

The Reproduction of Visual Pictures in Poetry Translation

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Abstract

It is generally recognized that poetry is the most difficult genre of literature to translate because linguistic competence alone does not guarantee an overall transference of all poetic factors. The soul of poetry is its aesthetic sense which can be conveyed in the light of picture reproduction to achieve aesthetic harmony and evoke similar emotional response in target readers. To achieve this goal, a descriptive analysis of translated poems from two perspectives, namely, reproduction of formal beauty and inner beauty, reproduction of static and motional pictures, are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: poetry translation, visual beauty, picture reproduction

1. Introduction

As the most evocative and condensed literary form, poetry is the gem of a language and the crystallization of a culture. Accordingly, poetry translation has attracted more attention and endeavor than any other forms of literature. However, it is also generally recognized that poetry is the most difficult genre of literature to translate because linguistic competence alone does not guarantee an overall transference of all poetic factors. The soul of poetry is its aesthetic sense which, however, faces a dilemma of the balance between form and content and thus results in a deviation of aesthetic qualities and distorted understanding and appreciation of the poem in target readers. Therefore, transference of aesthetic features in poetry translation is of paramount importance.

Enlightened by the close connection between poetry and picture, this paper discusses poetry translation in the light of picture reproduction to achieve aesthetic harmony and evoke similar aesthetic sense and emotional response in target readers.

To achieve this goal, the paper employs literature research method and comparative analysis approach to give a descriptive analysis of the examples of translated poems from two perspectives, namely, reproduction of formal beauty and inner beauty, reproduction of static and motional pictures.

2. Literature Review

The close connection between poetry and picture has been long recognized by both Western and Chinese artists. Lucius Mestrius Plutarch, a Greek philosopher stated that poetry had been regarded as intangible picture and picture as tangible poetry. Ben Johnson once said, "... poetry is a speaking picture, and picture a mute poetry...". To the Chinese, "painting in poetry and poetry in painting" has been one of the criteria for the evaluation of excellence in works of art. Traditional Chinese painting is a combination in the same picture of the arts of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal engraving. In ancient times most artists are both poets and painters.

In the history of translation theories and practice, many translators and translation theorists have compared literary translation to painting and translators to painters. In Western translation cycles, this could be traced back to the 18th century when this comparison was very popular. For example, J. Dryden in *Sylvae* and Alexander Fraser Tytler both compared translators to painters. In China, similar propositions enjoyed a prestigious status as well.

"Visual beauty", as Wang Ping put it, was "a crucial part of artistic value of literary language. (Wang Ping, 2002: 47)" According to him, in literary translation, the translator was expected to perceive the visual beauty inherent in the original work with artistic sensitivity and reproduce it accurately in the target language. Some other scholars, such as Liu Shicong & Zhang Bohong (2002), Jiang Qiuxia (2002), Xu Yuanchong (2003), Huang Guowen (2003), Lu Gan (2012), Xin Hongjuan & Qin Yuanzhou (2014), Su Chong (2019), to list just a few out of many, have discussed reproduction of original pictures in literary translation, especially in poetry translation

from different perspectives. Different names maybe they are, for instance, “image actualization” by Jiang Qiuxia (2002), but to the very essence, they are similar---all about reproduction of original pictures in target text. Recent research has witnessed an interdisciplinary study of image translation, i.e, Gestalt image (image-G) within the framework of cognitive translology. “The organized Gestalt whole---Gestalt image (image-G) by nature, is not only a subjectively unified and artistically integrated aesthetic category, but also a sentimental artistic scene with cognitive subjects’ aesthetic optimization (Su Chong, 2019: I).”

