

# WHAT IS THE PLACE OF TRANSLATION?

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The standard distinction between literal and figural meaning(s) may be supposed to be as old as that between an 'original' text and its translation. Indeed, this pair of distinctions provides a standard for Occidental rationality (in the supposition of its meaning). By this standard, supposedly, it is only derivatively, or secondarily, that reason succumbs to the flowers of rhetoric. But what of oneiric 'rationality', or 'reason since Freud' (as Lacan's 1957 reading of the letter of the dream has it)?

## I.

Freud's 'Interpretation of Dreams', with its apparently governing distinction between latent dream-thought and manifest dream-content follows this standard - while, precisely, it unworks the distinction, in addressing the dream-work. In this work's 'interpretation', in its attention to the question not simply of its translation (as indeed the possibility of its translation), but of what lies 'between' the terms of this pair of distinctions, Freud cautions his readers: not to identify ('confuse', he says) the dream ('literally') with the latent dream-thoughts, any more than, as formerly, with their manifest content. As it reads in the Standard Edition of this work (which is, of course, a work of translation, in(to) English): "It has long been the habit to regard dreams as identical with their manifest content; but we must now beware equally of the mistake of confusing dreams with latent dream-thoughts" (ft.(1914) p.736 & ft.(1925), p.650).

The question of the 'interpretation' of dreams is addressed to the dream-work (not least as a question of the cause of its being (re)told, of what it is that it has to say). To be addressed is the form of thinking indicative of the translatability of its apparent irrationalities into the very linguistic condition supposed by - and for - the production of its 'reason(s)' (as the 'interpretation(s)' of the oneiric). Were one then to erase a 'mistake' in the translation of the Standard Edition - by reading not so much between its languages as by simply identifying ('confusing') the content of the interpretation with an 'original' language ('latent' with respect to its translation) - then one's reading would conform to the very reading which Freud's unworks. The work of reading between languages exposes what is in question in reading in(to) any language, precisely as this is posed as a work of 'interpretation' in psychoanalysis, and, more specifically, of reading The Interpretation of Dreams: that is, the *work* of translation. Simply to effect the 'silent correction' of a 'mistake' would be to repress the work of translation as it is, precisely, a cause of psychoanalysis. To what standard, indeed, would a retranslation (such as Alex Holder, for example, has proposed in respect to Strachey's edition) more faithful to, closer to (etc.), a German 'original' work?

In the instance to be discussed below, the terms that standardly condition the possibility of translation - the literal and the figural - are the very terms that effect a textual display of the principal possibilities of the dream-work; that is, displacement and condensation. This instance of translation (as an interpretation) will prove apposite for indicating that translation is itself, literally, metaphorical; that its 'proper' meaning - as is standardly supposed of the literal sense - instantiates the work of translation as it is to be read in(to) any language, not least the supposed 'original'. It is a question (above all, in psychoanalysis) of seeing how the translation 'works',

precisely where it is standardly understood to be 'mistaken'. While its meaning remains undecidable (as Freud advocates), despite the authority of its interpreter (or translator, i.e. despite what he or she may be supposed to know concerning languages), yet it can be shown to work in translation, precisely where it appears as 'mistaken'.

We might note that the German word of which 'figural' is the standard translation is 'übertragen', also translated (übersetzen) in the psychoanalytic lexicon as 'transference'. Metaphor and translation instantiate this transference. How could one think it otherwise than through translation - which is thus not 'secondary' (in English) nor 'derived'? (Just as the German edition can no more be the 'original' than its 'translations'.) And so we must ask, how otherwise does the thought of the unconscious require us to think through (that of) translation, i.e. its work? Not least - as it concerns this writing in(to) English of the question of the unconscious (its interpretation, as making decisions as to its translatability) - as it is manifested in Die Traumdeutung and the instance which I shall consider here, that of the 'Wagner opera dream'. (This appears in chapter VI. D, under the title of 'Considerations of representability', 'Die Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit'.)

