

## TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

by Rainer Schulte

What is the function of interpretation: to provide the reader, listener, and viewer with entrances into a text, whether that text be a literary, visual, or musical work. Each artistic work presents a particular view of the world, a way of seeing objects and situations as if it were for the first time. Critics and scholars must help us to find ways of entering into these new perspectives of seeing the world. However, it seems that criticism in the last few years has failed to respond to this need. Often, critical approaches that are meant to bring the reader closer to a text have the exact opposite effect. They distance the reader from the text and close rather than open doors to a better understanding of the particular nature of a given form of artistic insight and expression.

Partly responsible for that phenomenon is the critic's and scholar's attitude to see the text as a springboard for the development of his or her own ways of thinking rather than looking at the text as something that has to be entered and clarified. What we have in this case is criticism of criticism of criticism. A look at many of the books that have been published by scholarly presses in recent years confirms this trend which has as its unfortunate consequence that many students and readers turn away from the act of reading literary works. One should remember that any work of criticism comes into existence only because there is a work that was created by the writer or artist.

To counteract this trend in contemporary criticism we looked at translation as a possible new way of revitalizing the act of interpretation. At first sight it is difficult to see the immediate

relation between interpretation and translation. Seen however in the larger context of interpretation as communication with a text, the connection becomes transparent. George Steiner's comment that "all acts of communication are acts of translation" further affirms this way of thinking. There is no communication without translation and the reading of a text is an intense act of translation. The words of the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer come to mind: "Reading is already translation, translation is translation for the second time... The process of translating comprises in its essence the whole secret of human understanding of the world and of social communication."

Thus, the methodologies of the art and craft of translation can be seen as one way of revitalizing the complicated act of interpretation not only of the literary work but also of all artistic works. What does this mean? Simply, that we begin to look at a text from the translator's point of view. The translator learns and applies methods of transplanting words, or rather situations, from one language into another. Interpreting a text within the same language can also be considered as an act of translation, and therefore an investigation of the translator's methods can shed light on the process of interpretation. What is it that the translator does when confronted with the text in the foreign language?

A few basic considerations might help to clarify the translator's procedure. The word "to trans-late" which gains even a clearer visualization with *über-setzen* in the German language underlines the notion of interaction and exchange. In its original meaning, *über-setzen* indicates that something is being carried across from one side of the river to the other, yet what is carried across must be modified so that it can be integrated into the laws of the otherness in a

new culture. What this means is that the translation process begins in the other. For a communication to take place with the other, a thorough exploration of the dynamics of the situations on the other side of the river must be undertaken. The translator's starting point—and here resides the important link with the act of interpretation—must be anchored in that which he or she has to face in the foreign text. If we transfer this idea to the act of reading within the same language, then each word must be considered a “foreign” entity. To think in the foreign constitutes the first step toward a possible interpretation that can then lead to the actual translation. Let us assume that the English translator reads the simple words *maison* or *jardin* in French and initiates his or her approach to this text by thinking about these two words in terms of “house” and “garden,” then a real entrance into the foreign text is seriously endangered. The English word “garden” creates a totally different atmosphere than the French *jardin*. They are the same as far as the dictionary is concerned, but in terms of their cultural and aesthetic ambiance they are miles apart. The translator who decides to think through the French text in terms of the universe that surrounds the English word “garden” closes the door to any true communication with the foreign in the other language. The translator carries something to the foreign text which its semantic boundaries cannot hold. A mold is imposed on the foreign word that freezes the word’s internal energy and destroys its recreative power for the dynamic interchange with other words. The interpretive process ends before it has begun.

The interpretation as translation within the same language requires the same attitude. The reader must approach each word as if it were a word in a foreign language. A writer manipulates words, often modifying and enhancing their established connotations, and creates

new fields of meaning through the interaction with other words, and builds a universe of feelings and emotions that enlarges the reader's/interpreter's way of seeing and understanding the world. Only through the experience of the other can we expand our insights into the human condition.

