Impossible Interpretation

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Writing about *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau turns towards painting twice; in both cases, the text precedes the picture, the text is what determines the pictorial representation of reality.

For the illustrated edition of the novel, the author himself orders the etchings. The choice of the twelve scenes which will be accompanied by pictures reveals as much from the psychological as the narratological points of view. Rousseau gives the engraver two kinds of directions for each picture: some are about the different positions of the bodies (1st: "The young man holds out his arms to Julie", 3rd: "Edouard holds a letter in his hand", 9th: "On the right, Mrs de Wolmar is sitting"), others about the characters' moods; thus, Milord Edouard's face has to reflect "pride devoid of arrogance" (2nd), the young officers will "have a mocking air about them" (4th). No one knows – at least the modern edition of the novel does not reproduce – Rousseau's comments and reactions as to the engravings made according to his directions; looking at them today, one notices that the engraver has quite easily followed the first series of instructions, but has not always succeeded in exactly reproducing those subtle degrees of feeling which show up on faces and which the author required him to depict.

Here no doubt there is a problem in transposition, and Rousseau is fully aware of this, since the same problem occurs in the heart of the scene in which Saint-Preux refers to the portraits of Julie (Part II, Letters XXIV & XXV). After a painter made three portraits of her, meant for her mother, Claire her cousin, and herself, Julie, without her parents' knowledge, chooses the best likeness of the three in order to send it to her lover:

> This was a deception over which I did not hesitate much, for a little more or less resemblance hardly matters to my mother and my cousin; but the homage you would pay to a face other than mine would be a sort of infidelity, by so much the more dangerous[1] as my portrait would be better than I, and I do not want you in any manner whatsoever to acquire a liking for charms I do not possess.

So Julie does not want a "better (portrait) than herself": the faithfulness in reproducing guarantees the faithfulness in love.

Saint-Preux's reaction is complex. On the one hand it shows he entirely shares Julie's opinion, even improving upon what she writes:

> Let's forgive the painter for having omitted a few of your beauties; however the point whereupon he does no less wrong your face is that he has omitted the defects too.(...) it is not only your beauties I am in love with, but with you as a whole such as you are.

Argumentation **6**: 423–431, 1993.

On the other hand, quite strangely and bluntly, Saint-Preux addresses Julie in the same letter XXV – which he does in spite of a seemingly radical negative at the very outset: "The first thing I can criticise about it is that it looks like you, but is not you"[2] – and he informs her that he has planned to have his beloved's portrait done again according to his own ideas: "I have conveyed them to a skilful painter; and from what he has already done, I hope I shall soon see you as yourself again." The painter admires his subtle observations: "He does not understand how better-learned a master the one who dictates them to me is than him." Therefore, according to Saint-Preux, what goes beyond the likeness of a portrait is not the portrait that is idealized in conformity with an immutable aesthetic rule, but the portrait conceived through the eyes of love. And the words for this perception are more likely to call forth a good portrait than is the study of reality. The latter only leads to likeness; "being yourself" can be called forth, even for a third party, only by words of love. For Rousseau, it looks as if visual reality could not possibly be rendered in painting until it had previously undergone verbal transposition![3]

Our philosophical and socio-cultural experiences impose upon us a continual to-and-fro between the verbal and the visual. Therefore the question can be raised on the general level. Words create pictures, pictures create texts: what is added, what is lost, during this process – these countless cultural processes – of transposition?

Reality, i.e. the referential world not conveyed yet, is not – I doubt this will please the followers of realism – the only source of inspiration for the artist. Painters draw their inspiration from paintings, writers from pre-existing texts: Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* hints at Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre*, Tournier's *Vendredi* resumes *Robinson* by Defoe.[4] Nowadays after two centuries of dogmatically compulsory inventiveness, the complex abundance in intertextual and interpictorial interplay becomes the very touch of postmodernity: Péter Esterházy adds to his enormous novel *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* (Introduction aux Belles Lettres, 1986) a list of about a thousand authors he says he has borrowed quotations from, while the catalogue of the Adami Exhibition (Centre Pompidou, 1985) contains a long chapter on "marquetry" written out by the painter himself wherein he locates his own works in a historical, cultural context (paintings by Poussin, Böcklin, title-pages of old books, photographs) by showing them all side by side on the same page.

