Saved in Translation[1]

I

My contribution to *Rhyming the Dead* begins and ends with translation.

Towards the end of my own recent winter journey, in my birthplace Wrocław, I was asked by the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski to translate an essay of his, written in honour of the recently deceased Stanisław Barańczak (1946–2014), and destined for an English-language issue of the journal *Zeszyty Literackie* (*Literary Notebooks*) dedicated to Barańczak.[2] This evolved into the larger task of co-editing this issue, and the ongoing project of translating one of Barańczak's most intriguing poetry collections, *Podróż zimowa* (Winter Journey).

As it turned out, the poetry and critical prose of this great Polish poet, translator and literary scholar, entered into a very fruitful dialogue with developments in my own poetic work. Out of this confluence came the suite of poems dedicated to Barańczak and titled "Snow Like Wool, Frost Like Ashes."[3] These poems grew, in equal measure, from the struggle to translate a particularly challenging poetic text, from a wrestling with my own relationship to my mother-tongue and birth-place, and from an engagement with various poetic and philosophical problems implicit in the very notion of translation.

All of these threads were further complicated with the issues arising from the premise of the project: a commerce with the dead that is, in its own way, a model of translation. I am reminded here of Walter Benjamin's conception of translation as the *afterlife* of the original. Is our relation to the dead—or to a text, after the *actual* death of the author—one in which some saving remnant is retained and borne across the river of forgetfulness? Or, as Paul de Man's rather bleak reading of "The Task of the Translator" would have it, do all attempts to translate reveal, by their failure, that even in the author's life-time, "the original was already dead,"[4] already subject to decomposition. Is the reception, interpretation, translation of a body of work, more akin to an autopsy—performed on John Doe—where even our sharpest instruments reveal no more than that "Life is slow dying" and "leaves / Nothing to be said"?[5]

In any case, this journey to the underworld, successful or not, was made under the sign of Hermes, herald of the gods, psychopomp, god of travellers, roads and boundaries, of thieves and eloquence, and above all, patron of the art of interpretation, which is, of course, another name for translation.

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[1] This is the title of Barańczak's wonderful collection of essays on translation: Stanisław Barańczak, *Ocalone w Tłumaczeniu* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo a5, 2004). Because of the double meaning of *tłumaczyć*, the title could also be interpreted as *Saved in Interpretation*.

[2] Adam Zagajewzki, "A Winter Journey," forthcoming in *Stanisław Barańczak: A Tribute*. Warsaw: Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich, 2015

[3] Psalm 147:16-17: "He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs; who can stand before his cold?

[4] Paul de Man, "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,' in, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 84

[5] Philip Larkin, 'Nothing to be Said,' in *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) p. 51

The following reflections will present a brief introduction to the work of Stanisław Barańczak[6] and a close reading one of the more obscure poems from my own poetic suite, against the background of a more general discussion of the problem of translation. However, the sort of self-interpretation ventured here, is not meant to pre-empt the response of readers. It is presented rather as a further unfolding of the poetic text itself, yet another "translation" of poems which explore the issue of translation, and the mobile boundary between poetry and its critical and theoretical interpretation.

II

Martin Heidegger famously wrote of Aristotle: "The personality of the philosopher is of interest only to this extent: he was born at such and such a time, he worked, and died."[7] Few, even of those who agree with this pronouncement, would say the same regarding the personality of the poet. Nevertheless, space and propriety keep me from encroaching too much on the life and personality of a poet whom I am only beginning to discover. I will restrict myself to a few important biographical facts. Stanisław Barańczak was born in Poznań, Poland, in 1946, studied Polish language and literature at Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, and was deeply involved in the poetic, political and academic life of his country, both before his emigration to the United States and during his subsequent career at Harvard.[8] His life was marked by his experience of political oppression, his fate as an émigré writer, his extremely fruitful work as a poet and translator, and his critical writings, many of which dealt with the nature of poetic language, its relationship to questions simultaneously political and metaphysical, and its opposition to the language of power.

In what sense was Barańczak's poetry and prose concerned with issues simultaneously political and metaphysical? Here it is best to let the poet answer:

> it has always seemed to me that there is little to explain my being placed in the category of "political" poets or, in general, to explain the—lately quite common—drawing of an uncrossable line between a "political" poetry (i.e. a necessary evil) and a "metaphysical" poetry (or that which a proper poet *should* write, and would if the times permitted). I could explain that, for instance, my poems about the concrete of cooperative housing blocks or about standing in a queue at the butcher, are in equal measure "political" and "metaphysical," that they emerge from both a sense of human solidarity and the experience of human solitude, that they speak as much about the suffocation of the human being by institutions and systems as about the wrong done to him by time and nothingness.[9]

And, one might add, the wrong done to him by language; for, what unites these two indivisible aspects of Barańczak's work is what Hanna Trubicka has dubbed his "critique of

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[6] All translations from Polish are my own.

[7] Martin Heidegger, "Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy," *Collected Works*, Vol. 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2002) p.5

[8] Barańczak was the Alfred Jurzykowski Professor of Polish Language and Literature.

[9] Stanisław Barańczak, "On Writing Poems," in *Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1996) pp. 153-154

language,"[10] especially language animated by "the spirit of generalisation,"[11] language speaking in the "anonymous voice of the Great Manipulators."[12]

In the essay "On Writing Poems," Barańczak writes:

> One of my early poems bore the title "I Would Never Have Guessed." Another, somewhat later, was titled "And No One Warned Me." The fact that the first was an erotic poem and the second a sort of political satire is not pertinent here: compounded into a single couplet, these two confessions could constitute the motto of the whole of my creative work.[13]

The first poem[14], in describing an erotic encounter, evokes the embrace of Eros and Thanatos, which is presented via a kind of superimposition: "the stifled cry, the sweat, spasm, and then the inertia of the body characterise the intensity of erotic closeness and at the same time the death agony."[15] We are shown two lovers in bed and simultaneously, as if by x-ray, the embracing skeletons beneath, like the neolithic couple found in Alepotrypa Cave.

The second poem[16] presents two pictures of the same event: the poet's interrogation by members of the security services, during which his person is searched, and the contents of his pockets (including, absurdly, a shopping list) are scrupulously analysed. All the while, a notebook of his poems remains undetected, hidden in his thermal underwear. The first stanza begins: "And no one warned me, that freedom / might depend also on this . . .". While the second, mirroring the first, begins: "And no one warned me that bondage / might depend also on this . . ." and continues with a superficially similar account. This time, however, the formerly amusing absurdity of having one's shopping list analysed for signs of subversion, becomes the ultimate indignity: "and above all (no, this I cannot bear) that page: / soup veggies / can of peas / tomato paste/ potatoes." The poem ends:

> and no one warned me, that my entire globe
> is this space, dividing the opposing poles,
> between which there is, in point of fact, no space.

