

II. REVIEWS

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RHYTHM, METRE, AND RHYME.
ON TRANSLATING POEMS*

Review of James W. Underhill, *Voice and Versification in Translating Poems*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2016, pp. xiii + 333. ISBN: 978-0-7766-2277-4, paperback.

This recent book by James Underhill, a collaborator and friend of Lublin-based ethnolinguists for over a decade, may be somewhat surprising. Until now, we have known Underhill as a scholar sensitive to linguistic nuance, an expert on Wilhelm von Humboldt, the author of an original, five-layer model of linguistic worldview, a translation analyst and critic (cf. Underhill 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014). On top of that, however, James Underhill is also a practising translator, and translator of poetry (mainly from French into English). In the book reviewed here, the author links his experience in all these fields. After nearly two decades of translating, observation, and cogitation, he revisits the problems discussed in his doctoral dissertation (Underhill 1999): the role of form in poetry, translation, and more generally in language as a whole. Because form is a vague notion (cf. p. 7), one that is difficult to capture and is variously understood, it is worthwhile to break down our intuitive reception of meaningful poetic form into its several aspects and seek correlations between them. In pursuing this goal, Underhill is honest with his readers and the translators whose work he reviews, often rather critically: he does not only discuss and assess the work of others but also proposes his own translations of some of the poems he scrutinises.

As behooves a poetry lover and a poetics scholar, Underhill makes us ponder over the very title of his book: *Voice and Versification*. If the latter term is well-established in poetics, the notion of *voice* does call for an explanation. A succinct one comes in the Glossary at the end of the volume (a glossary is a feature characteristic of all books of this author): voice is defined as “[t]he persona of the poem that emerges in the meaning of the words and the way those words are

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organized into rule-bound metrical and rhyming structures, or into free patterning with alliteration, free rhyming, repetition, and the like” (p. 319). The author further explains that this understanding of voice is very close to what his mentor Henri Meschonnic understands by *rythme* – but Underhill prefers his own term because of the difficulty in translating theoretical and terminological solutions from one language to another. This shows, on the one hand, the originality of Underhill’s approach, but on the other hand, his undisguised indebtedness to his master: the author refers to no fewer than eighteen Meschonnic’s publications!

The second part of the book’s title, *in Translating Poems*, is equally intriguing and well-chosen at the same time. Borrowing this idea from Meschonnic (cf. p. 255), Underhill explains:

We do not translate a language, we do not translate poetry; we translate a poem. As long as we remain close to the poem, we will remain close to a voice that emerges in its versification. Meter helps make sense. Rhymes underline meaning. Alliteration forges links between words and lends those words a greater, more penetrating force. (p. 15)¹

In thus linking the key elements of his analysis, Underhill does not shun theoretical considerations, especially in Part 1, where he makes an attempt to pin down general linguistic patterns that guide French and English poetry. The author proposes a comparative, French-English (but also touching upon other languages) study of versification. He paints a historical development of these two poetic traditions and systematically surveys the individual (but connected) aspects of versification, such as rhythm, stress, syllable patterns, accent, metre, and rhymes, exploring dependencies between them and moving “beyond metrics” (Chapter 4), towards acoustic patterning, phrasing, and the role of repetition. Those are elements of what Underhill calls *orchestration* of poetic rhythmical form: it is thanks to orchestration so understood that the poem brings forth a “voice” that speaks to us.

In Part 2 of the book, the author moves on to problems inherent in translating specific poems, each poem being a “whole that must be dismantled into formal and semantic elements, which must be reassembled to form a coherent whole in the translation” (p. 22). We thus obtain a reflection on the “blind” and “meaningful” translation of form, as well as on translational strategies that by definition are ways of “reformulating” the original. The poem’s voice is viewed here as an emanation of the intricacies of its form.

Finally, Part 3 contains two extended case studies, profound and penetrating analyses of translations of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry into English² and of Emily

¹ Having noted which, I will nevertheless refer to “poetry” below (which Underhill does too), for the sake of convenience and in accord with standard practice.

² By Clive Scott, Lord Alfred Douglas, Frances Cornford, Arthur Symons, W. J. Robertson, Aldous Huxley, George Dillon, Edna Millay, Roy Campbell, Frank Sturm, Robert Sykes, Francis Scarfe, William Rees, Laurence Lerner, Richard Howard, James Liddy, William Aggeler, Philip Larkin, Robert Lowell, James McGowan, Jacques LeClercq, and Geoffrey Wagner.

Dickinson into French³ and German.⁴ The author, again, plays with the titles of the relevant sections, referring to different *Baudelaires* or *Dickinsons*. It is more than just a matter of style, choice of strategy, or translational decisions: at stake is no less than the *world view* that transpires through the works of a specific poet and that of a specific translator. Such is, for example, the case with Emily Dickinson: “Liepe enters into the poet’s world view, and when she re-emerges in her own tongue, she finds a language in accord with the American poet’s outlook” (p. 277).

