

Tension and Contention in the Translation of the Literary Text: The Real Dilemma

Salah BOUREGBI

Department of English, Badji Mokhtar University,

Annaba, Algeria

salihbourg@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Does translation of the literary text really need a theory? If yes which one among so many, which complicate more than simplify the matter? Which strategy do we adopt to at least communicate something of the original to a target reader, who does not know anything of the source language? The key problem is the meaning. Is it really grasped? If yes, is it of the text, or of the author, or of the reader? Meaning is not restricted to linguistic parameters; it is more cognitive and essentially based on the interpreter's own world knowledge. The text is not only a product but essentially an on-going process of meaning. Though it has precise time and space when produced, it is, nonetheless, timeless and spaceless. When we animate it, through reading, it becomes a text within the scope of a new space and a new time. That is, the meaning in the process of translation becomes anew. The text is autonomous and its autonomy makes it have its own specificity and existence. And so, the meaning in/of the text is ever-changing: there is no one meaning in/of the text, as there is no one reader of the text.

Keywords: *rendering, interpretation, literary meaning, translation, rubaiyyat.*

Introduction

Does translation really need a theory? If yes which one among so many, which complicate more than simplify the matter? Which strategy do we adopt to, at least, communicate something of the original to a target reader, who does not know anything of the source language? In any case, the crux of the matter is meaning: how can we get it? Is it really grasped? If yes, is it of the text, or the author, or the reader? Are understanding and meaning interchangeable? Is understanding a diagnostic process of meaning?

Meaning(s) and the Literary Text

Meaning of/in the literary text is problematic: it is not only restricted to linguistic parameters; it is rather more intentional, hermeneutic, cognitive and essentially based on the interpreter's own world knowledge. In *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Terry Locke maintains that: "Not only do different types of text require different ways of reading, but the same text can also be read in different ways to generate different meanings. Textual meaning becomes multiple and therefore indeterminate."¹ The text is not only a product but essentially an on-going process of meaning. Though it has precise time and space when produced, it is, nonetheless, timeless and spaceless. That is, its space and time are dialogically related to its act of reading: its now. When we read and animate it, we make it exist within a new space and time. It constructs its being through the process of reading. In other words, meaning is an interactive event between the text and the reader. The critic Norman Fairclough points that: "[The text] whose primary semiotic form is language increasingly combine language with other semiotic forms. The implicit content of a text is a sort of halfway house between presence and absence."² Fairclough believes that any meaning in a literary text is pre-constructed. This preconception of meaning paves the way for the reader to get within the text and finds out what he has already constructed. Fairclough maintains that: "The concept of «pre-constructed» has been used to give an intertextual understanding of implicit content (presupposition); the unsaid of a text, what it takes as given, is taken as the already-said-elsewhere, the form in which a text is shaped and penetrated by (ideological) elements from domains of prior textual practice."³

In the same vein, the critic H.G. Widdowson points out the instability of meaning in creative writing, mainly fiction and poetry. He writes:

The text is there at first hand, stable, continuous, well-ordered, fixed on a page, or on a screen. But these very features of the textual record can mislead us into thinking that its relationship with the discourse that gave rise to it is relatively unproblematic, and we are drawn into the delusion that meaning is inscribed in the text itself, and that what the writer intended to mean can be discovered, inferred, directly from textual evidence.

¹ Terry Locke, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 14.

² Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 4.

³ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 6.

[...] *The orderliness and apparent completeness of written text disguises the fact that it too is only a partial record of intended meaning.*⁴

The Literary text poses a great problem of interpretation: it holds many stances of interpretations. Its process of meaning is multiple and based on the interpreter's intention(s). Widdowson states that: "The writer enacts a discourse with a projected reader who may be very different from the actual readers who derive their own discourse from the text. [...] And unlike spoken conversation, there can be no on-line negotiation to enable the two parties to converge on a common understanding. In this respect, the stability of the text conceals an intrinsic instability of meaning."⁵

So, what we get as meaning from the text is only a meaning of one's own assumption. Even, the same reader could find a series of meanings through his different diverse readings of the same text. In other words, your own intentions will, subsequently, chase the author out of the context of his own reality.

