

Translators and Translations- An Expanded Definition in Relation to Multiple Art Forms

The idea of authorship and its social, economic, and literary ramification is something literary scholars must grapple with quite frequently. Since perhaps the time when copywrite came about and the idea of ownership of one's words and thoughts was introduced, the author has had somewhat of an all-powerful grip on the idea and interpretation of the novel. Students in high schools all across the United States (and perhaps the world as well) are taught to consider the author as they analyze literature. Who wrote this? When were they writing? What was their religious background, family life, love life? All of these questions are well and good in some contexts, but what is even more interesting is what happens when the idea of authorship is contorted. All of the previous questions shift when one reads a text in, lets say, English, when that text was originally written in another language. Walter Benjamin discusses the issues translators face in their work and the effects of translation on literary meaning in his piece *The Task of the Translator*. His ideas and thoughts, as well as the opinions of professional translators can then be applied to translated works such as Haruki Murakami's novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. Taking this idea further, what "translations" happen when a text is made into a movie, such as the novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan or a play or musical, such as *Phantom of the Opera*? Finally, when considering Thora Brylowe's commentary on sister-arts, is it then possible for other, non-literary art forms to be translated? I argue that translation of a text not only has a significant impact on the interpretation of that text, but that the translation itself can be viewed as its own work of art. Furthermore, I assert that translation has many more forms than simply translating from one language to the next and that those translations create even more works of art with a plethora of meanings and interpretations.

Before delving into the nuances of translation and the effects they have, it is necessary to discuss the idea of authorship, especially in relation to a translator. Until recently, even in my own way of thinking about literature, the author has held ample sway, influencing the way literature is interpreted. It always seems to be about “what did the author mean by such and such phrase?” or “what did the author intend to get across to a reader with this literary device?”. But these questions can no longer be the sole way to ‘meaning’ in a text when a translator becomes involved. When a text is given over to be translated, it becomes like a blank sculpture, perhaps of a woman, in need of a paint job. The form is already there, with the contours of the face, the shape of the body, the height, the clothes, but it is up to the painter to bring the appearance to life. Does the painter want this woman to be European, African, Asian, Indian, Native American, et cetera? Should the woman be blonde, brunette, a redhead? What color should her eyes be? Her clothes? All of these interpretations that the painter must make of the sculpture will “color” the viewer’s thoughts on the sculpture and its meaning. This is the daunting task that a translator faces when moving a text from one language to another. This analogy will become useful later on as well, when the idea that translators are not simply those who work with words and languages is discussed in more thorough detail. But for now, let’s use this analogy to discuss the work a translator must accomplish.

As the translator begins his or her work, freedom and fidelity must be taken into consideration. Translation implies a relationship between languages, because ideas can transfer from one language to another. According to Walter Benjamin in his piece *The Task of the Translator*: “if the kinship of languages is to be demonstrated by translations, how else can this be done but by conveying the form and meaning of the original as accurately as possible?” (Benjamin, 255). To Benjamin, this accuracy can be described as fidelity to the original

language, and the translator's task "consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original" (Benjamin, 258). Essentially, a translator must first understand what the author is saying in the original language, and then must decide what words and phrases to use in the second language in order to best reflect the original ideas. This becomes increasingly difficult, because, as anyone who has tried to learn a second language will know, every language has words and phrases that express such specific ideas that it becomes nearly impossible to directly translate these ideas into another language. Benjamin, himself, even concedes this point, saying, "fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the sense they have in the original. For this sense... is not limited to what is meant, but rather wins such significance to the degree that what is meant is bound to the way of meaning of the individual word" (Benjamin, 288). Language is a tricky beast in that translating becomes like a game of Telephone, where each shift from language to language can result in a loss of meaning. An idea that in one language might only take a word to express might require three or four words in a second language, and even then, the full idea might never fully be understood.

What then are translators to do? Should they, in the interest of fidelity to the original language, translate directly and risk a clunky and possibly incoherent translation? Or should they, as artists in their own rights and therefore imbued with their own artistic liberty, use their freedom in translation to create a piece that resembles the original, a work that "lovingly and in detail incorporates the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language" (Benjamin, 260)? This resemblance is key, because, due to the fluidity of language, no translation will ever achieve an exact replica of an original work.

