

# The Synaesthetic Poetics of Reading and Translation: Barthes – Nabokov – Robinson

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Engagement with literature, like all forms of contact, always lies somewhere between the pleasurable and the unpleasant. Reading and translating are activities which engage the body doing the experiencing – whether somatic, sensual or sexual. And yet the pleasurable potential of literature, bound by the stiff corset of modern theory, has not crossed over in a clear fashion to reflections upon literary studies. Only a few provocative projects involving the eroticisation of literary theory, such as those formulated by Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, have opened it up to the literary realities of delight and pleasure. As indispensable elements of textual engagement, physical repulsion and fulfilment have become fully-fledged forms of aesthetic experience – dimensions of a fully restored *aisthesis*: aesthetics as sensation. Barthes' theorising of the delight (*jouissance*) and pleasure (*plaisir*)<sup>1</sup> experienced by readers liberated the body of theory from its shackles:

The unnameability and inexpressibility of delight (...) will be targeted especially against exegesis, the sensuousness of reading will stand up to the dictatorship of the senses, frivolity trembling before intelligibility. The body dressed by Barthes solely in a transparent veil of scandal will play a truly revolutionary role – offering interpretative theory a sort of shock therapy, putting into action the earlier and equally provocative (though never realised) project of Susan Sontag<sup>2</sup>.

Barthes' scandalous *The Pleasure of the Text* from 1973 does not just address the theme of delighting in reading – it is also a demonstration of it. Barthes' text not only suggests, but also makes present erotic experiences: the subject takes possession of language, occupying with loving fever the style of Barthes' manifesto. By revealing the "flirtatious"<sup>3</sup> aspects of literature, Barthes juggles multi-modal

<sup>1</sup> Following Barthes these are understood as two separate qualities (in contrast with a perception of delight as an intense pleasure – and so in categories of quantity, and not quality): transgressive, asocial delight as well as social, familial pleasure.

<sup>2</sup> A. Burzyńska, *Ciało w bibliotece / The Body in the Library*, [in:] *Ibidem, Anty-teoria literatury / The Anti-Theory of Literature*, Kraków 2006, p. 245.

<sup>3</sup> R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill & Wang, p. 6.

sensual metaphors, engaging and combining the senses in an erotic/synaesthetic embrace: words have flavour, a texture, making us giddy, blush and aroused. Synaesthesia turns out to be a major argument in *The Pleasure of the Text*, as it fleshes out in a unique way the substantive quality of language, becoming an immovable threshold for the eroticisation of the written text: “The erotics or physical pleasure derived from literary experiences emerges through a focus on the materiality of the text.”<sup>4</sup> Synaesthesia as a rhetorical precedent gives language a sensual aspect, pointing to its complex poli- and inter-sensual nature. This linguistic materiality “is a multi-faceted concept; it includes anything that pertains to the physical constitution of the text”<sup>5</sup>, and it emerges from the sound aspects of speech, the visual typographical aspects of type, as well as the less obvious components of how texts are perceived, such as the smell of freshly printed ink along with the texture of paper or the screen. Tong-King notes that “literary writing and translation are and always have been a material and multimodal affair”<sup>6</sup> if only because of the “kinesthetics involved in writing, the words on a page or screen complete with color and typography, vocal sound in the case of oral interpreting”<sup>7</sup>. In this article I radicalise this thesis, pointing out that we sense language as a synaesthetic aesthetic formula (in the full etymological sense of this word), because the way we experience texts, stretching across a non-linear web of delight, pleasure, appropriateness, anaesthetic boredom, somatic robotisation and idiosyncracies. Synaesthesia seems to feed on a unique poetics of reading and translations of the authors being analysed. Synaesthesia is for Barthes about the reader’s pleasure in reading – pleasure that is hyper- or inter-sensual, in which one can experience a range of sensory inputs. The source of this pleasure is the tactile-kinetic sensuality of reception: “Thus, what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface; I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again”<sup>8</sup>. Human eyesight skimming across the text changes into touching the text, to skimming (with one’s fingers, eyes, head and hand movements) across its body, and eventually tasting it. The text is a body, a physical space (an expanse of skin) into which one can collapse, which can be run across, leaped over, risen above. The text is a body and reading is corporeal:

Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need.<sup>9</sup>

The synaesthetic “patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels”<sup>10</sup>, “their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips”<sup>11</sup> become the foundation of reading and creating delight in the text. The escalating sensual metaphoric intersensual aspect in *The Pleasure of the Text* fulfils an additional function: intersensual experience becomes the foundation for understanding language as a fabric with a given texture and potentially olfactory and kinetic potential, as matter with the properties of taste and visuals (“words *glisten*”<sup>12</sup>, they are colourful),

<sup>4</sup> T.-K. Lee, *Translation, materiality, intersemioticity: Excursions in experimental literature*, “Semiotica” 2014, no. 202, p. 347.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> R. Barthes, op.cit., p. 11-12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

and also – above all – as sound material, sounding out in a speaking “muzzle”<sup>13</sup>: “that the voice, that writing, be as fresh, supple, lubricated delicately granular and vibrant as an animals muzzle”<sup>14</sup>. Intersensuality is thus a bridge between the body and language<sup>15</sup>. Synaesthetically experienced words are “unexpected, succulent”<sup>16</sup>. Through the synaesthetic experience of the materiality of language the speaking subject reaches through articulation into the body’s insides, its innermost pleasures – in order to achieve textual delights: “(...) it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes”<sup>17</sup>. *The Pleasure of the Text* is the pleasure of intersensual experience of a substantive linguistic fabric, exploration of its experiential potential. If a text is an erotic body, then language is its building block, its blood, muscles and skin. In biological and materialistic terms language is the source of movement, putting it more precisely: a sickly excitement – idiomatic palpitation (“an erethism of certain [...] expressions”<sup>18</sup>), linguistic ejaculation (a “gush of words”<sup>19</sup>), even a stylistic heart attack (“a suspension of the ‘heart’”<sup>20</sup>). Language is also a foodstuff – words can be savoured (“I savor the sway of formulas”<sup>21</sup>) or else forced down with disgust (“language must then be swallowed, without nausea”<sup>22</sup>). Barthes’ synaesthesia, a part of his broader project involving “the rehabilitation of sensory perception”<sup>23</sup>, is for researchers a tool, applied consciously as a corporeal figure, representing sensuality and pleasure. This Barthesian synaesthesia is therefore an operational synaesthesia; it is rhetorical too, applied resolutely as a function of a specific project. A different testament of synaesthetic sensitivity in texts is the intersensual prose penned by Vladimir Nabokov, an author gifted in the perceptual nature of synaesthesia. We know of many types of synaesthesia related to language:<sup>24</sup> tactile experience of the text, coloured lettering, savouring the taste of words, fragrant words, speech seen through the visual senses<sup>25</sup>, or even the personification of graphemes (meaning attributing to them genders or personalising letters of the alphabet and numbers). Vladimir Nabokov, synaesthete of the graph-colour type (coloured writing), phoneme-colour (flowery language)<sup>26</sup> as well as likely being a grapheme-personification<sup>27</sup>, chewed words carefully, precisely measuring

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> See. Anna Łebkowska’s understanding of synaesthesia: A. Łebkowska, *Jak ucieleśnić ciało: o jednym z dylematów somatopoetyki / How to flesh out the body: one of the somapoetic dilemmas*, Teksty Drugie 2011, no. 4.

<sup>16</sup> R. Barthes, op.cit., p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, pp. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> See. C. Oboussier, *Synaesthesia in Cixous and Barthes*, (<http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/17407.pdf>) [accessed: 20.05.2017], p. 115: “Synaesthesia is axial in the intersecting projects of Cixous and Barthes to rehabilitate sensory perception (...) which, in turn, is integral to a wider concern to redefine knowledge”.

<sup>24</sup> See. Updated data on S. A. Daya: *Demographic aspects of synaesthesia*, (<http://www.daysyn.com/Types-of-Syn.html>) [accessed: 20.05.2017].

<sup>25</sup> The ticker-tape type involves converting vocal utterances into graphic records, visually perceived in the visible space alas.