Underhill’s general message can be captured in a few key points, characteristic of the linguist’s approach to poetry, translation, and language in general:

1. Contrary to general belief, translating poetry is possible – indeed, it is a fact of life. It can be encapsulated into a theoretical framework, described, and assessed (cf. e.g. pp. 4, 288, 291). Translation, including the translation of poetry, is an age-long everyday practice that enriches target languages with words, collocations, and syntactic structures. The literatures of those languages acquire new genres, patterns of versification, and types of metric organisation.

2. It is harmful and counter-productive for both translation criticism and translation as such to limit oneself to the signifier-signified model of the linguistic sign, as this inevitably leads to one of its two aspects being favoured over the other, even if they are deemed “inseparable”. Underhill does not mention de Saussure but the allusion is palpable. Perhaps the allusion should be taken as targeted not at the Swiss linguist himself (for his ideas, modified and maybe even distorted by the editors of the *Course*, can be variously interpreted⁵), but at those models that, inspired by Saussure, clearly do separate the signifier from the signified. For Underhill, this is wrong: his dynamic view of poetry rests on what he describes as “signifying – a continuous and interactive process of ongoing meaning-making” (p. 145). *Signifiant* and *signifié* are harmonised in ways that only allow for their separation, somewhat artificially, for analytical purposes (cf. also pp. 157, 181).

3. If, then, one refers to form as something that is foregrounded in poetry, it happens not because of form as such (cf. the section “Translating Form Blindly”, pp. 155–158) but with a view to uncovering certain aspects of meaning (cf. the section “Translating Form Meaningfully”, pp. 160–165). But of course, in poetry (especially there) form does play a key role: “Form makes the poem more meaningful; the poem hits harder than prose” (p. 12).⁶

4. Moreover, language is not just meaning, it is something that moves us and affects our emotions: “Poetry highlights the modes of expression inherent in rhythm,

³ By Pierre Messiaen, Alain Bosquet, Guy Jean Forgue, Claire Malroux, Odile des Fontenelles, Patrick Reumaux, and Françoise Delphy.

⁴ We have just one translator here, Gertrud Liepe, but the results of her outstanding work (in Underhill’s opinion) are very skilfully juxtaposed with selected French translations.

⁵ Cf. Stawarska 2015, esp. ch. 7.

⁶ The author’s path and that of cognitive linguists meet here at a tangent. The cognitivist approach to form was succinctly captured by Dirk Geeraerts two decades ago: “Language is not just content: it is also form, and its formal side has an expressivity of its own, which does seem to create lexical configurations that can hardly be explained if we only take into account the conceptual expressivity of language” (Geeraerts 1988: 227).

repetition, stress, intonation, and... dramatic pausing” (p. 293). To receive a poem means to listen to it and to hear it, also in the literal, acoustic sense (hence the notion of *voice*). This must be done by the translator (cf. the titles of some of the sections devoted to Dickinson: “Malroux: A Voice that Hears and Responds”, “What Liepe Hears”), as well as by the recipient of both the original and the translation. Consider the concluding paragraph of Underhill’s book:

I believe that love [of poetry] entails contemplating the perfection of the parts and the way they fit together as a moving whole. There is a mystery in that contemplation, a profound encounter. It begins and ends in listening. Good translators speak to us in their translations, those newly sprung poems. And like those people we enjoy speaking to, good translators speak to us because they know how to listen. (p. 295)

We should thus eventually strive to achieve what Underhill calls *organic translation*, i.e. the kind of translation which “cannot be reduced to translation of the meaning or the form” but “grow[s] out of the meaningful shaping of rhythmic elements that enunciate and highlight the experience of poetic meaning” (p. 10).

James Underhill’s book guides the reader through the thick forest of poetic forms and semantic nuances so that one would not feel “lost in translation”.⁷ It is not an easy read: it covers a plethora of versification patterns, metres, rhythmic and rhyming schemas (indeed, on p. 8 the author himself advises the more analytically-oriented readers to “skim over” the theoretical Part 1 and focus on Part 2). Moreover, to fully appreciate the book’s import one needs to have more than a basic command of French and, in some sections, of German. However, it is extremely well-written, in a style worthy of literature lover and poetry translator. As a result, the reader is rewarded for their struggle with the breadth of perspective, the profundity of the analyses, and a joyful communion with poetry.

Translated by Adam Głaz

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⁷ The author begins his book with a reference to Sophia Coppola’s 2003 film with this ambiguous title: it can refer to either the content or to someone “lost” in the process. It is a pity, however, that he omits to mention Eva Hoffman’s breathtaking autobiography (1989), titled the same way, where the ambiguity is perhaps even more poignant.

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