that it has attracted a profusion of philosophical responses, be it from Sartre (Sartre 1947), Blanchot (Blanchot 1989), Derrida (Derrida 1984), or Steiner (Steiner 1989).

Archer's introduction, however, is only a foretaste to a multiplicity of oxymoronic designations of Ponge once offered by Gleize. I am quoting only the most antithetical handful from this somewhat dazzling inventory: a surrealist phenomenologist, oneiric rationalist, prehistorian of the Avant-garde, baroque classicist, crude dandy, naïve encyclopaedist, subjective extoller of the objective, anti-lyric lyricist, materialist animist, and lazy activist (Gleize 1989: 11). Naturally, it is somewhat difficult to define any of these witticisms. Puzzling as they might be, these labels nonetheless reveal the two-faced nature of Ponge's legacy, as two-faced perhaps as the very umbrella term they may be subsumed under. This term–Archer was quite right to suggest it–is ambiguity, which as the Oxford English Dictionary indicates, is ambiguous in itself, i.e., it has at least a double meaning to it. Interestingly, it can signify "an uncertainty" and/or "a dubiety," but it can also refer to "a capability to be

understood in two or more ways; double or dubious signification; ambiguousness" (OED 2009).

1.2 Ambiguities of Ambiguity

It is instructive to note that William Empson, the author of seminal *Seven Types of Ambiguity,* had much difficulty defining the very term he wrote his treatise about. Here is a handful of his definitions. The preliminary one describes an ambiguity as "something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful" (Empson 1949: 1), thereby exposing it as something untruthful and misleading, an illusory quip rather than a mere statement of fact. Another definition highlights it as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (Empson 1949: 1), thus commingling the objective, that which is being said, a linguistic utterance, with the subjective, that which is being understood, the perception of a piece of language. This definition also describes ambiguity as doubt expressed as choice between alternative possibilities, the either/or with "no ground for making the choice between "mutually exclusive meanings" (Rimmon 1977: 17). Yet another of Empson's definitions: "a word or a grammatical structure effective in several ways at once" (Empson 1949: 2), in turn, lays emphasis on multiplicity or plurality, the and/or of an inclusive rather than exclusive alternative. Yet another brings both these controversies, namely, subject vs object and binary vs plural, together: "'Ambiguity' itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (Empson 1949: 5–6). Finally, there is the most ambiguous of all Empson's ambiguities which shows "a fundamental division in the writer's mind" (Empson 1949: 192), more an expression of ambivalence and dramatic self conflict than the idea of a double meaning.

In his *A History of Ambiguity,* Anthony Ossa-Richardson neatly summarises Empson's intricacies by expounding on "the two faces of the term *ambiguity*, which has always denoted the subjective state of doubt as well as its objective correlative" (Ossa-Richardson 2019: 1). This outlook very much overlaps with depictions of ambiguity as inherent in the processes of speech production (linguistic utterances) and speech perception (interpretations of these utterances) (Winkler, 2015). Ossa-Richardson also follows Empson in that he discusses ambiguity as a phenomenon straddling the twin poles of dualism and plurality (Ossa-Richardson 2019: 2). According to the dualistic view, ambiguity may be described as a textual property susceptible of scien-

tific analysis and expressed in logic by the disjunctive A∧B ("A or B but not both"). The closest visual counterpart of such a property of language would be a "duck-rabbit" image discussed and popularised by Wittgenstein. This is also where ambiguity could be seen as an inherent vice of language, something that ultimately should be confined, resolved, and eliminated by means of analysis and interpretation. According to the pluralistic view, however, ambiguity would be more akin to the "perpetual lack of closure," or something that Hillis Miller called "a system of unreadability," whereby each possibility engenders subsequent possibilities in "an unstilled oscillation." Closely related to indeterminacy, this type of ambiguity promises no easy resolution by means of interpretation, and as such, it continues to disquiet even those readers who have been able to isolate and analyse it (Ossa-Richardson 2019: 7–18).

In this paper, I adhere to the notion of ambiguity expressed by I.A. Richards in his *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, where he argues that the concept in question in not "a fault in language," but "an inevitable consequence of the powers of language and […] the indispensable means of most of our most important utterances" (Richards 1936: 40). Without resolving whether ambiguity is an inadvertent product of language play or a purposeful and deliberate use of rhetoric, I would like to use Richards's understanding of the term to examine Ponge's work as a celebration of ambiguity in which the word and the world alternately drift towards and away from each other in an oscillation that may both attract and frustrate Ponge's translators. The goal of this paper is, therefore, neither to resolve nor categorise the ambiguities inherent in *Le Parti pris des choses*, but to offer readings that show how these ambiguities, be they of a lexical, syntactical, pragmatic, or referential nature (Sennet 2021), inform the import of his work as one that straddles the natural and the human realm. For Ponge's attempt, one might argue, is not to simply represent the physical realm but to immerse things in an increasingly anthropological world of his language.