<sup>26</sup> See. On synaesthesia in Nabokov see. A. Ginter, *Vladimir Nabokov i jego synestezyjny świat / Vladimir Nabokov and his synaesthetic world*, Łódź 2016; D. B. Johnson, *Synaesthesia, Polychromatism, and Nabokov*, [w:] *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov*, red. C. R. Proffer, Ardis 1974; S. Conradt, *Vladimir Nabokov Talks Synaesthesia*, (<http://mentalfloss.com/article/49442/vladimir-nabokov-talks-synaesthesia>) accessed: 30.04.2015]; *Nabokov’s interview*, BBC Television [1962], (<http://lib.ru/NABOKOW/Inter02.txt>), [accessed: 30.04.2015]. See: V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, New York 1966.

<sup>27</sup> Personifications appear in a curious type of synaesthesia: “ordinal-linguistic personification” (porządkowo-językowa personifikacja).

out their weight, shapes and sound, both in his own writings as well as in his translations. In his 1941 *The Art of Translation*, Nabokov mercilessly deals with translation errors, arrogance and ignorance, at the same time presenting and explicating his own talent for translation. In it he reveals his *ars translatória*, discussing the challenges in translating the first verse of Pushkin's *Я помню чудное мгновенье*, which the author of *A Pale Fire* quotes solely using phonetic transcription: "Yah pom-new chewed-no-yay mg-no-vain-yay"<sup>28</sup>. The attempt to replicate the sound of the Russian using English language syllables indicates he prioritised the sound aspect of texts in translation. Nabokov's description of the sensual properties Pushkin imbued his verse with is full of synaesthetic metaphors, which are in fact a reflection of the perceptual specifics of the poem in Nabokov's subjective, idiosomatic experience. He describes his own physical reaction to the Russian verse: it's soothing, exciting melody ("The melody of the line (...) is to the Russian ear most exciting and soothing"), with the "plump", "golden-ripe" and "chewed-no-yay" in the middle of the verse as well as the many additional "m" and "n" sounds, keeping the verse in a pleasant equilibrium ("the 'm's' and 'n's' balancing each other on both sides"). Juxtaposing the Russian paragraphs with its literal English translation Nabokov animates and personifies individual phrases or sets of words in the Pushkin verse: "Yah pom-new" and his English literal equivalent "I remember" perform a "plunge" into the past: "deeper and smoother" in the case of the original, "flat on its belly" like an "inexperienced diver" in the case of the translation. Furthermore "chewed-no-yay" has a lovely Russian 'monster' in it – considering the shared lexical original of the words (чудовище; чудный). Nabokov shows that translation does not involve the simple substitution of isolated lexical system items; words belong to sound and meaning continuums, dynamically co-creating the sense of the utterance. Stripped of this intra-linguistic weight, they bellyflop on the banal surface of unpleasant literalness. Nabokov's words not only possess colour, but also a tangible form<sup>29</sup>. Writing, translating – these are tactile states. Translations – this is a process of weighing up words, judging their shapes, textures, shades, their kinetic potential, and finally: their mutual, multi-level connections (etymological, cognitive, audible). In Vladimir Nabokov's literary criticism on translation, the clinical synthesis experienced by him becomes a real flavour criteria, an instrument of the critical process, a technique for evaluating translations. Another example of the synaesthetic poetics of reading and translating is Douglas Robinson's somatics of translation – a project involving the re-evaluating the idiosomatic impulse in translations regarding socially confirmed ideologically somatic terror. In terms of the somatic theory of translations developed in the early 1990s, the process of creation, reading, translating and reading the translation is perceived as a "series of somatic responses"<sup>30</sup>. Robinson takes the category of classically understood equivalence and replaces it with a thesis about "somatic equivalence", and equivalent to sensing: "Equivalence between an SL and TL word or phrase is always primarily somatic: the two phrasings feel the same."<sup>31</sup> A key mechanism in this sensing is synaesthetic, we "roll words around on our tongues"<sup>32</sup> during the translator's hunt for a corporeal equivalent in the target language, proprio- and intero-receptive (inner-corporeal) sensing of equivalent linguistic expressions. As in Barthes' example, language is a tangible material as well as being animated: we can "stumble over words"<sup>33</sup> and "words can also

<sup>28</sup> V. Nabokov, *The Art of Translation*, The New Republic 1941. All Vladimir Nabokov quotes come from this source.

<sup>29</sup> See.: "Mg-no-vainyay has over two thousand Jack-in-the-box rhymes popping out at the slightest pressure".

