

Old Masters in New Interpretations

Old Masters in New Interpretations:

*Readings in Literature
and Visual Culture*

Edited by

Anna Kwiatkowska

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



Old Masters in New Interpretations:
Readings in Literature and Visual Culture

Edited by Anna Kwiatkowska

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2016 by Anna Kwiatkowska and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0330-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0330-4

TABLE OF CONTENT

List of Illustrations	vii
List of Tables	viii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
Anna Kwiatkowska	

PART I. Poetry

Chapter One	10
Notes in the Margins, Insertions and Deletions. Andrzej Sosnowski (Re)interpreting Poetry Dominika Kotuła	
Chapter Two	23
Should One Be Afraid of Death? <i>Holy Sonnets</i> and <i>The Songs and Sonnets</i> by J. Donne—Tradition and Novelty Dorota Gładkowska	
Chapter Three	43
Translating "The Wasteland": an Analysis of the Poem's Title Agata G. Handley	

PART II. Opera & Theatre

Chapter Four	64
Opera in Contemporary Light: the Challenges of Presenting and Translating Modernised Opera Productions Aleksandra Ożarowska	
Chapter Five	75
Wagner and the 21 st Century Contribution to Contemporary Opera Direction Lauma Mellēna Bartkeviča	

Chapter Six	87
William Shakespeare's Tragedy <i>Hamlet</i> in Olgerts Kroders's Stage Interpretations	
Vesma Levalde	

PART III. Tales & Legends

Chapter Seven	100
W.B. Yeats—Between Drama and Ritual: the Tradition of Celtic Legends	
Joanna Kokot	

Chapter Eight	113
Ever-Green Gables. On Modernised Retranslations of Children's Classics	
Izabela Szymańska	

Chapter Nine	132
Insidiuos Tales and Grim(m) Realities in Anita Brookner's Novels	
Eliza Gładkowska	

PART IV. Words & Images

Chapter Ten	150
Pre-Raphaelite Day Off—the Visual Aspects of Katherine Mansfield's "Bank Holiday"	
Anna Kwiatkowska	

Chapter Eleven	168
Bram Stoker's <i>Dracula</i> : The Master of Terror and His Impact on Popular Culture	
Olivier Harenda	

Chapter Twelve	184
Writing a picture	
Zbigniew Urbalewicz	

Contributors	190
---------------------------	-----

Index	194
--------------------	-----

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 5-1 A scene from *Das Rheingold* (dir. Stefan Herheim), Latvian National Opera, 2006
- 5-2 A scene from *Das Rheingold* (dir. Stefan Herheim), Latvian National Opera, 2006
- 5-3 A scene from *The Twilight of Gods* (dir. Viesturs Kairiņš), Latvian National Opera, 2011
- 5-4 A scene from *The Twilight of Gods* (dir. Viesturs Kairiņš), Latvian National Opera, 2011
- 6-1 Director Olğerts Kroders
- 6-2 *The Tragic Story of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1972). Valmiera Drama Theatre. Hamlet: Rihards Rudāks
- 6-3 *Hamlet* (2008), Valmiera Drama Theatre. Hamlet: Ivo Martinsons
- 10-1 John Everett Millais, *Lorenzo and Isabella* (1849)
- 10-2 John Everett Millais, *The Bridesmaid* (1851)
- 10-3 John Everett Millais, *Mariana* (1851)
- 10-4 John Everett Millais, *Christ in the House of His Parents*, (1849-1850)
- 10-5 William Holman Hunt, *Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary* (1849)
- 10-6 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix* (1870)
- 10-7 William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, (1853)
- 12-1 Zbigniew Urbalewicz, *Memory and Distance I* (2014)
- 12-2 Zbigniew Urbalewicz, *Memory and Distance II* (2014)
- 12-3 Zbigniew Urbalewicz, “Door”, a poem by Mirolsav Holub (2014)
- 12-4 Zbigniew Urbalewicz, *Reconstruction of Prospero’s Adventures* (2014-2015)
- 12-5 Zbigniew Urbalewicz, *Under Ice* (2015)
- 12-6 Zbigniew Urbalewicz, “*What is reprehensible about war?*” (2014)

LIST OF TABLES

2-1	The exchange of arguments between the Speaker and “Death”
5-1	Sample 1
5-2	Sample 2
6-1	William Shakespeare’s works in Eduards Smiļģis stage directing
9-1	Skinner’s diagram

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank the contributors to this volume for their very positive involvement, collaboration and prompt response to all kinds of requests sent to them during the preparation of the publication. The articles published in this volume are based on the presentations they delivered during the Old Masters in New Interpretations conference, which was dedicated to young researchers, but those more experienced were welcomed as well. The event was held at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland, on October 27, 2015.

I am also deeply grateful to all the volunteers who devoted their private time to the project, among them the members of Anglo-Cooltura Seniors, one of the student interest groups active at the Department of English Philology of our University.

Finally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Eliza Gładkowska and Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska who deserve special thanks for their hard work and outstanding support. Without their help, perseverance and advice the conference as well as the present volume would not have happened. They were always there when I needed them most.