The obvious choice then, is for the translators to use their freedom to create a translation that is coherent, flows well, and yet still does justice to the original. While this technical and ethical problem of translation is important and should by no means be understated, it is not the issue I am interested in; I want to consider what happens when translators make use of this freedom, namely, do they become authors or artists unto themselves? Jay Rubin and Philip Gabriel, at the end of the audiobook version of their translation of *1Q84* by Haruki Murakami, discuss their thoughts on translators as creating something new. Their take on the matter is that they see themselves as agents of the author, and the works they create through translation are simply extensions of the original, not pieces that stand alone. I, myself, have done some translations, and that experience would lead me to agree with Rubin and Gabriel. However, there is a difference between my translations and the work of these two professional translators, and that difference lies in what the translations are and how and why they came about.

My translations were of Old English colloquies and a few poems and riddles, meant as homework assignments, while Rubin and Gabriel work on fully-fledged novels that are to be published and shared with a wide audience. My translations were meant as a tool for understanding the events and lifestyle of those described in the colloquies, as instruments for historical and educational purposes. There was no enacting of artistic or literary freedom in these translations because they were not meant as an art form. On the other hand, Rubin and Gabriel described how Murakami would rarely respond to questions concerning the translations, and the two translators were left to fend for themselves. Therefore, they had to rely on translation freedom to create a translation they deemed suitable for the world to read. Therefore, although they would disagree, I maintain that Rubin and Gabriel (and any other literary translators that are making use of literary freedom in their translations) are, in fact, creating new works that can

stand next to the original work. Furthermore, Thora Brylowe, in her book, *Romantic Art in Practice: Cultural Work and the Sister Arts*, discusses comparisons between sister arts such as poetry and painting. While an original text and a translation are not different mediums, rather they are both novels, one can still consider them to be sister arts. They are closely related to each other through themes, symbols, and the like, but they are two distinct works of writing, and according to Brylowe, “because it is laterally relational, a sister-arts practice replaces the notion of the “copy” with one that encourages comparison between medial forms” (Brylowe, 66). This means that translations are not simply “copies” of the original, but they are two separate works that can be compared against each other. A translation is closely related to an original work, but it is not a replica. The relationship between original and translation allows, even encourages, a reader to compare the two in order to perhaps fully understand the meaning of a novel and the implications within.

This idea of comparing sister-arts, or in this case, an original work, and a translation, comes in handy when reading another of Murakami’s works, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland, and the End of the World*. One of the most frequent questions students are asked when analyzing novels is “what are the author’s intentions here?”. This question is difficult for a novel in the original language, because one can never entirely know what the author intended in their writing, but perhaps one can come close. Now, the question of intent gets mangled further when reading a translated text. It becomes impossible for a reader to determine any sort of intent, because the choice might have been made by the original author or the translator. Murakami and *HardBoiled Wonderland* are a magnificent example of this. According to Rubin and Gabriel in their audio interview, Murakami is known for his rather “Americanized” way of writing; he likes to add references to American pop culture in his novels. This is evident right away in the novel through

the title “hard-boiled.” The hard-boiled detective genre is a type of American crime writing, and “hard-boiled wonderland” not so subtly begs readers to intertextually relate Murakami’s works with this specific genre of writing. Mette Holm, in her journal article “Translating Murakami Haruki as a Multilingual Experience” reveals that “Murakami makes it very clear that he deliberately tried to emulate some of [Raymond] Chandler’s style in his writing” (Holm, 124). Holm argues that in order to do justice to Murakami’s intent, one must translate “as precisely and fully as possible” (Holm, 125) in terms of the hard-boiled genre writing of Raymond Chandler that Murakami wishes to imitate. This means that a translator of Murakami’s texts must familiarize themselves with the hard-boiled genre and attempt to imitate both that genre and Murakami’s writing as they translate the piece. Holm claims that to ignore Murakami’s imitation desire, as Alfred Birnbaum did in his translation, is to “considerably lessen the chances of the English-language reader making the intertextual connections clearly intended by Murakami and potentially diminish one layer of understanding of the novel” (Holm, 124). With such an obvious intertextual clue in the title, many readers would read whilst looking for similarities to hard-boiled fiction; but if a translator does not do justice to the genre, a reader would miss the similarities and therefore also miss some of Murakami’s intended meanings. In this particular instance, with the help of Holm’s article, a reader would learn that the intent in the hard-boiled mimicry of Murakami’s novels is meant by Murakami and imitated by a translator, not a product of translation itself.