There must be, at the bottom, an implicit grammar of intertextuality, of quotation and rewriting, both in textual and pictorial matters. But the problems get different, more complicated, when the source of inspiration is to be found outside the medium used, when the poet draws his inspiration from an earlier picture (and the painter from an earlier text). I keep the words of "intertextuality" and "interpictoriality" to the above-cited cases, i.e. the relationships established *within* the verbal medium and *within* the visual medium; and by '"transposition", I understand all the cases when the limits of the medium are transcended, i.e. when a text is at the origin of a picture and a picture at the origin of a text.[5]

Yet can a more precise definition of transposition possibly be given? Only when it comes to studying the shackles and trammels along with the freedom of such an operation that shall try to answer the question; however it is advisable right now to set aside a common type of answer that would be based on the untoward traditional distinction of form and contents. Admittedly transposition implies a move towards elsewhere while simultaneously maintaining something that has been set in motion. Something will have changed, but something else will have remained self-identical, before and after change: if this were not the case, we would not refer to transposition but metamorphosis. Accordingly, the question is to know whether this duality can be referred to as that of contents, which remain identical, and form, which changes.

If the art of painting were only of the mimesis or representation type, we might feel tempted to answer positively. The painter reads the mythological tale of Leda and the Swan or the historical narrative of Napoleon's coronation and transposes this matter into another art, that of painting: only form will have changed. But saying this, one forgets that the contents are not characteristic of literature, one mixes up the referent and its most frequent and obvious expression, the text. But pictures do not necessarily work through the agency of texts to represent reality. Like writers, painters can draw their inspiration directly from events; texts are symbolic operations imposed upon these as well as pictures. And it must be said to the credit of modern art that it has denounced this mistake; referential contents do not define the specificity of either literature – its literariness – or painting.

Theoretically, given the degrees of constraint and freedom, it should be possible to distinguish three types of transposition: at both ends, those of maximum and minimum, there would be *translation* and *inspiration*, and, in between, the immense field of *interpretation.*

The ideal of any translation is its accuracy: as exact as a transposition can be. When it comes to translating, not from one medium to another, but one language to another, we speak of *literal* translation. However, recent debates on translation theory as well as on the semantic concept of "literal meaning" show that such a translation is theoretically impossible.[6] Scientific texts and instructions for use are illusive on that point: one forgets that the first translator has had to coin words or add new semantic connotations to existing words. Thus the first person who used "grammaire générative" in French did not accurately translate the English word into its French equivalent, but added a new shade of meaning to the French adjective. Literal translation takes it for granted that there is consensus and total equivalence between two languages, not only at the level of the lexis, but also that of syntax and phonetics. How can you accurately translate from one language with three past tenses (French) into another that has only one (Hungarian)? How can you, from one language into another, conjure up identical sound-connotations, which are most of the time likely to occur unconsciously? The noun "predicate" can sound like the verb "predict"; but in Hungarian "àllitmàny" (= predicate) would rather call to mind "àllat" (= animal)

than "megjòsolni" (= to predict).*

If the ideal of interlinguistic translation raises such serious theoretical issues, one really has to wonder if analogy in inter-art translation can possibly be demanded, or even conceived. If there are some doubts whether the meaning and the connotations of the noun "Haus" are always and everywhere the same as those of the noun "maison", it is all the more advisable to ask whether the noun "maison" can be the exact translation of the picture "maison" and vice versa. Besides, both transpositional operations are not alike: translating a picture into the word "house" means erasing an infinite number of details, representing the word "house" through a picture means adding as many. Raising this problem may touch on a quality of pictures that has to be well defined in order to determine what transposition is all about: if a picture always gets noticeably poorer whenever there is an attempt at summing it up in one word only, it is because it resists such a reduction and its verbal equivalent is in fact a linguistic unit longer than one word! Yet what unit are we talking about? The noun is not sufficient – probably the adjective, verb, adverb are even less – to translate a picture: the latter corresponds to at least one sentence and perhaps better does to one text. The verbal equivalent to an interior painted by Vuillard would be a collection of descriptive pages by Huysmans or the Goncourt Brothers.