INTRODUCTION

ANNA KWIATKOWSKA

The title of the present volume, *Old Masters in New Interpretations*, is to serve two functions: first, it is to encourage thinking of visual arts and literature at the same time, and second, it aims at drawing attention to the fact that these two spheres of human activity are very much interrelated. The term “old masters” is traditionally associated with the realm of painting, sculpture or music, whereas the word “interpretations” brings to mind the verbal, descriptive aspect and therefore, by analogy, the world of literature. However, as a result of juxtaposing these two referential domains, the bridge between text and image is built. Such bridges have a long tradition in both art and literary criticism. The never-ending debate concerning the relations between visual arts and literary phenomena was started by Horace’s *ut pictura poesis* statement. Of particular importance were the ideas proposed by German poet, philosopher and above all literary critic, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. His famous work *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* broadened the scope of the long lasting visual-arts-versus-literature polemic. His conviction that these two fields of human activity should be looked upon in the same way and that different arts could be practiced with the use of the same set of tools, inspired numerous critics and scholars. To a smaller or larger extent, he was responsible for igniting the interest of the 19th- and 20th- century thinkers, playwrights and artists in ancient ekphrasis and the relation (also across time) between the arts. Among those who commented on the issue of mutual influences of the visual and the verbal, and the past and the present, were, to mention but a very few, Mario Praz, René Wellek, Ortega y Gasset and John Berger.

It is certainly interesting to note that despite the huge modernist wave that swept across Europe at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, there has always existed a firm tendency to refer to Old Masters, be it in art, philosophy or literature. For example, the writers and poets unequivocally associated with modernism, such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats or Joseph Conrad, eagerly turned for inspiration and help to the past ages and the long gone Masters. Their experiments and innovations related to narration, characterization or

visuality of texts and *vice versa* ring many bells of the aesthetic thoughts and technical solutions from the previous ages. Laurence Sterne and his *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759) might serve as an example of such an influential work.

Throughout all epochs, those who practiced art as well as those who wrote about it have thus tried to show that a correspondence between and among arts, their mutual influences, are indispensable in order to create an emotionally truthful piece of art. The search for a common ground in their artistic expression led poets, writers, playwrights, composers, sculptors, painters and later photographers and filmmakers to cooperation, adjustment or adaptation of themes, methods and/or techniques from the fields different than their own.

The re-makes, adaptations or intersemiotic translations can often be very interesting, thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating. Moreover, it is fascinating to see how these texts of culture address each other and one another across ages. In fact, the main drive behind the present publication was the wish to examine this timeless exchange of thoughts, to rediscover and reinterpret the Old Masters of previous centuries, to bring them before the eyes of the modern recipient, this time dressed in a new verbal/visual attire. The volume *Old Masters in New Interpretations* offers, therefore, a variety of new readings of several well-known and culturally established works of verbal and visual culture. It demonstrates how the two spheres (literature and broadly understood art) as well as the two qualities (old and new) interfuse, affect, reshape and complement each other and one another. Furthermore, the focus is on the perception of the canonical texts of culture by the modern-day, often young, addressee.

Who are Old Masters? Are contemporary works of art influenced by them? Is it possible to create “new classics” without a reference to the established conventions? These fundamental questions had served as a starting point for a stimulating academic discussion and a vibrant intellectual dialogue between more experienced scholars (“Old Masters”) and academia freshers (representing “New Interpretations”). Accordingly, the fervent, inspiring debates resulted in a book filled with pertinent reflections and captivating ideas, both verbal and visual.

The book is divided into four parts, which differ in context and perspective of the presented material and which deal with different types of text/image relationship.

Part I, concentrates on the oldest form of verbal composition, i.e. poetry, and the images induced, either semantically or graphically, by the discussed poems. In Chapter One, entitled “Notes in the Margins, Insertions and

Deletions. Andrzej Sosnowski (Re)interpreting Poetry”, Dominika Kotuła discusses the poetry of Andrzej Sosnowski, who built his poetic empire on voices. Some of them were borrowed, some reconstructed, retraced or deconstructed. His poetry is a constant, never-stopping conversation, or rather a tangle of conversations in which the voices of his multiplicative lyrical egos meet the voices and the echoes of the voices of not only the Old Masters of poetry, but also of the avant-garde artists, versatile scientists and famous eccentrics. The text is an attempt to trace the patterns of Sosnowski’s choices in the light of Harold Bloom’s theory of poetry, as well as Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the *infrathin*.

Next, in Chapter Two, an interesting approach to one of the Old Masters of literature, i.e. John Donne, is presented by Dorota Gładkowska. In “Should One Be Afraid of Death? *Holy Sonnets* by John Donne—Tradition and Novelty”, the author points to the fact that it is the irregularities in the composition of John Donne’s verses and stanzas that constitute the key to deeper levels of interpretation, as these are easily noticeable and thought-provoking. Many modern writers and poets, including T. S. Eliot, regarded John Donne as the most important representative of the 17th-century metaphysical poetry. However, even if the high status of Donne’s works is widely acknowledged, the true nature of his concept is not fully appreciated. In some of his poems, such as “The Flea,” this concept still seems more shocking, rather than accurate. Literary analyses dwell upon the line of logical arguments and therefore lead only to the first level of interpretation: highlighting its intellectual quality and the pleasure we take in discovering distant analogies. It still remains vague why “The Flea” or “Elegy: To His Mistress Going to Bed,” with its clear sexual meaning, are called metaphysical poems, i.e. deeply rooted in human spirituality. Therefore, the author puts forward a hypothesis that John Donne deliberately breaks existing patterns to expose selected elements and to weave an elaborate network of relations between poems.

Turning to the next chapter, in “Translating ‘The Wasteland’: an Analysis of the Poem’s Title”, Agata Handley discusses the influences behind Polish translations of T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland”, focusing predominantly on the title. It may come as a surprise that such a seemingly simple, uncomplicated name becomes the cause of an avid discussion among critics and a source of translators’ disputes. In order to demonstrate the complexity of the short title’s translation, Handley quotes and discusses several comments and opinions on the importance of titles made by linguists, translators, literary critics and Eliot himself. The author also points to the intricate relations between the title and the text of the poem, namely she draws our attention

to the fact that the title is responsible for the reader's interpretation of the poem. Handley comes to a conclusion that just like T.S. Eliot, who resorted to the bygone ages to inspire his imagination, the translators of this poem will always be compelled to search the past, i.e. study the original version in social and personal contexts to write a new version of the poem and its title.