However, not all translators have articles revealing their thoughts as they translate, and it is most likely not the case that all examples of American slang in Murakami’s novels, specifically *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* are products of Murakami’s intentions. What becomes difficult for a reader is determining if these American colloquialisms,

anecdotes, and references are from Murakami himself, and therefore perhaps some sort of commentary on American society, or if they are a consequence of translation to English and are examples of translators using freedom in translation to create a text that is better understood by an American audience. This dilemma that befalls a reader is one example of why translations of texts can and should be considered separate works. The translation of Murakami novels by Alfred Birnbaum, with the “cuts and abbreviations and paraphrasing” (Holm, 124) in scenes that were meant to mimic hard-boiled detective fiction, will differ vastly in form, content, and ultimately meaning and interpretation from a translation of the same novel by Mette Holm that contains a more accurate depiction of a hard-boiled detective scene. Both of these works will differ in form, content, and meaning from the original, and from each other; they can and will be read differently and will produce three different implications in a reader’s mind. Therefore, all three can be considered separate sister-arts pieces that can be compared but that can also stand alone, apart from an original.

Now that it has been established that translators are artists in their own right and create their own works of art through translation, what happens when the definition of translator and translation is expanded even further? If translation creates new works of art, then by extension, taking a literary work and making it into a new medium of art would imply translation. Take, for example, the making of a novel into a movie. Most, if not all, people who have seen a beloved book turned into a motion picture have the grievance: “the movie is nothing like the book”, or perhaps “that movie is no good, it skips over so many parts of the book.” Yes, while it is frustrating to see a cherished book torn apart and remade by a movie, perhaps the remaking is not as bad as everyone makes it out to be. Before moving further, a caveat must be made: the movies I will be discussing as translations do not include movies that completely change key elements

such as plot line, or that add or eliminate important characters and major themes or ideas. Rather, these movies are the ones that stay accurate to the plot and themes of the text, while perhaps leaving out small details and minor plot elements that would make a movie excessively long.

One example is the brilliant novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and its motion picture counterpart. The novel tells the story of how a thirteen-year-old girl, Briony, in her attempt to control the world around her in a rather childish and naïve manner, falsely condemns a young man to the life of a criminal, wherein he dies a tragic death and is never reunited with the woman he loves. Briony's lie destroys the lives of at least two people, even more when considering the family and friends of the two lovers, Cecilia and Robbie. The novel is written in such a way that a future Briony is the narrator, a fact that is not revealed explicitly to the reader until the end but that is hinted at throughout the novel. These hints sometimes come in the form of attempts to rationalize and explain young Briony's thinking such as this one:

Six decades later she would ... be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone ... Like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself. She knew that ... her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it. (McEwan, 38-39)

This hint is key, because it reveals not only who the narrator is, but the narrator's thoughts on Briony as well. It becomes clear that the narrator does not like Briony; in fact, the narrator intends to mock Briony as well as her future accounts of her actions. The narrator is one of the most important factors in making a reader hate Briony. The hints allow readers to understand that

a future Briony, who is indeed the narrator, also hates herself. However, while in a novel or text form, these hints and sections can be analyzed as foreshadowing and one can explain why they are necessary to the text or what function they serve, in the movie adaptation, there are no such hints, no verbal clues to analyze.