Freud's explicit standard of comparison for his 'interpretation' of dreams is the translation of hieroglyphic script: "...in spite of all this ambiguity, it is fair to say that the productions of the dream-work [die Darstellung der Traumarbeit], which, it must be remembered, are not made with the intention of being understood, present no greater difficulties to their translators than do the ancient hieroglyphic scripts to those who seek to read them" (p.457). One might suppose then that they present no lesser difficulties either!

Prior to this Champollionesque dream of translation - able to figure out the address of a message, even when it is 'made with the intention' of not being understood (thereby giving it the lie) - Freud elaborates some considerations of ambiguity, not simply in dreams but as a quality to which words themselves are 'predestined'. "If one ambiguous word is used instead of two unambiguous ones the result is misleading [we shall see how this applies to the place of interpretation in the 'Wagner opera' instance]; and if our everyday, sober method of expression [i.e. what will have been the dream-thoughts; standardly, 'literally'] is replaced [through consideration of the dream-work] by a pictorial one [the manifest dream-content; standardly, 'figurally'], our understanding is brought to a halt [in spite of] the subsequent power of translation, providing a figure for transference, to make it move again; standardly, by taking the figural literally], particularly since a dream never tells us [because of the dream-work] whether its elements are to be interpreted literally or in a figurative sense, or whether they are to be connected with the material of the dream-thoughts directly or through the intermediary of some interpolated phraseology [i.e. whether it is the dream or the free associations that are to be interpreted, or which provide for an interpretation]" (p.456). ["Es ist ja irreführend, wenn ein zweideutiges Wort anstatt zweier eindeutiger gesetzt wird, und der Ersatz der alltaglich nüchternen Ausdrucksweise durch eine bildliche halt unser Verstandnis auf, besonders da der Traum niemals aussagt, ob die von ihm gebrachten Elemente wortlich oder im übertragenen Sinne zu deuten sind, direkt oder durch Vermittlung eingeschobener Redensarten auf das Traummaterial bezogen werden sollen" (p.343-4).]

## II.

To take Freud at his word here, 'literally', what then does (the translation of) the 'Wagner opera' dream have to 'tell us' – "whether... literally... or in a figurative sense" - concerning its possible translation (or 'interpretation')? In the first instance ('it must be remembered'), we see that it tells us that there is a question as to what lies between the literal and the figurative - a question of its 'reason' or 'interpretation' (not least as, or of, what it does not intend to have understood). This begins to unwork what is to be understood of what is 'told us' in what is supposed of either English or German - here, of course, through its being written out of its form as rebus (or hieroglyph), in becoming 'writing' (in its English or German editions). (Fundamentally, this condition of translatability in Freud's work is that of the grave distinction, for what is Occidental, between writing (as 'phonetic', with the distinction implied between speech and writing) and the image, with respect - traditionally - to the thought of consciousness.) The following extensive quotation is from Strachey's Standard translation (p.457-8; p.344-6 in the German edition):

*A lady of my acquaintance had the following dream: She was at the Opera. A Wagner opera was being performed, and had lasted till a quarter to eight in the morning. There were tables set out in the stalls, at which people were eating and drinking. Her cousin, who had just got back from his honeymoon, was sitting at one of the tables with his young wife, and an aristocrat was sitting beside them. Her cousin's wife, so it appeared, had brought him back with her from the honeymoon, quite openly, just as one might bring back a hat. In the middle of the stalls there was a high tower, which had a platform on top of it surrounded by an iron railing. High up at the top was the conductor, who had the features of Hans Richter. He kept running round the railing, and was perspiring violently; and from that position he was conducting the orchestra, which was grouped about the base of the tower. She herself was sitting in a box with a woman friend (whom I knew). Her younger sister wanted to hand her up a large lump of coal from the stalls, on the ground that she had not known it would be so long, and must be simply freezing by now. (As though the boxes required to be heated during the long performance.)*