2 Ponge Controversies

2.1 The World or the Word?

The overview of literature shows that the ambiguities inherent in Ponge's work may likewise perplex its readers, even those extremely refined. Many of the most articulate readers of *Le Parti pris des choses* differ in their views on the nature of the poet's engagement with the world/word and his leanings to either side of this equation. Calvino says that Ponge's books "give us the

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best example of a battle to force language to become the language of things," and calls their author "the Lucretius of our time, reconstructing the physical nature of the world by means of the impalpable, powder-fine dust of words" (Calvino 1988: 76). Calvino's reading is perhaps closest to mimetic interpretations of Ponge whereby language remains subordinate to things and the word is an expressive or referential means rather than a world and an end in itself. Other readings may share a starting point with that of Calvino's, but their conclusions are somewhat different and certainly more complex. Sartre, who first spoke about Ponge in his 1944 essay *L'Homme et les choses*, takes a firmly phenomenological stance on Ponge's writings in that he describes the poet's struggle with language as an attempt to redefine, purify, and perfect it for the sake of things in themselves. However, he also notes the very paradox of this enterprise in which "the reading of *Le Parti pris des choses* often appears to be an uneasy oscillation between the object and the word, as if one no longer knew very well, in the end, whether it is the word which is the object or the object which is the word" (Sartre 1947: 226)[1]. Surprisingly, his conclusion is far removed from anything that phenomenology could preach in that he sees Ponge's ideal, which was to turn his texts into things, not as an imitative gesture in which words become iconic images of the world but as an autonomous act of creation in which words become increasingly self-referential and reveal the whole world of intralinguistic relations to them (Sartre 1947: 233). Blanchot, who uses almost the same wording as Sartre's word-things, pushes this reading to the extreme and describes Ponge's poem-things as a work of pure language, "a powerful universe of words where relations, configurations, forces are affirmed through sound, figure, rhythmic mobility, in a unified and sovereignly autonomous space" (Blanchot 1989: 42). Its closest analogue in the world of painting would be that of a formal arrangement which no longer reproduces the world "but produces being", and in the realm of literature of those poems that "must not mean but be." The far-reaching implications of such an interpretation were perhaps best expressed by Herjean, who spoke openly about *le crépuscule des choses*, or the twilight of things. In his view, Ponge's legacy reveals nothing but the gloaming world of vanishing things, buried by the épaisseur (density) of words. As such, it testifies to the impossibility of representation, figuration, and mimesis (Herjean 1992: 54).

Departing from Calvino's "language of things," this overview ultimately arrives at "the language of false appearances," which only shows that what really is at stake in the readings of Ponge is representation and mimesis. This is where two philosophical responses to Ponge come into play. Derrida's is that

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[1] Unless indicated otherwise, translations from French and translations and back translations from Polish were provided by the author.

of a deconstruction of the notion of mimesis in which words both enable and preclude the process of "letting things speak" (Derrida 1984: 4). Those words that show the closest affinity to things, argues Derrida, produce a "sweet illusion"; they "denounce," i.e., both reveal and criticise, imitate and parody, expose and deconstruct the mimetic quasi-hallucination they produce (Derrida 1984: 138). Steiner's response, in turn, is that of the vehement apology of mimesis and an ambitious attempt to restore "the covenant between word and world," which was arguably broken by modernity (Steiner 1989: 105). With its phenomenological leanings and the focus on "the obstinate 'thereness' of things," it is "the crucial poetry of Ponge" that proves to be one of Steiner's greatest allies in his effort to redress the balance between language and being. However, with its "most extreme of verbal fantastications," (Steiner 1989: 214), this poetry also provokes resistance from equally outspoken advocates of mimesis, most notably Miłosz. The author of *Unattainable Earth* and the poet of epiphany accuses Ponge of "writing *objeu* (*objet-jeu*---object-play) poems in which things provided him an opportunity for linguistic games." Miłosz's ultimate and snap judgement is that Ponge shows a more vivid interest in dictionaries than in visible phenomena (Miłosz 1998: 69). He goes as far as to suggest that in Ponge's *objeu* poems language (*jeu*) and the self (*je*) eclipse thigs (*objet*) (Miłosz 1990: 168).