The text is not only a linguistic matter: a system of codes, sentences and expressions dissociated from contexts and insights. It is a whole, and its interdependent relationship between form and content weave its own texture. Bettina Fischer-Starcke points out that: the meaning is not a linguistic phenomenon, which could be found out through linguistic analyses. Rather, it is text-internal analysis that "gives a new perspective on the data, so that the researcher can detect new meanings even in a widely discussed text. The detailed linguistic analysis allows to find meanings, which are virtually invisible in an intuitive approach to the data as in literary studies."⁶ James Paul Gee maintains that there are two major elements that affect the text's meaning(s): the "who" and the "what". He writes:

*If I have no idea who you are and what you are doing, then I cannot make sense of what you have said, written, or done.[...] What I mean by a "who" is a socially-situated identity. What I mean by a "what" is a socially-situated activity that the utterance helps to constitute. Finally, we can point out that whos and whats are not really discrete and separable. You are who you are partly through what you are doing and what you are doing is partly recognized for what it is by who is doing it.*⁷

⁴ H. G. Widdowson, *Text, Context, Pretext: Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis* (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 10.

⁵ Widdowson, *Text, Context, Pretext*, 11.

⁶ Bettina Fischer-Starcke, *Corpus Linguistics in Literary Analysis Jane Austen and her Contemporaries* (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 6.

⁷ James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (London: The Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001), 13/14.

In the same context, Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig acknowledge the “ingraspability” of the literary text. Words on their own — separately — are significant, and they cause no difficulty in their comprehension. But being within a sentence, the sentence within a paragraph, and the paragraph within a text, the meaning is no longer the sum of the meanings of each word, but it steps beyond such significances. This sum, as a whole, gets a new sense dictated by the intentionality of the reader(s). Lepore and Ludwig point out:

*The meaningful complexes in a language obviously are understood on the basis of their parts and mode of combination. The illusion of understanding is increased when we realize that this makes available to us the apparatus of quantification theory in giving a systematic account of the meanings of complex expressions on the basis of the meanings of their parts and mode of combination.*⁸

If the text resists to its reader, or if the reader builds up its significance on his own intention, then: how can we translate the text? Or put forward: what do we exactly portrait? Anthony Pym claims that: “Meaning transfer is thus an assumption — certainly a social illusion — operative in the use of translations as translations. Yet it is not ubiquitous. Inasmuch as there are users for whom the source text is unavailable, this assumption of meaning transfer is specifically external to actual translation processes. No translator or translation critic need believe that translation is the transfer of stable meaning. Indeed, inasmuch as there is a plurality of translators for whom source-text meanings differ.”⁹

In his article “Theories of Translation,” Eugene A. Nida points out that: “The basic problem of formulating an adequate theory of translation is the fact that translation actually takes place in our brains, and we do not know precisely what actually happens. There are no complete synonyms within a language or between different languages, but such a statement seems evidently incorrect because almost all dictionaries have extensive lists of synonyms, for example, sets such as rich/wealthy and run/race. But such sets of synonyms are normally limited to a restricted set of contexts.”¹⁰

And so, the problem of translation is within the text at the first degree, and the text and the reader at a second degree. Commenting on Nida’s definition of translation, Shiyang Ran writes: “If there is an absolute correct translation, then we have to face the question that «who can identify the absolute correct translation?»

⁸ Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, “Ontology in the Theory of Meaning,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14, 3 (2006), 327

⁹ Anthony Pym, “Doubts about Deconstruction as a General Theory of Translation,” *In TradTerm*, 2 (1995), 18.

¹⁰ Eugene A. Nida, “Theories of Translation,” *Pliegos de Yuste* I, 4 (2006), 12.

An expert or an ordinary reader? Are their opinions the same? [...] As every estimator is characteristic of his/her personal class, any valuation is characteristic of relative class feature. Readers decide to accept or reject translations, and different types of reader will require different types of translation. A closest natural translation for highly qualified intellectuals may not be the closest natural one for common people or ordinary citizens.”¹¹

What Ran wants to transmit is that all meanings are contextual, and all contexts are dialogically related to the reader through his intention and the ‘what’ to discover. In the process of translation, the operation becomes doubly complicated since, by definition, two languages and, thus, two cultures and two societies are involved.¹²

The literary text is an iceberg: What it hides is more than what it shows. Like mercury, it slips from your hands whenever you try to grasp its meaning(s). Furthermore, involvement within the choice of words and expressions makes the translator/interpreter reconstruct a context proper to his own strategy and, thus, makes another text out of the relics of the original. The critic Maria Tymoczko maintains that: “Translations themselves form subsystems of textual systems — notably literary systems — and collectively can be grouped by parameters such as function, audience, text type, formal effects, and patronage.”¹³