Even though the dream was well focused on a single situation, yet in other respects it was sufficiently senseless: the tower in the middle of the stalls, for instance, with the conductor directing the orchestra from the top of it! And above all the coal that her sister handed up to her! I deliberately refrained from asking for an analysis of the dream. But since I had some knowledge of the dreamer's personal relations, I was able to interpret certain pieces of it independently of her. I knew she had had a great deal of sympathy for a musician whose career had been prematurely cut short by insanity. So I decided to take the tower in the stalls metaphorically. It then emerged that the man whom she had wanted to see in Hans Richter's place *towered high above* the other members of the orchestra. The tower might be described as a composite picture formed by apposition. The lower part of its structure represented the man's greatness; the railing at the top, behind which he was running round like a prisoner or an animal in a cage - this was an allusion to the unhappy man's name<sup>1</sup> - represented his ultimate fate. The two ideas might have been brought together in the word 'Narrenturm'.<sup>2</sup>

Having thus discovered the mode of representation adopted by the dream, we might attempt to use the same key for solving its second apparent absurdity - the coal handed up to the dreamer by her sister. 'Coal' must mean 'secret love':

Kein *Feuer*, keine *Kohle*  
kann brennen so heiss  
als wie *heimliche Liebe*,  
von der niemand nichts weiss.<sup>3</sup>

She herself and her woman friend had been left unmarried [German '*sitzen gebleiben*', literally 'left sitting']. Her younger sister, who still had prospects of marriage, handed her up the coal 'because she had not known *it would be so long*'. The dream did not specify *what* would be so long. If it were a story, we should say 'the performance'; but since it is a dream, we may take the phrase as an independent entity, decide that it was used ambiguously and add the words 'before she got married'. Our interpretation of 'secret love' is further supported by the mention of the dreamer's cousin sitting with his wife in the stalls, and by the *open* love-affair attributed to the latter. The dream was dominated by the antithesis between secret and open love and between the dreamer's own fire and the coldness of the young wife. In both cases, moreover, there was someone 'highly-placed' - a term applying equally to the aristocrat and to the musician on whom such high hopes had been pinned.<sup>4</sup>

1. [Footnote added 1925:] Hugo Wolf.
2. [Literally 'Fools' Tower' - an old term for an insane asylum.]
3. [No fire, no *coal* / So hotly glows / As *secret love* / Of which no one knows. (German *Volkslied*)]
4. [The element of absurdity in this dream is commented upon on p.565.]

### III.

The dream report is, it seems, concerned with Freud as the one who knows (as an authority). He features in a network of 'secret' and 'open' relationships as one confided in (both 'in' and 'out' of these relationships); not part of the family, except in the professionally 'intimate' role of family doctor, being (made) thereby a party to family relations without being a relation himself - except, precisely, by what is related in speech. But besides Freud's assurances to the reader, what form does this knowledge - of dreams, rather than of the dreamers - take? If not in the interpolated declarations of acquaintance (the place of the interpreter), then in the 'key' for translating the 'apparent absurdity' into an 'interpretation'; that is, in the work that allows 'replacing' a 'pictorial method of expression' with one of 'everyday sobriety' or rationality (as that of the supposed 'intention').

We should first note Freud's remarks preliminary to the dream-report (p.457), concerning 'the key to symbolisation' in dreams; contrasting his own practice as an interpreter with that of others, Freud specifies the term 'verbal disguise' in place of 'symbolism'. "In the case of symbolic dream-interpretation the key to the symbolisation is arbitrarily chosen by the interpreter; whereas in our cases of verbal disguise the keys are generally known and laid down by firmly established linguistic-usage." (This point is elaborated subsequently in this part of the chapter (pp.461-3), where, as it were, the 'collective' incidence of images (pace Jung) is addressed in terms of the dreamer's 'culture' - condensed in the repeated phrase 'linguistic usage'. The term 'culture' here connotes being subject to the signifier ('linguistic usage'). The dream is itself 'already' an interpretation of what it will have been in being (re)told ('translated' or 'transferred'), as the thought (or 'reason') of the dream.