Interlinguistic translation is characterized by a constant endeavour to be faithful to the original: one translates (or has translated) the texts one admires because of their success, importance, beauty, and the translation should not lose any of these qualities. Likeness, i.e. submission to the text, seems to characterize illustration too. It works like a figure of speech pertaining to the amplification-type: repeating, emphasizing, reinforcing without adding anything new – such is the first impression you get at the sight of a drawing by Doré opposite a page from *Don Quixote* or a fable by La Fontaine: illustration as a visual translation;[7] yet no more the accurate translation of a text than any other picture that draws its inspiration from it. To be convinced of this, it will be enough to compare etchings made by various artists for the same famous texts. If interart literal translation were possible, Oudry, Grandville, Doré would have made absolutely identical illustrations for this or that fable by La Fontaine: their having chosen different solutions seems to indicate that any transposition requires a part of personal interpretation. Besides, the subjective element in any of the above does not show until it is confronted with the others; in itself, each illustration may look like a translation, comparison only will un-veil its real character.

* Translator's note: The French "prédicat" and the English "predicate" do have different meanings. Yet we have left the example as such without trying to find a close equivalent, since the author is concerned with a resemblance in sound, not in meaning.

The question however is to know whether it is legitimate to define illustration as a transposition that is self-allegedly a translation. Do illustrations only aim at repeating and reinforcing? There is room for doubt, even in the case of the famous engravers of the XIXth century; but the painter's personal part, the creative will of a working that does not allow its own reduction to a visual figure added to a text, becomes obvious in the new books and albums of the XXth century that have been produced through painters' and poets' joint authorships and express a common will to make "inter-art books", so to speak. Consequently, nothing is translated: there is no transposition; the text and the picture complete and thereby interpret each other.[8] Is there a verbal equivalent to illustration? In other words, are there texts that are able to arouse the same illusion of exact transposition, but in the opposite direction? Examples thereof are probably a little more difficult to find. On the one hand, one of the effects of the "ut pictura poesis" principle will have been that poetry felt obliged to take over topics which had been previously dealt with in literature, and that the process was far more seldom reversed; on the other hand, even at the time when one had no photographs at one's disposal so as to reproduce a picture for the use of those that could not come to see it, the absolute likeness of copies and etchings was preferred to verbal description.[9]

Yet ever since classical times there have been descriptions of pictures, and this practice has been extant even in modern times, let alone the famous "Salons" in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, in the catalogues of exhibitions and art criticism. Yet do these texts seek accuracy? It is not easy to allot the shares of what was usually called denotation and connotation twenty years ago, nor distinguish description from whatever elements of their own invention authors, with a view to having something admired or sold, or maybe simply, as is often the case with Diderot, to conveying their enthusiasm, have added to pure description.

Theoretically a very good example of such a transposition could be found in the ancient novel *Daphnis and Chloe*, about which Mittelstadt[10] expressed the hypothesis that its following scenes could correspond to a series of frescoes; it seems to be a sound, attractive hypothesis but the frescoes referred to have disappeared, so that a modern reader will never be able to check if Longus has tried to follow pictures faithfully or freely drawn his inspiration from them.

Free inspiration is indeed poles apart from translation: the artist does not obey the original, he uses the alternative medium only to create something entirely new. Here, in this strange no-man's land between faithful translation and free inspiration, one should quote one of Italo Calvino's latest novels *Le Château des Destins croisés* (Seuil, 1976). Struck dumb after supper, the guests in a castle cannot tell their stories but by laying out on a table and turning up tarot cards. The pictures making up a pack of cards have a fixed meaning, the one that uses them cannot but translate them to abide by the rules of the game; once translated though, they enter extraordinary narrative combinations invented by the writer. A slight change in translation – which is not descriptive but prescriptive, as it is summed up in its own meaning – allows the passage from faithful transposition

to free inspiration.

The subjective element, the part of personal, unrepeatable choice, is so large in the texts and pictures which draw their inspiration from the other medium – without truly translating or interpreting them – that it is strictly impossible to lay down rules on that point. What is the source of inspiration: a memory? maybe some form of misunderstanding? And what is its object: a colour? the sound of the adjective? What is Cucchi's relationship to Rimbaud when he entitles a series of his paintings *Harar*? And what does Michel Butor's prose poem about the Queen of Sheba owe to the painting by Claude Lorrain?[11]

If faithful *translation* is impossible and *inspiration* escapes transposition, the latter eventually seems to exclude the cases of the two extremes studied here, in order to purely and simply coincide with the extensive field of *interpretation.* Any transpositions are interpretations, in so far as it is impossible for artists not to erase or add anything when they transpose pictures into texts or vice versa.