2.2 Translators on the Ponge Method

This almost circular review of equivocal and sometimes mutually exclusive readings is deeply embedded in what might be called the Ponge method, which is thoroughly exemplified by his *L'Huître* (Ponge 1965: 48). As neatly presented by Archer, this poem celebrates the French in a variety of its visual, vernacular, grammatical, etymological, or phonetic qualities (Ponge 1972: 9-10). Ponge chooses to play with the noun *huître,* in particular with its circumflex and the following letters t, r, e. Accordingly, he elaborates a description in which he reproduces this basic pattern in a number of adjectives: *blanchâtre* (whitish), *opiniâtre* (stubborn), *verdâtre* (greenish), *noirâtre* (blackish). Ponge's oyster contains a whole world inside and it also becomes a world in itself. Covered by a *firmament,* which in the Vulgate denoted the vault supporting or strengthening the sky, a term deriving from the classical Latin verb *firmare* (to make firm or strong) (Chisholm 1910), the oyster reveals its surprisingly literary qualities. By virtue of pseudo-etymology, this firmament closes in on (the French *fermer*) the insides of the oyster. The oyster is thus wrapped in a shell the way a letter may be enclosed in an envelope (*enveloppe*), which nonetheless may also transmogrify into a fortified enclo-

sure (Littré 1873–1874) or even, as Archer has it in her translation, a book cover (Ponge 1972: 37). Incidentally, her choice to entertain a poetic license in this passage may not merely be an imaginary whim because the entrails of the oyster are *frangé d'une dentelle noirâtre* [fringed by blackish lace], which produces connotations of a sartorial and textual nature. This is because *dentelle* signifies both "lace" and "title page vignette," the pearl thus being fringed or edged by the "blackish lace" of printed letters. This literary reference is made thoroughly explicit at the end of the poem where *une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre* [a formula pearls in the oyster's nacreaous throat or gullet], which is a pun on formule/globule and a punchline comparing a pearl, the product of an oyster, with a poem, the product of a poet, the *"formule"* being both a little round form, an attribute, a quality, or a characteristic feature of an oyster; and a sentence having all the hallmarks of a definition, the product of a literary mind with philosophical and scientific dispositions.

Translators other than Archer may also shed some light on the Ponge method. This overview offers insights from Fahnenstock (Ponge 1979a, Ponge 1995), Gavronsky (Ponge 1979b), Bie Brahic (Ponge 2008), and Corey & Garneau (Ponge 2016). The ultimate product of such a method is, as Fahnenstock puts it, "a text that draws attention, metapoetically, to its own presence" (Ponge 1979a: 11). Nevertheless, Ponge has earned the designation of a metapoet (Greene 1970) not only for his openly whimsical and self-referential trickery but also for a stance on the nature of language whereby words are neither artificially agreed labels for things nor their onomatopoeic cognomina. This neither mimetic nor anti-mimetic element to Ponge's oeuvre is what flabbergasted Miłosz so much, and its name is *objeu*, a tangible object which turns into a literary game, something real that shows its equally arbitrary qualities. In his extremely informative introduction, Gavronsky best summarises it a quote from Ponge himself: "Call it nominalist or cultist, or by any other name, it doesn't matter to us: we have baptized it the Obgame" (Ponge 1979b, 42). While word- or poem-things seem to be at the very heart of Ponge's game with the world and the word, Fahnenstock gives a more palpable understanding to what one could simply dismiss as Sartre's or Blanchot's *haute théorie*: "Words, too, are objects that impinge on the senses, demand notice, provoke attention or disgust, revealing [...] the lesson of their power" (Ponge 1979a: 10).

These words, naturally, present mounting challenges to translators, who are left to struggle with a method that, as Archer says, "alas, no translation can render fully" (Ponge 1972: 9) or, as Fahnenstock has it, "is inevitably lost in translation" (Ponge 1979a: 11). The latter argues that this could be because of his style, which covers a lot of literary ground, including archaisms and

inversions, colloquialisms and puns; or because of his prolific use of subjunctives and litotes (Ponge, 1979a: 11). Similarly, as Corey & Garneau point it out in their notes on the translation, it might be his love for allusions, French typography, wit, irony and scientific detachment (Ponge 2016: 63–64). The last saving grace of Ponge's poetry in English might, in turn, be his strong propensity for using Latinate terms, which would, at least in theory, help to retain some of its quintessential Frenchness in translation. However, even at this point, translators seem to disagree, as Fahnenstock sees it either as "the intermediary of the common Latin heritage" that shows "beauty […] across the language barrier" (Ponge 1979a: 11) while Archer denounces it as something that may produce a sense of mere "heaviness of translation" (Ponge 1972: 26). Nevertheless, even Fahnenstock, who is "thankful for shared Latin roots which permit much of the wordplay to carry over," advises to play "the poet's own game" in translation" (Ponge 1995: 10). This own game may take a variety of guises, but one thing which Archer, Fahnenstock, or Bie Brahic seem to agree on is the primacy of sound and rhythm (Ponge 1972: 26; 1995: 10; 2008: 143) as the spirit of his poetry.

