Adaptation as Rewriting: Evolution of a Concept

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Abstract


Etant donné que les traductions et adaptations suggèrent l’existence de textes primaires, elles sont rarement examinées pour leurs propres mérites esthétiques mais opposées aux « œuvres originales sacrées.» Il en résulte que l’adaptation et la traduction sont souvent considérées comme des formes de création inférieures et n’échappent pas à ce que Barbara Folkart nomme « l’effet d’entropie » ou lente dégradation d’une œuvre originale et, en conséquence, sont rarement évaluées en termes de créativité et d’originalité. Cet article explore les raisons à l’origine de l’évolution des mentalités et souligne l’importance de la rupture épistémologique qui a eu lieu au XVIIIe siècle, modifiant à jamais notre conception de l’adaptation littéraire.

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It is often difficult to identify the fine line separating literary adaptation from plagiarism. Even laws attempting to define the boundaries between creative writing and sheer imitation do not provide clear criteria of evaluation for derivative works. It may be that adaptation, as rewriting, is part of a natural and unavoidable process of evolution. M. Bakhtin in The Dialogic Imagination describes at length this phenomenon and defines the novel as a developing genre encompassing a wide spectrum of stylistic adaptations. Literature is no longer seen as a fragmented composition of successive genres as defined by formalists such as Tzvetan Todorov, but as a continuum involving the constant renewal of literary styles. By constantly readapting and translating the words of others into a new language, writers ensure the survival of what would be otherwise forgotten literature while adapting narrative strategies to contemporary readers. This article extends Bakhtin’s concept of developing genre to literary adaptation and presents it as a type of rewriting sharing many characteristics with translation practices.

Usually, we associate translation with bilingualism and polyglotism. Foreign language teachers, translators, interpreters and bilingual speakers readily come to our minds when we think of translation.

1 “Plagiarism is sometimes a moral and ethical offence rather than a legal one since some instances of plagiarism fall outside the scope of copyright infringement, a legal offence” (Joseph Gibaldi, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 6th Ed. New York: The MLA of America, 2003, 66).
Foreignness, difference, fear, cultural mores and customs are all imbedded in the term. Yet, there is another type of translation we practice on a daily basis in our dealings with friends, colleagues and relatives. We resort to this type of translation when we feel the need to explain or clarify a concept, reword a complex sentence or make us better understood by children, students etc. All instructors, parents, administrators, technicians, politicians, ordinary citizens, and writers use this strategy to improve the communication of a message. In 1963, Roman Jakobson coined the expression “intra-lingual translation” to define this particular adaptational mode of communication.

Comparison of literary adaptation and translation can help us better comprehend the transformational process at the core of these practices at three different levels, namely: etymological, cultural and linguistic. The first relationship I would like to establish is concerned with etymology, for as we shall see, retracing the origins of the word gives us a better understanding of the evolution of adaptation as a genre. Borrowed from the Latin word “adaptatio,” which was associated with a particular type of translation involving a certain degree of creativity, adaptation carried the idea of transformation, adjustment and appropriation when it first appeared during the 13th century. Douglas Kelly claims that:

There are three prominent modes of translatio in medieval French: translation as such, including scribal transmission; adaptation; and allegorical or extended metaphorical discourse. In each case, a source, an extant materia surviving from the past, is re-done by a new writer who is, in effect, the translator.

Translation is closely linked to the concept of creation in the form of updating or recycling of ideas. In the Middle Ages, there is no dichotomy between writer and translator and the practice of translation allows some originality. On the contrary, we can detect a deep sense of collaboration and admiration. Often seen as an extension of the author’s view as well as a communion of spirits, the translator writes as the author might have written had he lived in the translator’s days and age. Translation is viewed as a positive practice and is associated with the ideas of invention and originality. Douglas Kelly remarks:

Translatio is a diversified and fundamental characteristic of medieval composition, of its history and import. Topical invention is the means for translatio in the Middle Ages. The artful elaboration of true or credible arguments at suitable points in a given source, the whole process in keeping with the idea or ideas the author seeks to show forth through the work’s representations—such topical invention translates, transfers the past to the present.