It is worth noting that "opposing poles" serves as an example of the happy accident that sometimes befalls a translator, when the resources of the target language create apt associations absent from the original. The poem shows us, so to speak, two poles in one Pole. Further, where I have translated "in point of fact" the Polish has "właściwie" (whose range of meanings includes "properly"). My version emphasises the point-like character of the "fact" of the self and its "world" (the point as a fundamental posit of geometry having a unique position but no extension)—

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[10] Hanna Trubicka, "Stanisław Barańczak as a Critic of Language: On Two Essays from *Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation*, *Przestrzenie Teorii* 16 (Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2011), p. 135

[11] Stanisław Barańczak, "Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation," in *Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation*, pp. 248-258

[12] Stanisław Barańczak, "A Few Conjectures on the Theme of Contemporary Poetry," in *Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation*, p. 5

[13] Barańczak, "On Writing Poems," pp. 151-152

[14] Stanisław Barańczak, "*Nigdy bym nie przypościł,*" in *Wiersze Zebrane* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo a5, 2006), p. 61

[15] Iwona Misiak, "Stanisław Barańczak's Dialogue Between Surgeon and Demiurge" *Teksty Drugie* 3 (Institute of Literary Research Polish Academy of Sciences, 2007) p. 74

[16] Stanisław Barańczak, *"I nikt mnie nie uprzedził,"* in *Wiersze Zebrane,* pp. 252-253

a translation which suggests at one and the same time the basic, non-discursive and non-physical character of the self, and its empirical emptiness.

In both poems, the "author's point of departure is the creation of antitheses, followed by the erasure of the boundaries between them."[17] In the first half of the latter poem, a notebook lies hidden in the poet's winter underwear, like a seed of individuality and authenticity, a protest against the world's intrusions. In the second half, the state's scrutiny of his shopping list becomes a fate worse than the discovery of hidden verses. What at first suggested an incipient protest, now seems diminished, and somehow less personal than all the "viscera," which the functionaries of the state have ripped from his life and are now groping. What is left, what scrap of self remains, when surveillance reaches into the very innards of one's daily life, interrogating even the most banal phenomena?

These examples perhaps paint a too sombre picture of Barańczak's work. Just as often, he presents a humorous and ironic vision of the poet's predicament, such as when he compares him to the straight man in a comedic duo, struggling to hold his own against the constant stream of absurdity spouted by his counterpart—the world:

Writing poems is perhaps nothing more than playing the role of the straight man in a cabaret sketch, in which the funny man—engaged in a constant monologue, without a moment's rest, not allowing himself to be interrupted, outshouting us without further ado—is the world . . . Obviously, if in this analogy the world appears in the role of the funny man, it is as one whose jokes amuse us rather rarely, almost as an exception . . . [The world's] complete unpredictability gives it a tone of inspired insanity, as if the comic on the stage lost all inhibitions and not only blathered without embarrassment on every possible topic, but further—like the visionaries in certain religious sects—spoke many languages at once.[18]

In the same essay, Barańczak suggests that the force of the couplet in question ("I could never have guessed. / And no one warned me.") arises

from an instinctive conviction—as strong as it is lacking in rational foundations—that most of what meets us is a violation of some unwritten agreement, whose existence is alluded to at the moment of our birth. Thrown by an unknown hand into the world, we have surely—it would seem—a right to expect that the place into which we are thrown is a dwelling predestined for us, a space favourable to human life. Meanwhile, it suffices for us trustingly to push down on the door handle—like a tenant crossing the threshold of an apartment and longing only to spend a few moments in peace—in order for the lights to blaze forth and for us to be deafened by the shout of all the birthday guests hidden in the corners: "SURPRISE!!!"[19]

Poetry, for Barańczak, is always a kind of protest, "a challenge to the injustice written into the laws of the universe,"[20] an insistence on fairness in a game whose rules will always favour our opponent, whether this be the impersonal laws of nature, the anonymous power of the state, or the will of God. As he writes, in "A Licence Plate from Macondo,"

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[17] Iwona Misiak, p. 74

[18] Stanisław Barańczak, "On Writing Poems," pp. 150-151

[19] Ibid., p. 152

[20] Ibid., p. 153

there is something in the very nature of poetry, which provides an answer to the basic defect of life: its finitude. This is, it should be understood, an answer provided by someone who is himself inevitably subject to that finitude; an answer, therefore, which is unable to remove the defect, which comes down to putting on a brave face in a bad game. The game is bad because we stand, from the beginning, at a disadvantage; but it would be even worse, if we were to admit that—as a result of the certainty of failure—the game is not only bad, but completely senseless. Acting with dignity in this stupid situation, putting on a brave face, depends on finding some sense within it. We will not defeat our opponent in this way; but we will, at least, throw a stumbling block in his path. Nothingness is keenly interested in propagating the feeling of meaninglessness, which paves the way for its progress and eases its task.[21]

This sense that poetry represents an invaluable, but never final, wresting of sense from the often hostile chaos of the world, accounts for the distinctive weaving in Barańczak's work of "dissonance, doubt, even nihilism, and at the same time stoicism."[22] A stoicism, I hasten to add, which is not of the grimly heroic variety, gritting its teeth like Prometheus in the face of the eagle's "surgical precision,"[23] but full of wit, humour, self-deprecation, and exuberant linguistic play.

We can further specify the poet's role, by noting that language is, of course, the medium of his agon with the world. Everything which has been said so far about the world, applies to language. If, as Heidegger put it, "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells,"[24] it is a home whose lease includes, "a few additional paragraphs, written in small print—those which state that the tenant has a responsibility to accept the property with all of the dubious benevolence of its contents: suffering, solitude, death."[25] As with life in the world, so with language: we are compelled to accept a dwelling which we possess only by agreeing to a contract that we don't remember signing, containing a number of clauses that may have given us pause, had we had the opportunity to peruse them. Everywhere we find the traces of former inhabitants, which we are unable to efface and must somehow integrate into our own decorating plans. Or, to refine the analogy further, perhaps it is less a private apartment, and more like the communal apartments once common in the Eastern Bloc. A space in which various individuals, united by a shared identity, struggle for space and privacy.

Just as poetry is a protest against finitude, made by a *subject* subject to finitude, so poetic *language* is a struggle against the sometimes oppressive inheritance of language in general, conducted by someone whose very freedom to rebel is guaranteed by that transcendental trust-fund. But what is it about poetic language that enables it to make even a fleeting protest?

In the essay, "A License Plate from Macondo," Barańczak sums up the distinctive character of poetic language as "polysemy-in-spite-of-and-thanks-to-concision."[26] This is further supplemented, in "Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation" by the claim that poetic language is, or should be, opposed to the totalising tendencies of those discourses (political, philosophical, religious, scientific, and so on) which would replace the irreducibly particular and personal, by an

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[21] Stanisław Barańczak, "A Licence Plate from Macondo," in, *Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation*, p. 166

[22] Tomas Venclova, in, *Zeszyty Literackie* 129 (Warsaw, 2015), p. 119

[23] *Surgical Precision* (*Chirurgiczna precyzja*) is the title of one of Barańczak's later poetry collections.