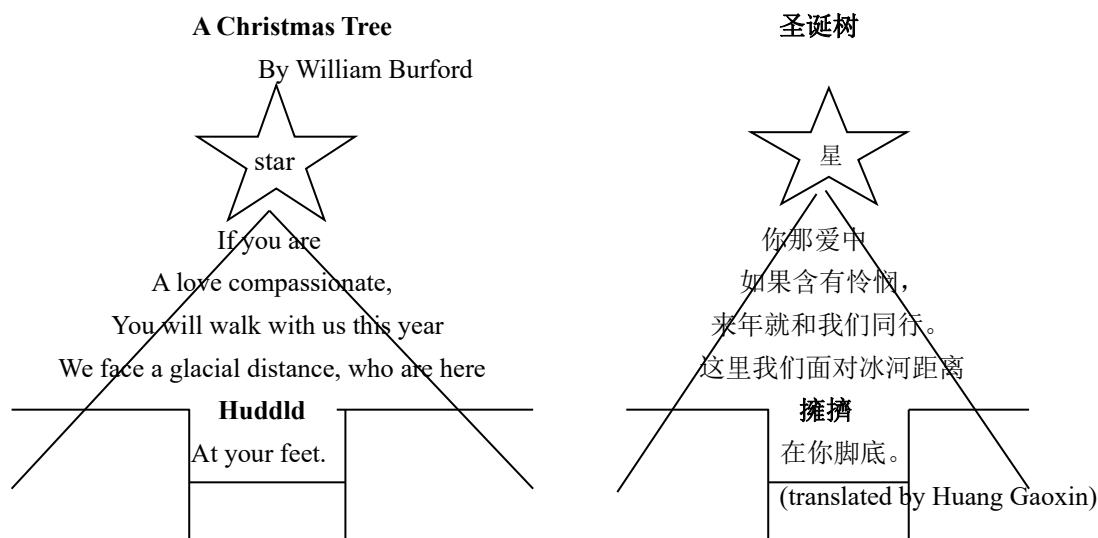
However, “the existing research fails to achieve the unity of translators’ subjectival psychic reality and objective language realization of source text (Su Chong, 2019: I).” Accordingly, this paper aims to discuss the proposition from an integrated view and give a descriptive analysis exemplified by some well-chosen poems to find out the different interpretations, diverse ways of reproducing the original pictures and different aesthetic effects that the changes cause.

3. Reproduction of Formal Beauty vs. Inner Beauty

Formal beauty refers to the disposition or layout of characters or words in a poem. Formal beauty is the initial and pivotal characteristic that distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature. The unique arrangement of characters or words conveys some special meanings, which means more than a form. Form is part of theme significance or emotional inclination that the author wants to express. Form, in the case of poetry, is as significant as its content but more vivid than that. Form is part of the integrity of poetry. Consequently, ignoring the formal beauty in poetry translation is a tremendous loss in transferring artistic and thematic qualities.

The most obvious and representative formal beauty of poetry finds adequate expression in “altar poem”. Altar poem, naming after a poem “The Altar” attributed to George Herbert (1592-1633), a metaphysical poet, refers to a special type of poems in which figuration is elaborately designed into a particular shape to imply its content and theme.

“Altar poem” is the most suitable example for the criterion of “poetry in painting and painting in poetry”. It impresses a direct and overall image on readers at their first glance before their access to the content.



The poem named “Christmas Tree” is exactly a Christmas tree in shape with a “star” at the top of it. It is worth mentioning the “stem” of the tree--- “huddld”. The right word should be “huddled”. But it is not a mistake of the author. It is the author that intentionally missed the letter “e” for the purpose to make the readers feel “huddled” with three “d” huddling together. The author is marvelous for changing this word because he visualizes the meaning of the word by endowing it a “huddled face”.

Then let us see the translated poem by Huang Gaoxin.

First, the translated poem is also in the shape of Christmas tree with “星 (star)” at the top of it. As for the stem, the translator who must have noticed it, does not reduce the components in the characters “拥挤”. Instead, he changes the simplified characters into ancient Chinese characters with more strokes: “擁擠”. This is different in approach but equally satisfactory in result because the original poet tends to make a “huddled” impression by missing a letter while the translator achieves the same goal by adding more strokes in the characters of “擁擠”.

Let us see another example by British poet Roger McGough.

40-Love	
Middle	aged
Couple	playing
Ten-	nis
When	the
Game	ends
And	they
Go	home
The	net
Will	still
Be	be-
tween	them

3 比 0

中	年
夫	妇
打	网
球	打
完	后
回	家
那	球
网	仍
隔	在
他	们
中	间

(translated by Huang Gaoxin)

This is a more interesting example. The erect in-between line is like the tennis net. The words or parts of words separated by the middle line are like the tennis ball that falls onto the ground on both sides alternately. And the process of reading is like watching a tennis game. Our eyeballs shift back and forth with the “ball” falling alternately on both sides of the net. The title of this poem is like a scoreboard beside the playground because the number 40 represents 3 scores and love for 0 in tennis game. The title, however, can also be regarded as a hint of the poem’s theme, i.e., the marital condition---aloof and estranged relationship in middle-aged couples. The erect line symbolizes both the tennis net and a “wall” which remains between the couple even after the tennis game ends.