Let us take a scene from history, a landscape, an abstract painting. He who refers to them *erases* what speech is unable to express or what it expresses in a way which is only too long or complicated: the giddying diversity of lines that follow and cross one another, the extreme variety of colour-hues and their transitions. But he *keeps* what can easily be translated, the objects that can be pointed at by means of substantives or profiles (e.g. human beings talking together, snow on branches, black and red lines forming a triangle). And he *adds* what is peculiar to the nature of discourse which is an argumentative, narrative move (a narrative about both speakers – friends because ...; enemies because.... – a fleet of snowy mountains from left to right; a metaphysical reflection on the ideal shape).

As an instance of the opposite, let us choose a novel or a love sonnet. The painter that transposes a text *erases* what painting is unable to express: a continued narrative, causal argumentation, developed emotions. He *keeps* the objects his brush will easily sketch out: the main characters in the novel that he will try to catch in a particularly characteristic situation (where we recognize the famous doctrine of "punctum temporis"), the beauty of the young woman the sonnet is dedicated to. He finally adds what is specific to the nature of painting: an attitude that sets the essential colours, lay-out in space, gestures, sartorial details, in short every visually indispensible element the writer or poet will have omitted.

The concept of interpretation is generally used when referring to an operation by an addressee, i.e. a spectator or a reader. Such an operation involves two stages: the addressee begins by identifying what his/her experience enables him/her to recognize, then turns to appropriating what seems to escape his/her experience.[12] In the case of transposition, interpretation does not remain a mental process, we do know the result of it: that a painting is the interpretation of a text, that a text is that of a painting.

The stage of identification is an easy one: the poet and the painter keep, "translate", what their experience of the referential world enables them to

recognize. Erasing concerns what the new medium is unable to absorb, the definitely unknowable element cast out by interpretation, the negative part in the choice. The second stage, as mentioned above, appropriation as such, is done by adjoining what characterizes the "addressee" – i.e. the properly textual or pictorial elements – to what has been accepted (because it has been identified).

Such an analysis, identifying the two main stages of any process of interpretation, within transposition, seems to prove that transposition is one indeed. But our analysis of the second stage will probably have been fairly rapid: an appropriation which consists in annihilating what is specific to a medium, a text turning images into narratives, a picture changing a text into an object of timeless meditation, can such a form of appropriation still be called interpretation?[13] Texts thus altering pictures in order to retain the mere extrapictorial referent of it, and vice versa, should be referred to as, at most, sources of inspiration. As a matter of fact, transposition by denying what is specific to each medium, betrays interpretation.

How is it, then, that our culture has abounded in numberless transpositions for centuries? There is indeed an immense temptation to condense texts into pictures and to extend pictures into texts. Roughly speaking, man lives somewhere between two realities he perceives differently. The *seen reality*, that of objects surrounding him, sends him a comparatively stable picture: trees, towns, faces change very slowly; their fixedness is reassuring. On the contrary, the felt reality, that of personal emotions and interhuman relationships, gives him the impression of a fleeting world always on the move; their dynamism is frightening, but creates life. The *felt reality* is preferentially expressed through the medium that resembles it most: speech, that fleets just like it. What remains is the written word: verba volant, scripta manent. The picture, by changing itself into an illustration of speech, tears the latter from its vanishing flowingness. But the seen reality, expressed through pictures, would tend to remain in a distance. We would like to appropriate it, we endeavour to retranslate pictures into words, so as to make them enter our narrative lives.

This dual reality is what creates the irresistible need for transposition within us. It is a powerful source of our culture, but its full achievement remains impossible. Making an accurate portrait after words is possible in fiction only, like with Rousseau.

Translated by M. Gouverneur

NOTES

[1] This phrase is all the stranger as only a few pages below (Letter XXVI), Saint-Preux confesses to Julie that he has betrayed her with a Parisian courtesan.

[2] It seems at first sight that it is all about an ontological defect inherent in any pictures, as these can never coincide with what they represent. But reading this letter a bit further on, one can wonder if this is an entire rejection and if Saint-Preux does not rather wish he could distinguish the realistic portrait, physically like the original, from the real portrait

such as the lover can see it, and which can bridge the gap between reality and its representation.

[3] According to Françoise Meltzer, who also studies these two excerpts from *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the portrait and the text are reciprocal cases of mise-en-abyme, the portrait illustrating the text and the text simultaneously illustrating the portrait. (*Salome and the Dance of Writing*, Chicago-Lourdes, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 126–148).