[24] Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1993, p. 262

[25] Barańczak, "On Writing Poems," p. 152

[26] Barańczak, "A Licence Plate from Macondo," p. 169

objectifying and universal language of ready-made phrases—a language which tries to "dissuade us from the habit of thinking, to inculcate this or that set of absolute truths, to subject us to particular systems of values, to force us to this or that form of behaviour."[27] In a discussion of the continuing relevance of Orwell's writings, Barańczak notes:

we must discern that the "totalitarian temptation" depends on the displacement of individual truth by a false "generalisation"—a generalisation appealing to this or that type of collectivity, distinguished on the basis of ethnicity, class, skin-colour, education, religious affiliation . . . always based on the same principle of *totum pro parte . . . ,* i.e. the very assumption that the individual can be represented—completely and without loss or reduction—by a collectivity . . .[28]

In *Saved in the Edifice of a Poem,* Jerzy Kandzior suggests that the philosophical thinking of Barańczak is committed to an "imperative of multi-aspectivity."[29] Poetry serves the presentation of truth, not by abstraction and generalisation, but by variation, concentration, juxtaposition, complication. In view of the irreducible tendency of language to generality, it serves the revelation of the inexhaustible particular, by presenting it simultaneously in multiple, and multiplying aspects, and achieves this adumbration by the concentration of its language, in which the maximum of possible meanings is expressed in a minimum of words. Here, Barańczak brings to mind another great poet, and enemy of the "spirit of generalisation"—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who, in the introduction to his *Theory of Colou*r, wrote,

In reality, any attempt to express the inner nature of a thing is fruitless. What we perceive are effects, and a complete record of these effects ought to encompass this inner nature. We labour in vain to describe a person's character, but when we draw together their actions, their deeds, a picture of their character will emerge.[30]

Goethe's point here is not the sceptical one that the inner nature of things is inaccessible, but rather that things in their nature are inexhaustible. Thus, instead of a generalising abstraction, which moves from observation of the vivid particular to a sort of grey average, we should clothe the particular in a coat of many colours, through which its living form is intimated.

These considerations have, for Barańczak, their stylistic corollary:

I think that [. . .] the central experience today is not—as it was for the generation of Różewicz— an experience of the collapse or disintegration of the human world, but rather an experience of many co-existing (but incompatible and conflicting) systems and schemes, in which every individual is entangled [. . .] To render this experience is perhaps precisely the task of today's poetry. In what form and in what style? There are certainly many answers, but I think that they all come down to replacing the disintegration of form and reductionism of style [. . .] with a model, speaking banally, that is polyphonic, many-voiced and with multiple points of contact,

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[27] Barańczak, "A Few Conjectures on the Theme of Contemporary Poetry," p. 5

[28] Barańczak, "Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation," p. 255

[29] Jerzy Kandzior, *Saved in the Edifice of the Poem: On the Poetry of Stanisław Barańczak* (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2007), p. 360

[30] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Theory of Colour," in, *Scientific Studies*, ed. Douglas Miller (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 158

based not on simplification, but rather on complication, not on an ascetic one-dimensionality, but on a multifaceted game of tensions.[31]

I have already suggested how this multifaceted game of tensions realised itself in the two poems mentioned above, in which eros and death, freedom and bondage, were presented as indivisible aspects of a single poetic fact.

II. "Untranslatable? Let's try . . ."[32]

What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
a parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
and profanation of the dead.
—Vladimir Nabokov[33]

As already mentioned, the poems in "Snow like Wool, Frost like Ashes" are strongly informed by my ongoing struggle to translate Barańczak's *Winter Journey,* a collection of twenty four poems inspired by, and written to, the music of Schubert's *Winterreise.* With the exception of one strategically-placed poem, these are not translations of the poems of Wilhelm Müller that inspired Schubert's song-cycle, but original compositions (although they do, in certain ways, engage in a polemic with the German poet's work). These poems, aptly described by Zagajewski as "mystical and cabaret-esque,"[34] are elusive, formally rigorous, and full of the "polysemy-in-spite-of-and-thanks-to-concision" mentioned earlier. Barańczak achieves this density of meaning, partly through his ingenious play on Polish idioms.

Rather than attempt a general description of the whole collection, I will focus on one exemplary and enigmatic poem, the fifteenth, which, through its seeming untranslatability, leads into some of the more general issues of translation that deeply influenced my work. This discussion will serve both as an illustration of the philosophy of translation I have followed, and a statement of the poetics informing my own suite.

A vapour trail writes something off	Białą krechą skreśla coś
the jet has jettisoned.	odrzutowiec-brakarz.
Earth, have you not had enough?	Ziemio, jeszcze nie masz dość?
What do you still demand?	Czego znów wymagasz?
Does your jetsam jot upon	Krechę, trwałą nawet mniej
the sky—like excrement	niż ekskrement wróbli,
birds drop—write off, trial-balloon,	stawiasz na wieczności nieb—
the endless firmament?	ty, balonik próbny?
Should the jet's thrust jettison	Gdy za odrzut uznał Raj

[31] Barańczak, "Autonomy and Support," in, *Zaufać nieufności. Osiem rozmów o sensie poezji 1990–1992 (*Kraków: Biblioteka Nagłosu,1993), p. 51

[32] This is the title of an essay in Barańczak's *Saved in Translation.*

[33] Vladimir Nabokov, "On Translating 'Eugene Onegin,'" *The New Yorker*, January 8, 1955, p. 34

[34] Adam Zagajewski, "Winter Journey," in, *Zeszyty Literackie* 129 (Warsaw, 2015), p. 102

Paradise as waste—	brakarz-odrzutowiec—
write yourself off, thus have shown	krechę sama sobie daj,
consistency at least.	konsekwencji dowiedź.

Cross yourself out, briefly lift　　　　*Skreśl się sama, moment trwaj:*
white and simple shrift.　　　　　　*biała, prosta spowiedź.*

Already in the first two lines, the translator is faced with the seemingly impossible task of translating the hyphenated "odrzutowiec-brakarz," a play on words that combines, in an extremely compact package, a wide range of meanings, and may be said to contain the whole poem *in potential.*

A "brakarz" is a "sorter," a "quality-controller"—someone, in other words, who examines products for flaws. It is related to the word "brak" ("lack," "absence," "deficiency"), and "brakować" ("to lack," but also "to sort," and "to reject"). The suffix "-arz" (akin to the English "-er," in "sorter") gives the word the combined sense of someone who sorts things and rejects those that are lacking. A Polish friend has suggested that, in the context of this poem, it may have an additional shade of meaning, by association with the Communist-era phenomenon of "buble," (derived from the English "bubble" and meaning "duds")—namely, faulty and unusable mass-produced items.

The play on words deriving from the various meanings of the Polish word for "jet," takes us even further into the realm of the seemingly untranslatable. "Odrzutowiec" combines "odrzut" with a suffix signifying a doer. "Odrzut" means "thrust" (in the sense of the propulsive force exerted by the jet engine). Another sense of "odrzut" is related to "odrzucić," meaning "to reject" but also "to jettison." In this sense it means "something which has been thrown away as useless." Thus "odrzut" combines two senses: firstly, the force that thrusts the jet up and away from the earth, and secondly, what is thrust away by this—the earth—which now becomes a factory reject, a dud, a waste-product. This reciprocity is essential to the meaning of the poem.

