Transfer of energy

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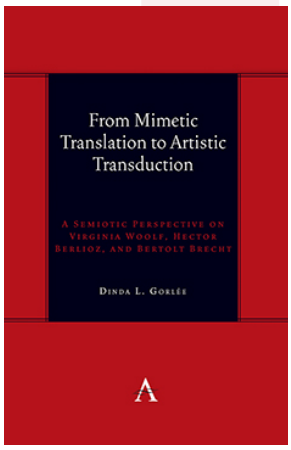

Dinda L. Gorlée

From Mimetic Translation to Artistic Transduction: A Semiotic Perspective on Virginia Woolf, Hector Berlioz, and Bertolt Brecht

London & New York: Anthem Press, 2023, pp.192,
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This is not an easy book to read. Dinda Gorlée is a unique phenomenon, and so is her writing. It is a book about music, poetry, inspiration, Peirce, Sebeok – but mostly, I think, it is about Roman Jakobson and his theory of intersemiotic translation, as demonstrated in the works of the three writers of the title, Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*, Hector Berlioz's opera *Les Troyens*, and Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. It is not a conventional book, and this is not going to be a conventional book review. After considerable thought, I believe the best way to present the book is to start at the end and work toward the beginning. So, let us begin with the bibliography.

Gorlée has been writing on the semiotics of translation since 1993, and on music since 1996. Her list of sources for this book, while certainly not exhaustive, is long and varied, ranging from linguistics and philosophy to music, literature, art, and physics. The most striking part is undoubtedly the section on Jakobson: a full page of articles and books dating from 1921 to 1987. Gorlée clearly knows her Jakobson and references him extensively, though she does not pause to explain his positions. It helps if readers are familiar with Jakobson's terminology for different forms of translation, and it is perhaps even more important if they keep in mind his theories about speech sounds and lyric poetry.

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The most conventional case of translation that Gorlée examines in these pages is that of Bertolt Brecht and the *Threepenny Opera*. It is an interesting case for any study of translation, since it begins with a 'ballad opera,' *The Beggar's Opera*, written in 1728 by John Gay with music from ballads and other popular songs arranged for orchestra by Johann Christoph Pepusch. It satirizes the grand music and heroic themes and settings of Italian opera, which was fashionable in London at the time, by placing its plot among the London underclass of robbers, thieves, and whores, thus inviting an unflattering comparison of its lowlife rascals with their aristocratic betters. The production was very successful and gave rise to a popular satirical musical theatre genre, the ballad opera, which flourished throughout the 18th century. *The Beggar's Opera* has been revived repeatedly, notably in a 1920 production in London which ran for nearly 1500 performances.

The play came to Brecht's attention because Elisabeth Haubtmann, his partner at the time, had received a copy of the script and translated it. However, Brecht seems to have reworked the translation extensively to produce his own version. The music is almost entirely new, written by Kurt Weill, with elements of jazz and popular song; the lyrics are by Brecht, with four ballads by the late medieval French poet François Villon, translated into German by K.L. Ammer.

Brecht kept the plot of Gay's play but moved it forward by a century and a half to Victorian London. He also, in true Marxist fashion, underlines some of the implied parallels between 'polite' society and the criminal underworld (Macheath, the boss of a criminal gang, is most unconvincingly pardoned at the last minute and made a baron with a castle and a pension, which is more a comment on the acquisition of wealth and noble titles than a conventional happy ending).

The *Threepenny Opera* opened in 1929 in Berlin and, like Gay's play in London two centuries earlier, became quite fashionable in prewar Berlin. It was also translated into English, among other languages.