Practically speaking, the interpreter as translator continuously engages in the question: what kind of research must I undertake in order to do justice to the text I am reading whether I choose to translate it from a foreign language into my own or whether I translate it into my own frame of mind within the same language? The translator's interpretive act is always rooted in the concreteness of the textual situation and not in some theoretical construct. The translator—in contrast to many critics—does not consider the word as an object that can be described or even frozen into a specific meaning but continuously interacts with the internal of a word's magnetic field. When the interpreter assumes the translator's role, he or she lives inside the word and thereby establishes a dynamic environment rather than a static one. Even when a translation appears in the fixed form of the printed page, it cannot claim to be final. There is no such thing as the definitive translation of any text, as there is no definitive interpretation of any text. Whenever a translator returns to the same text, a different reading will take place and therefore also a different interpretation. At every moment, the translator recreates the process of interpretation in the sense of finding new connections between the two sides of the river. That process is in no way different when we read and interpret within the same language. We constantly must transplant ourselves into the foreign so that we build the bridge from there back to our own way of seeing.

The translator who has to anchor the interpretive act in the realities of each word has to develop a certain strategy to do justice to a word as an isolated phenomenon and as the link in the ever-widening circle of connotations that a word gains through its context expansion. Words, as we know, have primary and secondary meanings. No two people will ever take the exact same impression and visualization from a word. Language in itself is quite restricted: in many instances we have one or two words to describe an object. When we use the word “chair” every person immediately creates an image in his or her mind that hardly ever coincides in all its details with the visualization of that object in the mind of another person. The chair comes in multiple shapes: a high or low chair, an easy chair, a reclining chair, a swivel chair, a secretarial chair etc. It is unlikely that our first association upon hearing the word “chair” would create in our mind the image of an “electric chair,” although that might be the connotation of that word when it first appears in a literary text. In that sense the reader as interpreter and translator must unlearn language before the act of interpretation can be initiated. What we think a word connotes upon a first reading of a text rarely coincides with the connotations that the writer injected into that word. Unlearning could also be characterized as an attitude of openness toward the multiplicity of meanings working within any given word. The tremendous variety inherent in the presence of “chairness” underlines the dilemma that faces all writers: to create through language something that transcends language. Not only does the chair come in many different shapes, but the specific appearance creates varying emotional reactions in the viewer. A French chair built under Louis XIV generates an atmosphere quite different from a contemporary Swedish or Danish chair, not to speak of a chair that was chiseled out of a stone.

A writer's foremost concern is not to offer statements of meanings to the reader, but to build atmospheres which make it possible for the reader to experience a situation. In order to succeed in this endeavor writers constantly discover new relationships between words that have to be reconstructed in the interpretive process by the reader/translator. Yet, we must remember that a word does not only exist through its semantic reality. Each word comes to life with a certain specific physicality that includes its meaning possibilities, its sound and rhythm, its link to cultural and historical traditions, its modified uses conditioned by geographical realities, and also its visual appearance on the page, especially in poetic forms of expression. All of these ingredients begin to work on the writer as well as on the reader. Exploration of the word's internal levels of meanings initiates the reading and translation process. The translator places himself or herself inside the word to think out its magnetic field, to uncover the streams that will flow into the semantic fields of other words. That act—which is the most fundamental one of any interpretation—should be called “visualization.” The American poet W.S. Merwin opens his poem “In Autumn” with the following words: “The extinct animals are still looking for home...” None of these words pose any serious difficulties for the English-speaking reader. Yet before any entrance into the line becomes feasible, the reader must undertake an act of visualization. The expression “the animals are still looking” causes in itself no major problems. What initially confuses the reader is the combination of “extinct” with “animals.” How can animals who are extinct—which might suggest that they do no longer exist—be engaged in an act of looking. Do we change the meaning if we replace “extinct” with “dead”? Very much so. “Dead” and “extinct” generate different processes of visualization. The use of “dead” in that