The rigorous logic of Barańczak's metaphor depends on the idea that the movement of the jet in one direction is a reaction to the expulsion of exhaust gas in the opposite direction. One might explicate the combined meanings implicit in this word, as Barańczak uses it, by translating "odrzutowiec" by "thrust(away)-er." Thus, "odrzutowiec" turns out, in the context of the poem's play on words, to be a virtual synonym of "brakarz." This "odrzutowiec-brakarz" is described as "crossing out" or "deleting something" with a "white line," namely, its vapour trail.

What can the translator do, in the face of such "polysemy-in-spite-of-and-thanks-to-concision," especially when it is rooted in distinctive semantic features of the source language? I considered, and ultimately rejected various options ("sorter-jet," "vetting-jet"). In the end, the obstacle was not displaced so much as evaded, dug under by digging deeper into the ground of the target language, to recognise that many of the resources needed to translate "odrzutowiec-brakarz" are already hidden in the less-common meanings, and in the etymology, of the English word "jet."

The noun "jet" derives from the English verb, which in turn derives from the French "jeter" ("to throw," but also "to throw away" and, interestingly, "to jot down"). "Jet" can mean, among other things: "to protrude," "to jut," "to spout or spurt forth," "to emit in a jet," "to spring, hop, bound, dart," "to throw," "to encroach on," "to strut," "to swagger," and "to behave boastfully."

Thus, the svelte noun "jet," derives its meaning from a range of activities, including the intertwined senses of *thrusting* and *thrusting away* implicit in the Polish "odrzutowiec." "Jet" is also productive of apt meanings arguably implicit in the original poem, though unable to be realised there because of the "limitations" (in this particular instance) of the Polish language.

We have here an example of "polysemy-in-spite-of-and-thanks-to-concision" at the level of the single word. By setting the various meanings and etymologies of the word into play, we have, so to speak, uncovered "the discord, difference and polysemy lurking beneath the surface of harmony, accord and obviousness"[35] with the result that now, instead of a relatively abstract term (at first glance the figurative dimension of "jet" in not as patent as it is with the Polish "odrzutowiec") we have a dynamic word, pulsing with energy, inwardly divided, in just the same way as the poem as a whole.

Thirdly, and this will become clearer as I continue, the word thus complicated, stands, in a certain sense, in a relation of *pars pro toto,*[36] with respect to the poem as a whole. The part, here the jet, represents the whole, in the sense that it contains, in miniature, the *gesture* of the poem as a whole and, similarly, is torn by the same inward tension. Indeed, both the "jet*"* and the poem as a whole, exemplify the "creation of antitheses, followed by the erasure of the boundaries between them . . .", discussed with relation to the two poems whose titles constituted Barańczak's credo. Or perhaps more accurately, both suggest that the antitheses are reciprocally determining.

The vapour trail "writes something off." This translates "skreśla coś," which could mean "crosses something out," especially in a text, or "sketches something." I chose "write off" because, again, its range of meanings realises possible readings of the source text which are not as explicit in the original. To "write off" can mean the following: Firstly, "to cancel the record of a debt," or "acknowledge the loss of an asset." In this sense, the jet can be thought of as cancelling, or crossing out, its debt to the earth, which has provided it with the resources enabling it to abandon its origin. Secondly, it can mean "dismiss something from consideration as insignificant, irrelevant, a hopeless failure." Here, the jet, as a quality-controller, rejects the earth—judging it, one might say, as a "bubel," a botched job, a dud. This, of course, implies a condemnation, if not indeed a negation, of its traditional maker, God. Finally, it can mean "damage something (especially a vehicle) beyond repair." The gesture of judgment and rejection, which jettisons heaven and earth as waste is, simultaneously, the hubristic technological drive which *writes off* the earth, in order to propel our man-made vehicle upwards, thus encroaching ("jetting") upon the heavens (the traditional realm of the divine), and laying waste to the earth in the process.

A literal, prose translation of the next quatrain could be: "Do you, trial-balloon, place upon the eternity of the heavens a mark, more fleeting than sparrow dung?" However, the lines contain a number of ambiguities. Firstly, it is unclear whether the "trial-balloon" being addressed is the jet, or as the shape of a balloon would seem to suggest, the earth itself. The first option presents the jet as a test-balloon sent up from the earth, while the second accords the primary agency to the earth, which in producing the jet uses it, perhaps as a writing instrument, to make a mark on the heavens. Here, Barańczak is probably alluding to "wypuścić balon próbny" ("to release a trial-ballon"), an idiom whose meaning is akin to the English "to float an idea." The referential ambiguity of these lines can be resolved if we understand the jet as a existing in a metonymic relationship with the earth, understood here as the locus of human activity, and of a distinctively human project of emancipation. The human world sends up a trial balloon, the jet, testing the atmosphere, perhaps preparing for a more permanent departure from the earth. By implication, the human world is itself revealed as a trial-balloon, something fleeting and provisional.

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[35] Barańczak, "A Few Conjectures on the Theme of Contemporary Poetry," p. 6

[36] *Pars pro toto* being proper to poetry, according to Barańczak, as opposed to *totum pro parte*, which he identifies with the implicitly totalitarian "spirit of generalisation."

The quatrain also plays on the idiom "mieć u kogoś krechę" (literally "to have a mark with someone" but meaning "to be in considerable and long-lasting disfavour with someone"). One might perhaps translate this as "to be in someone's bad books" or perhaps "to have a black mark against one's name." In any case, the mark of erasure and rejection is clearly placed upon any notion of metaphysical transcendence ("wieczność" having the dual-meaning, like "eternity," of "endless time," and "the afterlife"). In crossing out "eternity" the jet rejects any traditional religious conception of the goal of human striving.

In translating "krecha" as "jetsam-jot" I am, again, going beyond the original, multiplying the occurrences and echoes of the primary word "jet" ("jot" being a half rhyme) and suggesting that the mark which the jet places on the heavens is both a waste-product ("jetsam" as what is "jettisoned," in particular to lighten a vessel that is in danger of sinking) and insignificant ("jot" being derived from "iota," the smallest latter in the Greek alphabet) against the background of the heavens, which, in the absence of any notion of metaphysical transcendence become the seemingly endless reaches of cosmic space. The sense of the mark as a waste-product is augmented by it being compared to bird excrement, dropped by the avian jet.

The first two lines of the third quatrain might be rendered: "If and when the *brakarz-odrzutowiec* takes Paradise as waste." I translate "uznać" as "take as" advisedly, to allude to the phenomenological insight concerning the indivisibility of the way in which things appear to me (always and only *as something*) and of my *taking them as* this or that. Thus, one might say that the jet's thrusting self-affirmation and rejection of Paradise (meaning both "Eden" and "Heaven") is structurally correlated with the earth's appearance as "waste" (both as as something thrown away, and as something *laid waste*). The whole quatrain has the form of an *if-then: if* the jet does what has just been described, then the earth is asked to give *itself* a "krecha," and thus to demonstrate its consistency.