As for Part II, it is focused on opera and theatre. This section opens with Chapter Four by Aleksandra Ożarowska. In her article entitled "Opera in a Contemporary Light: the Challenges of Presenting and Translating Modernised Opera Productions", the author ponders over the possibilities of marrying the old and the new when it comes to opera. It must be admitted that this musical genre enjoys a particularly high reputation. However, it is simultaneously often considered to be old-fashioned and unattractive, however, recently there have been numerous attempts at breaking this unfair stereotype and presenting opera in a contemporary light. The most popular way of achieving this aim is staging modernised opera productions, i.e. transferring their plot from their traditional setting to the here and now. It is an original and increasingly popular trend, but it also brings a number of problems, one of which is translating libretti for such productions in the form of subtitles. On the one hand, the translated libretto should be adapted to the production, but on the other, too precise an adjustment may easily result in a situation when the translator is quite unfaithful to the original; finding a golden mean is therefore a necessary and also highly challenging task.

Another aspect of performing on stage is discussed in "Wagner and the 21st Century: Contribution of the Contemporary Opera Direction", where Lauma Mellēna Bartkeviča tries to find out what makes Wagner topical today. The bicentenary of Richard Wagner in 2013 was marked by diverse contemporary productions of the composer's operas. This gave rise to the question related to the type and scope of the contribution of the contemporary opera productions to the interpretation of the so-called "classics", and Wagner in particular since he claimed that he wrote his operas for the audiences of the future. The article looks at different interpretative strategies of the contemporary opera directors and analyzes the contribution of new productions. One of the main issues is the interrelation of the original author and the stage director viewed as the new author, for the latter reads, interprets, adds and creates new meanings of the plot by using symbols and references which are readable and interpretable by today's audience. Based on the idea of an opera production as a complicated, many-layered text, in terms of methodology, the hermeneutical and semiotic approach becomes useful while interpreting the "old" text in a new way, re-contextualizing it in time and space to encourage a reflection on the nature of mankind, arts and

their mutual interaction. Departing from the notion of a “total work of art” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) applied by Wagner in the context of opera as the most complete genre of arts, the chapter focuses on the contemporary full multi-media experience on opera stage as a projection of Wagner’s idea. It seems that the contemporary productions of Wagner’s operas reflect the interaction of society and culture in the past and in the present, thus trying to “translate” the ideas expressed in the 19th century into the language of the 21st century.

In the subsequent chapter, entitled “William Shakespeare’s Tragedy *Hamlet* in Oļģerts Kroders’s Stage Interpretations”, Vesma Levalde writes about four different approaches of the stage director to one play and how he manages to be original and enchants the viewers with every production of *Hamlet* he produces. The chapter presents the approach to staging proposed by the famous Latvian stage director Oļģerts Kroders. His interest in this particular play stems from that fact that Kroders considered Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* the highest peak of dramaturgy and an outstanding source for interpretation. Explaining his choice to stage *Hamlet* so many times during his creative career (in 1972, 1984, 1997 and 2008) he confessed that this particular dramatic work of Shakespeare is like a blueprint: all other plays that have appeared so far are merely variations of *Hamlet*. In what follows, the article centers on the importance of the director’s work with the text during the rehearsal process and emphasizes the close relation between the concept of the production and the time period of its realization. Moreover, Levalde shows how the choice of main actors influences the potential success of the production.

Part III, entitled “Tales and Legends”, brings the reader’s attention to the issues related to the old days and the tradition of story-telling and, because of its correspondence to fairy tales, also to childhood and children. Interestingly, the first chapter in this section contributed by Joanna Kokot and entitled “W.B. Yeats—Between Drama and Ritual: the Tradition of Celtic Legends”, may be viewed as a linking element between Parts I, II and III. For on the one hand, the reader remains in the world of theatrical performance and representation, yet on the other, s/he is introduced to the realm of folk stories and the language of poetry. The article is devoted to the analysis of William Butler Yeats’s one-act plays referring to old Celtic legends and myths. It concentrates mainly on their function as codices of theatrical spectacles—that is on the ways in which they shape the theatrical reality realized during the performance, on the relations between the audience and the stage, as well as on the model of the world communicated by them. Even if commonly defined as poetic dramas, the plays reveal their function as rituals—blurring the boundary between the stage and the audience, the *sacrum*

and the *profanum*, as well as between the mythical and the historical time.

In the following chapter we turn to the young ones and their world which is looked at from the adult, translator's, perspective. Izabela Szymańska, in "Ever-Green Gables. On Modernised Retranslations of Children's Classics", deals with the phenomenon of retranslation of literary classics with reference to Balcerzan and Legeżyńska's concept of translation series, which is based on the assumption that a new translation is a new interpretation of the literary text, and to Berezowski's pragmatic model of relations between the text and its recipient. Special attention is paid to the frequent practice of retranslation witnessed in the realm of (broadly understood) literature for children/young readers, with the aim of identifying both the cultural and commercial reasons for preparing new versions of canonical works, and reinterpretations presented to modern readers. The issue is illustrated with examples from two modern Polish translations of *Anne of Green Gables* (of 2003 and 2013, respectively).