This is fertile ground for examining translations and retranslations. Gorlée has several pages of discussion of the relative merits of different versions of one of the best-known songs, *Pirate Jenny*, including some remarks about their relation to Weill's music. I would have liked a more extensive discussion of that. Song lyrics clearly relate to their music, and it seems to me that this relationship could be understood as a case of 'transduction,' a creative transfer of meaning between two semiotic media. *Pirate Jenny*, the wish-fulfillment song of the tavern prostitute Polly, is an interesting case of this: the refrain, the last line of each verse, has a characteristic melody which instead of closing the musical phrase, seems to 'open' it, creating the expectation of a continuation; this reinforces the sense of threat implied in the words of the refrain: "*Und ein Schiff mit acht Segeln* / *Und mit fünfzig Kanonen* / *Wird liegen am Kai*" (And a ship with eight sails, and / With fifty great cannon / Sails in to the quay," the translation by Desmond Vesey

quoted by Gorlée), as Polly imagines taking her revenge on all the men that have used her. Such an implied threat would sit well with Brecht's Marxist goal of a theatre that, instead of cultivating emotional identification with the characters on stage, creates a *Verfremdungseffect*, an effect of distancing or estrangement leading to a more objective understanding.

Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* is not a translation of Gay's Beggar's Opera; it is a new artistic creation with a new setting, music, lyrics, and a distinctly different set of values. However, it does have things in common with Gay's musical play, particularly because it works within the same literary and musical genre. *The Beggar's Opera* was one of the earliest examples in Europe of popular musical theatre (what was to become the modern 'musical'). This originally satirical genre included much critical commentary on existing social conditions. Brecht may have been more rigorous in his political goals, but the genre's conventions are recognizable within his play.

This is not the case with Gorlée's second case study. In the mid-nineteenth century, Hector Berlioz undertook to write a grand opera based on Virgil's *Aeneid* and designed on the lines of Shakespearean theatre, that is, not following the conventions of French classical drama. This was probably a wise choice. French classical drama insists on a strict interpretation of the three Aristotelian unities of place, time, and action. Virgil's *Aeneid* covers several years of wanderings, wars, and adventures throughout the Mediterranean, and even though Berlioz chose to limit his opera to Books Two and Four, the action still includes both the fall of Troy and the romance of Dido and Aeneas and extends geographically from the eastern Aegean to North Africa.

However, even if using Shakespearean dramatic conventions allowed Berlioz to include all the material he wanted in the five acts of the opera, adapting even one-third of a Latin literary epic of the first century BCE written in dactylic hexameters into the French libretto of a 19th-century opera cannot be considered a translation. Berlioz, who wrote both the music and the libretto himself, did indeed translate passages from Virgil into French, but – as Gorlée points out – his priority was the music, not the poetry. And it is not clear that the libretto for an opera should be judged by the same Jakobsonian criteria as purely verbal lyric poetry.

To begin with, Jakobson's definition of the poetic function of language does not necessarily apply only to the sounds of spoken language, but to anything that focuses on the message for its own sake (Jakobson 1960: 356). Indeed, sound in lyric poetry is a way to focus on the message, that is, on the phonetic material of the language medium itself, because sound in lyric poetry can become significant in ways that do not apply to other uses of language, but are those ways the same for epic poetry as for lyric? There are undoubtedly lines in Virgil that are 'lyrical' in a Jakobsonian sense (one thinks of the *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangent*. "[here also] there are tears for things and mortal things touch the mind", Bk I, line 462). However, epic poetry also has its own

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ways of focusing on the message for its own sake. Anyone who has read Virgil in Latin has felt the pull of the hexameter rhythm and how the meter and the inflectional nature of the language cooperate to allow Virgil to bring certain words to prominence in a line. Still, these are not the same kinds of sound effects that Jakobson finds in the lyric.

They are also not effects that can be retained within the constraints of the musical form of a libretto. Something else will have to take on the job of focusing on the message for its own sake, and in Berlioz's case, that something is the music. It would have been interesting to have more analysis by Gorlée of how Berlioz's music copes with the task. Music is perhaps the most 'poetic' of all the semiotic systems, in that the material nature of the medium – the sound itself – plays such a prominent part in the message that it is difficult even to identify any other kind of signification.

Before continuing to Gorlée's chapter on Wagner and Virginia Woolf, we must consider some terminology issues. So far, Gorlée's book (read backwards) has been treating forms of literary translation of poetic texts. Jakobson calls this *transposition*:

> […] poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible, either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally, intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting. (Jakobson 1959: 238)

It has long been understood in translation studies that literary translation should not and cannot be literal (or mimetic, as Gorlée refers to it), and that especially translating poetry requires a new creative act from the translator. This act involves replacing the meaning effects of the source text's linguistic forms with something as close as possible to an 'equivalent' in the target text. If Jakobson had this in mind with his concept of 'transposition,' it also applies when translating into another semiotic medium. However, this process is more often called 'adaptation' because moving into a different semiotic medium requires much more extensive modifications than simply finding 'equivalents' for linguistic meanings.