3 Ibidem.
“Topical invention” is a key expression here. Translation is viewed as a bridge across cultures and time as well as a creative transformational stage. It allows for collective memories to be passed on, while being adapted to the needs, mores and customs of the next generations. The emphasis is not so much on accuracy, fidelity and authenticity as on the literary talents of the translator who becomes a spokesperson for the source writer. We must keep in mind that medieval cosmology revolved around an epistemology different from our own, based on the concept of unity, continuity and harmony. In such a universe the poet, and to a lesser extent the writer/creator/translator occupy a privileged place for they are believed to convey and translate God’s words. Since God created man and the universe, and poets and writers find their inspiration in the things He made, then the result of their creation stems necessarily from God. As Fernand Hallyn notes in Le Sens des formes, until the Renaissance poetry is the form of discourse that is given center stage and it is commonly used as a metalanguage encompassing all other forms of discourse, i.e. sciences, philosophy, etc. We notice among scientists, writers, poets and philosophers an effort to reconcile seemingly unrelated disciplines. Decipherment in all areas is a key concept at the core of medieval knowledge. Translation within this context is extended to the search of interrelations and plays a significant part. On the one hand, when it involves two languages, it contributes to spreading knowledge that would not be accessible to some individuals. On the other hand, when it consists in a rewording within the same language, it sometimes equates to a simplification or explanation of a source text. In both cases translators are asked to demonstrate their artistic qualities in the rhythm, rimes and images they produce. From the viewpoint of some 21st-century critics imprinted with Cartesianism and with the concept of authorship inherited from the Enlightenment, pairing translation with invention sounds more like an oxymoron than a logical association of ideas. However, from a medieval perspective, translation could be viewed as a locus of exchange where hidden truths had to be brought to the surface and reinterpreted in order to be carried on. “Translatio is itself a lingering over old matter. But it is also an expansion of vision and knowledge about that matter”5. “Expansion,” in both space and time, is another key concept exemplifying the dynamic side of a world in a developing process. In this instance, development must not be confused with detachment, which implies a sudden break. On the contrary, there exists a sense of divine communion between the source “author” and the


translator/adaptor. Thus, translation becomes a collaborative endeavor oriented toward knowledge and progress. “As Marie de France wrote, the ancients understood the truth contained in their matter, but left it to posterity to rediscover and catch the light of the wisdom buried in material obscurity”

Translation may be seen as a religious duty, and the translator’s role is to decode texts and sub-texts before adapting them to the audience of the time using metaphors and creating allegories comprehensible to all audiences. In this context, any attempt toward literal translation or plain imitation is imprinted with negative connotations and becomes synonymous with stagnation and regression.

“Adapted” (or free) translation, on the contrary, is an ambivalent activity that is given enough freedom to ensure what Walter Benjamin calls “the after-life of the original”. This freedom is illustrated at its best in adapted translations of source texts. Inspired by literary works, but not quite equivalent to them, adaptations, whose main purpose is to bring across and modify, claim their “differing” status from the start. The flexible nature of adaptation, both viewed as a state and a process of transformation epitomizing a subtle blending of sameness and difference, stresses the dynamics at play between a receptor, a source text and its offspring. Benjamin claims that it seems more appropriate to assess the relationship between a source text and its translation in terms of kinship. This is also true for free adaptations that can be closely or remotely related to the source texts. Yet, kinship “does not necessarily involve likeness”. In fact, it implies an array of relationships ranging from immediate family ties to distant connections. Benjamin’s characterization of translation as kinship is an excellent metaphor of merging as it exemplifies a perfect, unavoidable—but not necessarily harmonious—combination/cohabitation of sameness and difference identified by relations of contiguity within one single individual or element. Translation—free or literal—is therefore entrusted with the task of revealing secret relationships. With translation, aspects of the invisible world become visible. From at least the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the 17th century “la traduction était considérée comme un genre” oriented toward the acquisition of knowledge. Roger Zuber states: “Dès la fin du treizième siècle, on voit dans l’histoire de notre littérature, la traduction répondre au plus noble des besoins: l’appétit du savoir.