In the following chapter, i.e. "Insidious Tales and Grim(m) Realities in Anita Brookner's Novels", Eliza Gładkowska looks at Anita Brookner's novels as texts which frequently refer to fairy tales in order to explore the motif of virtue rewarded. This continuation of the literary tradition offers an opportunity to reflect the social changes which have taken place in the last decades. The plot of most fairy tales may seem archaic in regard to the model of a self-assured, independent woman promoted by contemporary western culture. Thus, the literary allusions to the Brothers Grimm's characters, notably to Cinderella, underline even more sharply the contrast between the morals which the canonical texts convey and the opposing reality. In such a way, this discrepancy contributes to the impression that fairy tales serve as the distorting mirror for their readers. Moreover, very often the fate of the fairy tale characters stands for the marginalized existence of the typical Brooknerian protagonist. Thus, the role of fairy tales in Brookner's fiction remain dubious. On the one hand, they symbolize the realm of ethics and dependable values often related to nostalgia. On the other hand, their lack of compatibility with the modern world is painfully exposed and their influence is critically scrutinized.

Finally, the spotlight of Part IV is on the artistic techniques and tools employed in order to make the text more visual and the visual closer to the text. Chapter Ten, "Pre-Raphaelite Day Off—the Visual Aspects of Katherine Mansfield's 'Bank Holiday'" by Anna Kwiatkowska, demonstrates that in Mansfield's short story, "Bank Holiday", apart from the obvious Modernist influences, the reader can spot the reflection of certain artistic and/or aesthetic ideas connected with *fin de siècle* but still in circulation at the

beginning of the 20th century England. When Mansfield came to London for the first time in 1903, the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) was still admired by many. Although Mansfield later on seems to have become ashamed of her adolescent artistic fascinations, in her mature literary works she comes back to the favourites of her teenage days. In the article the question of the pre-Raphaelite influence on Mansfield's "Bank Holiday", a short story from the collection entitled *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922), is addressed. The focus is thus on presenting how Mansfield, consciously or not, translated and incorporated the style of the PRB by borrowing and accommodating some of its features on the one hand, and how she modified and personalized the style on the other. The influence is sought and discussed on various levels, e.g., construction of the text, descriptive mode or types of characters.

The next chapter in this section, namely "Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: The Master of Terror and His Impact on Popular Culture" by Olivier Harenda, examines how the figure of Dracula became re-invented throughout the decades in the field of cinema and discusses the impact these transformations have on the present perception of the vampire figure in popular culture. The article focuses on the origins of the novel by presenting examples of Dracula's literary predecessors (John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney The Vampyre*, or Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*) along with the imaginings of vampires in local folklore beliefs. Subsequently, the literary character is juxtaposed with his most famous re-imaginings on the silver screen. Apart from the above, the article presents the character's overall influence on the creation of vampire movies and their adaptations. The comparative analysis aims to show that the character of Dracula greatly influenced the standardization of vampires in modern culture. Moreover, his unique embodiment of stereotypical traits still has a major influence on the reinvention of vampires in general.

Finally, Zbigniew Urbalewicz's closing chapter of Part IV, which is at the same time the final part of the book, entitled "Writing a Picture", is composed of a set of reproductions of paintings that were exhibited during the *Old Masters in New Interpretations* conference that was held in October 2015 at the University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn, Poland. The works presented during this private view hark back to Old Masters of literature. The artist plays with lettering and writing, creating images reminiscent of the works of famous poets and playwrights. He demonstrates that our writing system is a peculiar *signum* of man, a notation of thoughts, a record of words and of the surrounding reality. Urbalewicz looks at the writing system as an ingenious "invention" which was bound to appear sooner or later

as a consequence of the development of communication, but also as a self-expression. As a result, writing becomes a reflection of mankind; it reads like a map of the development of human civilization, of the changing world around. From a yet different angle, writing serves as a building material for creating an intimate, spiritual, emotionally deep, timeless space. To some extent, this chapter makes a loop and takes the reader back to the beginning of the volume. In spite of using different methodologies, both Urbalewicz and Kotuła discuss the language of poetry and its impact on the receiver. Likewise, the two look for and try to follow personal traces and vestiges of poets'. Subsequently, their respective texts of culture enter into a dialogue with each other, thus creating a bridge between arts, times and audiences.

As shown above, the book is a fresh addition to the ongoing discussion about art and literature, the old and the new, the mutual influences of the two spheres and values, and the impact of Old Masters on modern interpretations of texts. Therefore, the publication hopes to appeal to a wide readership. Hopefully, its content will provide plenty of food for thought and some inspiration for both young researchers and experienced scholars. Moreover, since the book covers a broad range of topics related to different aspects of culture, it may also be of interest to the specialists in diverse academic fields, such as literature, history of art, music, film, theatre, as well as those involved in the interdisciplinary research.

PART I

Poetry

CHAPTER ONE

NOTES IN THE MARGINS, INSERTIONS AND
DELETIONS. ANDRZEJ SOSNOWSKI
(RE)INTERPRETING POETRY

DOMINIKA KOTUŁA

Andrzej Sosnowski, born in 1959, used to be an academic teacher specialising in American literature. He is a translator, member of the editorial staff of “Literatura na Świecie”, and the author of some profound and truly touching essays on poetry.¹ As the inventor of a peculiar and revolutionary poetic idiolect, he started a new literary path and became a prominent source of influence for the youngest generations of Polish poets. His lyrical ego is Protean but in the most recent volumes he tends to vanish. Sosnowski’s attitude towards language is sensual and erotic (as well as erratic), and his poems are elusive and dauntingly—often playfully—eloquent, designed in such a way that the literary critics find it difficult when trying to describe them. While obsessively avoiding the danger of being analyzed and explained, Sosnowski has managed to nonchalantly create his own poetic empire.