line would derail the poetic as well as the experiential logic: a dead animal has lost the ability to look. That kind of reasoning brings us, the reader/translator, closer to the visualization of “extinct.” Even though the animal as a species might be extinct, it possibly can still live as a stuffed animal in a museum. The context of the following lines in the poem seem to suggest that kind of visualization. For the combination of “extinct animals” to come to life, the reader will be forced to assess every possible existing meaning—as specified through entries in philological and etymological dictionaries—and then decipher the evolving meanings in relation to the context of the poem. Again, the process of *ubersetzen* as a carrying back and forth is at work, this time within the dynamics of the text itself. Coming from the semantic field of “extinct” the reader relates that field to those emanating from other words in the text, only to come back to the starting point to see whether the context will enrich the connotations of “extinct” even beyond what we have learned about the word from the dictionary entries. That enrichment of words through the contextual progression often affects the decisions a translator of novels has to make. A word that appears on the first page of a given novel is repeated several times throughout the progression of the work. Each time the word reoccurs the translator realizes that another level of meaning has been added to the word. Finally, in the middle of the novel the translator comprehends the full impact of that word, which then forces him or her to reassess the original translation choice that was made. And since frequently the new language might not have a similar word that allows for all the nuances that the writer instilled in the word to be incorporated, the translator will choose several different words to carry the situation over into the new language environment.

From the visualization of the individual word the translator moves to the contextual visualization: the word in relation to the word before and after, to the rest of the sentence, to the paragraph, to the entire text, and finally to the oeuvre. At every step of the translator's work, questions will be asked that come out of the necessity of the word and its placement within the text. Where does the word come from, what semantic and emotional baggage has it acquired through the centuries, what original image lies behind the surface appearance, what role does it play in a given text, how often does it appear in the oeuvre of a given writer, how have other writers of the same period used the word, has the writer revived a meaning-aspect that was prominent in a previous century but not necessarily common today, and how has it been treated, if at all, by other translators and critics? All these considerations constantly bombard the translator's consciousness, and they should also be the major concerns of any person who approaches the interpretation of a text. A famous critic is said to have interpreted a particular passage in a Henry James story where the word "coil" appeared. The critic, at the time deeply involved in studying Sigmund Freud, constructed an interpretive approach around all the possible Freudian connotations that the word "coil" brings to mind. When the article was published, the author received a short note from the printer who told him that "coil" was actually a misprint and should have been "soil." I have never verified this incident, but even if it did not happen, it illustrates what can happen when an interpretation loses its contextual placement.

Texts from the past that have already undergone the scrutiny of time are in that sense easier to handle. Dictionaries will be able to tell us what certain words meant at a particular



time of literary history. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* is an indispensable tool for reading English texts of the past. Not only are the words themselves explained, but they are also documented with specific examples from various works written around the same time. The contemporary text, that is to say a text that has just been written by an author, poses more complicated problems. Whatever linguistic and semantic innovations the poet or writer has brought to the use of his or her language has not yet been reflected in the fixed form of a dictionary. It might show up in a few years which is of little help for the current reader and interpreter. In that case the new meaning attributed to a word, or an expression, can only be illuminated through the process of a rigorous contextual visualization. The English writer Francis Bacon wrote an essay titled "Of Studies" in 1597. The first sentence of that essay reads: "Studies serve for pastimes, for ornaments and for abilities." For that sentence to regain meaning for the modern reader, a series of scholarly pursuits have to be undertaken. Literary history tells us that this essay, when first published, had a certain impact. Since the words "pastimes," "ornaments," and "abilities" have changed through the centuries, we no longer have immediate access to the power of expression they had in their own time. Thus, a process of translating these words into the present linguistic and semantic environment has to be initiated. The interpreter explores the foreignness in these words and tries to find equivalents in present-day language. Once again, the question has to be asked: "what kind of research do I have to undertake in order to do justice to this line or text?" Actually, the investigation of a single word such as "pastimes" or "ornaments" could serve as an agent to reconstruct an entire Zeitgeist of that period. Starting with the exploration of all the immediate connotations

associated with those two words, the reader/translator will then pursue the cultural, aesthetic, artistic, social or political nuances that might be working in these words. What becomes clear in this approach is the important recognition that all translation research—in whatever direction it might lead the translator—will always lead the reader back to the text itself. Here lies a major difference between critical and translational practices. In the former case, critics often distance themselves from the text without feeling any obligation to return to it at the end of their interpretations.