One should not forget that the duty of the translator is to transfer for us a source text and to enable us to read the text as if it was written in the target language. But, is he able to do it? The embodiment of the source text is not made in a vacuum: its texture both formal and contextual is trailed to a degree that we cannot take even a fibre of its oneness — its constitution. We can dislocate or relocate its style and content and make it foreign to its source — original: there is a great risk of transformation because any act of translation is an act of omission and addition. Laurence Venuti speaks of illusory translation. The text you read seems to be a foreign text that you accept as such because of the ingenuity of the translator, who recreates it in a way that makes you appreciate both the form (his from) and the style (his style) and you claim its originality. Venuti points out:

The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator’s effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning. What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals

¹¹ Shiyang Ran, “Philosophical Interpretation on E.A. Nida’s Definition of Translation,” *Asian Social Science* 5, 10 (2009), 45.

¹² Ran, “Philosophical Interpretation,” 45.

¹³ Maria Tymoczko, “General Considerations About Theory,” in *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. (1-10). ed. Carol A. Chapelle (London, and New York: Publishing Ltd. 2013), 5.

*the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text.*¹⁴

But this invisibility Venuti is talking about can in no way be possible: the more the translator is invisible, the more the text becomes his own — the more he possesses it. He becomes his author — his creator. In other words, invisibility excludes the author and corrupts the text.

There is no adequate, equivalent style and expression in/between languages, even those of the same roots. And no meaning is ever possible without these expressions and stylistic patterns. Even equivalences pose a problem. Meaning we derive, or deduce from equivalence, is not the meaning of the text, but the meaning of a text suggested by the reading of the translator. Equivalence is, then, what is intended to be a meaning. In this context, the critic Mona Baker states that:

*The notion of equivalent effect is also linked to the idea of reproducing the “intention” of the source author, i.e., emphasizing the equivalence of intended meaning. This is also highly problematic because it assumes that the translator “understands” rather than “interprets” the source text – that somehow he or she has direct access to the communicative intentions of the original author. But translators cannot know with any certainty what the source author intended to convey, especially where there is a large temporal gap between the source and target texts. All they can do is try to interpret it, so that any theory or model based on some notion of equivalence of intention would be impossible to verify.*¹⁵

The text seems for us, as readers of the target, as if it was an original one because of the effect the translator uses in his formulaic and imitating narrative. This illusory artefact makes us believe him and accept the text as a good translation and what we read must be the original, but, unfortunately, it is not.

In his article “Translation Theory and the Problem of Equivalence,” Mariano Garcia-Landa raises such problem of equivalence and its inadequacy with meaning transfer. He thinks that equivalence exists, but the matter is what/how do we transfer? He writes: “The problem with equivalence is this. We know that equivalence is the real thing in translation, that there is no translation if there is no equivalence between the original text and the translated text. And we know of course that equivalence exists, that is not the real problem.”¹⁶ He maintains that translating is another way of speaking of conveying messages through signs, and

¹⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London, and New York: Palgrave, 1995), 8.

¹⁵ Mona Baker, “The Status of Equivalence in Translation Studies: An Appraisal,” in *Centre for Translation & Intercultural Studies* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 2004), 3.

¹⁶ Mariano Garcia-Landa, “Translation Theory and the Problem of Equivalence,” *Hermēneus Revista de Traducción e Interpretación* 2 (2000), 1.

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through these signs we produce perceptions. “But the problem is that these perceptions, which are produced through these sign chains, are different from these sign chains. This means that translation is the reproduction of the same perceptions which are produced with another sign system of another language.”¹⁷ This is somehow a mirage!

And so; what about poetry whose problem is double-edged: problem of form (meter, rhyme, rhythm) and content (context, in-text, intention). Poetry is, then, a real challenge for translators!