This empire is built on voices. Some of them are borrowed, some—reconstructed or retraced. His poetry is a constant, never-stopping conversation, or rather a tangle of conversations in which the voices of his multiplicative lyrical egos meet the voices and the echoes of the voices of not only the Old Masters of poetry, but also of the avant-garde artists, versatile scientists and famous eccentrics. The text is an attempt to trace some of Sosnowski’s patterns and motivations behind his choices.

In an interview for the “Chicago Review”, given in 2000, a Polish poet Piotr Sommer described Sosnowski as “maybe the single most exciting younger Polish poet” because of “breathtaking and very innovative” work that displays a “rich cross-fertilization of influences.” Sommer also explained that the poets of the New York School and OULIPO were “an important

¹ The essays were collected in volumes *Najrzykowniej* (Wrocław 2007) and *Stare śpiewki* (Wrocław 2013).

part of Sosnowski's literary tradition and reading experience" (quoted in Belli 2011). And indeed, the poet converses agitatedly and eloquently with many others. Among them, there are both French and American authors, such as Mallarmé and Russell, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Elizabeth Bishop. These are the voices easiest to hear in his texts. They might be distinguished fairly easily in the work which Sosnowski himself called a "complicated, polyphonic adventure, sometimes a dialogue, sometimes a polylogue" (Paloff 2011).

The poet often emphasises the strength and independence of language: "The language that I feel within myself is a language that rarely goes silent, that rarely sleeps. And since it doesn't shut off and doesn't sleep, it usually speaks with itself" (ibidem). Emily C. Belli recalls his words in her review of *Lodgings*, a volume of Sosnowski's poems translated into English by Benjamin Paloff, and illustrates them with "an effusive, even vociferous" "Poem For J. S."—a poem filled with voices, resembling a conversation with a lover and with James Schuyler. The lines of the text serve simultaneously as exemplification and reflection of the poet's method: "(I'm no longer taking part in the conversation.) I'm so scared, James. 'Why / is this poem so long? And full of death?' / Your words" (Belli 2011). With all his inclinations for postromantic irony and dark playfulness of the camp stylistics, Sosnowski is incessantly close to the topics of vanishing and declining. Coming to an end. Dying. Quotes rattling in the lyrical egos' heads prove this quite often. However, as it was observed by Belli, those poems are mostly contrapuntal when it comes to their dynamics and construction and their overall tones are not easy to describe. While stating this, the reviewer quotes a well-known poem "Time and Money":

Years of eating in silence and stress
 From the weakening grip of conscience on the throat
 And the wind from the inferno's fifth canto dying down
 And the fact that we have to hurt ourselves
 If it's all to go singingly (ibidem)

Throughout his books, the occasionally dizzying cacophony of voices becomes more and more intense. While hinting, quoting, misquoting and referring to other poets, Sosnowski always affects them with his own style and perception. One of his most important inspirations is the poetry of John Ashbery. Since his debut, Sosnowski has been often labeled as Ashbery's Polish promoter, perceived as his disciple, believer or even imitator. After reading his poems, it is not difficult to notice that the connection between the

poets resembles rather a constant dialogue in which Sosnowski appears to be an extraterritorial ambassador of a peculiar poetic tradition and a rebellious continuator, once in a while experiencing fragmentary illuminations. Both poets can be characterised by an inclination for indeterminacy, flowing phrases, polyphonic structures, delightful linguistic imagination, concentration on the language and, finally—some secret dealings with that language. Both are often interpreted as postromantics, as they regularly use the perspective of conspicuous individuality, tend to create visional poems and prefer a peculiar kind of sublimity. There are, however, significant differences between them—differences which should prevent the readers from identifying their artistic programs with one another.

The creative strategy defined by Marjorie Perloff as poetics of indeterminacy is neither the precise and comprehensive description of Ashbery's poetry, nor the only strategy preferred by the author of *Taxi*. In the last few volumes Sosnowski's search for an escape from the postmodern trap of "old conjunctions and bad culminations" (Sosnowski 2012) became more frantic. Unable to create any stable constructions, problematising the issues of sense and lyrical ego, Sosnowski appears to be a nonchalant but troubled prisoner of his own initial ideas (Jankowicz 2013). Those elements which seem to be the sources of constant troubles filling (or even funding) the recent Sosnowski's volumes, in Ashbery's poetic universe are immanent elements of the represented world—or maybe, actually, its crucial foundation, described with fascination and regularly emphasised acceptance. The differences are especially visible when Sosnowski rewrites Ashbery. We can observe this phenomenon in the "Poem For Françoise Lacroix"—inspired by Ashbery's *Autoportrait in a Convex Mirror*. Here Sosnowski writes

the soul is a soul,
it grieves, it's young, and finally it falls
behind us, like molted skin.
It has no place in the monstrosity of our now,
though nothing exists but the teratology of our now
(it's a melody, not a lullaby):
the fairy-tale fender-bender & scrap heap of past & future.
Everything ultimately comes down to harbingers. (In Belli 2011)

There is a specific dramatic tension here, and fright, which are absent in the nostalgic, yet rather affirmative original text. Ashbery describes a picture of Parmigianino in the following way:

But there is in that gaze a combination
 Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
 In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
 The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
 Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
 has no secrets, is small and it fits
 Its hollows perfectly its rooms, our moment of attention.
 That is the tune but there are no words
 The words are only speculation
 (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror).
 They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
 We see only postures of the dream,
 Riders of the motion that swings the face
 Into view under evening skies, with no
 false disarray as proof of authenticity. (Ashbery 2003)