3 Ponge in Polish

3.1 Two Languages with Little in Common

These stark realities of dealing with Ponge's oeuvre in English seem to be even more poignant when reading his work in Polish, a language which shares only a fraction of the Latin heritage that helps English translators preserve some of the playful original associations inherent in *Le Parti pris des choses*. One obvious illustration of these linguistic incompatibilities and a fitting specimen in the context of this paper is the portmanteau word *amphibiguïté* from the following passage of *La fin de l'automne*: *Dans cette grenouillerie, cette amphibiguïté salubre, tout reprend forces, saute de pierre en pierre et change de pré* (Ponge 1965: 37). A blend of *amphibien* and *ambiguïté*, this neologism finds a handy if equally contrived English equivalent, and one that also shares its Greek and Latin roots. Quite naturally, the English translators see no reason to alter the term in any way. I am quoting a translation by Williams: "In this frog-farm, this salubrious amphibiguity, everything regains strength, leaps from stone to stone, changes pasture" (Ponge 1994: 11).

This elusive frog-farm may fall easy prey to its Polish translators, too, who have nouns such as *amfibia* (both amphibious organisms and amphibious vehicles) and *ambiwalencja* (both double feeling and double meaning; instead of *dwuznaczność/niejednoznaczność* as a more immediate term for

linguistic ambiguity) at the ready. This, however, may result in a shift of an archaeological nature whereby slightly dated or strictly scientific (*amfibia* as an amphibious organism) or more psychological rather than purely linguistic (*ambiwalencja* as self conflict) meanings of these words come to the fore. Although this particular word-thing by Ponge may be rendered in Polish in a less or more similar and felicitous form, Trznadel, the Polish translator of the poem, chose to do otherwise: *W tym bagnisku, w tej jędrnej wodoziemi…* [In this bog, in this robust earthwater] (Ponge 1969: 27). His choice was to compensate for a slightly unwieldy and heavily Latinised neologism with an invention of his own, a word that brings two disparate elements together and acts as an ambiguous throwback to the late Romantic or early Modern period in the history of Polish literature and its fantastications on undifferentiated matter, possibly preceding the very act of creation. In his painstaking critical analysis of the Polish translations of Ponge, Swoboda lists a whole gamut of such shifts, inconsistencies or infidelities which are due to both the incommensurability of the Polish and the French and the downright errors made by Ponge's translators. Swoboda concludes his investigations thus: "reading Ponge in translation is at times like watching once fashionable 3D designs by someone who is unable to capture the third dimension" (Swoboda 2014: 116). However, the point of this paper is to show that selected Polish translators or translator teams are able to produce the three-dimensional effects that, according to Swoboda, Polish translations from Ponge might be so desperately lacking. The following authors and texts are a case in point: Kozak and her rendition of *Le Pain* (Ponge 2003), Gondowicz and his take on *Escargots* (Ponge 2006b), and Wasilewska & Kurek's translation of *Le Cageot* (Ponge 2006a). English renditions, in turn, were used as a contrasting backdrop for a discussion of the translations into Polish. This is intended to show how different it is to operate in a linguistic realm that shares very little from the profuse Latin heritage to be found in French and English.

3.2 *Chleb,* or Metamorphosis

It is true that this third dimension may not be attainable for Polish translators. My contention, however, is that despite operating in an irreducibly different linguistic realm, Polish translators of Ponge are nonetheless able to produce captivating texts in their own right. *Le Pain* is a case in point (Ponge 1965: 51). Agata Kozak, who received much praise from the exacting Swoboda for her "convincing" and "almost flawless" work (Swoboda 2014: 95, 97), offered a Polish rendition that stands out with a disciplined and well-informed use of syntax and rhythm and an air of ironic detachment (Ponge

2003). Even so, there are pronounced differences between Polish *Chleb* and English *Bread* (in its various guises, I have counted at least five different renditions of *Le Pain* into English that are available in book form: by Archer, Gavronsky, Williams, Fahnenstock, and Corey & Garneau). Ponge's description of bread celebrates it in a variety of its surprisingly metamorphic qualities, a plain loaf transmogrifying into a literary-like bas-relief or stamp, a celestial body and a crustacean. This process of transmutation brings to the fore one shared characteristic of these objects: they are hard and divisible on the surface and soft and undifferentiated inside, and they seem to gradually gain in individuality by developing a hard crust around them. In this subversive act of literary creation, Ponge plays a genealogical game with a number of words which share etymology with their English counterparts (Bloomfield 1988).