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6 Ibid., 30.
7 In The Task of The Translator, Walter Benjamin insists on the dynamics of translation and claims: “for a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translator at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life” (Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Brace and World, 1968, 71).
8 Ibidem, 74.
Pour les poètes et, du moins en partie, pour les auteurs d‘imagination, des adaptations suffiront très longtemps encore”\(^\text{10}\).

Knowledge does not depend on imitation or cloning but on the translator’s ability to adapt and communicate cultural materials appropriately. Described as a “mode of translation” (see Kelly) or sub-genre relying primarily on the transformation and updating of source texts, adaptation often contributes to the enrichment of language and to the building of a domestic literature representative of the nation. During the 16\(^\text{th}\) century, in *La Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française*, even though he does not use the term “adaptation,” Du Bellay himself urges poets to enrich their language by drawing ideas from the Romans who had themselves translated the Greeks:

> Si les Romains (dira quelqu’un) n’ont vaqué à ce labeur de traduction, par quels moyens donc ont-ils pu ainsi enrichir leur langue, voir jusqu’à l’égaler quasi à la grecque? Imitant les meilleurs auteurs grecs, se transformant en eux, les dévorant; et, après les avoir bien digérés, les convertissant en sang et nourriture: se proposant, chacun selon son naturel et l’argument qu’il voulait élire, le meilleur auteur, dont ils observaient diligemment toutes les plus rares et exquises vertus, et icelles comme greffes, ainsi que j’ai dit devant, entaient et appliquaient à leur langue. Cela fait (dis-je) les Romains ont bâti tous ces beaux écrits que nous louons et admirons si fort\(^\text{11}\).

Du Bellay uses anthropophagous metaphors to describe the transformation of ancient texts into noble literature. Assimilation appears as a necessary stage to impose the vernacular as a full-fledged language and the botanical images contained in the idea of grafting serve as metaphors for kinship, expansion, ramification, growth, development, and multiplicity. Although Du Bellay severely criticizes translators “mieux dignes d’être appelés traditeurs, que traducteurs”\(^\text{12}\), he obviously praises adaptational modes of translation as a solution for illuminating the vernacular language and illustrating the literary greatness of France\(^\text{13}\).

The conception of adaptation as creative writing is further developed and reaches its peak during the 17\(^\text{th}\) century with *les belles infidèles*. The expression *belles infidèles* was coined by the French writer

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\(^{10}\) *Ibidem*, 21.


\(^{12}\) *Ibidem*, 100.

\(^{13}\) I do not pretend to offer a thorough historiography of adaptation and translation. The canonical works of major French authors mentioned here are meant to underline adaptational practices used from the Middle Ages to the 21\(^\text{st}\) century. The purpose of this chronological development is to establish historical links between translation and adaptation supporting the problematic advanced here.
Ménage who ironically used these words to qualify the “unfaithful” translations of M. d’Ablancourt, a famous translator of the time. As Roger Zuber claims, translation helped improve one’s writing skills by adapting old texts to new trends. The inevitable comparison between unfaithful women and unfaithful translations (due to the feminine gender of the French word) has not escaped the attention of critics from feminist writers to Marxist critics who have brought the gender issue to the surface.14 In “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,” Lori Chamberlain writes:

The sexualization of translation appears perhaps most familiarly in the tag *les belles infidèles*; like women, the adage goes, translations should be either beautiful or unfaithful. The tag is made possible both by the rhyme in French and by the fact that the word *traduction* is a feminine one, thus making *les beaux infidèles* impossible.15

Roger Zuber points out in his study titled *Les Belles Infidèles et la Formation du Goût Classique* that a beautiful translation does not imply a faithful translation, and the translator/adaptor often feels the need to clarify in order to beautify: “Ces infidèles comment nier qu’elles soient belles? Mais elles ne le sont vraiment que parce qu’elles sont claires”16.