This, to me, is one of the most obscure sections of the poem. In what sense is it consistent for the earth to place a black mark against its own name, or, as the final couplet suggests, to cross itself out, in response to the jet's rejection of Paradise? What does "Paradise" stand for in this context?

One simple reading of the concluding couplet would be: "Cross yourself out, last for a moment, white, plain confession." However, I have chosen to translate "spowiedź" not by the obvious "confession" but by the archaic "shrift." "Shrive" has the multiple senses of "hear someone's confession," "grant absolution," "relieve of a burden," "confess one's sins" and also, "reveal, disclose." Depending on who we identify as the subject shriving, these lines could suggest the following: firstly, the jet is relieving itself of the burden of the earth; secondly, the world (here standing for humanity) is making a confession whose content is the fleeting mark made by the jet on the heavens.

"Shrift" is today more apt to suggest the idiom "short-shrift," an association that is most appropriate. The confession in question is both literally short, lasting but a moment, and complicated by the etymological roots of the idiom—the short time given to a condemned criminal to confess their sins before execution. The jet, in writing off the traditional Judeo-Christian conception of the world—in which the human being is located between Paradise (in the sense of the Garden of Eden, a good, unfallen creation) and Paradise (in the sense of the afterlife or heaven)—gives short-shrift to it, curtly dismisses it from consideration. The condemned creation, a mere blink of the eye (in the context of the vastly expanded scope of the scientific picture of the universe) is like a condemned criminal, having a only a brief moment in which to make its confession. But in so condemning a former self-understanding, the world condemns itself, reveals itself as complicit in the failure of that project.

This confession is "biała,"—which can mean both "white" and "blank" (e.g. blank paper)—and "prosta" which has a wide range of meanings ("straight," "plain," "simple," and so on). In this context, coming at the end of a poem torn by so many inward tensions, the line cannot be read as affirming a confession that is in any straightforward sense pure, white, simple, frank. The confession is, in some sense, self-erasing: it removes the conditions for the possibility of its own sense. It is a confession made in a world in which any confessor, anyone able to grant absolution, is absent. "Shrift," it should be noted, derives from the Latin "scribere," ("to write"). We have to do here with a white confession, written on blank paper, empty and fleeting.

These considerations perhaps bring us closer to the sense in which the self-erasure of the human world and of its confession is a demonstration of consistency in response to the jet's erasure of the Judeo-Christian world-picture. Barańczak's poem seems to inscribe an intrinsic limit within the very essence of the defiantly original Icarian gesture of the jet. Human existence is founded on nothing, and reaches into emptiness. The human script, written upon nothingness, bears a burden which can never be relieved.

The jet is a piece of advanced technology, the result of a scientific and technological revolution motivated, in part, by the desire to control the natural environment, and our own physical nature, with the limitations that they impose upon us. With all of its benefits, it is also a development that has brought the world to the point of ecological crisis, threatens to write it off in a headlong rush into the future, towards a utopia where science and technology resolve all problems. The *odzrutowiec-brakarz* of Barańczak's poem suggests, among other things, the technocratic vision so chillingly described in Denise Levertov's "Those Who Want Out":

But no one can say they don't dream,
that they have no vision. Their vision
consumes them, they think all the time
of the city in space . . .
                              Imagine it, they think,
way out there, outside of 'nature,' unhampered,
a place contrived by man, supreme
triumph of reason. They know it will happen.
They do not love the earth.[37]

The jet's flight seems like an attempt to lift finitude above itself, to write it on a cosmic scale, to achieve an independent existence by means of a rejection of an earlier context of meaning.

This is a particularly striking case of a poem whose "departure is the creation of antitheses, followed by the erasure of the boundaries between them."[38] The poem is centred on the inwardly divided metaphor of *thrust*. In defining itself against what it rejects, the jet is caught in an inseparable bond that is simultaneously a distinction and a relation.

But there is more. While the poem begins and ends with a reference to the same phenomenon, its sense changes radically. We move from the *"white line"* of the jet's vapour trail ("biała krecha") to the "white, simple confession" ("biała, prosta spowiedź"). Somehow, the white line that began as a mark of affirmation/rejection, now becomes a confession. The relation between line and confession is underscored by the fact that "prosta" also means "straight," The poem as a whole seems to involve a relation between three objects: the vapour trail stands for the jet, and the jet stands for the human world, for the human project of emancipation from both natural and

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[37] Denise Levertov, "Those Who Want Out," in, *Door in the Hive* (New York: New Directions, 1989), p. 44

[38] Iwona Misiak, p. 74

supernatural constraints.

In the final couplet, the focus returns to the vapour trail. The command is paradoxical. How can a line erase itself? If a line were to draw itself upon itself, thus superseding itself, it would in one and the same act assert itself anew.

And yet, despite the paradox expressed here, one cannot help but hear a quiet dignity in the final "white and simple shrift." The poem describes a certain ill-fated movement of transcendence. It is a transcendence which is inseparable from what it rejects, and by which it defines itself. One way to read the command is as follows: In writing off and attempting to free yourself from your enabling context, you have implicitly erased yourself, revealed your self-affirmation as empty, shown yourself to be a fleeting, insignificant speck in the universe. But looked at differently, in writing its mark on the heavens, the jet has, despite itself, confided its secret, confessed its flaw and debt, its irreducible and irreplaceable finitude, its inability to transcend the realm of duality and paradox. The impossible injunction, "cross yourself out," is not so much a new command, as a revelation of what has all along been the case. Recall the passage quoted earlier,

> there is something in the very nature of poetry, which provides an answer to the basic defect of life: its finitude. This is, it should be understood, an answer provided by someone who is himself inevitably subject to that finitude; an answer, therefore, which is unable to remove the defect, which comes down to putting on a brave face in a bad game.[39]

Or, as Rilke put it, "Who speaks of victory? To endure is all."[40] Putting on a brave face means, in this context, begetting sense, despite the impossibility of any final meaning. These reflections on poem XV have implications for how one understands this poetic gesture of sense-finding/sense-making. The burden of sense is not optional, but to put it crudely, a structural feature of being human. We *exist* to the extent that we engage in the Sisyphean task of pushing the burden of sense uphill. This is, of course, as much an ethical as an epistemological endeavour.

Barańczak himself takes up the myth of Sisyphus, in discussing the poem "Socialism" by the Polish Romantic poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid:

> Ah! work of days, unending, without rest—
> you shoulder uphill still that shapeless clod;
> blink—and it presses back upon your chest,
> sit—and its burden will erase your head . . .
> Ah! work of days, unending, without rest
> the globe by conscience yet un-cauterised.