One might start the overview of the differences between *Le Pain* in its Polish and English guises by noting the peculiarities of these English and French etymologies. The first inimitable quality of Ponge's bread is that it produces an impression: *La surface du pain est merveilleuse d'abord à cause de cette impression quasi panoramique qu'elle donne: comme si l'on avait à sa disposition sous la main les Alpes, le Taurus ou la Cordillère des Andes.* This impression may be understood in several ways: as 1) a feeling or sensation which develops as one looks at or touches the surface of bread (a visual or tactile impression); 2) the impression of a seal on the wax (something soft develops a hard crust); 3) the action of taking impressions from a surface where there are hollows or projections; 4) and the act of printing a book (Littré 1873–1874). These various undertones can easily be found in English translations, which almost unanimously speak about "the quasi-panoramic" (Gavronsky in Ponge 1979b: 87) or "almost panoramic" (Archer in Ponge 1972: 39; Williams in Ponge 1994: 33; Fahnenstock in Ponge 1995: 20) impression bread gives, the English "impression" sharing the same etymology and much of the meaning with the French original (OED 2009). The Polish translation is different in that *powierzchnia chleba stwarza wrażenie prawie całkowitej panoramiczności* [the surface of bread produces (but also and perhaps more importantly: creates) the impression of an almost panoramic quality], the Polish *wrażenie* indeed being a translation of Latin *impressio* and deriving from the noun *raz* (punch or blow) (Brückner 1927: 631) but failing to produce in contemporary readers any connotations with the act of stamping, embossing, or printing. Nevertheless, Kozak's carefully selected wording and idiomatic collocations suggest something quite surprising: a reading in which the surface of bread becomes the harbinger of stellar genesis depicted in the subsequent paragraph. As such, it transforms the act of printing hinted at by the English translations into the very act of creation. Given the irreduc-

ible differences between French, English, and Polish, it may also be read as a subtle, almost invisible display of Kozak's powers of invention.

This act of genesis is peculiar in that it produces something more than just an earthlike body: *Et tous ces plans dès lors si nettement articulés, ces dalles minces où la lumière avec application couche ses feux, – sans un regard pour la mollesse ignoble sous-jacente.* The phrase in focus here is *plans […] si nettement articulés* [planes clearly articulated], *articulés* designating 1) the shape and structure of the first division of the ringed invertebrates, subdivided into five classes: arachnids, insects, myriopods, crustaceans,or cirrhopods; and 2) distinct pronunciation or well-articulated voice (Littré, 1873–1874). Driven by the same set of etymologies and denotations (OED, 2009), the English translators seem to concur in their reading of the passage, either in the choice of the same wording: "distinctly" (Gavronsky in Ponge 1979b: 87), "cleanly" (Williams in Ponge 1994: 37), "clearly" (Fahnenstock in Ponge 1995: 20; Corey & Garneau in Ponge 2016: 16) "articulated"; or the choice of the same imagery: "those planes so neatly joined" (Archer in Ponge 1972: 39). The latter choice might be motivated by Archer's displeasure with the presupposed heaviness of Latinate translation. A successful allusion to the shape and structure of an arachnid or crustacean, it nonetheless fails to produce an association with human voice or phonetics.

The Polish version: *Ileż tu wyraziście uformowanych płaszczyzn, cienkich płytek, na których pracowicie kładą się błyski* światła, *ignorując ohydę podskórnej miękkości* [So many distinctly formed planes, thin plates, which glimmers of light laboriously settle on while ignoring the horrors of a subcutaneous/subsoil inside], in turn, is something of a compensation for Ponge's genealogical wordplay that is nowhere to be found in the Polish language. It does offer a more generalised allusion to "form", be it a material, literary or overall artistic form, but it proves to be most extraordinary in its handling of the noun *płytki* [little plates, as in tectonic plates or plates of armour] and the adjective *podskórna,* which produces a number of images, including *woda podskórna* [subsoil water], *tkanka podskórna* [subcutaneous tissue], *podskórny niepokój* [inner turmoil] or *podskórny konflikt* [underlying conflict], each of which is closely related to what Ponge had in mind in this passage. Accordingly, "subsoil water" may produce geological associations, "subcutaneous tissue" suggests a living organism protected by a shell or carapace, "inner turmoil" alludes to the undifferentiated nature of what is underneath bread's or Earth's crust, and "underlying conflict" refers to the layered structure of the metamorphic entity described in *Le Pain.*

The final phrase of the poem brings an encouragement in which the art of discourse commingles with that of consumption: *Mais brisons-la: car le pain*

doit être *dans notre bouche moins objet de respect que de consommation.* The verb *briser*, again, is suggestive of two actions: breaking or cutting something into pieces, including breaking or cutting bread (*mettre en pieces*), and breaking the flow of speech (*briser un discours, cesser de parler*) (Littré 1873–1874). Some of the English translators are cognisant of this double entendre: "let's break it off here" (Gavronsky in Ponge 1979b, Williams in Ponge 1994), "let's cut short here" (Fahnenstock in Ponge 1995), whereas others are primarily concerned with preserving the image in its materiality: "let's break it up" (Archer in Ponge 1972), "let it [break]" (Corey & Garneau in Ponge 2016). The Polish version of the passage: *zmiażdżmy ją* [let's crush it] seems to align with the latter reading whereby bread is divested of its discursive qualities. This, however, cannot be said of Kozak's *Chleb* in its entirety, which proves to be an informed attempt at bringing the world and the word together. This effort is all the more successful and intriguing given the seemingly insurmountable constraints deriving from the non-compromising and highly equivocal Ponge method.

