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Keywords

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Around 750 CE, the Chinese poet and painter Wang Wei composed 《鹿柴》 ("Deer Park"), one of his most renowned poems. Four lines long, it was part of a landscape scroll containing twenty poems about the scenery near China's Wang River. More than a thousand years later, "Deer Park" would be translated many times—and in 1978, by Gary Snyder. Around 1569, Pieter Brueghel the Elder painted *The Peasant Dance*, showing townspeople celebrating Saint's Day in Belgium. Almost 400 years later, Williams Carlos Williams composed his ekphrastic poem "The Dance" after Brueghel's painting (see Appendix for the painting and poems).

Although Brueghel's and Wang's works manifest in different mediums, both may be considered forms of visual translation, which involves translating the visual qualities of poetry into another language, or, as with ekphrasis, translating image into text. In their respective translations, both Snyder and Williams endeavor to capture elements of their source texts' pictorial representations, an endeavor that is also a form of recovery. As Eliot Weinberger explains in *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, which contains Snyder's, among other translations, of "Deer Park," Wang's poem was originally part of a landscape scroll, a genre that Wang invented (5). The original scroll would have likely depicted Wang's poem alongside a painting of the scenery—making it a project of both poetics and painting.

Yet the pictures created in "The Dance" and "Deer Park" deviate from their originals as Williams and Snyder grapple with capturing the imperceptible elements of their source 'images' while operating within the confines of poetic language. As a result, much that we see in the originals gets lost in translation. Yet so much interpretation and creation occurs in the composition of Williams's and Snyder's poems that new images are also discovered in the process, demonstrating that translation is a task that requires not only looking at and reproducing a poem or picture, but also reimagining it.

As mentioned above, Williams's and Snyder's translations involve distinctly different mediums: Snyder translated poetry into poetry, while Williams produced an ekphrastic poem based on a painting.

To some theorists, this difference is limiting; for instance, Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoon* delineates strict boundaries between painting and poetry by associating the former with spatial qualities and the latter with temporal structure. For Lessing, painting uses "forms and colors in space," while poetry "articulate[s] sounds in time" (91). Poetry and painting cannot achieve the same effects because they manifest in fundamentally different forms. Yet translation offers a way to consider both mediums as equals instead of rivals. According to W.J.T. Mitchell, ekphrastic poetry is "a process of pictorial production and reproduction" (24). The very linguistic act of description can create images that are more vivid than the objects themselves. Similarly, literary translation offers a mode of reproducing poetics in another language; for the reader of a translation, the translated text provides an image that is otherwise inaccessible to them in the source text. Furthermore, the linguist and theorist Roman Jakobson has argued that "poetics deals with problems of verbal structure, just as the analysis of painting is concerned with pictorial structure" (1). There are shared methods and forms, such as structure, that allow one to approach poetry and painting in parallel ways. One can analyze both "The Dance" and "Deer Park" in conjunction particularly when the shared act of 'looking' make *ut picture poesis* ("as is painting so is poetry") especially relevant to both translations.

The importance of looking in translation is particularly evident in the ways that visual elements of the original works are carried over through description and translation. As a poet translating a painting into a poem, Williams uses literary devices to describe Brueghel's images. The repeated sounds of "round" in the poem's opening lines emphasize the cyclical sense of commotion that matches the spatial circularity of the dancers' movements, foregrounded in the painting. Williams also employs enjambment to move the word "around" to the third line, creating the visual impression that the words themselves are moving in formation: the dancers "go **round**, they go **round** and / **around**" (ll. 2-3).

And just as Brueghel portrays his subjects in a state of action, depicting every dancer in the painting with one leg kicked up, Williams translates action into poetry through the frequent use of gerunds (tipping, kicking, rolling, swinging, rollicking) that repeatedly signify movement. The hard consonants in words such as "kicking" and "rollicking" give the dancers' actions great impact, conveying the energy we see in the painting. As was the case with the repetitive "round," the rhyming gerunds

highlight the movement in Brueghel's painting. Moreover, the poem is composed of two run-on sentences that make the reading experience breathless and, appropriately, "off balance" (l. 7). Williams draws our attention to these two words—"off balance"—by placing them at the end of the seventh line, where the first period appears.

There is indeed an imbalanced quality to Brueghel's picture, which seems slightly slanted to the right, has houses disproportionately positioned on both sides of the painting, and portrays townspeople scattered throughout unevenly. Based on Williams's own 1945 performance of the poem, it becomes clear that even the meter of the poem is uneven, for the number of accented syllables per line (three in the first three lines, five in the fourth, then four in the fifth) is not uniform:

In **Brueghel's** great **picture**, The **Kermess**,
 the **dancers** go **round**, they go **round** and
around, the **squeal** and the **blare** and the
tweedle of **bag/pipes**, a **bugle** and **fiddles**
tipping their **bellies** (**round** as the **thick-** (ll. 1–5)

Yet it is not only the image of the scene that Williams translates, but also the physical shape of the painting itself. He applies a framing technique to his poem, beginning and ending "The Dance" with the same line: "In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess." The identical lines form a border along the top and bottom edges of the poem, the way a painting's frame would. This framing device also occurs within the poem through the use of parentheses: "(round as the thick- / sided glasses whose wash they impound)" (ll. 5-6). It is fitting that "(round...impound)," the first and last words inside the parentheses, mirror each other: the roundness of the dancers' bellies is made fuller by the shape of the brackets.

