

A New Horizon for the Study of the Arts and Humanities

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A GREAT DEAL OF NERVOUSNESS AND DISSATISFACTION has entered the hall of the study of the arts and humanities. Changes will have to occur to bring a new direction to the current uncertainty of these studies. The word that immediately comes to my mind is the German word *Vordenken*. The word, which has no immediate English word correspondence, denotes thinking toward the future. However, it has a prominent presence in German newspapers, literary magazines, and academic journals. To think toward the future could be considered a new paradigm. The idea of *Vordenken* is not particularly cherished in the academic world of the arts and humanities. The thinking and academic practice seem to be more oriented toward preserving the research and intellectual approaches of the past.

More than ever, current practices in the teaching of literature and the humanities should be re-thought and redirected, especially at a moment when technological inventions require some drastic changes in the way we do research and approach the interpretation of texts, whether they are verbal, visual, or musical. The major function of studying the arts and humanities is the act of interpretation, the understanding of a work of literature, painting, musical composition, or historical and philosophical works.

One way to revitalize the interpretive approaches to works might be achieved from the point of view of translation. George Steiner, in the following statement, opens a new vista to the practice of the act of interpretation:

"All acts of communication are acts of translation."

It should be understood that the approach from the translation methodologies should not be considered to be the only way of creating new approaches to the act of interpretation. The reading of a novel or short story is an act of translation; the viewing of a painting or listening to a musical piece are acts of translation. Lately, some serious research is being advanced from the study of facial expressions and bodily movements of human beings as acts of translation. What kind of changes can be expected from the application of translation thinking and practices to renovate and revitalize the act of interpretation?

Looking back to a general practice of approaching the interpretation of a work, the immediate question always comes to the forefront: What does the text mean? Such a question relied on the assumption that a text could be reduced to one definitive meaning. Translation practice teaches us that there is no such thing as the only definitive meaning of a text: think of the numerous translations of Dante's *Inferno* or even the Bible. The same thing can be said about the interpretation of literary texts: no novel, short story, poem, or play can be reduced to one final definitive meaning.

The question "what" does a work mean should be transformed to "how" does a work come to mean? It is time to rethink our approaches to the practice of interpretation, which constitutes the essence of the work in the arts and humanities.

The paradigm of translation might help to understand how the interpretation of works can be initiated and practiced from the point of view of how does a work come to mean? One of the best examples might be the poem by Arthur Rimbaud entitled "Voyelles" (Vowels). The guiding principle of the poem is anchored in the five vowels that come to life via sound, color, and the associations that Rimbaud attributes to each vowel. What Rimbaud wants to communicate is that reducing a poem to one meaning is an illusion. The poet must create the atmosphere of the poem that will be communicated to the senses. The prominent approach to the poem will be anchored in the reconstruction of how the poem was built. Not one meaning but meanings come to life from the reconstruction of the associations that the individual reader can derive from the associations that the poet begins to visualize in the movement of words.

In the words of Rimbaud:

"I invented the color of the vowels. I regulated the form and movement of each consonant, and with instinctive rhythms I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible someday to all the senses."

The approach to the interpretation of works that have been created by writers, painters, and composers always requires an act of translation. No two translations are ever the same. Speaking about literary works, the number of re-translations of Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue) or Charles Baudelaire's "Correspondances" continues to rise every year. That practice reconfirms that the definitive translation of a work does not exist. The original work will not change and does not have to change in order to maintain its power, whereas the translation needs to be revitalized as the cultural and social standards and energies of each century change. Each translation reflects a new effort of the translator to revive the internal energy and vision of a work to the present sensibility of the reader.

My guideline to rethink the way we approach and interpret a work comes from the many years I have practiced the art and craft of translation and studied the theoretical dimensions of translation. In addition, my many years of playing musical pieces on the piano continuously forced me to explore and understand the quality and expansiveness of a sound. Listening to a note twenty times opens up new vistas to the potential communication force of a single note or chord. The interaction with individual notes opens a new way of how to interpret a work as a performing and translation act.

Some of my ideas were also generated by Steven Pinker's 2014 essay "Why Academic Writing Stinks," an essay that caused quite a strong reaction when it was published. The essay opens some serious questions about the nature and value of existing academic writing. One of Pinker's main arguments was that academics describe the works with a prose that is "turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand." These rather offensive descriptive outbursts require a serious rethinking of the act of interpretation.

THE PRACTICE OF TRANSLATION DOES NOT START WITH describing a text, but rather with a continuous effort to establish relationships between the words, images, and sounds of the other language and the possibilities of the English language. An ongoing dialog with the other language, the foreign word, must be established. That activity initiates a continuous act of performance that has to be enacted by the translator and the reader. The stasis of the printed word on the page will be transferred into a continuous activity of establishing associations.