3.3 *Ślimaki,* or the Principles of Signification

Another poem which brings a slightly different set of challenges is *Escargots* (Ponge 1965: 57–61). With its intricate combination of homonyms and homophones, individual syllables as the building blocks of signification and a typography that brings out letters in their material and iconic qualities, this long and tortuous piece of writing calls for a translation strategy that may be called anasemic conversion. An approach of this kind "does not concern exchanges between significations, signifiers, and signifieds" (Derrida 2007: 135). Instead, "it produces traces not yet or no longer endowed with meaning" and "wrests language from meaning and returns it to its material, non-mattering, primal matter" (Marder 2015: 184). In other words, the focus of such a translation is not so much on meaning as a product of the original as on the production of meaning. Instead of repeating particular signs, it simulates the very process of signification.

There are several such governing principles of the production of meaning in Ponge's *Escargots.* One is in full view at the very beginning of the poem, in its opening line: *Au contraire des escarbilles qui sont les hôtes des cendres chaudes, les escargots aiment la terre humide.* A homonymic interplay that occurs in this line not so much at the level of particular words as particular syllables announces the strategies of invention used by Ponge throughout the poem. This interchange of sonic and visual similarities is not merely a pun juxtaposing cinders and snails and their contrasting hot and cold, dry and

moist qualities. It also shifts the focus from words to their primary components, be it syllables or individual sounds and typographical signs. When divided into syllables, they reveal a whole new layer of signification to them for both *es-car-gots* and *es-car-billes* share the same set of homophones, including *car, eschare,* and *que* (because/car, scar, that) and even the prefix: *est-ce que?* (is it?) (Marder 2015: 188). This produces plentiful associations, not only restricted to the French but also transgressing the linguistic boundaries of the French and the English.

Accordingly, the sentence that follows takes the readers on such an interlingual foray and brings to their attention the very letters which these words are made of: *Go on, ils avancent collés à elle de tout leur corps.* Some critics argue that the Anglicised phrase *Go on* not only echoes the final syllable in the French *escargot*, which suggests that being on the go constitutes their essence (the verb inserted into the noun; what you do is who you are); in its capitalised form, it also acts as a typographical likeness of the shell as the snail's defining silhouette (Swoboda 2014: 113). *Eschare* in *escargots* is in turn suggestive of their literary nature and the fact that they cannot live without producing written traces. *Est-ce que?* is later echoed in the following playful reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: *Voilà le hic, la question,* être *ou ne pas* être *[…]*, which might be suggestive of the snail's ontological preoccupations and enquiries into the status of their being. According to Marder, a deeper affinity between *escargots* and *escarbilles* can also be seen in the phrase: *un sillage argenté les suit* [a silvery trail follows them], where *suit* in its printed form proliferates into a series of homophones such as *suit* (derived from *suivre*, to follow, the snails leave literary traces), *suis* (as in *Je suis*, yet again, a reference to Hamlet-like obsessions with being) and *suie* (soot, a trace and a direct link to *escarbilles*) (Marder 2015: 187).

In the light of the above, it may be more understandable why the Polish rendition of *Escargots* abounds in such playful references, many of which are nowhere to be found in the original and which nonetheless simulate some of the principles of signification inherent in Ponge's original (Ponge 2006: 584–591). Its author, Jan Gondowicz, earned mixed praise from Swoboda for his "tour de force of linguistic invention," which is nonetheless peppered with small defects and a little crumbling towards the end (Swoboda 2014: 93). That being said, the reading I am now going to offer is not concerned with shortcomings or deviations from the original. Instead, I would like to briefly investigate Gondowicz's effort to create a new mesh of signification, the products of which may sometime overlap with those of Ponge's. The very first sentence is a case in point: *W przeciwieństwie do* ŚLepaków, *szafarzy ognistych popiołów,* ŚLimaki *lubią mokrą ziemię* [Unlike blank bullets (slang) /

deer flies, the stewards of fiery ashes, snails like wet ground.][2]. The pun offered by Gondowicz may resist immediate understanding, as it calls for an inquiry into the taxonomy of insects rather than following a colloquial and more discernible train of thought. It is also quite unclear as to why the deer flies should have anything to do with fire or ash.

Still, the link between ślepaki as deer flies and ślimaki announces a network of purely phonetic associations whereby ŚLimaki produce ŚLina [saliva] and ŚLady [traces] as they enjoy their ŚLizg *doskonały* [perfect glide]; they are also compared to ŚWinia [pig] and ŚWięci [saints]. The resulting interplay is truly compelling as new and surprising connections emerge on the way. The reference to saliva brings a pun that sounds perfectly idiomatic while alluding to the round shape of a snail's shell: ŚLinę *pychy toczą tak* łatwo*, tak gładko* [They roll (literal) / produce (idiomatic) the saliva of pride/vanity so easily, so smoothly]. This later interlocks with another pun where being *pyszny* does not only mean being proud or vain but also delicious:

> *Tyle że ślina* <u>pychy</u> *naznacza wszystko, czego tkną. Ciągną za sobą srebrzysty kilwater. On pewnie oznajmia je dziobom ptactwa, którego są smakołykiem. W tym sęk, oto pytanie, być albo nie być* <u>(pysznym)</u>*, oto ryzyko.*
>
> [Only that the saliva of <u>pride/vanity</u> marks everything they touch. They drag a silvery wake behind them. It confidently announces them to the beaks of the fowl that love to eat them. There's the rub, this is the question, to be or not to be <u>(vain/delicious)</u>, this is the risk.]