The pictorial nature of punctuation enacts a kind of visual replication in Snyder's translation, too. One might think of "—hear—" in line 2, an 'ear' inclosed by two m-dashes, as a direct mirroring of the Chinese character "聞," which denotes an ear (耳) surrounded by doors (門). Here, Snyder seems committed to recreating the visual qualities of Wang's poem, even on the level of the pictorial Chinese character. Indeed, it is telling that Weinberger's primer contains the word "looking," but not

“translating,” in its title; what one translates becomes equivalent to what one sees. Yet whereas Williams was devoted to translating the form of Brueghel’s painting, Snyder sheds the square shape of the classical Chinese poem by using hanging indents to stagger each line. Moreover, he extends Wang’s poem from four lines to eight, breaking the square’s symmetry. Here, Jakobson’s characterization of line breaks as creating the “verse shape” (14) of poems comes to mind; techniques such as enjambment, caesura, and indentation give verse literal “shape” on the page, independent of how the poem is recited. Poetry is visual and has a form that becomes mutable through translation.

While Snyder’s formatting represents his aesthetic choice as translator, it also reflects the untranslatability of classical Chinese poems. The strict form of Chinese poetry resists English translation, for “Chinese prosody is largely concerned with the number of characters per line and the arrangement of tones—both of which are untranslatable” (Weinberger 8). This is not to say, however, that Snyder abandons form completely in his translation; his lines remain relatively short, paralleling the brevity of Chinese poetry. “Empty mountains” and “again shining” each have only four syllables, as is the case with each line of the Chinese quatrain (ll. 1, 7). Indeed, Weinberger distinguishes Snyder’s translation for the poet’s ability to “*see the scene*” (45). Yet Snyder’s challenge was exactly that: to render an ambiguous scene that appears differently depending on the viewer.

The different ways of translating “Deer Park” are especially evident in the several interpretations of its last line, “復照青苔上.” A transliteration of every character yields the following possibilities: “*to return/again—to shine/to reflect—green/blue/black—moss/lichen—above—/on (top of)/ top*” (Weinberger 53). Snyder chose the word “above” to represent “上” because he interpreted the final line as describing the sun “illuminating some moss up in the trees” (Weinberger 46). Placed at the end of the line, the word “above” in Snyder’s translation matches the position of “上” in Wang’s original, and is a mark of how “lines wholly correspond to each other syntactically, [and] morphologically” such that the structural properties of a translated line match the syntax of its source (Jakobson 16). Among all the translations published in Weinberger’s primer, this correspondence is a visual parallel specific to Snyder’s translation.

A single word can modify the image of the entire poem. For instance, Snyder’s image differs

from the one pictured by James J.Y. Liu, who translates the same scene by picturing a “reflected sunlight” that “pierces the deep forest / And falls again upon the mossy ground” (Weinberger 23). Whereas Snyder interprets the Chinese “上” as “above,” Liu adopts its alternate meaning—“upon”—in his envisioning of the poem by picturing the moss *on the ground*. Furthermore, the word translators choose to represent “上” affects not only the literal but also the abstract image construed. Paz uses “illuminates” to describe how the light behaves upon the moss, and writes that the green reflection “ascends” to evoke the “spiritual character of the scene” (Weinberger 54). Wang, after all, was a Buddhist; perhaps the length of Snyder’s translation, which is eight lines long, visually captures a sense of ‘ascension’ in a spiritually informed poem. A similar ambiguity appears with the third line of the poem, in which the character “景” could mean either “brightness” or “shadow,” and in the fourth, where “復” could signify “to return” or “again.” These ambiguities challenge any translator because they change the amount and the direction of light entering the forest, and hence the picture to translate. Thus, Wang’s poem refuses to be merely referential. Rather, it embraces ambiguity as “an intrinsic... corollary feature of poetry” (Jakobson 17). These ambiguities shape the entire image of “Deer Park.”

To be sure, there is much in translating a picture that lies beyond the realm of sight, and therefore requires more than ‘looking.’ For both Snyder and Williams, this complexity is especially evident as there is an auditory element in the pictures they translate that is central to the image they construct. The picture of Wang’s poem is complicated by the fact that, although there is no one to be seen in the empty mountains (空山不見人), the speaker can still hear the sound of voices (但聞人語響). Burtson Watson translates these first two lines as “the sound of someone talking,” while Soame Jenyns describes “the echo of voices” (Weinberger 27, 15). Are the sounds heard by the speaker distinct echoes, resounding voices from afar, or a conversation, voices approaching from nearby? Snyder seems to eliminate part of this ambiguity by combining both in some compromise: “human sounds and echoes” (l. 4).