Using the dictionary definitions for the word “abilities” might not necessarily provide us with a totally intelligible meaning of how the word is used in the line. Yet, the various choices given generate in the reader ways of thinking about the text that otherwise would not have happened. Here are some definitions given for “ability” in the *OED*: suitability, fitness, aptitude, faculty, capacity, bodily power, strength, wealth, talent, cleverness, mental power, or capacity. The gamut of associations could probably be extended some more. Somewhere in between all of these definitions lies the meaning of “ability,” that the translator must decipher in his or her act of interpretation. The example brings us back to the above-mentioned comments about “chair” and “chairness.” The plurality of existing chair designs reaffirms that there is such a thing as “chair.” On a higher level, one could say the multiplicity of existing *Bible* translations throughout the centuries reassures us that there is such a thing as the *Bible*. With respect to the excursion into the word “ability,” the translator must move among all of these dictionary possibilities, since each one of them will force him or her to return to the text and rethink the line in terms of each given meaning. In that sense, the act of interpretation seen

through the translator's eyes develops a reader's and student's ability to visualize a text.

From the practice of translation, we learn above all the art of "situational thinking."

The Bacon example showed how one can approach a text through the exploration of one word with its numerous branches of meanings. That practice can be transferred to the interpretation of texts, especially poems, through multiple translations. A poem can never be fully recreated in another language through one translation. However, the use of multiple translations of a given poem transplanted by several translators opens up a different way of thinking about the poem. A case in point is the opening line of Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Panther." In the original it says: *Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe....* The key word in that line is *Blick*, which has been translated as "glance," "vision," "seeing," "sight," and "gaze." The English reader immediately perceives the differences between the words that the translators used to render *Blick*. Clear boundaries can be drawn around the semantic fields of "glance" and the other renderings. The activity of visualization contained in "glance" is different from that of "vision." That practice leads the reader/interpreter to an intense interaction with the situations that each one of these words create as an isolated phenomenon but possibly also in the context of the line. In addition, the comparison of these expressions will automatically force the interpreter to ask the simple question: why did the various translators come up with these diverse solutions? That question takes the reader back to think in the context of the original German poem. Something foreign in that text needs to be uncovered that is responsible for the multiplicity of renderings. Thinking about the word in the German reveals that indeed the word comprises two directions of meaning at the same time: on the one hand

*Blick* encompasses the content of looking at an object, on the other it is also the activity of seeing. Thus, the English solutions of “seeing and glance” versus “sight and vision.” Naturally, none of the English words contain the double activity at work in the original German text. So far, the interpretive process has only dealt with the dynamics of one single word. Now the reader has to explore whether the two directions of thinking within the word are essential to the further development of the poem. Could it be that this ambiguity were to become a structuring principle for the entire poem? Thus, the reader/translator will dissect the rest of the poem, only to assemble it again at the end of that process and relate it back to the situational thinking in the word *Blick*.

The study of a poem through the medium of various translations displays the complex associations of poetic thinking and induces the reader to ask questions about the nature of the poem that otherwise would not have been asked. Out of all these various interpretations readers can formulate their own ways of seeing and interpreting the poem. This kind of reading offers an extraordinary richness of perceptions, a living inside the poem, which could rarely be reached by reading just one translation of a given poem. As an afterword to these remarks, it is curious to realize that to this day there is no anthology in the English-speaking world that would provide the reader with a selection of multiple translations of the same text. Such a textbook could indeed become one of the most valuable tools to introduce students to the art of reading and interpreting. This kind of reading is always anchored in the reality and the concreteness of the text which generates its own excitement by forcing the reader to actively recreate the interactions and relationships in a text. The text becomes an experience rather than an object

that is being seen by the reader/interpreter from a distance. Participation replaces description.