The dichotomy between beauty and fidelity, aesthetics and accuracy implies that beautiful translations are often unfaithful and that unaesthetic translations are not necessarily faithful. This divorce based on seemingly irreconcilable differences precludes any compromise between beauty and fidelity while stressing the importance of decision-making. Although the concept of “original” is lurking beneath the surface, priority is given to originality and creativity, for it is believed that a writer can develop his skills and beautify domestic literature through adaptational translation. As Chamberlain stresses:

*Les belles infidèles*, fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translation (as woman) and original (as husband, father, or author). However, the infamous double standard operates here as it might have in traditional marriages: the unfaithful wife is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of committing. This contract in short makes it impossible for the original to be guilty of infidelity. Such attitude betrays real anxiety about the problem of paternity and translation; it mimics the patrilineal kinship system where paternity—not maternity—legitimizes an offspring.17

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17 Lorrie Chamberlain, “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,” *op. cit.*, 58.
This attitude toward translation undermines the responsibility of translators since the emphasis is on female infidelity (translation as instigator of infidelity) and not on the translator who performed the translation (most likely to be a male).

One of the main challenges facing the translator lies in his/her ability to bring the text to the readers and lead them to “collude” with the translation. Introduced by Bassnett, the concept of “collusion” implies the complicity of the reader who consciously or unconsciously agrees to surrender to the translation. “When we collude with something, we go along with it, we agree with it, but only to a certain point... And we collude with things in different ways” 18. In the 17th century, the translator/adaptor has to meet aesthetic criteria demanded by the public in order to appeal to his potential readership. Readers approach translations with the mutual understanding that they are, in fact, derivations of source texts. Roger Zuber emphasizes that: “On savait qu’elles [les traductions] s’écartaient du texte original, et qu’elles donnaient des héros une peinture choisie. Ce choix même témoignait des exigences du goût du temps. Racine ne fait que le reconnaître en employant si généreusement des tournures qui chantaient dans toutes les mémoires”19.

The expression “on savait” (it was known), is in line with Bassnett’s concept of collusion and appears as an unofficial—but well-concerted—effort to overlook differences. It also emphasizes the public’s taste for derivative works meeting the aesthetic trends of audiences. Les Belles Infidèles illustrates the need for importing foreign literature through acculturation of “cultural capital” (see Lefevere) as well as through linguistic and aesthetic remolding. In a study dedicated to the evolution of “The European Picaresque Novel in the 17th and 18th Centuries” Hendrick van Gorp writes:

Around 1620 the translations become noticeably freer and move to an “acceptable” or target-oriented type of equivalence, reflecting the growing self-confidence and assertiveness of French culture at the time. The translators apply French cultural and social norms and take their bearings from the leading writers of their own country. Although at first the greater freedom manifests itself at the level of language and style only, soon the development of the story is adapted to current target norms too. The initial situation undergoes little change, but the plot is accommodated in such a way that amorous adventures overshadow social criticism and the protagonist’s material needs. Conspicuous are the changes made to the endings of a number of novels. In line with the fashion in ‘regular’ novels of


the period, translations are given a “happy ending” incompatible with the element of disillusion and the typical “open ending” of the original novela picaresca. As we can clearly observe in Van Gorp’s study, adaptations undergo significant changes that not only apply to style and language, but are also extended to plots and characters. Using three distinct works considered as typical picaresque novels, Van Gorp demonstrates how the Spanish Picaro is turned into “a gentleman-picaro with bourgeois airs” imprinted with French taste. He also emphasizes the fact that, from the start, the reader’s attention is drawn to the amusing character of the story. Van Gorp demonstrates the significant impact of adaptation on the evolution of genres, which are subject to political and religious reinterpretation once transferred to another culture. The author even mentions the case of German translations of la novela picaresca, which he characterizes as a “hybrid of the picaresque novel and the Bildungsroman”. Van Gorp shows that literary adaptations have a bearing on the evolution of language, style, genre, culture and aesthetics. He also draws our attention to the mediating role played by French translators in the passing down of foreign literatures adapted to the classicist code of 17th century France, suggesting that many German, Dutch and English translators were never in contact with the Spanish version. As he indicates in his study, France fostered the propagation of adaptations of la novela picaresca in England, Germany and the Netherlands and passed down its classicist aesthetic code to neighbouring countries.