Snails, who hold their heads high in another passage (*głowa noszona tak godnie* [heads held in great dignity], are suddenly stripped of their false pretences. No longer active agents, they are reduced to something inferior, passive prey, a mere delicacy, something eaten rather than someone who eats. This opens up a whole new network of meanings and allusions in which references to fate and food proliferate while snails are juxtaposed with swine. In this comparison, snails come across as entities of a more stoical cast of mind, ones who take in their stride whatever fate is able to bring them: *Gdziekolwiek rzuci mnie* <u>los</u>*, mam pewność, że stanę na nogę, przywrę do gleby i znajdę mój* <u>żer</u>*: najpospolitszy z pokarmów, ziemię* [Whatever <u>fate</u> throws at me, I am sure to get back on my foot, cling to the soil and find my <u>prey</u>: the most common of foods, earth.]. The reference to żer, i.e., prey or food, finds its continuation in a passage where swine are depicted as restless and always on the prowl for more and ever newer types of food:

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2 Caps and highlights were added by the author.

> *I nie mówmy, że przypomina w tym ŚWinię. […] To więcej niż sprzeciw, więcej niż stoicyzm. Więcej niż metoda, więcej niż godność i z pewnością coś ponad obżarstwo – ponad kaprys, porzucanie tej karmy, by rzucić się na inną.*
>
> [And let us not say that he resembles a pig. […] It is more than opposition, more than stoicism. More than method, more than dignity, and certainly something beyond gluttony – beyond whim, abandoning this karma (fate/ food) to pounce on another.]

Snails are nothing like swine because they have learnt the demanding art of acceptance in which their *los* [fate] equals their *karma* [both fate and food]. This formula is perhaps the best illustration of how the principles of signification inherent in Ponge's original might be transferred to a language which shares only a negligible fraction of its associative network with the French. In his translation, however imperfect and self-indulgent at times, Gondowicz gives a new lease of life to a text which requires that its readers and translators never stop in their efforts to connect the world with the word. He also shows that the business of translating Ponge is an equally mimetic and metalinguistic enterprise, and one in which the art of close reading must necessarily be complemented with a substantial degree of creative originality. The lesson of anasemic translation by Gondowicz also displaces the very concept of the original which emerges as a set of principles governing textual production rather than its product. That is why the reading of Polish *Ślimaki* was provided without referencing relevant passages in French *Escargots.* The reason is simple: it seems superfluous to compare two texts which at some point begin to live their separate and independent lives. Gondowicz's focus on playful creation rather than mere reproduction is also very much in the spirit of Ponge, whose primary concern was with texts that are never final and always in their making. This is at its most apparent in *La Fabrique du Pré*, an unfolding account of écriture and, as Fahnenstock puts it, a "self-demonstrating development of a thought process" (Ponge 1979a: 9).

3.4 *Skrzynka,* or the Marriage of Rhetoric and Physics

The thought process in which the study of words comes indistinguishably close to the study of objects is the very theme of *Le Cageot,* yet another short prose piece which presents metaliguistic considerations in a disguise of objective description: À mi-chemin de la cage au *cachot la langue française a cageot, simple caissette à claire-voie vouée au transport de ces fruits qui de la moindre suffocation font à coup sûr une maladie* (Ponge 1965: 41). The way the opening of this piece commingles the language of mimesis with the language that exposes the illusory pretences of mimesis is best seen in the ways its Eng-

lish translators are trying to handle this conceptual double entendre. With their primary focus on words as entries in a dictionary, the efforts by Archer (Ponge 1972: 34), Guiton (Ponge 1994: 17) and Fahnenstock (Ponge 1995: 16) could safely be called metalinguistic. I am quoting the passage in Archer's translation, the other two are almost identical: "Halfway between *cage* (cage) and *cachot* (cell) the French language has *cageot* (crate), a simple openwork case for the transport of those fruits that invariably fall sick over the slightest suffocation." Versions by Corey & Garneau: "Halfway between crib and cage the French language puts crate…" (Ponge 2016: 7) and, in particular, by Bie Brahic: "Midway from a cage to a dungeon, the French language has crate…" (Ponge 2008: 9) are more mimetic and certainly more visual. Their authors chose to depict objects in the world, objects which are interrelated visually, as is the case with the former (cribs and cages share a similar structure), or logically (a cage may only be a stop-over in a criminal's way to a dungeon), as is the case with the latter.