#### IV.

It is thus with considerations of linguistic usage that one is concerned here with pictorial (conditions of) representability (as translatability). Clearly, in the first part of this dream-interpretation the key word is 'apposition'. But this does not seem to apply to the second part, which Freud nonetheless introduces by saying 'having thus discovered the mode of representation'. For the key of 'apposition' here follows from a decision (Entschloss) concerning the (linguistic) effectuation of meaning (Ich entschloss mich also...). (One might note the homophonic proximity to 'entschlüsseln', 'to decipher'.) The 'mode of representation' (given the translation of the dream-content into its report), to which apposition is the key, is given by Strachey as 'metaphor' – "I decided to take the tower in the stalls metaphorically". This is, however, 'literally' a mistaken translation. The 'I' of this decision is the translator (Strachey), literally repressing what the German says of its decision (making it literally metaphorical). For the German reads: "Ich entschloss mich also, den Turm im Parkett *wortlich* zu nehmen", in which 'wortlich' – 'literally' - is set in italics. (The role of italics, the representability of letters in typeface will be returned to below.)

But in what sense is this translation manifestly mistaken - if one is simply reading the English, in(to) which, of course, this reading is itself being written? What, precisely, is the place of translation? (Or, what kind of 'place', or 'placing', does translation require to be thought?) This question is over-determined by the context in which the dream is reported (i.e. not that of what is 'related to' Freud, but precisely what Freud has already related concerning what a 'dream never tells us'). Is there then any textual symptom that instantiates an interruption - precisely in the work of translation, concerning the relation between word and image as one of 'apposition'? Before we consider this, as indeed exemplary (or 'apposite') for any reading of 'the interpretation of dreams', what does this 'mistake' 'tell us' about Strachey's interpretation of the term 'translation' - in which metaphorical (or figural) is taken to correct (or at least to replace, to transfer) an instance of the literal? What is implied in this 'standard' (of) translation with respect to its understanding of 'linguistic usage'? As is manifest in the text, the 'literal' is the very symptom of translation here; i.e. concerning what insists, *in italics*, as not translated (distinct from not being translatable), as what interrupts the text in(to) its standard English reading (or interpretation), as the mis-placing of (the) translation.

For what is made manifest by this 'mistaken' translation is that key textual mechanism of displacement - the translator's footnote, wherein the 'literal' returns (recuperated as the supposed authority of the work of the translator). This latter is necessary to gloss the interpretation (translation) of '*Narrenturm*' – "[Literally 'Fools Tower']" (which appears in italics in the Standard English edition; in the German it is simply within quotation marks, and without notes obviously). The footnote then also renders, as, precisely, an effect of translation, that which goes without saying in German, i.e. the use of 'one ambiguous word instead of two unambiguous ones': "... left unmarried [German '*sitzen gebleiben*', literally 'left sitting']". (The German phrase appears in italics in both editions - but not, of course, in the English 'unmarried'.) But here there appears to be a reversal, offering, perhaps, some point of elaboration for Strachey's 'original' 'replacement' of one word for another.

The English interpretation functions here visually, typographically, as an apposition in the (obscure, according to the OED) rhetorical sense; displaced there from the grammatical sense in which it appears as literally untranslated in the text

*'Narrenturm'*. The Standard English edition translates so literally that the German word is left 'untranslated' - given that 'literally' has not only not been translated literally, but rather metaphorically. The literal thus reappears typographically in the rhetorical apposition of the work of translation - in its 'standard' edition as an interpolated translator's note. It is ambiguous whether this phrase (*'sitzen gebleiben'*) is the dreamer's or Freud's - but it clearly offers an interpretation, in which the question of its meaning remains ambiguous (rather than 'decided') as to whether it is to be taken literally or metaphorically. One might, therefore, say, in(to) English, of this passionate dream that the two women are 'sitting it out'; or that, in their box, they have been 'left on the shelf' (with these phrases set in italics, of course).