French Classicism had a significant impact on translation within the country as well as outside its boundaries. What were the main characteristics of classicism? To what extent did it influence literary genres and particularly translation and in what way? The answers to these questions are best illustrated in the classicist works of famous French playwrights who recycled Greek canonical tragedies. Writers such as Racine and Corneille, who found their inspiration in Greek classics, epitomize this trend and bring the texts to an audience abiding by the rules of “les trois unités de temps, de lieu et d’action” as well as by the rules of “bienséance.” “Toward the end of the seventeenth century the method of translation becomes even more free, so that we can speak of adaptations rather than translations.” At no other period in history do we more clearly witness the intertwining of translation and adaptation. The most important rule is to please and move an audience, says Racine in his preface to Bérénice. Very often, the plays are inspired by different

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21 Ibidem, 146.

22 Ibid., my emphasis, 139.
sources drawn from various authors in order to find the most suitable attitude for a character. In L’Originalité, Roland Mortier remarks that during the 17th century: “Imitation et invention finissent ainsi par se rejoindre et presque par s’identifier. Dans cet esprit, l’invention est conçue comme un prolongement, comme un enrichissement des œuvres tenues pour des modèles”23.

Racine acknowledges having read Hippolyte by Euripides and Phèdre by Seneca, but to this intermingling of sources, he adds his final touch. In his preface to Phèdre, Racine admits having manipulated the text in order to make it more appropriate and attractive to his audience:

J’ai même pris soin de la [Phèdre] rendre un peu moins odieuse qu’elle n’est dans les tragédies des Anciens, où elle se résout d’elle-même à accuser Hippolyte. J’ai cru que la calomnie avait quelque chose de trop bas et de trop noir pour la mettre dans la bouche d’une princesse qui a d’ailleurs des sentiments si nobles et si vertueux. Cette bassesse m’a paru plus convenable à une nourrice, qui pouvait avoir des inclinations plus serviles, et qui néanmoins n’entreprend cette fausse accusation que pour sauver la vie et l’honneur de sa maîtresse. Phèdre n’y donne les mains que parce qu’elle est dans une agitation d’esprit qui la met hors d’elle-même, et elle vient un moment après dans le dessein de justifier l’innocence et de déclarer la vérité.


Racine cultivates the art of suggesting by shading contours and transforming shortcomings into qualities once they are transferred from a princess to a servant. In Racine’s hierarchical society, a princess is not allowed to accomplish lower deeds perfectly acceptable for an ordinary woman. Racine retains the idea of treason, but through a process of transfer, he beautifies the servant’s behaviour by presenting her treachery as an act of love and protection. Furthermore, Racine adapts the Greek plays to the mores and customs of 17th-century France, avoiding bloody representation and describing psychological dilemmas in a language suited for 17th-century classic drama. Paying attention to both form and content, the playwright complies with an ideal of beauty where: “Les passions n’y sont représentées aux yeux que pour montrer le désordre dont elles sont cause; et le vice y est peint partout avec des couleurs qui en font connaître et haïr la difformité. C’est là proprement le but que tout homme qui travaille pour le public doit se proposer”25.

25 Ibidem, 199.
Combining eloquence with higher thoughts, Racine follows the tenets of classical drama by teaching while entertaining. The alexandrine verse form that gives a particular rhythm to the play exemplifies the beauty of the language as well as the grandeur and eloquence of the characters in a purified style imprinted with moralist overtones. Many similar examples are to be found during the same period in other authors such as Corneille and even Molière in *Dom Juan*.

Strongly influenced by the idea of “bon usage,” playwrights, like translators/adaptors, exercise censure to avoid what might be perceived as vulgarity or unacceptable behaviour and do not hesitate to make additions to meet the needs of their contemporary audience. Aesthetics triumphs over accuracy and fidelity. Even though detractors criticize some translators for their lack of accuracy, during the 17th century the mainstream favours psychological, physical and linguistic grandeur in art over graphic representation and language.

In *L’Originalité*, Roland Mortier explores the origins of the word originality and demonstrates how in the 17th century “originality” meant paradoxically departing from an original text. Mortier explains how French Classicism’s desire to replace nature by beautiful nature led the authors to investigate innovative modes of expression, such as rewriting Greek plays in alexandrines.