In the movie *Titanic*, the story is told through narration by an old, reminiscent Rose. Because of the way *Atonement* is written, one might expect a movie based on the novel to do something similar, with an old, reminiscent, penitent Briony narrating the story and imposing her self-loathing and hatred upon the viewers in the same way that the novel imposes Briony's hatred of herself on its readers. However, this is not the case. For most of the first half of the movie, there is very little dialogue, except that which is necessary between characters as scenes unfold. But when characters are alone, or even sometimes when they are together, there is a sort of uncanny silence, punctuated every now and then by character leitmotifs. Leitmotifs, an idea introduced to the world by Richard Wagner in his operas, serve as a musical theme for characters in visual performances. The most prominent of these leitmotifs in *Atonement* is the sound for Briony. It is not a musical tune, rather Briony's leitmotif is the aggressive sound of a typewriter. While the novel contains lengthy paragraphs detailing Briony's thoughts and musings on the world around her, the movie has no such narration, rather it repeats the typewriter sound in lieu of Briony's thoughts.

This repetition of the typewriter leitmotif is a wonderful example of translation from one medium to another through an artistic freedom. Rather than give away the ending, or the truth that Briony is the narrator, with something so obvious as narration, the movie director, Joe Wright, chose to use a more subtle hint, the typewriter, in keeping with the subtlety of the novel

itself. Although a close reading of the novel on the first time through can reveal to a reader the narrator's identity, it is not blatant, and the novel is therefore set up for a surprise ending.

Similarly, the typewriter noise in the movie alludes to the ending, since viewers know Briony is a writer and it can be assumed she will continue to write in the future, but the hint is not so strong that the surprising ending is ruined in the first thirty minutes. Here it is clear how a movie director can be a translator and a movie can be his translation. In order to translate a novel to a new language, one must understand the nuances of both languages as well as the themes, messages, and subtle details of the novel itself. In the same way, a movie director must understand the nuances of the novel they intend to remake, the themes and messages that need to be portrayed, as well as the nuances of film and what visual and sound effects are most effective in moving a story from the written page to the performative stage or screen.

However, it is not just directors who can be considered translators in this new definition of translation between media; actors have a very similar task in front of them. Actors need to have a deeper understanding of whatever they are performing before they can perform it effectively. This is equivalent to how translators are knowledgeable about the novel they are working on and directors are familiar with both the novel and performance media. This, under an expanded characterization of translation, would equate actors to translators, because, in the same way that no two translators will produce the same text, no two actors will play the same part in the same manner. Each actor will put a different spin on a character's demeanor, accent, facial expressions, way of speaking, and more. These actor/translators are translating a text to a visual and vocal performance with an element of freedom, but at the same time, they are held back in part by the attributes given to their character by the author.

Take, for example, the musical version of *Phantom of the Opera*. This literary masterpiece is a perfect example for this discussion, because it has been translated many different times, into multiple media. *Phantom of the Opera* started out as a novel, written by the French author Gaston Leroux. Eventually this story was translated into English, and further translated into a movie form, as well as a widely successful musical by Andrew Lloyd Weber. Each time *Phantom* was translated, the story was tweaked just a bit, details were omitted or changed, and the work became something entirely new. For the sake of this argument, I will focus mainly on the translation from book to musical. Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical adaptation has become a Broadway hit, and is performed across the country on a rotating schedule, hitting places like the Buell Theater every few years. Each time *Phantom of the Opera* is performed at the Buell, the cast usually consists of new actors, which means not only new voices for each of the characters, but slightly different personas for each character, and new ways in which the plights of Christine, Raoul, and the Phantom are portrayed. While some actors choose to give the Phantom more anger and venom than loneliness and desperateness, other actors choose to emphasize the lonely backstory of the Phantom and exemplify his lack of warm social interactions. This difference usually comes about in the emotions and voice inflections the actors use in their singing and speaking parts as well as their body language. The same sort of changes happen in Christine's character. Some women choose to portray her as only frightened by the Phantom, while others tinge that fright with elements of pity for his predicament. Each time *Phantom of the Opera* is performed, although the story remains the same, the performance itself is never the same, and viewers might take away new things each time they see it performed. In this way, acting becomes a translation, because, just as two different verbal translators will create

two distinct translations of a novel, two different actors playing the same character will create two different versions of that character.