However, this particular painting by Parmigianino is not mentioned in Sosnowski's poem. He refers directly to Ashbery and lets the words play with each other, look at and through each other. He also lets the reader feel a little lost and unable to understand and grasp the whole context. Moreover, he allows the lyrical ego to get confused in the labyrinth of a great archive filled with voices. Here, again, Sosnowski begins to differ from Ashbery. The author of *The Tennis Court Oath* was certainly influenced by the linguistic turn and development of the philosophy based on language. However, his poetry, often defined as aesthetic and narcissistic, has never been located in opposition to experience, to life which he described as a phenomenon based on connections between words and occurrences. While declaring his attachment to the category of *mimesis*, Ashbery widened its semantic space. Like William James, he identified the flow of thoughts with the flows of experience and language (Bartczak 2006). In one of his sketches he noticed that "the almost physical pain with which we strive to accompany the evolving thought of one of James's or Gertrude Stein's characters is perhaps a counterpart of the painful continual projection of the individual into life" (Ashbery 1957) and later, while still commenting on Stein, he added:

If these works are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of the complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening, in an attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature. (ibidem)

By rejecting the basic oppositions of the Western culture and classifications based on the representation theory, Ashbery successfully blurred the boundary between literature and existence. His own idea of mimesis is based on imitating the complex relations between the lyrical ego and the world, presenting the emotional frequencies of the potentially speaking person, taking over his or her perception filters. Imitating the rhythm of existence, tracing the intellectual and emotional processes—all of those tasks demanded breaking the current poetic regulations. Paradoxically, peculiar mannerisms often appeared to be the best way to preserve authenticity. Ashbery himself explained in one of his experimental, expansive, stylistically diversified poems, “The Skaters”, that he was “trying to see how many opinions (he) had about everything” (in Epstein 2006).

Leaving behind the form that we are accustomed to, crossing the borders, inclination for a peculiar amorphism—all of these confusing strategies were designed to recreate the complicated states of mind. Ashbery’s poems, demanding careful reading, purposefully lengthening the act of perception, are filled with images resulting from careful self-analyses and loops of thoughts. Still, these are examples of a peculiar form of imitation. The non-precisely-determined “unknown which loves us” (Perloff 1986, translation mine), equally lovingly described by Ashbery, can be interpreted as a force which guides the lyrical ego into a niche of redefined artistic challenges, from inside of which he relates the troublesome meeting of the mind and things, real or imagined, being the subjects of his contemplation (*ibidem*).

The extremely complex space, opening in front of Sosnowski’s reader, might be called a simulacrum of mimesis, which is both a significant reduplication and complication. Like Ashbery, Sosnowski acquaints the reader with a subtle net of tropes and traces, apparent obviousness and multiplicative references. Still, from the seemingly affirmative beginning², his poetry is filled with much more anxiety and doubts; there is more narcissistic solipsism and, on the other hand, much less hope for contact (already in his debut, *Life on Korea*, the potential interlocutor is being encouraged to write to non-existing addresses and a few years later the lyrical ego is left with the rain of bar codes in his eyes, having changed the reader into a moth³).

² Especially surprising enthusiasm towards communication breakdowns and nonobviousness filled his first volume, *Życie na Korei*. It was expressed in memorable declarations, poems such as “Wild Water Kingdom” or “All That Jazz”. In: A. Sosnowski, *Dożynki 1987-2003*, Wrocław 2006, pp. 37, 38.

³ See A. Sosnowski, “Wiersz dla czytelnika”. In: *ibid.*, 228.

Subtle but meaningful differences in the tonic keys of two poets can be perfectly illustrated by comparing the already mentioned poems: Ashbery's "Autoportrait in the Convex Mirror" and Sosnowski's "Poem For Françoise Lacroix". The latter comes from a volume titled *Zoom*, in which the lyrical ego, sentenced for life in the closed circuit of words, is exposed to numerous devastations and painful degradations.⁴ There are delicate changes of mood and tone in Sosnowski's version of the poem. "There is in that gaze a combination of concern and worry .../ that one cannot look for long"—he writes, while for Ashbery there is "... a combination/ of tenderness, amusement and regret." Later, in Sosnowski's poem we read that: "regret is too plain, mystery too obvious ... because the soul is a soul, it grieves, it's young, and finally it falls behind us, like molted skin," and in Ashbery's: "The secret is too plain. ... The soul is not a soul,/ has no secrets, is small and it fits/ Its hollow perfectly." Then, Ashbery states: "But your eyes proclaim/ That everything is surface. The surface is what's there/ And nothing can exist except what's there" (Ashbery 2003). However, his younger Polish interlocutor, instead of embroiling himself into ontological nuances, continues the story of the soul: "It has no place in the monstrosity of our now,/ though nothing exists but the teratology of our now." Occurrences defined by Sosnowski as teratology, a profound and overwhelming study of anomalous development, are described by Ashbery as an approved *status quo*, accepted with enthusiasm, tender amusement or, alternatively—with charming confusion, and sometimes with painful resignation.

Indeed, both poets present the power and capacity of language, both treat particular elements of the not entirely satisfying reality as important topics and attack conventional systems of senses and symbols. However, Sosnowski's recent volumes seem to be filled with anxiety and weariness, elements which are not often present in Ashbery's poetry, especially not since he abandoned the idiolect described by David Shapiro as "not precisely defined, elevated obscurity and pathos of incomprehensibility" (Shapiro 1986). Sosnowski, even in his worst moments, does not lose his peculiar nonchalant style (in one of the interviews he explained that tears in the eyes should never blur the letters), but still a poignant kind of dramatic tension can be found in his poetry—tension which results from a never-ending collision with the endless force of destruction.