Is the formal beauty of this poem fully transferred to the target text? Let us see the translation by Huang Gaoxin. First of all, the “net” and “scoreboard” are remained the same in target text. Thanks to the quadrate form of Chinese characters, the orderly shape looks more like to tennis ball in the translated version. And the number of the total lines is the same. In other words, the falling times are equal to the original. To my way of thinking, the number of lines or the falling times are meaningful. As I mentioned above, this poem compares marital condition of middle-aged couples to a tennis game so the back and forth flying of the ball can be regarded as communication between the couples in agreement or disagreement, friendly discussions or quarrels. But the author may suggest that after so many “rounds” of communication, the “net” still remains. Therefore, the number of total lines in translation should be kept consistent with the original. And the translation does maintain it.

Apart from “altar poems”, formal beauty in poetry also lies in some special arrangement of words or characters such as rhyme, alliteration, or some word forms.

Let us see another example.

无边落木萧萧下，不尽长江滚滚来。（杜甫）

The beauty of these two lines lies in two groups of characters “木萧萧” and “江滚滚”. The character “萧” has a “サ” at the top which means “grass” in Chinese. Grass can be regarded as one type of “wood” (木). The characters “江”, “滚”, “滚” all have a “シ” which means “water” in Chinese. This kind of formal beauty on the basis of character structure is very difficult to be reproduced in English translation.

The boundless forest **sheds** its leaves **shower** by **shower**;

The endless river **rolls** its waves **hour** after **hour**.

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

In this translation, Xu takes full consideration of the formal feature of the original lines and translates the two groups of characters into phrases in alliteration. To be exact, Xu transfers “サ” by employing words with alliteration of “sh” and transfers “シ” by employing words with alliterations of “r” and “h”.

Alliteration, as a popular form of expression in English poetry, is easily accepted and widely appreciated by Western readers. Here, alliteration is very close in spirit to the character groups with “サ” in one group and “シ” in the other. Moreover, “shower by shower” is not only close to the meaning of the original expression “萧萧” (/schio/) but also onomatopoeically close to the rustling sound of falling leaves. “Hour after hour” describing the endless flowing water is also close to the meaning of “不尽长江滚滚来”. Thus the formal beauty of the original lines has been transferred and reproduced by alliteration in target text.

Nevertheless, aesthetic features in a poem mostly reside in its inner pictures described. This does not mean that formal beauty is inferior to inner beauty. However, paying only attention to the beauty of form and ignoring the beauty of content is like painting only the form but not the soul. This is why I delve deeper to discuss inner beauty. Inner beauty here refers to scenes, pictures or images evoked and sketched in the readers’ mind when they read a poem. Poetry is the most convincing representative in conveying images and pictures. Poetry translation, in this sense, is image transference and picture reproduction. Complicated as a translation is, the translator in the process of translation is expected not only to understand the surface meaning but also to sketch the potential pictures described in the original and try to reproduce them in the same way in target text. Therefore, poetry translation is like reproducing pictures by way of another device, another language.

Next are some examples for discussion.

Oread

Hilda Doolittle

Whirl up, sea---
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines,
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Over us with your pools of fir.

山林仙女

卷起波涛吧，大海——
卷起你的针叶松林，
将你高大的松涛
泼溅在我们的岩石上，
挥动你的绿在我们的头顶，
用你杉树的漩涡将我们淹没。

(translated by Gu Zixin)

奥丽特

翻腾吧，大海——
翻腾起你尖尖的松针，
把你巨大的松针
倾泻在我们的岩石上，
把你的绿扔在我们身上，
用你的池水似的杉覆盖我们。

(translated by Qiu Xiaolong)

As far as the inner image or picture concerned, this poem provides an appropriate material to turn it into a tangible picture. When we read the poem, we can imagine a field of pine trees undulating in the wind. The wind sways the trees and “whirls up” green waves of pine trees like waves in the sea.

Accordingly, the expression “松涛 (wave-like movement in the pines)” in Gu’s translation vividly visualizes the original image in target text. With the appearance of this word, target readers can understand “大海 (sea)” in the first line is but a metaphor comparing forest of pine trees to sea. When they finish reading it, they can understand what the poem is really about. On the basis of this understanding, target readers can enjoy the images and pictures in the translated poem and sketch a similar picture in their mind. In this sense, Gu’s translation is successful.