Now that I have established the idea that translation not only works for moving between languages, but that moving from one artistic medium to another can also be considered translation, it is time to think about the most radical form of translation yet, one that does not deal directly with the written word or novels of any kind. At the beginning of this essay, I briefly discussed the idea of sister-arts, and used the metaphor of a painter painting a sculpture to highlight the job of a translator. Now, it is time to talk about the sister arts again in a new light. William Wordsworth, in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, begins to explain the idea of sister-arts, saying, “we are fond of tracing the resemblance between Poetry and Painting, and, accordingly, we call them Sisters” (Brylowe, 1). One might think, “why is the relation between poetry and painting important when the discussion is about forms of translation?”, and the answer is revealed when looking at Thora Brylowe’s elaboration on the sister-arts and their ramifications in her aforementioned book.

Thora’s claim is that while poetry and painting are sisters, “poetry and prose are so alike in Wordsworth’s account that they ‘speak by and to the same organs,’ meaning they are both textual and can therefore, unlike painting, be comprehended though the eye *and* the ear” (Brylowe, 1). So then, using rather mathematical logic, one can assert that since poetry and prose are nearly the same thing, and since poetry and painting are sister arts, then prose and painting are sister-arts as well. Furthermore, Brylowe states: “there is something irreducible in sisterhood. To suggest that the sister arts are merely alike... misses the aspect of relational complexity... [Sisters] may be alike in their affect but physically different, or the reverse... Sisterhood is

fundamentally asymmetrical... Sisterhood invites comparison, but it does not suggest equality” (Brylowe, 3). Then, by another logical deduction, if ‘sisterhood invites comparison,’ and prose and painting are sisters, it is logical that painting can be analyzed in a similar way as prose and elements of painting can be compared to prose.

This means that if prose is translatable, perhaps painting has its own form of translation. Here we alight on the most radical definition of translation in this essay: paintings can be translated when their media is changed, and meaning is lost or gained in that change. In 1972, the BBC released a four-part television series titled *Ways of Seeing*, that was chiefly written and narrated by John Berger. The first episode of *Ways of Seeing* discusses the translation and transmission of paintings over time. One of the original ways in which paintings derived their meanings and interpretations were through the buildings in which they were located. Many paintings would be designed specifically for a building; we can think of this like the original text of a novel, in the first language in which it is written. Now, because of media like photography or video, paintings can be seen anywhere in the world; this is like the translation of a novel from one language to many others. In the same way that translation makes novels and other forms of writing transmittable, and therefore able to be understood in many different contexts, the transmission of paintings also allows them to be understood in many different contexts, thereby making them translatable.

So now, since we have established that paintings are translatable works of art, we must deal with some of the same translation problems that arose in the translations of text. The first of these questions to be asked is: who or what can be the translator of paintings? The most obvious answer to this question might be that anyone who reproduces a painting would be a painting translator. Clearly, the reproduction of a famous painting by a student in an art class would be

considered a translation in nearly the exact same way that my translations of Old English colloquies for a class were translations. But perhaps the definition of translator when it comes to paintings can be expanded even further, in the same way that the definition of literary translators was expanded mere pages ago. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger explains how the invention of a camera has made paintings transmittable; it is able to relocate a painting in both time and space, which can provide an entirely new layer of meaning for the painting. According to Berger, the invention of cameras meant that, “the days of pilgrimage are over” (Berger, 6:33). Essentially, paintings no longer reside in unique painted surfaces, in one place, at one time, rather they have become widespread information, easily accessible from anywhere, without the need to travel far and wide to see the painting. Using this idea, the camera then becomes the translator of paintings.