While commenting on Ashbery's poem "Flow Chart", Sosnowski wrote

⁴ That volume was widely discussed among the critics, as it combines emotional extremism with the subject's ironic distance to himself and to the world and events taking place around him.

that he perceives that text as a poem *in extremis*. He noticed an angel's perspective in it, an image in which everything happens simultaneously. Every beginning is a beginning of an end, the end is on its way and has always already happened. In every moment language includes all the voices, tones and messages. Sosnowski associates Ashbery's polyphony with the Apocalypse; he perceives the multilayered speaking voice as the external voice of revelation. The nature of writing is, according to him, inevitably eschatological (Sosnowski 2007). It is not difficult to observe that, while diagnosing Ashbery, the author of *poems* speaks rather about himself. Of course, the endless circles of meanings, labyrinths of connotations, chains of references, apocalyptic nature of language—all of those topics are important in Ashbery's poetry and, naturally, this poetry has a truly radical and confusing dimension. Still, Sosnowski's exegesis is very intimate, almost private, especially when he mentions the Angel of History, portrayed by Walter Benjamin, flying towards the unknown future and seeing only ruins he is leaving behind. The "teratology of our now" (Sosnowski 2006, translation mine). Reality destroyed by the never-ending rush of language. Constant writing, rewriting and translating might be understood as rescue operations, as well as a way of preserving an especially precious content. Also repetitions, filled with slight, almost imperceptible changes, seem to have similar results. Translating is one of the salvage strategies.

At this point another classic, Marcel Duchamp, should be mentioned. The French artist claimed that "the passage from one to the other takes place in the *infrathin*" (in Murray 2013). This phenomenon is, according to him, impossible but it can be claimed that it is based on sensitivity to difference. "What art is, in reality," commented Duchamp, "is the missing link, not the links which exist. It's not what you see that is art, art is the gap. I like this idea and even if it's not truth I accept it for the truth" (ibidem). Slight differences, appearing especially in repeating, shimmering, trembling and vibrating, are the truly individual, poignant elements of art. Missing links, gaps between intentions and realisations, slips of the tongue—this is art. There is a reflection of his words in Sosnowski's repetitive poetry. After being asked if he perceives his texts as a monologue, the extremely self-conscious poet said:

As far as the 'whole' is concerned, it's not that I feel an affinity with some concept of the Book, in the manner of Mallarmé. I just like when poems are in conversation with each other and at times extend certain threads, when they refer to each other, when they shift something within themselves. I also have the sense that, in an absolutely fundamental, almost physical (corporeal) way,

the things I write are “telling” one story. *When all is said and done*, this will be one story. *But only for me*. Of course, changing the story is an unavoidable consequence of changing the language. You can’t tell the same story in two different languages (Paloff 2011).

Bearing that in mind, one can reflect on how Sosnowski’s poems, so strongly influenced by American poetry, will sound when translated into English. According to Paloff, this kind of returning to one of the sources, returning through a different language, might recall a game of Chinese Whispers. The American translator of Sosnowski’s poems claims that the Polish name of this game, Dead Line / Deaf Telephone, is more accurate, as it suggests that the line is dead, that “that there’s nothing to hear other than what you *want* to hear, although unconsciously” (ibidem). It sometimes seems that Sosnowski’s poems, or even lines and words in his poems, are speaking to each other while knowing in advance that the communication will never work perfectly. As, for example, in the poem “Morning Edition”: “Stop, / I think you misheard that” (ibidem). According to Paloff, an unusual effect is visible here—an internal conversation that is truly dialogic, and is not just a traditional internal monologue transcribed into voices. The earlier quoted words of Sosnowski, devoted to the rarely sleeping, internal tongue which does not belong to him and resembles rather a polylogue, are probably crucial for his whole project. This polylogue might be illusory but it has a great alluring power, based on nonobviousness, constantly changing registers and flickering links to other dimensions (also those created by others).

The traditions to which Sosnowski refers most often are connected with peculiar private predispositions—especially a predisposition to avoiding unambiguity. Unambiguous utterances, especially those of a moral nature, are simply impossible to create in this literary niche. In the interview with Paloff, Sosnowski refers to a poet he truly admires, Elizabeth Bishop:

Something like a ‘statement’ or ‘message’ simply cannot work, because some other voice always appear that suddenly challenges and dismantles the tone and composition of the ostensibly unambiguous utterance. I’ll refer again to Bishop. Poems like “The Monument”, “At the Fishhouses”, “Over 2000 Illustrations”, and “The End of March”—these are very serious, beautiful, and intelligent poems. And yet Bishop absolutely does not appear in them as a kind of moral authority. She stirs us and delights us, but she does not preach. In this case we can perhaps speak of artistic authority, even existential authority, but not moral authority” (ibidem).