The exploration of 17th century theatrical adaptations is of particular interest, for it implies the ideas of performance and “performability”—inherent in film adaptation—to use the terms of Susan Bassnett. In an article titled “Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre,” Bassnett argues that:

The translator of dramatic texts is expected to grapple not only with the eternal problem of “faithfulness”, however that may be interpreted, but also with the problem of what the relationship between the written and the performed may be. “Performability” offers a way out of the dilemma, since it allows the translator to take greater liberties with the text than many might deem acceptable, in the interests of the end product of “performability.” The term thus justifies translation strategies, in the same way as terms such as “adaptation” or “version” which have never been clearly defined either, are also used to justify or explain certain strategies that may involve degrees of divergence from the source text.

Such connections, between the notions of “performability” and “adaptation” used as justifications to compensate for a lack of accuracy along with the absence of definition of these terms, are of paramount importance. The use of words such as version, performability, adaptation and transposition are as many clues pointing to feelings of fault, shame and treason inherited from the philosophers of the Enlightenment. The need to justify one’s choices, which also implies the idea of guilt, tends to

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undermine the prestige of an art that is no longer in tune with 18th century philosophy.

Indeed, during that period we notice a change of attitude characterized by a strong desire of individualization (already on the rise in the 16th century) and a slight detachment from God. Man no longer takes things for granted but asks ontological and philosophical questions that no longer find a definite answer in God. *Le Neveu de Rameau* by Diderot in which the protagonist asks apparently naïve questions to which the philosopher has no simple answers exemplifies this epistemological shift entailing a permanent questioning of established knowledge. During the 18th century, this role reversal of the Socratic model where the pupil sometimes appears to be more refined and knowledgeable than his master illustrates a new freedom of thinking that destabilizes hierarchical power and universal knowledge. Power relationships are overturned in many areas (literature, philosophy, politics, etc.) and the constant questioning of universals opens the ways to a new epistemology based on fragmentation. In politics, fragmentation is achieved through power delegation and by giving citizens a stronger sense of personal responsibility. In philosophy and literature, it is illustrated by a desire to bring a personal contribution to society by exposing any institutional wrongdoings. Personal testimonies, exemplified by Diderot’s *La Religieuse* and epistolary novels such as Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* epitomize such a fragmented trend where various perspectives are represented at the same time and where individual voices are represented. Man as an individual takes responsibility for his personal actions and ideas, and in so doing claims his right of ownership. Authors own a privileged moment in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature and the sciences and endeavour to make a difference. Within this context, any adaptation of primary texts is regarded as deceitful and becomes suspicious. Respect for authorial discourse as well as economic concerns such as author’s rights, rights of reproduction, etc. had a devastating effect on literary adaptations and contributed to the depreciation of this genre. In “What is an Author,” Michel Foucault sheds light on this epistemological change and demonstrates its noticeable impact on literature:

In our culture—undoubtedly in others as well—discourse was not originally a thing, a product, or a possession, but an action situated in a bipolar field of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous. It was a gesture charged with risks long before it became a possession caught in a circuit of property values. But it was at the moment when a system of ownership and strict copyright rules were established (toward the end of the eighteenth century) that the transgressive properties always intrinsic to the act of writing became the forceful imperative of literature.

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Considered as finished products rather than creative processes, literary works surrender to economic laws. Under such conditions, creative adaptations of literary works become assimilated with the profanation and theft of original works. In “When is a Translation Not a Translation,” Susan Bassnett reaches the same conclusion and claims that: “Indeed, as has been so often demonstrated, the concept of original is a product of the Enlightenment thinking. It is a modern invention, belonging to a materialist age, and carries with it all kinds of commercial implications about translation, originality and textual ownership”.

The repercussions of “this modern invention” on artistic translation/adaptation have been far reaching and have led to a devaluation of “derivative” works such as translations and adaptations. Paradoxically, the Enlightenment secures the liberty and rights of some by restricting the freedom of others. Confusing the concept of original with originality, lawmakers impose restrictions on certain modes of translation as well as on artistic development. Translation is no longer considered as an art but as a tool and therefore becomes a mechanical gesture charged with the impossible mission of cloning an “original.” Entrusted with an unrealistic task, the translator is deprived of his own right to authorship from the start. As Lawrence Venuti demonstrates clearly in *The Translator’s Visibility*, translation becomes synonymous with entrapment:

British and American law defines translation as an ‘adaptation’ or ‘derivative’ work based on an ‘original work of authorship,’ whose copyright, including the exclusive right ‘to prepare derivative works’ or ‘adaptation,’ is vested in the ‘author.’ The translator is thus subordinated to the author, who decisively controls the publication of the translation during the term of the copyright for the ‘original’ text, currently the author’s lifetime plus fifty years. Yet, since authorship here is defined as the creation of a form or medium of expression, not an idea, as originality in language, not thought, British and American law permits translations to be copyrighted in the translator’s name, recognizing that the translator uses another language for the foreign text and therefore can be understood as creating an original work. In copyright law, the translator is and is not an author.