Now there is a translator for paintings, the camera. But it was established earlier that the broad definition of translator worked when a translation was made through artistic freedom, rather than lingual fidelity. So, what exactly does a camera do that constitutes artistic freedom? First, there is the idea of relocation. Someone viewing Michelangelo’s painting in the Sistine Chapel from the Sistine Chapel would be filled with wonder and awe at the artwork; this wonder would be exemplified by the impact of so many religious paintings filling such a magnificent religious building. But someone viewing the paintings in the Sistine Chapel from a web browser on a laptop would not get that same sense of awe. This is comparable to idiomatic expressions in language translation. While someone who speaks the original language of a text will understand the nuances that do not always come across in translation, a reader who is reading a translated version may not get the full effect of a phrase because it lost some of its original meaning after translation. Therefore, the relocation of a painting can change its meaning through the emotions it evokes.

Another way in which a painting can be translated artistically through the use of a camera is through angles. Berger discusses the ways in which a camera can alter a viewer's perception of paintings, and thereby the meaning a viewer would glean from a painting, through the use of camera angles and variation of shots. Take a painting with an extreme amount of detail, one that can be viewed from far away and up close, where each view gives a new interpretation. In his example, Berger discusses the painting *Road to Calvary* by Breughel. He asserts that "if you look at the whole picture, you will see that it is about grief, about torture, and above all, the callousness, the eager inquisitiveness, the superstitious drive of the crowd" (Berger, 14:47). In this painting, a wide-angle view provided by the camera will not give a viewer many details, but it does provide one message or meaning. However, because of the versatility of the camera, one can zoom in on specific portions, and "as soon as this happens, the comprehensive effect of the painting can be changed" (Berger, 15:11). Zooming in on details creates a more religious or devotional message within the painting, whereas the wide angle gives a more secular view. When the camera is panned across the painting from side to side, the painting becomes a landscape instead of a story. All these variations in camera movement and angle result in new meaning and interpretation for the painting; the camera angles become analogous to the artistic liberty of a translator in choosing which word to use or of a movie director in choosing which scenes to keep and which to omit when making a novel into a movie.

Finally, a third way that a painting might be translated is through the viewer and his or her direct experiences. Toward the end of this BBC episode, Berger provides an example of young children as they try to interpret a painting and explain what is happening on the page. Berger states: "Children connect images directly with their own experiences" (Berger, 26:07). But, when it comes to paintings, children are not the only ones who connect personal experiences

to interpretations. While children may have more imaginative ideas and wilder, more exciting theories about what is happening in a painting because of their youth and because they have less life experience to teach them societal “logic,” adults will still relate to one painting or another because of things they have experienced in life. For example, one adult might take a painting of a field to depict a peaceful scene, perhaps a tranquil summer day, a place to retire to someday, while another adult might see the field as scene from childhood, full of mischief and child-like shenanigans, and a third might connect the field to a sense of loneliness or despair. Because this painting has been reproduced and is no longer in its original location, all three of these interpretations and potential themes of the painting are equally valid. They are still based on the original painting, but the interpretations have been altered by each adult’s reality. In context of translation, the adults are the translators, and their thoughts and feelings on the painting are their translations. The artistic liberty or freedom comes in terms of how each person’s life experience caused them to translate the painting differently.

So, how can an expanded definition of translation hold up under scrutiny? First, it must be made clear that no translator will ever be able to exactly copy an original work. Once this is established, translators themselves can be considered authors because of their artistic translation freedom. This means that translations, because they are produced by authors (artists), are, in fact, new works of art. Since translations are works of art, other art forms that are based off of novels, such as movies and plays, can be called translations. Under this definition, anyone who creates these types of art, namely directors and actors, are translators. Then, by the definition of sisterarts, wherein closely related art forms can be compared to one another, paintings can be compared to literary artwork, implying that paintings can also be translated. Finally, since they are translatable, paintings may have multiple translators. Following this logic, this new definition

of translation does hold under scrutiny. How then, are the arts affected by this expanded definition of translation? To start, by defining translation more broadly, translators are given the agency to call themselves artists, even authors in their own right, because their works can be considered solitary artwork, not simply a branch off an original work. Even further than this, as translation is expanded to the sister arts of literature, the shackles of more vast and imaginative interpretations are unfettered, which leads the way to more extensive insights into not only works of literature, but all works of art.

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