A duet of Polish translators, Anna Wasilewska and Marcin Kurek, decided to produce a slightly different set of associations: *W połowie drogi między skrzynią a krzynką język francuski ma skrzynkę…* [Halfway between a trunk and a tiny piece of something, the French language has a crate…] (Ponge, 2006). Their pun offers an amalgam of sonic associations with those related to the concept of size, *skrzynia* denoting a large and capacious chest while *krzynka* referring to something very little, almost negligible. Their *skrzynka,* therefore, might be placed halfway between something extremely big and something extremely small. This (intended? unintended?) playful reference to Pascal's concept of the two infinities is only a prelude to what could be deemed as the celebration of Ponge's thing-poem in its most literary and most mundane qualities. The second paragraph of *Le Cageot* brings the following description: *A tous les coins de rues qui aboutissent aux halles, il luit alors de l'éclat sans vanité du bois blanc. Tout neuf encore, et légèrement ahuri d'être dans une pose maladroite à la voirie jeté sans retour […]* In Archer's translation, this passage offers a fitting portion of anthropomorphisms: "On all street corners leading to the market, it shines with the modest gleam of whitewood. Still brand new, and somewhat taken aback at being tossed on the trash pile in an awkward pose with no hope of return […]" (Ponge 1972: 35). Other English translators concur in this reading: "a bit bewildered," (Guiton in Ponge 1994: 17), "somewhat aghast" (Fahnenstock in Ponge 1995: 16), "a little startled" (Bie Brahic in Ponge 2008: 9) and "slightly surprised" (Corey & Garneau in Ponge 2016: 7). Wasilewska and Kurek, too, offer an anthropomorphising reading but also one in which a simple crate reveals its equally physical and rhetorical essence. This product of nature and language is *zbity*

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z tropu, which means "confused" (anthropomorphism; idiomatic meaning) as well as "nailed together" (physical) and "made of trope" (literary) (literal meaning). This peculiar word-thing is also a quintessentially Pongean object which might not be able to exist outside of the Polish language. This consummate product of two Polish translators also shows that there is life for Ponge's material concepts even in those languages that share very little of their heritage with the French.

4 Conclusion: Ponge and Mimesis

Swoboda may be true in saying that in their vast majority Polish translations of Ponge lose the third dimension of his legacy. My goal in this preliminary overview was to show, however, that despite their obvious restrictions and shortcomings some of these translations are able to do justice to Ponge's literary output. Miłosz, in turn, may also be true in saying that "Francis Ponge probably never thought about what the non-French could make of him and he could not care less" (Miłosz 1990: 169). Nevertheless, with translations by Kozak, Gondowicz, or Wasilewska and Kurek, Polish readers may now be able to enjoy a fraction of Ponge's oeuvre which is neither a mundane depiction of mere physicality nor sheer wordplay with no anchoring whatsoever in the world. These three translations also show that such challenging feats of ambiguity as those by Ponge might serve as rewarding research material for those theorists and practitioners of translation who wish to explore it as a field of ultimate yet disciplined creativity. With her deft use of compensation and subtle linguistic ingenuity, Kozak shows that even multi-layered and metamorphic poem-things such as *Le Pain* can speak to their Polish readers in their richness and complexity. Gondowicz goes a little bit further in that he strives to create a mesh of signification that would act as a parallel universe to one created in *Escargots*. Finally, Wasilewska and Kurek create a textual fabric in which the ultimate project of Ponge, namely, the marriage of physics and rhetoric, finds its consummate realisation.

The intricacies and ambiguities of Ponge's word-things and their Polish translations may also serve as an encouragement to revisit the very concept of mimesis. The fundamental question here is this: What does it mean that these texts side or part with things? If they part with things, "if they serve as evidence that we cannot connect with the outside world," as Miłosz would have us believe, this it because of Ponge's concern with human language. In this light, Ponge and his "foray into non-human" would be "utterly mistaken" (Miłosz 1990: 167). However, what Miłosz sees as a mere perpetuation of illusions and the celebration of the self rather than the other (Miłosz 1990:

168) found its enthusiasts among other equally strong and articulate proponents of mimesis. Only their understanding of the concept is different. Where Miłosz sees *imitatio* as focused primarily on being as a product of creation, Steiner pursues the same concept but defines it as the imitation of the very act of creation rather than particular entities. The latter says "I take the aesthetic act, the conceiving and bringing into being of that which, very precisely, could not have been conceived or brought into being, to be an *imitatio*, a replication on its own scale, of the inaccessible first *fiat*" (Steiner 1989: 213). In this light, Ponge's texts and some of their translations would side with things in as much as they create a whole new universe in which things do not irrevocably and irreversibly precede language but they interact with language to show their metamorphic qualities. One might even venture to say that, as they undergo a series of transmutations through Ponge's writing, these things begin to show a greater affinity with language in that they reveal their ambiguous and ever shifting nature.

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