Immoral beauty, astonishment and intensity rule the poetic world of Sosnowski. The issue of ownership seems minor when the main philosophical prophet, Jacques Derrida, says that he has only one language and yet it is not his (Derrida 1998). As a result, poets cannot be sure that they can ever “have” their own language. In his prose poem “Local Traffic Rules” Sosnowski refers to Maurice Blanchot: “It was then that, in a manner as mysterious as it was inevitable, Maurice Blanchot became entangled in my sentences”—and Blanchot promoted an idea according to which writing itself is an activity, whereas what we call “writing” is only a trace of the previous action. While discussing that claim, Paloff and Sosnowski noticed that in this sense translating appears to be tracing the traces which might be perceived as disturbing, if poets and readers seek for a revelation—and they do, apparently. Sosnowski claims that he writes in an utterly fallen, scrambled language, and it is possible that somewhere in this language of his, in the language of these poems, there “remains some fallen spark of revelation”. And that is one of the definitions of a trace (Paloff 2011). And although Sosnowski is perceived as an extremely hermetic poet, eloquent to the point of inaccessibility and neurotic, Paloff calls his writing a treatment for solitude. While usually trying to communicate with himself (he calls his writing “a certain way of listening to and hearing oneself”), he offers the disoriented readers his own model of conversation and regularly locates himself among carefully chosen antecedents. He chats with them and, despite his acting like a broken radio, transmitting shattered voices of tragic cavernous poets (like Paul Celan) and mixing them with quotes from pop singers (“Some ways ash, some ways funky” is a clear reference to David Bowie’s song “Ashes to Ashes”), despite being darkly playful—he seems to treat them very lovingly. When it comes to declarations, Sosnowski acts like William Shakespeare, an old master of puns, an artist who had known about infrathin before it was defined by Duchamp. “I think nothing, my lord,” said Ophelia (Shakespeare 2003-2016). And Sosnowski, to avoid further investigations, says nothing, my lords and ladies. The balance between being the incomprehensible and the seductive is constantly preserved by, e.g., mere choice of words. This strategy can be perceived in his poem titled “Song for Europe”:

It was never thus. No, it was ever thus.

Will you be the one? Such a strange encounter — with an emerald
round your neck and a shadow on your eyeshadow — is that a smile
or a veil of mourning for the words that have gone missing?

Is the emerald so that you won’t

distract yourself? So the poem can tail you
 like a shadow and screen your eyes, I mean this
 poem — a dark spot on the truth fetched up from the depths
 of a tear, a shiver of light, vitreous full stop
 that terminates all this chat about broken mirrors?

Be her, be the one left over, in the quiet of the ‘all clear’.
 Perhaps we were callous to be drawn so easily into
 the black-out life with never a hint
 when you took the ground from under my feet
 while the sky took an overdose of snow? Love
 isn’t the word, but neither is any other. The poem knows this
 and declares it, as if it’s declaring the Blitz. (Sosnowski 2002)

Other poets and pop singers constitute an intertextual layer which is relatively easy to recognize, whereas the polemical references to philosophers and experimenting with rewriting their chains of thoughts seem far more concealed. Bearing in mind Harold Bloom’s theory of influence, according to which the poet always tries to cover the traces of the forces that actually affect him (and at the same time insert the language of those powers into his own idiolect), it would be fitting to consider Sosnowski’s relationship with scholars, philosophers, sociologists and—above all—literary critics. Several literary revolutionists, like Rimbaud and Mallarmé, are tangled between the verses and act as nonchalant commentators. One of them is, naturally, the previously mentioned Blanchot, appearing in the poetic prose “Local Traffic Rules”:

Nearly everyone pays exorbitant bills. One day I crossed the sandy road by the cemetery in Serock and was puzzled by the rules, “Rules of the Cemetery,” a metal sign with a prominent header and a few barely legible words on a grey, rusty background. A drill, rules? A heat wave. I had just been sick for more than two weeks. Behind a stand of trees, on the banks of the Zegrze Reservoir, anglers were casting their hooks.

The lyrical ego, both confused and intrigued, is obsessively looking for links between bills and death—sensual sensations turn out to be both serious distractions and elements connecting him with empirical reality:

I was thinking not about Tadeusz Różewicz, but about bills and fees, in particular about the one the reticent sign was encouraging: “...payment of

the fee ensures a grave's existence for years to come..." But I had the sun on the back of my neck the whole time, and I had to keep moving, from Serock to Jadwisin, not from Bordeaux to Nürtingen, but then I kept thinking of Hölderlin, of long treks, of the thirty-sixth year of my life. When did Susette Gontard die? It was then that, in a manner as mysterious as it was inevitable, Maurice Blanchot became entangled in my sentences.

The phrase "grave's existence for years to come" might be associated with Blanchot's struggle with searching for appropriate forms of remembering his friends. Similarly to Derrida, who in his personal response to the process of mourning underlined a great and endless influence which it has on the subject's identity, Blanchot emphasised the existence of a peculiar weave of closeness and strangeness, a kind of mutual foreignness, bonding the mourner and the object of mourning. While the previously quoted part of the prose (Sosnowski, while covering his tracks, claims that it is mysterious—but also inevitable) refers to his analyses of death, in its further sections other Blanchotian concepts are indirectly evoked. The French philosopher who decisively negated the economic rules of the world, basic divisions, such as day and night (e.g. with the idea of "the second night", dominated by worklessness and exploration of *l'incessant*—various continuous processes) and constantly interpreted the legend of the Book (Mościcki 2007), appears to be not merely one of many commentators and interlocutors. Meeting him unexpectedly is inevitable, as his texts are also nonobvious sources of basic tensions and particular notions funding Sosnowski's poetry. They linger in the background and provide the imagery even when the subject becomes interested in other issues, moral, sociological or political:

I was struck by the notion that someone was dancing, but that someone else was benefiting rather substantially from that dance. For example, that people were "freeing themselves" sexually, but that at the same time an easy, erotic, calculated industry was blossoming, and production was up for books and newsletters that furnish sex with a permanent address. I have nothing against it in theory. The loss of a truly free time and space is significant, but it is otherwise well established that nothing meaningful and free is ever registered as residing permanently at a given address.

He escapes from his obsessive thoughts into the world of words and exotic details, tries to distract himself and distract Blanchot with definitions and subtle jokes. Language, however, is deceitful and constantly brings him back to his constant troubles. He seems to carefully follow Blanchot in