Barańczak writes,

> This is one of the greatest stanzas I have read. Poetry shows itself here . . . wiser than political utopia—simply because while the author of a utopia can give free rein to his dreams, the poet must take into account the logic of his own metaphor. . . For, since our life in history is like the work of Sisyphus, every successive attempt to found a Golden Age, to mark an end to history, not only ends in failure, but is for us downright

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[39] Stanisław Barańczak, "A Licence Plate from Macondo," p. 166

[40] Rainer Maria Rilke, "For Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth"

calamitous—if we cease to push the boulder, it rolls back from its own inertia and threatens to crush us to a pulp. . . [History] would be brought to completion only if the weight of the boulder—the weight of our evil—were reduced to zero; if the boulder—which is as big as our whole globe, since the boulder pushed by Sisyphus-humanity cannot be anything less than the entire earth—were completely "consumed by the fire" of Conscience.[41]

The burden of sense can never be relieved. No one can take our place, no one can lift the weight from us, ease the individual responsibility of resistance to inertia. The jet—with its fleeting script— has attempted to lay down the burden of its debt to earth and heaven, to conquer gravity. The poem undermines any possibility of a final victory. However, in so doing, it also leaves open a space for the affirmation of the finite, precisely *as finite*.

Barańczak is unambiguous in suggesting that any completion and perfection are out of reach for human beings. Nevertheless, there is a certain sense in which the confession of the particular, in all of its imperfection, becomes a sacramental act, opening up to a possible, though undefined, response.

The image of the jet's vapour trail occurs more than once in Barańczak's work, also outside his *Winter Journey*. In another poem, from the collection *A Postcard from this World*, it appears in a context more openly, though no less enigmatically, concerned with the human relationship to transcendence:

What do finger tips
feel stroking a breast; a clock's scrape; on heaven
the trace of a jet: such waste from myself
in airtight stanzas—a living offering, though crippled—
obliquely, upwards, on the verge of nothing
I bear out beyond the threshold, wanting in exchange only a speck
of faith that I can fit
myself
within a *me* such as—here, now—You would have me be.[42]

III

I began by noting that my suite of poems dedicated to Barańczak arose in response to the experience of translating his *Winter Journey*. I would now qualify this by saying that my poems are themselves implicated in translation.

Firstly, they are translations/interpretations of Barańczak's *Winter Journey*, in the loose sense that I have striven to express similar themes in my own idiom, while drawing on certain formal features of his book.

Secondly, they are implicated in translation in the sense that they are, in a peculiar way, ordered towards their own *afterlife*, in a critical explication and interpretation. Further, the process of their composition at times resembled the style of translation I have demonstrated with reference to poem XV, from *Winter Journey*. In this second sense, they are akin to an interlinear translation in so far as they operate on two distinct levels, which, to borrow a distinction that Joanna Kosturek applies to Barańczak's *Winter Journey*, I will call the *horizontal* and the *vertical*. Kosturek notes

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[41] Barańczak, "Poetry and the Spirit of Generalisation," pp. 252-253

[42] Barańczak, "Carrying the Rubbish Bins Out in Front of the House," in *Wiersze Zebrane,* p. 378

that in places "the linear, horizontal dynamism (a movement towards death) written into *Winter Journey*, is replaced by a vertical dynamism,"[43] visible for instance, in the epiphanic moment described in poem XVIII.

In my poems, this contrast takes another form (while also alluding to the above contrast between what one might call linear and epiphanic time). To explain what I mean by this, I would like to consider the enigmatic claim that closes Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator": "The inter-linear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation."[44] This sentence comes at the end of an essay in which Benjamin makes a number of challenging claims. Firstly, he suggests that a poem is not intended for a reader, and that a proper understanding of translation can only be obscured by focusing on the issue of reception. This is connected to the claim that it is not the purpose of translation to communicate the informational content which a cruder theory of translation might think of as being separable from the original form and transferable to a new form in the target language. What, then, is the goal of translation?

For Benjamin: "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work."[45] The original Adamic language of naming, which was not communicative of anything other than itself, since there was no difference between the thing and its name, and whose exile "among alien tongues" is recounted in story of the Tower of Babel, is served by a translation whose ideal is suggested in an interlinear translation of the Scriptures.

Unlike a typical translation, an interlinear text presents the translation between the lines of the source text, translating word by word, and retaining the syntax of the original. An online interlinear edition may in fact serve as an even better example of what Benjamin seems to have in mind. In an online interlinear text, one can click on individual words in the source text, which are linked to a lexicon. The interlinear text's adherence to the syntax of the original, and its links to a lexicon, can highlight differences in the way the two languages present the "same" things.

For example, Benjamin seems to imply that the reality meant by all of the different words for what English speakers call "bread," could only be truly revealed through a reconciliation of all of the different *ways of meaning* this reality in the various existing languages. These different ways of meaning are visible in the distinct figurative dimensions of different languages, and inextricably linked to contexts that give a particular word its special, local resonance.

It is not that the target language is, in and of itself, *purer* than the source language, since translation can go either way. It is rather that the sort of (foreignising) translation Benjamin has in mind—in enriching the target language with the semantic and syntactic peculiarities of the source text, and at the same time showing the source text's limitations—echoes more adequately the *pure language* underlying all human tongues. Since this only meant as an analogy, I will leave aside the question whether Benjamin seriously entertained the existence of such a *pure language*, either in some prelapsarian state, or in what he calls the "messianic end"[46] of the history of languages.

To go back to the distinction between the horizontal and the vertical dimension in my poems, I would suggest that while the focus of the horizontal dimension is on the sentence, the focus of the vertical dimension, the "translation," between the lines, is on the epiphanic potential of the individual word or phrase. Thus, in certain cases, individual words or phrases suggest a meaning

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[43] Joanna Kosturek, "The Dialogue Between the Human Being and God in the Poetry of Stanisław Barańczak," *Świat i Słowo* 2 (15), 2010, pp. 190-191

[44] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, in, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 1* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 253-263

[45] Ibid., p. 261

[46] Ibid., p. 257

that is not authorised by the grammar of the English language (the meaning cannot properly be read into the sentence in which the word or phrase occurs), but which is revealed if the word or phrase is considered as a window onto its own linguistic depths (alternate meanings, associations, etymologies).

My intention was to write poems whose familiar and simple lyrical form elicits certain generic expectations in the reader which are upset as the reader comes upon elements which, in one way or another, repel a casual glance. The poems are written in common meter (alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter, rhyming *abab*), a form associated with ballads, hymns ("Amazing Grace") and national anthems ("Advance Australia Fair"), in other words, with genres that are, in one way or another, connected to forms of human community that can be both nurturing and oppressive with respect to the individual (folk traditions, religious denominations, nationalities). This form is also the closest approximation to the most common metrical form in Barańczak's *Winter Journey.*

In "Snow like Wool, Frost like Ashes," the short lines, relatively jaunty metre, and regular rhyme scheme, pull the reader along. However, this simple form is marked by moments of opacity, lapses in understanding, words in other languages, technical or recondite terms (apophany, anarthrous), puns and references whose ambiguity or outright obscurity impede the "natural" horizontal flow of the form. The reader is forced either to skim over these problematic gaps, satisfying herself with a vague sense of what is going on, or to enter the vertical dimension of the poem, following the threads of sense at the cost of losing the pleasure of the more "immediate" aesthetic engagement with the poem. If the reader does go down one of these many rabbit holes, she will find that even the most obscure terms and references tend to have a quite precise meaning in the context of the individual poem, or the sequence as a whole.