While Qiu translates “great pines” to “松针 (pine-needles)” instead of “松涛”. With only one character different, the image appearing in target readers’ mind is totally different. What is the relation between “needles” and sea? How can “needles” be “splashed” like water or any other liquids over rocks? Can we appreciate the expression of “pool of fir” in the same way as source readers do with the impression of “needles”? As a result, with one image different, the whole picture portrayed in target text appears not so harmonious as the original.

In conclusion, Gu’s success is thanks to his attention to the inner picture. He interprets the poem from a visual view and chooses “松涛” accordingly for “great pines” and consequently unites the other images like “sea, splash, pools of fir” harmoniously in the translated poem. In contrast, Ignoring the inner picture of the poem, Qiu’s translation pays much attention to the literal meaning of language fragments resulting in a deviation from the original picture, which hinders target readers from understanding and appreciating the poem.

However, both versions have ignored that with the word “over”, what the author may suggest is the amazing beauty of the waves of pine trees---the embracing green. In other words, the word “over” does not imply a high observing and describing angle in the sky but implies the green of pine trees is embracing. But in these two versions, both translators have used “在我们的头顶 (overhead)”, “遮没 (to shelter)” and “覆盖 (to cover)” to render “over”. By doing this, the observing perspective of the original has been changed and the final picture reproduced is a little different from the original.

4. Reproduction of Static Pictures vs. Motional Pictures

Static pictures here refer to motionless, static inner pictures produced in a poem by poetic arrangement or layout of language. A static picture is usually constructed by presenting motionless images employing noun phrases, stative verb phrases or some structures like participial noun, verbal noun, absolute construction or infinitive phrase.

Motional pictures refer to a sequence of pictures indicating “actions or events” marked by some dynamic verb phrases or clauses. Appreciating this type of poems is like to view a traditional Chinese garden and find the scenery ever changing with each step forward.

The static or motional characteristic should be kept consistent with that of the original pictures. That is to say, if the source text is static, changing the originally still pictures into dynamic ones would break the tranquility and the static beauty of the original pictures. The motionless is not equal to meaninglessness or dullness. Silence may speak more. On the other hand, if the motional occasion is transferred into quiescence, animate beings are frozen. The vigorous and dynamic images are turned into deadly sculptures. The dynamic picture characterizing “a step a scene” becomes a fixed photograph without any variation.

In short, both static and motional pictures in a poem express something. The diversity should not be ignored.

Let us take one of the poems of Liu Zongyuan (773-819), a great poet in Tang dynasty as our first example.

江 雪

柳宗元

千山鸟飞绝,

万径人踪灭。

孤舟蓑笠翁,

独钓寒江雪。

When we read the original poem, a picture appears in our mind like this: An old fisherman is fishing in his small boat alone with hills around covered by a heavy fall of snow and no trails of any animate beings round about.

The focus of this poem is the solitary old fisherman. The background---hills, paths and roads around, which the poet spent half of the text to describe, functions to give prominence to the leading figure. In the first two lines, with all the activities of animate beings described by “绝 (vanish)” and “灭 (disappear)”, a quite still and tranquil picture presents itself. Meanwhile, the quiet old man against such a quiescent background successfully draws all readers’ attention and appears to be the only alive and animate being in this “fishing picture in snow”.

From the analysis above, it is obvious that the whole poem presents a static picture before readers, especially the picture portrayed in the first two lines. The old fisherman in the third line is also a motionless image. But against such a tranquil background, his emergence becomes vivid and lively.

Snow on the River

No singing of birds in the mountain ranges

No footprints of men on a thousand trails

There **is** only one boat on the water

With an old man in a straw rain cape

Who **stands** on deck and **fishes** by himself

Where the snow falls on the River.

(translated by Wang Shouyi)

In this translation, the first two lines are rendered to two noun phrases without literal equivalence to the two verbs: “绝” and “灭”. Whereas in the last two lines’ translation, the translator adds “there-be” structure to depict the existence of the lonely boat and “stands” to narrate an accompanying action of the fisherman when he is fishing.