Gorlée uses various terms, and there seem to be some overlaps among them. Her term for Jakobson's intersemiotic transposition seems to be 'artistic *transduction*.' 'Transduction' is a term used in several scientific fields, sometimes with widely differing meanings. Below, I quote from the disambiguation entry of *Wikipedia*:

> *Biology*: any process by which a biological cell converts one kind of signal or stimulus into another.
> *Biophysics*: the conveyance of energy from a donor electron to a receptor electron, during which the class of energy changes.

> *Genetics*: the transfer of DNA from one cell to another using a virus or viral vector.
> *Machine learning*: the process of directly drawing conclusions about new data from previous data, without constructing a model.
> *Physiology*: the transportation of stimuli to the nervous system.
> *Psychology*: reasoning from specific cases to general cases, typically employed by children during their development.
> A process by which a *transducer* converts one type of energy to another.

I think we can assume that Gorlée is not referring to the definitions used in machine learning or psychology. The definitions from biology, genetics, and physiology are more promising: they all involve the transmission of information. If we combine this with the concept used in biophysics of an exchange of energy (the meaning that we also find in the last definition, the action of a transducer), I think we have a fairly good approximation of what 'artistic transduction' is for Gorlée: a communication of signals or stimuli that involves a transfer of (creative) energy.

This goes well beyond even the widest version of Jakobson's concepts of translation. It seems most closely related to intertextuality, a concept introduced by Julia Kristeva and building on Mikhail Bakhtin's work: a kind of dialogue between texts that can range from allusion to adaptation, from rewriting to parody to explicit rejection.

This seems to be the kind of relationship that Gorlée envisages between Richard Wagner's opera *Das Rheingold* and Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*. Woolf did know Wagner's work and had visited Bayreuth in her twenties, but she cannot in any sense be said to 'translate' the waves of Wagner's Rhine-maidens into her novel. Wagner's waves are the waves of the river Rhine, which the music and the opera's libretto evoke, but Woolf's waves are a metaphor for consciousness, individual and/or collective. Indeed, as Gorlée is well aware, Woolf was fervently opposed to the political interpretation of Wagner's work that was common in Germany in the 1930s. If there is any relationship between the two texts, it is one of complete rejection.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that the kind of romantic, heroic nationalism that the Nazis found in Wagner haunts *The Waves* in the figure of Percival (named after a medieval knight, *Parsifal*, the hero of another Wagner opera). The novel shows the attractiveness of authoritarianism and the sense of elation, community, and purpose it can inspire – and, at the same time, the hollowness and falsity of that promise (Percival sets out heroically to defend the British Empire in India, only to die after falling off his horse). The extraordinary thing about Woolf's writing is her sensitivity to both the seductive quality and the violent brutality of the ideologies that were "in the air" of Europe in the 1930s: imperialism, nationalism, militarism, fascism, racism, authoritarianism, and patriarchy.

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It is impossible to know if Woolf was thinking of Wagner while writing *The Waves* (there is no textual evidence I know of), and it is ultimately unimportant. If she is acting as a transducer of energy, it is the negative energy of rejection, the energy of fervent political opposition.

I am not going to try to write a critique of Gorlée's introductory chapter. I believe I understand Jakobson fairly well, but I do not see that Peirce's interpretant or Sebeok's emblematic sign are very helpful in understanding translation or transduction. I do feel that the book would have benefited from a final edit (*Beowulf* is not an Anglo-Saxon chronicle, and Aeneas is not a Greek either in Virgil or in Berlioz), and from some attention to the language, which is frequently idiosyncratic and at times borders on the incomprehensible.

Gorlée is a transducer of many different texts and has brought them together into a work that is unmistakably her own. I hope this review has provided potential readers with enough background information to at least make it easier to read.

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