<sup>30</sup> D. Robinson, *The Somatics Of Translation*, [in:] *The translator's Turn*, 1991, pp. 20-21.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

caress, soothe, placate”<sup>34</sup> Robinson posits a thesis about the universality of synaesthetic sensing of language: for all of us printed text has a smell, speech – flavour: words touch us, words hurt:

We smell words, all of us, as well as see them; taste words as well as hear them. Because our culture discourages perception of language in terms of sensation, however, these somatic responses to words remain subconscious and therefore often dormant, unused, unacted-upon. We also feel words in the tactile sense – we can feel assaulted or bludgeoned by words.<sup>35</sup>

Richard Cytowic would agree with Robinson’s perception of the commonality of culturally suppressed linguistic synaesthesia, according to whom synaesthesia is a conscious process of universally inter-sensory perception<sup>36</sup>, subjected to a standardised categorised mental adjustment. Nevertheless, Robinson doesn’t describe in his project the perception aspect of synaesthesia – instead he relates the way we sense language directly to the meaning of words, to concepts; sensing encompasses for him that which is cognitive, while a key mechanism turns out to be association. Hence Robinson’s somatic theory of language I would rather call idea-aesthetic (*idea*: concept with *aisthesis*: sensing, hence the way we perceive concepts) rather than synaesthetic (*syn*: together, and so: linked to perception). Robinson’s somatics problematizes the sensing of concepts and meanings, rather than pure, non-semantic linguistic matter. Robinson appeals for the cessation in translations of tactics for the controlling of the body (and so the cognition and suppression of the ideo-somatic dimension in translation – de-masking the ideologised body, the institutionalised body which has been socially confirmed in the somatic automatism of reactions) in the name of its individualised exploration<sup>37</sup>. Successful translations are not – in the light of Robinson’s translation somatics – the result of a series of intellectual procedures, but the fruit of a translator’s sensitivity to the corporeal impact of language<sup>38</sup>. According to the author, the ideo-somatic “robotization of somatic response [...] feeds the Western myth of the purely cognitive nature of language<sup>39</sup>”, which needs to be overcome: this is because language is a sensation, oscillating between a socio-political determinant and authentic idio-somatics. The return journey towards idio-somatic experience of language is indicated by idea-aesthetic language and the sensual body in and of themselves.

In the three texts quoted above synaesthesia appears as a principle underlying the pleasure experienced in reading and translating. It is this inter-sensory experience of language that gives rise to the translator’s instincts; intersensuality is also a key quality in readers’ sensitivities. In the criticisms and translations produced by Nabokov, much like in Douglas Robinson’s translational concepts (*The Somatics of Translation*), it is this synaesthetically sensed materiality of language which becomes a key criterion for the selection of lexical and syntactic means for producing a translation. In both cases, synaesthesia turns out to be – a more or less conscious – guide for translators’ linguistic intuitions. Intersensual, corporeal contact with language appears not only in the act of

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. R. E. Cytowic, *Synaesthesia: phenomenology and neuropsychology. A review of Current Knowledge*, “Psyche” 1995, no. 2 (10), p. (<https://sites.oxxy.edu/clint/physio/article/synaesthesiaphenomenologyandneuropsychology.pdf>) [accessed: 30.11.2018].