Poetry and the Problem of Meaning Transfer in Translation:

Form and content cannot be separate in poetry. It is like a coin whose value is based on its both faces. James Paul Gee states that: “Content is highly language-bound and this is what makes translation of poetry more difficult than the other types of translations. Poetry makes possessing components such as rhythm, rhyme, tone, deviation from the institutionalized linguistic code, musicality expressed through meters and cadence, etc., arouses pessimistic statements on the scope of its translatability that exceeds those affirmative ones.”¹⁸

O. Khayyam’s Rubaiyyat and the Contentious Versions of E. Fitzgerald and J. Pasha

Two translations of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyyat* into English seem to be very problematic: Edward Fitzgerald’s (1857-59) and John Pasha’s (1913) versions are very disparate to be authentic and faithful translations to the original. What do we read? Who is nearest to Khayyam: Edward Fitzgerald or John Pasha? Why do we have such diversities in form and content? The problem seems to be a question of meaning and how does the translator render the quatrains’ expressions and words into English. In his comments on Fitzgerald’s translation, the critic C. Eliot Norton assumes that:

*He [Fitzgerald] is to be called “translator” only in default of a better word, one which should express the poetic transfusion of a poetic spirit from one language to another, and the representation of the ideas and images of the original in a form not altogether diverse from their own, but perfectly adopted to the new conditions of time, place, custom, and the habit of the mind in which they appear.*¹⁹

¹⁷ Garcia-Landa, “Translation Theory,” 2.

¹⁸ James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (London: The Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001), 159.

¹⁹ Charles Eliot Norton, “Comments on Fitzgerald’s Poem,” *Norton American Review* CIX (1869), 575-76.

The critic reviewer of *Lippincott's Magazine*, Edward Hall, praised the poem and wrote: "He [Fitzgerald] has gone far to prove that the acceptableness among us of Oriental poetry may depend very largely on the skill with which it is transplanted into our language."²⁰

So many critics glorify Fitzgerald's version. But can we really acknowledge its originality? Are all these grandiloquent words adequate and ever-inciting? Does the poem hold the spirit of Omar Khayyam or Edward Fitzgerald's? Is it a mediator of both souls and philosophies? Or just has a total autonomy: It is from both, yet negates both? It just becomes another text for another reader of another understanding?

But before embarking on such contentious questions, it is of paramount importance to have a closer look on the nature of the meter in Persian poetry then draw a kind of similarity between the English and the Persian meters, and how did Fitzgerald deal with all these in his translation?

What is a *Rubai* in Persian literature? The critic, Alfred Mckinley Terhume, explains for us the *rubai* and its equivalence in English meters as follows: "It is simply for convenience that the Persian term *rubai* is translated into English «quatrain». Actually, the *rubai* is a two-lined stanza which breaks naturally into four lines of the English quatrain. In every variety of Persian poetry, the unit is the *bayt*, a line which consists of six or eight feet. Each *bayt* in a *rubai* is divided into two symmetrical halves called *misra*. Usually, the first, second and fourth *misra*, rhyme, resulting in the *aa b a* pattern used in English translations. In other words, a *rubai* consists of two lines divided into hemistichs with the first, second, and fourth hemistichs rhyming."²¹

In this translation, Fitzgerald adopted the rhyme pattern (a a b a) which predominates in the original, but he simplified the rhyme itself. Many critics contend that Fitzgerald has translated his personal outlook of the spirit/philosophy of Omar Khayyam rather than the quatrains of *The Rubaiyat*. Edward Hemon-Allen claims that Fitzgerald has not faithfully restricted himself to the quatrains of Khayyam; the first stanza, for example, is entirely his own.²² Hemon-Allen spent around twelve years surveying the entire range of Fitzgerald's Persian studies and tracing his quatrains to their sources. His object was: "to set at rest, once or

²⁰ Edward Hall, "Our Monthly Gossip," *In Lippincott's Magazine* XV (1875), 261.

²¹ Alfred McKinley Terhume, *The Life of Edward Fitzgerald: Translator of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (London, and New Haven: Oxford University Press, and Yale University Press, 1947), 220.

²² Edward Heron-Allen, *Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1899), 5.

forever, the vexed quatrain of how Edward Fitzgerald's incomparable poem may be regarded far as an adaptation, and how far an original work."²³ His observations are astonishingly remarkable:

- *Forty Nine* (49) quatrains are faithful and beautiful paraphrases of *single quatrains* to be found in the Onsley or Calcutta or both.
- *Forty Four* (44) quatrains are more than **one** quatrain and may be termed "composite" quatrains.
- *Two* (2) quatrains are inspired by Fitzgerald only in Nicolas' text.
- *Two* (2) quatrains reflecting the whole spirit of the original poem.
- *Two* (2) quatrains are exclusively due to the influence of the Mantik Uttair of Ferid Id di Attar.
- *Two* (2) quatrains primarily inspired by Omar were influenced by the Odes of Hafiz.