The vertical dimension—which is *potentially* present between the lines, and beyond the "hyperlinks" of particular words and phrases—cannot be immediately present in the horizontal text, because, for example, certain senses are barred by the grammar of the sentence. The only way to release these potential meanings is to *translate* the poems, in other words, to interpret them. I will illustrate what I mean by discussing two of the more obscure poems.

The first two lines of IV make an observation so obvious as to seem nonsensical, made stranger by use of the German "Schnee ist weiß" ("snow is white"), which produces a sentence whose point is hard to grasp. *That snow is white is not in doubt; it's true that snow is white.*

In fact the statement "snow is white" (or "Schnee ist weiß") is a commonplace in philosophy, particularly philosophy of language. It is sometimes used to illustrate what is meant by a "proposition" in the philosophical sense. A philosopher might say that "Snow is white" and "Schnee ist weiß" both express the same proposition. We have two sentences, but only one proposition. But if so, and if this proposition is something linguistic, what "language" is it expressed in? This talk of an identical proposition, of which the two sentences are expressions, may seem to suggest that there is a kind of metalanguage, which transcends the particular natural languages, and unifies them by grounding their specific and relatively inessential differences in a single perfectly adequate and unambiguous expression of the "meaning" more obscurely and partially expressed in "Schnee is weiß," "Snow is white," "Śnieg jest biały" and so on. "Snow is white" also appears in discussions of the theory of truth, for instance the so-called deflationary theory of truth. In essence, this theory states that to say "It is true that snow is white" is equivalent to saying "Snow is white."

Thus, two short lines intimate a number of complex philosophical issues. On the one hand, we find the suggestion that meaning (and the possibility of translation between languages) presupposes a meta-language not identical with any of the natural languages. On the other hand, we find a reference to the so-called deflationary theory of truth, which is anti-metaphysical in its

consequences, and which suggests that the concept of truth is empty, and adds nothing to the meaning of a sentence in which it occurs.

In the context of these references, the presence or absence of quotation marks is significant. The quotation marks around "Schnee ist weiß" indicate that it is being *mentioned* (as per the *use/mention* distinction) as a sentence, something linguistic, rather than being *used* to refer, "transparently," to a piece of extra-linguistic reality. This is emphasised by the fact that the sentence in quotation marks is in a language that is "foreign" (and may indeed be unknown) to at least some portion of the English readers of the poem. For readers with no German at all, the "transparent" referential function of language is lacking, and what is left is an opaque, or partially opaque, material: a series of marks on a page, or a series of sounds. There is also the further consequence that the placing of the 'foreign" German sentence in quotation marks serves, implicitly, to put the corresponding English sentence into the role of "neutrally" referring to the supposedly non-linguistic reality in question. But of course, quoted or not, "snow is white" is also just a bit of language, although one in the contemporary "universal" language, English.

The poem then shifts to an inquiry into the origin or foundation of meaning. It considers, in an irreverent manner, a certain traditional conception of meaning, according to which the intelligibility of the world, as well as the "fit" between reality and language, are grounded in the fact that the world is an artefact, created by an intelligent agent, namely God.

Words fall from heaven: white, seminal, like the so-called *spermatikoi logoi* or *seminal reasons* of ancient philosophy. However, these heavenly seeds of meaning are compared to God's dandruff, something falling from the divine head, but as a waste-product, rather than as something life-creating. God's dandruff, the original words, are here picture as originating from *the Word*, which is named in Greek and German, languages strongly associated with Western metaphysics, from Ancient Greek and later Christian philosophy and theology, to later idealists like Hegel. I also had in mind Heidegger's claim that Greek and German are the most philosophical languages.

This dandruff of snow/meaning, falls from faultless sense or meaning (*Sinn*)—the German word here suggesting the English "sin," and thus a paradoxical conception of "faultless sin." This alludes to a traditional conception of the Fall as serving a function within the economy of salvation (original sin as a *felix culpa*—a happy fault). But it also inscribes a paradox at the core of this conception of an original, pure, universal "Word" that transcends the specificity of any of the particular existing "words" in the natural languages. In falling from faultless meaning, the snow-words inevitably turn into the "snirt" (dirty snow) of the natural languages, which, vis-à-vis such a pure meta-language, is "idiomatic" and marked by all of those specific aspects of a language which don't translate readily.

Does the "world" here *mentioned*—and so presented as something essentially linguistically-structured—translate the original "Word" (the divine plan or prototype of the created universe)? Here *creation* is pictured as *translation*, from a universal meta-language, or meta-word. This original word which is explicitly described as a *hapax legomenon* (a term originating among ancient Greek grammarians, and referring to a word which occurs only once, either within a particular author's work, or within the surviving corpus of an ancient language). A *hapax legomenon* is a problem for translators, because the lack of context makes it more difficult to interpret the word's meaning. The original "Word" however, is an "absolute" *hapax legomenon* (and, given the line-break, "*the* Absolute," a philosophical term for God). Thus, it is utterly unique, alone, incomparable, and since the world is the only translation of this Word, and we have no other proof of its existence, we are unable to decide whether the translation is good or bad, and what the original Word might have meant.

The unique Word is "in view of being with / anarthrous deity," an obscure reference which again expresses a fairly precise meaning. The first line, "in view of being with," is a play on various

possible meanings of the Greek preposition *pros*, which appears to significant effect, in the following statement from the Gospel of St. John "and the Word was with God" (*kai ho logos en pros ton theon*). *Pros* implies not only that the Word is "with" God, but also that it is in some sense directed towards God. It suggests that the Word is, to put it figuratively, face to face with God, or in the presence of God. My "translation" of *pros* as both "in view of" and "with" plays on the double meaning of "in view of" as, firstly, "near enough to be seen" and, secondly, "in expectation of." This alludes to a difficulty implicit in the New Testament statement, and the immediately following statement that "the Word was God", which is what the expression "anarthrous Deity" refers to.

"Anarthrous" means "lacking a definite article." John 1.1 states, "kai theos en ho logos". Varying interpretations of the absence of a definite article before "theos" (God), lead to different theological consequences. Is the Word literally identical with God, such that they are strictly interchangeable? Is the Word merely *a* god, a subordinate, created deity? Is deity being predicated of the Word, so that the statement is merely saying that the Word is "divine"?

In the context of the poem, all of these theological subtleties are used metaphorically to explore the issue of the origin of meaning. The poem does not attempt to represent the views of any particular religious tradition. Rather, it alludes to a certain general philosophical account of the origin of meaning, found not only in parts of the Christian philosophical tradition, but also, for example, in neo-Platonism. In the poem, which certainly strays far from Christian orthodoxy, the Word is perpetually *in expectation of being with* God, always *on the way to,* but never reaching, his presence.