[4] When paintings illustrating famous texts are mentioned – for instance the best-known scenes from the Bible – what is often forgotten is that these paintings stand out more as attempts at some reinterpretation of older paintings rather than at a pictorial transposition of texts. Thus, the representation of the pilgrims of Emmaus, from Veronese and Rembrandt to Maurice Denis is in the first place part and parcel of a thematic history of the European painting and is less referrable to a (general and synchronic) theory of transposition.

[5] The word "transposition" might equally refer to the operation by which a subject, within literature, is transferred from one genre to another.Thus the bucolic poetry of eclogues gives birth to several pastoral genres (poetry, drama – Racan – novel – d'Urfé); so does the epic to various burlesque rewritings (Scarron, Boileau). Transposition here is a stylistic matter: what gets changed first is the style, and this influes on the subject.

[6] Supporters of literal translation hope they will exclude the translator's interpretative intervention, but in fact the distinction between literal translation and free adaptation remains theoretically problematic (cf. Maria Tymockzo "How Distinct are Formal and Dynamic Equivalences?" in: Theo Hermans ed., *The Manipulation of Literature Studies in Literary Translation*, London-Sidney, Croom Helm, 1985, pp. 63 and 79). See, for a more optimistic point of view: A. Hurtado Albir, *La notion de fidélité en traduction*, Paris, Didier, 1990. The difficulties indicated are no doubt connected to the fact that the distinction between proper and figurative meanings (of a word or a sentence) does not seem to obtain support from a psychological point of view. (cf. Raymond W. Gibbs jr., "Literal Meaning and Psychological Theory", in *Cognitive Science* 8, 1984, pp. 275–304).

[7] In the case of famous XIXth century illustrations of lengthy novels by Balzac, Eugène Sue or Jules Verne, they are not mere *partial* transpositions since what they make explicit is not the whole work but only a few passaages instead. Here the very fact of choice leads us to give up the thesis of accurate translation: the choice implies an interpretation, maybe not at the level of syntax – illustrators may endeavour to faithfully render all the details the chosen scene contains – but certainly at the semantic level.

[8] From the age of French symbolism onwards, there have been numberless examples of such cooperation, of which specialized publishers (Skira, Maeght), monographs, exhibitions and catalogues are evidence. Instead of large bibliographies, quoting the beautiful, substantial synthesis by François Chapon is enough (*Le Peintre et le Livre, l'âge d'or du livre illustré en France, 1870–1970* Flammarion, 1987; one should not be misled by the subtitle: it is not about illustrated books in general, but according to the foreword, about "new encounters" between poets and painters which enabled illustration to break loose from "former descriptive competence regarding texts".)

[9] Etchings and engravings are black and white: the whole point was to reproduce the drawing, i.e. mainly composition and contents, that is why colour, which is more specifically pictorial, was neglected.

[10] M.C. Mittelstadt, "Longus: Daphnis and Chloe and Roman Narrative Painting", in *Latomus* 26, 1967, pp. 752–761.

[11] About Cucchi see "La Trans-avant-garde italienne", a special issue of the journal *Art Studio* (winter 1987–1988). About Butor see his book *L'Embarquement de la Reine de Saba d'après Claude Lorrain*, Ed. de La Différence, 1989.

[12] Among the numerous references concerning the theory of interpretation, let me quote the books listed by Leo Hoek, and my article "Le texte, l'image et leurs référents", in the transactions of the Symposium *M/I/S, Mots/Images/Sons* (C.I.Ph.-C.I.R.E.M., Rouen,

1989); and Annette Barnes (*On Interpretation*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1988), Jozef Bleicher (*Contemporary Hermeneutics*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), Susan R. Horton (*Interpreting Interpreting*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), P.D. Juhl (*Interpretation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980) and Ellen Schauber and Ellen Spolsky (*The Bounds of Interpretation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1986). Bleicher and Juhl give detailed accounts of previous hypotheses (by Gadamer, Habermas, Hirsch, Ricoeur and others) and discuss them.

[13] According to Gottfried Böhm, the major difficulty in the interpretation of a picture consists precisely in expressing what is specific to it in terms of something else; must we then revert to the earlier process of creation, common to both media? ("Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes", in: H.G. Gadamer und G. Böhm eds, *Seminar: die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften*, Frankfurt, Surhkamp, 1978, pp. 444–471).