Similarly, Williams faces the challenge of translating music—which he cannot see. As a poem written mostly in amphibrachic trimeter (each foot has three syllables, the middle of which is stressed: “In **Brueghel’s** great **picture**, The **Kermess**, / the **dancers** go **round**, they go **round** and...”), “The

Dance” has a natural musicality by virtue of its rhythmic meter (Stevko 43). Moreover, Williams’ description of the “squeal and the blare and the / tweedle of bagpipes” (3-4) employs onomatopoeia to convey the cacophony of the scene. Onomatopoeia, although auditory, can be considered visually in some ways; Mitchell characterizes the literary device as “a natural image of what it means” (44). As music dictates the motion of the dancers, it directly influences the picture of the dance that we receive. Yet does the meter in Williams’s translation match the rhythm that the peasants dance to? The tipsiness of the dancers suggests a crudity in dance that perhaps resembles a lack of meter and control. As was the case in Wang’s poem, there is ambiguity here as to how the sounds we hear in the scene actually emerge.

These uncertainties relate to, naturally, the losses that any project of translation incurs. When Williams translates a painting into words, the colors of the painting disappear (not a single mention of hue is in “The Dance”). This exclusion obscures the fact that the color scheme of the painting is, on the whole, relatively dark. Many scenes of vice occur in the shadowy parts of the painting that are absent in Williams’s lively translation. On the left side of the painting are a drunken man who accidentally hits another in the face, and a man holding out a pitcher to the bagpipe player, encouraging him to drink. Moreover, although the painting depicts Saint’s Day, the church is in the faraway distance, while a picture of the Virgin is shrouded in shadow on a tree. Brueghel’s social commentary on the rambunctious nature of peasant life is partly lost in Williams’s translation.

There are also losses or absences that manifest through Snyder’s translation of “Deer Park” beyond the previously mentioned disappearance of the poem’s “shape.” Indeed, Weinberger characterizes Snyder’s translation as an “American poem,” one that reinterprets the Chinese poem to fit the aesthetic of contemporary American poetry (45). Just as Ezra Pound abandoned the formal, metrical qualities of classical Chinese poetry in composing *Cathay*, Snyder’s translation resembles an “[English poem] in free verse” (49). Moreover, whereas the original “Deer Park” contained a sense of temporal ambiguity due to the fact that the Chinese language has no tense, Snyder roots Wang’s poem in the present moment by “changing the passive *is heard* to the imperative *hear*” (45). Here, an instance of concreteness again appears in a poem that otherwise thrives on its ambiguity. We might consider how both Williams’s and Snyder’s translations reveal the limits of poetic language in capturing the works they translate, and how

take on the scene (ll. 10-11). Williams's perspective appears even in the first line when he says that Brueghel's picture is "great," making a value judgment that informs the image of the dance we receive. Moreover, whereas Brueghel's painting is a still image, reading Williams's poem aloud adds a dimension of time (absent in the painting) to the picture, animating the dancers' movements. In this way, Williams's poem translates and complements Brueghel's artwork so that we receive two pictures of the scene. Ultimately, what Williams and Snyder have both achieved is, through translation, "a reimagining" (Weinberger 46). Their poems present the sights and sounds of Brueghel's painting and Wang's poem in new ways that allow for insightful readings (or viewings) of the original works. The interpretive gap between what one sees and what is translated ultimately allows for individual perspectives and imagination to complete the work of translation.

In *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, Weinberger identifies translation with replication, saying that the poems and paintings on Wang's landscape scroll were "copied (translated) for centuries" (5). There are indeed ways in which images of one work may be copied into another form—the composition of a painting, its frame, and the ideograph of a Chinese character are all visual elements that can be reproduced in English poetry. Yet "The Dance" and "Deer Park" are far from mere "copies" of their original sources. Instead, they show that the project of translation requires not only looking at an image, but also imagining its sounds and setting to capture a full picture of the scene. Williams and Snyder adapt and recreate their sources—through both looking *and* imagining—in poems that not only present us with images, but also give us new ways of looking and imagining pictures we thought we understood.

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Appendix I



The Peasant Dance by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1569)

The Dance

William Carlos Williams (1962)

In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess, the dancers go round, they go round and around, the squeal and the blare and the tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles tipping their bellies (round as the thick-sided glasses whose wash they impound) their hips and their bellies off balance to turn them. Kicking and rolling about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those shanks must be sound to bear up under such rollicking measures, prance as they dance in Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess.

《鹿柴》
唐·王維

空山不見人，
但聞人語響。
返景入深林，
復照青苔上。

Deer Park

Gary Snyder (1978)

Empty mountains:
no one to be seen.
Yet—hear—
human sounds and echoes.
Returning sunlight
enters the dark woods;
Again shining
on the green moss, above.