What then does the reader learn from the methodologies derived from the art and craft of translation? As readers transplant themselves into the atmosphere of a new situation in the foreign text, they realize that the text does not build just one clearly defined reality, but, rather, possibilities of various realities. The readers are left with various options that they can interpret within the context of that atmosphere. The reader/translator reestablishes at every step of his or her work the inherent uncertainty of each word, both as isolated phenomenon and as semiotic possibility of a sentence, paragraph, or the context of the entire work. The rediscovery of that uncertainty in each word constitutes the initial attitude of the translator. Reading and thus interpreting become the making of meaning and not the description of already-fixed meanings. The foreign text does not offer the reader a new comfortable reality, but, rather, places him or her between several realities among which he or she has to choose; the words that constitute the text emanate a feeling of uncertainty. That feeling, however, becomes instrumental in the reader/translator's engagement in a continuous process of decision-making. Certain choices have to be made among all these possibilities of uncertain meanings. Whatever the translation decision might be, there is still another level of uncertainty for the reader/translator, who continues the process of reading not only within the text but even beyond the text. This proliferation of uncertainties must be viewed as one of the most stimulating and rewarding results that the reader/translator perspective finds in the study and interpretation of a text. Reading as the generator of uncertainties, reading as the driving force

toward a decision-making process, reading as discovery of new interrelations that can be experienced but not described in terms of a content-oriented language. Whatever questions translators ask with respect to their involvement in a text, these questions have no prefigured answers that would be prompted by outside information brought to the text or content-oriented statements about the text. In the translation process there are no definitive answers, only attempts at solutions in response to states of uncertainty generated by the interaction of the words' semantic fields and sounds. Reading institutes the making of meanings through questions in which the possibility of an answer results in another question: What if?

To look at a text from a translator's point of view changes our way of thinking about interpretation. Thomas S. Kuhn talks in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* about paradigm shifts as a vital necessity for the creation and the development of disciplines. Translation methodologies and their transferal to the field of interpretation have generated a paradigm shift in how we read and understand texts. When we think within the framework of translation, words such as integration, interactivity, interconnectedness, and interrelationships come to mind. In other words, the translation process establishes a systemic way of looking at a text. Everything is related to everything else in the overall structure of a poem, play, or novel. Even though the translator begins with a technique of dissecting every detail of a given sentence or paragraph, he or she will consider all individual insights and discoveries as part of an overall coherent structure. The translator aims at the reconstruction of the totality of a text in its human and historical context. Therein lies the integrating power of the translator's way of looking at works of art. Thus, a study dedicated to the reconstruction of the translation process

will provide the reader/interpreter with the tools to change interpretive perspectives that rebuild texts as dynamic rather than static entities. The translator's point of view positions the translator inside the text as a recreator of its complex semantic levels of expression. The composer Aaron Copland distinguishes three ways of listening to music: one where we notice music only when it is no longer played, as for example in department stores; one where we try to impose a specific meaning on any given composition, as with Beethoven's moon light sonata; and one where we become involved in listening and interpreting the melodic and structural lines of a piece of music. It is the last one that is the most exciting one and it is also the one that can be achieved by transferring the methodologies derived from the art and craft of translation to the interpretation of literary texts. The interpreter emulates the author's intensity through an intense form of recreation. At times the pleasures derived from the interpretive act can equal the pleasures experienced by the original writer/artist.

As the translation methodologies change our way of approaching the practice of interpretation, they also innovate our research attitudes. Translation research is always based on the necessity to solve problems. That problem-solving capacity requires that research be anchored each time in the necessity of the actual moment in the text. Translators don't bring anything to the text, they evolve everything from the text. The recurring question remains: what research is necessary to respond to the difficulties encountered in a work? All efforts of defining the course of research thinking is generated from the need of the actual textual situation that the translator has to face. Furthermore, based on the need of a particular moment in the text the translator's research procedures and tactics will always be of an

interdisciplinary nature. The exploration of a word or a situation frequently takes the translator beyond the boundaries of one discipline. In that sense, translation methods can not only be considered a revitalizing power in the literary field but also in the entire spectrum of humanistic and artistic interpretation. The methodologies of translation can be used as a dynamic process that engages the reader or the viewer and listener in a more intense “experience” of the artistic work.