<sup>37</sup> D. Robinson, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

creating, which should also include the work performed by translators, but also in the (Barthesian) reception of the linguistic arts and meta-reflection on the study of literature. And so, is this sort of project and manifesto capable of making us more sensitive to the omitted and suppressed, and yet universal, synaesthetic, somatic and pleasurable aspects of experiencing the fabric of language, or are they merely the projection of a completely unique idiosyncrasy of perception – synaesthesia as a rare form of neurological anomaly – set against the surface of theory? Barthes seems to use synaesthetic metaphors as a marker of the excesses of delight, occupying the body through erotic contact with language. Nabokov's synaesthesia is simultaneously a form of perception and creation – the functionalisation of inter-sensuality as a measure of linguistic equivalence is related to inter-sensual perception. And finally in Robinson's reflections on translation, ideaesthesia becomes a key element in the translator's toolkit: the effect of a careful and immersed introspection (or rather: intro-aesthesia) – the process of achieving an idio-somatic, creative response to language as well as a simultaneous resistance to ideo-somatic automatism. Synaesthesia is a strategy for linguistic pleasure, representing the somatic impulses leading to interactions with texts: writing, reading and also translating. Barthes, Nabokov and Robinson, daring to reveal their scandalously pleasurable relations with language, point towards the synaesthetic sensing of language as a source of translators' intuitions, readers' sensitivities, along with – inseparably – textual pleasure, perceived as an integral component of the experiential dimension of reading and translating. Synaesthesia is idiosyncratic in the same sense as every individual sensual-somatic experience, stretched inherently across pleasure and displeasure. Any way we conceive it, the individual experience of the body in language remains a bountiful impulse felt by readers, writers and translators; Barthes, an avid reader of Sade, Fourier and Loyola, provided Postmodernism with “one of the most beautiful testimonies on texts as an intimate approach, with all the possible connotations of words”<sup>40</sup>. The radical eroticisation of discourse<sup>41</sup>, making use of a broad range of strategies involving the embodiment of texts, bringing together that which is textual and that which is corporeal – including by means of the synaesthetic hyperbolisation of sensual linguistic matter – was a project in opposition to “strong” theory:

The materiality of written texts appeared in order to protect the “intransitivity” of literary language, and at the same time, return its idiomatic aspects. It became a strong signal of individualism and eventuality. It was thus – as Lyotard would later state – its own tool for resisting all manner of totalitarianism, including its intellectual form<sup>42</sup>.

In the revolutionary projects which highlight the raw materiality of language – representing a condition of embodiment and the consistent eroticisation of texts – synaesthesia often becomes one of the privileged rhetorical tactics as an instrument of corporeal-linguistic approximation. The synaesthetic poetics of reading and translating is to be found in the importance of taking pleasure in engaging with texts: the text of the original, the text of the translation and stretching between them the inter- and intra-linguistic game of sounds, colours, characters, tastes and touches and aromas.

translated by Mark Kazmierski

<sup>40</sup> A. Burzyńska, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem* p. 247.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

# KEYWORDS

*pleasure*

## THE PLEASURE OF THE TEXT

*synesthesia*

POETICS OF READING

### ABSTRACT:

In describing the delightful pleasures of reading and writing, Roland Barthes juggles multi-modal sensual metaphors, engaging and entangling the senses in a synaesthetic embrace: words have flavour, a texture, making us giddy, blush and aroused. A text is a body and reading a sensual experience: Barthes' tactile, kinetic "gush of words\*" becomes the basis for thinking, talking and taking action within language. Synaesthetic "patina of consonants, lustful vowels"<sup>1</sup>, "(...) materiality, sensuality of breathing, rasping, softness of lips"<sup>2</sup> becomes the foundation of readers' and writers' delight arising out of texts.

An excellent *exemplum* of a thus-understood synaesthetic sensitivity to texts is the inter-sensual prose penned by Vladimir Nabokov, an author gifted with a perceptive form of synaesthesia – both as a writer and a translator the man behind *Lolita* took care to chew on his words, carefully giving them their measure, shape, sound and identity. In Nabokov's criticism as well as his translation practice, much as in Douglas Robinson's translational ideas (*The Somatics of Translation*), it is this synaesthetically sensed materiality of language which becomes the key criteria in choosing the lexical and syntactic means at the translators' disposal. In both cases synaesthesia turns out to be – a more or less conscious – principle underlying the linguistic translators' instincts. Inter-sensual, corporeal contact with language comes into being during the creative process, which should also include literary translation, but also a (Barthean) reception of the literary arts, as well as meta-reflection in literary studies. Synaesthesia seems to feed its own unique poetics of reading and translating the authors under analysis.

Synaesthesia turns out to thus be a strategy for linguistic pleasure, representing a somatic impulse to engage with texts. Barthes, Nabokov and Robinson, daring to reveal their scandalously pleasurable literary habits, point to synaesthetic engagement with language as the source of translators' intuitions, readers' sensitivities, as well as – inseparably – textual pleasures, understood as an integral component of the experiential dimension of lecture and translation.

<sup>1</sup> Ibidem, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, pp. 98-99.

**Douglas Robinson**

materiality of the language

materiality of translation

*translation poetics*

ideasthesis

**materiality**

ROLAND BARTHES

*translation*

*V l a d i m i r N a b o k o v*

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