Established practices of approaching and reading a written work underwent some unexpected changes with the publication of Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*). It became obvious that the established ways of looking at a work were no longer written in stone.

Cortázar indicated that his novel could be read in two different ways: the first can be read in a normal fashion the way it was printed and ends with chapter 56. The second should be read by beginning with chapter 73, and then following the sequence indicated at the end of each page to end with Chapter 131.

Naturally, the publication of the novel caused some strong reactions on the part of critics and readers. What was Cortázar telling the reader? The logic of the linear walking through the pages of a novel is being questioned. The juxtaposition of situations that are similar in their intensity and visualization throughout the novel presents another way of recreating the atmosphere of the work. After all, one of the guiding aesthetic principles of modern art, whether verbal, visual, or musical, resides in the explosiveness of dissonant juxtapositions.

To refine this kind of approach to the understanding of a work, the practice of the reconstruction of the translation process can provide helpful tools. Reconstructing how a text was translated would provide new techniques of how to perform the interpretation of a work. The reader would explore how the work was put together, rather than seeing the work as an object that requires description. The static act of description is moved to exploring the associations inherent in words and images. Description versus performance!

Readers engage in an act of communication with the work and try to translate the work into their own sensibility. To understand how to enter a work as a dialogue, the reconstruction of how a work was built engages the reader as a performer. To show this method, I use “The Bound Man,” a 1958 short story by Ilse Aichinger, a very distinguished German writer who came to fame after World War II.

Ilse Aichinger. “The Bound Man” („Der Gefesselte“)

Here is the first paragraph of the short story.

Sunlight on his face woke him but made him shut his eyes again; it streamed unhindered down the slope, collected itself into rivulets, attracted swarms of flies, which flew low over his forehead, circled, sought to land, and were overtaken by fresh swarms. When he tried to whisk them away, he discovered that he was bound. A thick rope cut into his arms. (The rope cutting into his arm.) He dropped them, opened his eyes again, and looked down at himself. His legs were tied all the way up to his thighs; a single length of rope was tied round his ankles, criss-crossed up his legs, and encircled his hips, his chest and his arms. (The parts of the body covered by the rope.) He could not see where it was knotted. He showed no sign of fear or hurry, though he thought he was unable to move, until he discovered that (introduction of the notion of play) the rope allowed his legs some free play and that round his body it was almost loose. His arms were tied to each other but not to his body and had some free play too. This made him smile, and it occurred to him that perhaps children had been playing a practical joke on him.

The two prominent words that immediately come to the attention of the reader are **rope** and **play**.

These are the key words of the story. Because of digital technology, the reader can pursue these two words rapidly throughout the story, a kind of horizontal reading. This kind of reading activates the associative thinking of the reader. Both these words are repeated many times throughout the story. Each time they represent a repetition with a different association.

Following the repetitions of rope through the story shows how the writer has created the life of the rope:

The "rope" is around his entire body

The rope cuts softly into his flesh

Free play allowed by the rope

As soon as the rope tautened, he stopped

The rope around his ankles

The rope was knotted at his ankles

The rope slackened

Being cut by the rope

The limits set by the rope

Others gravely tested the rope

He did not take off his rope

The rope dancers

In his dreams he forgot his rope

He always anticipated the effect of the rope

To obey his rope

He was not hampered by the rope

He had never felt so much at one with his rope.

To follow the various repetitions of the word “rope” reveals that the author understands the importance of not mechanically repeating the exact phrase. By expanding a new association with each repetition, the presence of the rope expands the visualization of the rope in the mind of the reader. For this kind of technique, there is an excellent demonstration in the movie *Amadeus*. Antonio Salieri plays the exact same musical phrase of a music of line, and then Mozart comes into the picture: each time when he plays the same musical moment it is a repetition with an unexpected variation.

Digital technology enables a different way of walking through a work, which immediately engages the student in a performing activity: each repetition has to be visualized and challenges the student’s imagination. The primary question is no longer “What” does the text mean, but: How can I uncover what is going on in a text. In a sense, the reader begins to perform the text. The structure of the text begins to be revealed. The horizontal reading of a text immediately engages the reader into the structure of the work. The next step might be to choose the word “play” and follow it through the short story to see the variations of associations the writer has attributed to the concept of play. Horizontal reading can be performed on various levels. The horizontal reading should then be followed by reading the way the work was printed to recover the complexity of a work by reconstructing the movement of how the story was built. The advantage of entering a work as a performing act releases the readers from describing, since they recreate how the text was made. The stasis of “what” does it mean moves toward the “how” does the text come to mean. 1