The following lines change tack immediately, and consider one of the more recent, formulations of scepticism about this traditional account of meaning. "White and brittle myth" again alludes to words falling like snow (or dandruff) from heaven, but is also an implicit reference to Derrida's essay "White Mythology,"[47] in particular its questioning of the distinction between literal and figurative language, and the suggestion that philosophy—which came into being in a polemic with myth and poetry—is in fact no more than a "white mythology" which has tried to obscure its own character. "Anarchic tracery" also does multiple duty. "Tracery" is a reference to the Derridean "concept" of "trace," but also to the architectural meaning of the word, namely, the stonework that provides the frame for the glass of certain Church windows, and which is itself suggestive of snow-flakes. The "tracery" of language—those relatively solid structures which hold in place the glass through which the sun shines into a church (an image of the pure light of meta-linguistic meaning shining through the coloured glass of a linguistically-structured consciousness)—is now seen as anarchic, in other words, as lacking an *arche,* a single origin and governing principle. Anarchic here does not mean "chaotic" or lacking in any order, but rather that the order is not the result of the elements ordered being subordinated to some governing principle of order and unity.

However, having laid out just some of the theoretical viscera of the poem for inspection, it is necessary to point out that this poem is not arguing for a particular point of view. This is evident, first and foremost, in the fact that all but one of the sentences is a question. The only affirmative sentence, if not precisely tautological, is, in any case, highly uninformative. Rather that arguing for a point of view, the poem is, to borrow from Barańczak, setting various elements into a "multifaceted game of tensions."

I will now move on to another, perhaps even more obscure (and certainly more irreverent) poem, V. I begin by noting two revealing features. Firstly, the poem is dedicated to the memory of one "Karlheinz Kloppweisser," who, as the industrious reader will find upon consulting the internet, was one of the alter-egos of the pianist Glenn Gould. Kloppweisser (a fictional German composer

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47 Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology," in *New Literary History,* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 5-74

and musical theorist) was probably intended to satirise Karlheinz Stockhausen. I will return to Kloppweisser later. For now, note that the poem is dedicated to the memory of a fictional character. Next, comes a long, lofty, and in the context of the poem slightly pretentious quote from the Romanian essayist Emile Cioran, well-known for his profoundly pessimistic writings. So, at the very beginning, we have a reference to a no-longer living non-existent character, and a rather religious sounding paean, written by an atheist, who refers to "the Supreme" as a "plenitude without content."

The connection to Glenn Gould is not accidental, and is essential to the meaning of the poem as a whole. Gould is well known for his performances of Bach, including in particular the "Goldberg Variations." In the first quatrain of the poem, death is personified as a Gouldian figure playing the "Goldberg Variations" upon the "ivories" of the snow (and the dark, unspoken "ebonies" of silence). Like Gould, who often wore warm clothes regardless of the weather, death has trouble keeping warm in the icy landscape in which it finds itself, and hums (as Gould famously did) under puffs of breath.

Why is Death playing the Goldberg Variations? As later lines unpack, "Goldberg" means "gold mountain." The "golden mountain" is a standard philosophical example of a non-existent object (like the "unicorn"), and occurs, for instance, in discussions concerning the problem of reference to non-existent objects. If I say, "The golden mountain does not exist," am I not implying that it does, in some sense, exist (since otherwise I couldn't refer to it)? "Gold" is also, apparently, Gould's proper surname. His use of "Gould" arose when his surname was repeatedly misspelled. We thus have death—in the alter ego of "Gould," whose *true* surname (presumably the surname of his father) is "gold" (a noble metal not subject to rust)—playing cold and beautiful variations on the single, crystalline motif of non-existence.

The next line asks a question out of the blue: "How should we read the heteronym?". The reader unaware of the identity of Karlheinz Kloppweisser, is likely to be confused. As it turns out, "heteronym" has a number of possible interpretations. Firstly, it refers to Glenn Gould's alter-ego, Kloppweisser. Secondly, it alludes to the "heteronyms" of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (famous for having written poetry in the voices of various fictional personae). Thirdly, it refers to the linguistic term, meaning: "each of two or more words identical in spelling but distinct in sound and meaning." Indeed, the poem provides a perfect example of a heteronym in the previous line ("*per*fect play," "per*fect* and limn") in which perfection appears in both adjectival and verbal forms.

The next quatrain plays with some lines spoken by Karlheinz Kloppweisser in a mock-advertisement for a television show hosted by Gould. The passages in italics are direct quotes. In the advertisement in question, Kloppweisser states that his work is concerned with silence, and in particular with the difference between German silence, which is organic, and French silence, which is ornamental. This bit of inspired nonsense is used to allude to a stereotypical difference between the German and French philosophical styles. The crossed-out "Sound" is a playful jab at Heidegger —and his conception of the ontological difference, the difference between Being and beings—who in certain of his writings crossed out the German word for "Being" (*Seyn*).

Thus, Death, playing Gould, who is playing Kloppweisser, seems to express a preference for Germanic profundity (and pedantic thoroughness), but even death cannot evade the deconstructive critique which would reveal its own striving after presence to be in vain.

The last quatrain of the poem asks, "Where is the mountain made of gold / the virgin haunted glen. Here chalk is falling on the cold / cast of a unicorn." Where is the non-existent object (non-existence itself) whose presence Death, as the protagonist of the poem, has attempted to *present* to us, through variations on silence? Where is the virgin-haunted glen—an image of sylvan peace and perfection—where, given the traditional association between maidens and unicorns, one might expect to find a virgin (someone pure and un*known*)? "Glen" is also a pun on "Glenn Gould"

and his rumoured asexuality. Now comes an answer, though an unsatisfactory one. "Here," in the world of the poem, chalk (as if from the blackboard of the night sky) is falling on the abandoned cast of a unicorn. We have not the positive presence of a "unicorn," but only its negative shape, its absence from a cast (also summoning up images of broken limbs) which, in any case, could have produced it only as a copy.

Thus, a series of obscure and rather abstract lines, verging on the absurd, turn out to hang together. One might summarise the themes of this poem as follows: the ultimate "Other," Death (nothingness and non-existence,) is trying to be something, trying to find a voice, to become present, rather than absent. Since it has no identity of its own, the only way it can achieve this is to take on some alter-ego. But, by its very nature nothingness cannot be present, cannot be given to consciousness immediately, since being given to consciousness already involves some mediation, and since nothingness cannot be an object.

If the "Supreme" of the Cioran quote is a plenitude without content, then perhaps the "subject" of the poem is a plenitude of silence and absence which leaves no room for any "thing" to assert its independent existence.

Deep in the background, there is also a reference to Borges' very short story *Everything and Nothing*, in which Shakespeare, having died, complains to God of having no "self", to which God replies: "I, too, am not I; I dreamed the world as you, Shakespeare, dreamed your own work, and among the forms of my dream are you, who like me are many, yet no one."[48]

It perhaps goes without saying, that the playful surface of this poem conceals a darker core. The conflict between, on the one hand, its slightly manic irreverence, occasionaly wilful obscurity and bathos, and on the other hand, its ostensible theme—death—is part of its "message." Its puzzle-like quality alludes to the utterly impenetrable puzzle of death; the simultaneously abstract and baroque quality of some of its allusions and metaphorical connections to the long history of metaphysical speculations about our ultimate destiny; and the poem's proximity to the brink of absurdity to the desperate and precarious nature of our attempts to assimilate death in the stories we tell—whether literary, philosophical or religious.

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[48] Jorge Luis Borges, "Everything and Nothing," in, *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 2007), p. 248