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28 I am aware of the existence of *lettres patentes*, issued under *le privilège du roi*, limiting the rights of playwrights during the 15th century. Yet these documents do not specifically concern literary adaptations, but highlight power relations and censorship at play in theatrical representation.

29 Susan Bassnet, “When is a Translation Not a Translation,” *op. cit.*, 38.

30 *Le Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* states that the substantive *originalité* appears for the first time in the 16th century and means “lineage extraction.” During the 17th century, *originalité* is defined as the “quality of being original,” but in 1722, in France the word *originalité* is associated with strangeness and peculiarity (1385). Nowadays, *originalité* is most often associated with the idea of uniqueness in creativity as opposed to numeric singularity.

Given this second-rate legal status, undermining his work as well as his rights to authorship, the translator/adaptor occupies a “space in between,” where his right to creativity is challenged and often denied.

The translator/adaptor is entrusted with the difficult task of translating the untranslatable, namely “a pure language”\(^{32}\), undecipherable by the writer himself. Trapped within such ambiguous legal discourse, nowadays translation and adaptation raise numerous questions left unanswered regarding the protection of an author’s ideas and intentions.

The epistemological shift that occurred during the 18\(^{th}\) century led individuals to see translation as a tool and no longer as an art. As a consequence, fidelity, faithfulness and accuracy became primary criteria in the evaluation of translated work. Translation ceased to be artistic and became associated with mechanical production affecting in its wake the freest mode of translation, i.e. adaptation. In such an environment, adaptation was seen as the epitome of betrayal and had to justify the choice of its sources. The positivist approach to translation adopted by 19\(^{th}\) century scholars and publishers also contributed to the underestimation of translations, for they were constantly measured against originals, which were themselves the result of careful constructions\(^{33}\). By inventing “originals” the Enlightenment introduced a concept singularising texts and depriving them of their offspring. The quest for single authentic texts officially recognized as the only “originals” threatened literature with impoverishment by eliminating other possible sources. These taxonomical devices, which had a dramatic impact on creativity in all intellectual, religious, and artistic areas, nevertheless had a positive influence on literature as they also generated rebellious reactions on the part of poets and writers—such as the symbolists—who started reflecting on the act of writing and saw it as a system of “correspondences”\(^{34}\) or kinships. Writing was seen as a network of activities involving cognitive and sensorial participation. From this viewpoint, writing could no longer be associated with singularity but rather with plurality and fragmentation.

It is not until the deconstruction age, in the seventies, that translations are finally awarded the status of “originals” by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s deconstructive gesture suggests an

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\(^{32}\) Walter Benjamin coined the expression in *The Task of the Translator*. According to Benjamin, “pure language” as original thought only exists in an individual’s mind; any linguistic representation of pure language is sheer reduction of it.


\(^{34}\) The idea of “correspondances” developed by Baudelaire attests to this new vision of literature and poetry as complex networks of creation as opposed to singular production.
economy between two opposite poles complementing one another in such a way as to prevent us from distinguishing the point of origin. For Derrida any concept, idea or statement can always be overturned and validated by an opposite term, thus revealing a state of tension exemplified by the play of différence. In Derrida and the Economy of Différance, Irene Harvey explains: “The origin of deconstruction is différence, yet the reverse is also true. The difference, however, is that according to Derrida, différance can no longer be considered as an origin, pure and simple”35. Derridean différance joins opposites in a movement of revolution showing that discourse is a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape. Any statement is reversible, for there is no point of origin.