Does the standard translation open something here, or close it down, in the appearance of dis-ambiguating (what is 'literal')? It is only by reading (working) between the texts that the thought of what 'the dream doesn't tell us' - whether its elements are to be taken in a literal or in a figural sense - becomes a question. (For it is not a matter of identifying it with one or the other, although that is standardly the decision of the interpreter/translator, pace Holder et al.) The work is not to ('re-establish two unambiguous texts (as, supposedly, an 'original' and its 'translation') - but, rather, to consider the possibilities of what this interpretative text of dreams, of their work, tells us concerning interpretation (in - and as - translation); that is, what it has to tell us in (reading) its *work* (of/as translation) rather than simply its apparent statement.

## V.

One previous (non-Standard) variation of this instance goes by the title of 'authorised translation' - that in 1913 by A. A. Brill. Brill is even more literal - translating 'wortlich' as 'verbally': "I therefore decided to take the tower in the parquette *verbally*." In 1932 Brill revised this to read "I therefore decided to take the tower in the stalls verbally", 'translating' his earlier transliteration of 'Parkett' and adding the italics, but leaving the key word. He does, however, translate the first interpretation: "'Lunatic tower' is perhaps the word in which both thoughts might have met" (1913); "...is the expression..." in 1932. Of course, this hardly meets the case of Freud's 'literal' interpretation of 'apposition'. As to the second interpretation, it is only in the revised (1932) edition that the ambiguity of 'to remain seated' is spelt out, literally, again through the device of a translator's footnote.

We have noted how Strachey's attempt to disambiguate the translation produces an exemplary instance of displacement, an apposite symptom of the work of (its) repression. However, here I should like to offer my own non-Standard, variant, reading. As with the dream-image of spinsterhood (above), leaving open the 'decision' as to whether one is to translate the reported (related) image literally or metaphorically (in consideration of what we are told the dream doesn't tell us), how might one interpret (translate) in(to) English the reported 'tower in the stalls'?

We have to admit the 'two ideas' or thoughts that, in Brill's suggestive reading (given the amatory ambition supposed of the dream), 'might have met' in one word: i.e. the 'towering' figure of the man amongst contemporary musicians (having also been a friend of Wagner), and his having been brought low by madness (as a result of syphilis), resulting in his being sequestered in an asylum ('behind bars'). In English, it is possible for these two ideas to meet in a word (deriving from 'established linguistic usage') that remains equivocal (or ambiguous) concerning the relationship

of the dreamer to her 'intended' expression: that is, (a) 'Folly'. (As an interpretation this would, no doubt, be addressed with the intonation of a question; indeed, perhaps even set in italics, '*a folly?*')

It is here, in what Lacan calls the 'half-saying', that the intention of being (re) told is replied to, i.e. by 'interpretation' (as the consideration of the ambiguity of its representability, the 'intended'), rather than simply by replacing one term by another (the reported image with a statement "there is a fool's tower"). Here is an instance of precisely such 'change of expression' that "assists dream-condensation... by finding a form of words which owing to its ambiguity is able to give expression to more than one of the dream-thoughts" (p.456), i.e. as condensing two thoughts ('meeting') without ceasing to indicate literally their 'representability' (as 'figural'). As an instance of condensation, it is not, of course, literally an example of grammatical apposition, as is the German 'Narrenturm'. And yet, in consideration of translatability, of what may be admitted by linguistic usage, between German and English, it is apposite; offering one ambiguous word where the Standard Edition would claim to 'interpret' - to disambiguate between - what is literal and metaphorical, thereby re-working, rather than unworking, perhaps, the standards of repression (in either the German or English editions of what the dream tells us). To begin to work, to interpret, this standard (of) translation, without however failing to acknowledge the work to which it attests (in which the possibility of a supposed 'mistake', or 'mis-placing', will have been, potentially, determined by the very work it attests to, for instance, displacement); this, rather than a 'new translation' (pace Holder et al), in the name of a German 'original', would be to address anew Freud's recommendations concerning the place of translation, not least as it is manifest in (reading) the interpretation of dreams (i.e. the thought of the unconscious and the *work* of psychoanalysis).

#### References:

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Essays by Holder et al. on Strachey's translations are collected in Translating Freud, ed. D. Ornston, Yale UP, 1992.