The total accounts for 101 stanzas make up the poem in its final form.²⁴

Furthermore, Heron-Allen claims that Fitzgerald's poem is not wholly adapted from the original but various translated and non-translated references, besides some quatrains of Khayyam that are not of his *Rubaiyat*:

*Quatrains *forty six* (46) and *ninety eight* (98) are inspired by J. B. Nicolas.

*Quatrains *thirty three* (33) and *thirty four* (34) are Atter's.

*Quatrains *two* (2) and *three* (3) are Hafiz's.

*Quatrains *five* (5) and *eighty-six* (86) hold no reference to any quotation in the original,

but refer to Omar's philosophy.²⁵

Fitzgerald had studied three different collections of Omar's quatrains before his poem reached its final form: The Onsley Manuscript at the Boldean Library, Nicolas's translation, and the Calcutta Manuscript of Bengal Society. *The Boldean contains 158 stanzas; Calcutta Manuscript counts 516 stanzas, and J. B. Nicolas's translation of 1867 contains 464 Stanzas. Fitzgerald's contains 101 stanzas.* His version seems to be a distillation of Omar Khayyam's thoughts and philosophy.

Fitzgerald is skilled in the reproduction of the sense of the original. Quatrain *eighty one* (81) has been much discussed. In his 1903 edition, Aldus Wright quotes the following from a letter written to him by Cowell: "There is no original for the line about the *snake*: I have looked for it in vain in Nicolas; but I have always

²³ Heron-Allen, *Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, 5-6.

²⁴ Heron-Allen, "The Preface," at *Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, xi-xii.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

supposed that the last line is Fitzgerald's mistake version of quatrain 236 in Nicolas's edition."²⁶

Stanza 81:

*Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And ev'n with Paradise devise the Snake:
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd — Man's forgiveness give — and take!*

In a letter to Mrs Cowell, December 17, 1867, Fitzgerald acknowledged that: "You know I have translated none literally, and have generally mashed up two-or-more-into one."²⁷

The second version of *Rubaiyat* in English is that of Johnson Pasha. This version does not in any way lack dexterity to that of Fitzgerald. His translation was published in 1913, years after that of Fitzgerald. In his preface to such translation, he wrote underlining the difficulties he faced in the course of translation:

*I have, however, subject it [The Rubaiyat] to some revision, and hope that the more important errors have been corrected, and that it now presents a fairly accurate idea of the original meaning. I think that the great majority of the quatrains are, if not a literal, at least a fairly close rendering of the original text, but I have not hesitated to add expressions not to be found in the original where it seemed to me clear that anything like a simple translation of the original words not convey the same ideas as the Persian.*²⁸

He even claimed that the word "*khish*" in the quatrain **sixty seven** (67) was wrongly translated as "*spear*" not "*brick*" as usually rendered. "There is, of course, much (sic) repetition, but though this greatly increases the difficulty of any attempt to render into verse without contact repetition of the same phrases. [...] There is generally something new to be found".²⁹ About the feet he has chosen for the meter, he said: "I have feet justified in serving the needs of rhyme by speaking of the flower's thanks for new born-life." He adds "I have departed from the ten-syllable line in many instances, and have even exceeded the limits of the rubai, but I can only urge in extenuation that I have found the endeavour to turn seven

²⁶ Aldous Wright, "Literary Remains", VII, 18, in Alfred McKinley Terhume, *The Life of Edward Fitzgerald: Translator of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (London, New Haven: Oxford University Press, and Yale University Press, 1947), 229.

²⁷ Fitzgerald qtd Alfred McKinley Terhume, *The Life of Edward Fitzgerald: Translator of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (London, and New Haven: Oxford University Press, and Yale University Press, 1947), 229.

²⁸ Johnson Pasha, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, trans. Johnson Pasha (London: Kegan Paul & Trench, Trubner & Co, 1913), 5.

²⁹ Johnson Pasha, "The Preface," in *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, trans. Johnson Pasha (London: Kegan Paul & Trench, Trubner & Co, 1913), vi.

hundred sixty two (762) quatrains of Persian into seven hundred sixty-two (762) quatrains of English a task of great difficulty, and I hope for the indulgence of those who may care to read.”³⁰

Conclusion

Rendering seems to be the only solution to literary translation mainly in poetry. But rendering, itself, is dialogically related to the moment of reading and of transfer! But this transfer is in no way of the text, or the author or the reader; yet, it is from the text and the author and the reader.

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