In “Des Tours de Babel” [Babel Towers], Derrida uses the plural intentionally and describes translation as a maturing stage where the “original” text gives birth to another “original” and undergoes a transformation derived from a desire to communicate. By raising the status of the translation to that of an original text, Derrida allows us to consider the process from a new perspective as the author draws our attention to the metonymics of translation and highlights its power of regeneration by deconstructing the word Babel:

Babel: first a proper name, granted. But when we say “Babel” today, do we know what we are naming? Do we know whom? If we consider the survival of a text that is a legacy, the narrative or the myth of the tower of Babel, it does not constitute just one figure among others. Telling at least of the inadequation of one tongue to another, of one place in the encyclopedia to another, of language to itself and to meaning, and so forth, it also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. In this sense it would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on.36

The deconstruction of Babel enables Derrida to demonstrate, firsthand, the limitless possibilities of translation by presenting it as a developing process: “The ‘Tower of Babel’ does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics”37.

Derrida’s approach to translation is less reductive than that of Benjamin’s, for whom any translation of “pure language” (mental

37 Ibidem, 165.
representation) is associated with reduction. On the contrary, Derrida explores the capabilities of translation by highlighting metonymic reading. Translation becomes an endless search for lost unity. According to Derrida, translation becomes a dynamic process engaged in a dialectics between desire and the very impossibility to satisfy this desire. The very impossibility to thoroughly meet that desire is precisely what motivates the act of translation. The focus is no longer on the content of the message but rather on the power to communicate as well as on the motivation behind it. Translation becomes synonymous with revelation as language becomes a living organism. Under the microscope of translation, language becomes unstable, ungraspable, independent and even more desirable. It is actually through translation that man becomes “consciously” aware of the potential of expansion of language and experiences first-hand, what Barthes names a “plural text”\(^{38}\). By deconstructing a text, the translator perceives the possibility of multiple texts as well as the impossibility to carry them all across and to fully embrace language. Translation is both the awareness of one’s limits and the discovery of the limitless and expanding boundaries of the process. Therefore, translation ought to be assessed in terms of expansion and transformation rather than be viewed as a closed and fixed procedure. Translation is a good metaphor for the open text as it illustrates one reading while suggesting the possibility of many other readings.

As we have seen, translation and adaptation have followed similar paths, developed a kinship and undergone significant changes through history. From the Middle Ages through the 17\(^{th}\) century, translation was considered as a precious tool to acquire knowledge as well as an art and an opportunity to express one’s originality. Yet, during the eighteenth century a clear dichotomy was established between original and translation and the concept of translation was reduced to a mechanical act. Even though we can argue that the clash between original and translation has always been lurking beneath the surface—Du Bellay denounces certain modes of translation while praising others, and the expression “belles infidèles” is living proof attesting to the controversy raised by translation—we clearly observe that a particular type of translation described as “adaptation” was deemed acceptable until the 18\(^{th}\) century when it suddenly was seen under the light of “plagiarism”\(^{39}\).


\(^{39}\) “Plagiarism [From Latin plagiarius a kidnapper, literary thief]. The appropriation of someone’s artistic, musical, or literary work for personal ends. Because most artists are affected by other artists, it is not always easy to decide where legitimate influence ends and plagiarism begins. The term is usually reserved, however, for the flagrant lifting of material in an unchanged or only slightly changed form and its dissemination as the plagiarist’s own work. In oral and scribal societies, most performers ‘plagiarized,’ in the sense that they borrowed material but
It is probably no coincidence that we observe in France the emergence of the word “plagiat” to qualify a work of art that replicates an original work at the end of the 17th century followed by the verb “plagier”40 in 1801. Until then, only the noun “plagiaire” existed, stressing a person’s breach of the code of ethics instead of pointing to the deed or product. Again, we can clearly perceive an evolution from moral to materialistic issues in the extension of lexical expressions. The proliferation of terms qualifying this act of appropriation reflects a tendency to cultivate one’s ego (the author’s) as well as the fear of the superiority of competitors. Under the cover of protection, competition is restricted and artistic development placed under the microscope of the law.

Works cited


40 The *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* mentions the existence of the word « plagiaire » used as a noun and an adjective in 1555, borrowed from the Latin word *plagarius* that meant the one who steals slaves from others, also used to qualify a person who steals ideas from others.