Reading this version, a disagreeing picture appears. For one thing, the action of “standing” may deviate from the original picture because a fisherman in traditional Chinese culture seldom fishes on his feet. Secondly, adding two originally absent verbs “is” and “stand” weakens the prominence of the fisherman’s main action--- “to fish”. It seems to add too many actions irrelevant to the conspicuous action of fishing. In consequence, too many actions make the picture described in the translated poem too motional, which breaks the tranquility, the main character of the original.

River Snow

From a thousand hills, birds flights have **vanished**

On ten thousand paths, human traces **wiped out**;

Lone boat, an old man in straw cape and hat,

Fishing alone in the cold river snow.

(translated by Burton Watson)

“Vanish” as an intransitive verb is explained “to pass quickly from sight” which implies a quick action and “wipe out” here refers to all human traces disappearing or being removed. Both of them are dynamic verbs indicating “actions”. As I have mentioned above, the first two original lines seem to produce a “motional” picture but actually not. The translation provides readers with an evanescent picture of “birds’ flight having vanished” and “human traces being wiped out”. In the source text, however, there are no such evanescent pictures. The source text only impresses us with a tranquil background to prepare for the appearance of the leading figure, the old fisherman.

In this sense, the translation foregrounds the background by endowing moving properties to should-be quiet scenery. The tranquility of the background is broken. The static-and-motional balance in the original is broken accordingly. As a result, the old fisherman's vividness is lost. He is turned out to be a sculpture instead of the only animate figure in the picture.

Fishing in Snow

From hill to hill no bird in flight
From path to path no man in sight
A lonely fisherman afloat
Is fishing snow in lonely boat.

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

In Xu's translation, the expressions “鸟飞绝” and “人踪灭” are translated into two noun phrases as “no birds in flight” and “no man in sight” respectively. The third line “孤舟蓑笠翁” was also rendered to a noun phrase “a lonely fisherman afloat”. There is only one verb “fish” in its present progressive form in the whole translation appearing in the last line corresponding to the original verb “钓”.

The dominant number of noun phrases in the first two lines' translation endues the background with static character in target text. The only verb “fish” in its present progressive form therefore stands out and pictures a vivid and vigorous fisherman's image as its source text does in the source readers.

枫桥夜泊

张继

月落乌啼霜满天，
江枫渔火对愁眠，
姑苏城外寒山寺，
夜半钟声到客船。

The theme of this poem is about feelings of nostalgia and homesickness of a man far away from home at a cold and quiet night. A sense of grief and loneliness emerges with the sight of setting moon, frosty sky, weak light on the river and the hearing of crow crying. All the scenes portrayed in the first two lines are like a static scene on a stage which presents before readers a gloomy picture and provides a still background for the whole poem and paves a way for the vagrant's loneliness. Then the bell tolls at midnight and the piercing sound breaks the tranquility of the night and the nostalgic dream of the roamer's as well.

Here the crying of crow (乌啼) in the first line functions to reinforce the melancholy of the picture for the reason that in traditional Chinese culture crow is the symbol of bitterness and pessimism. By bearing this in mind, we can infer that the crow's crying does not serve as a real action but as a background music in order to achieve similar effect as narrated in the famous line “鸟鸣山更幽” (“The mountain is more secluded while the birds are singing” by Xu Yuanchong). In other words, the crying of the crow does not suggest a noisy occasion but to serve as a foil to the tranquility of the night. A weak noise makes the night quieter.

Mooring by Maple Bridge at Night

At moonset **cry** the crows, **streaking** the frosty sky;
Dimly lit fishing boats 'neath maples sadly lie.
Beyond the city walls, from Temple of Cold Hill
Bells break the ship-borne roamer's dream and midnight still.

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

The first line enumerates three images, i.e., “月落 (moonset)”, “乌啼 (crow's cry)” and “霜满天 (frosty sky)” with parallel emphasis. These three images together form a quiet background with motional images interspersed. After translation, the translator changes the originally coordinate structures into a sentence with “the crow” ascending to the subject and the other two descending to subordinate structures. As a result, it changes the parallel position of these three images. The crow, originally as part of the background, is highlighted with its crying emphasized. By doing this, the three images presented one by one in source readers' mind are changed into one scene with the crying crow as the focus while the “setting moon” and “frosty sky” as its background.

Therefore, the tranquility of the original background is broken and the crying becomes motional enough to be noticed in target text.

Moreover, in the first line's translation, the addition of "streaking" meaning moving at high speed or rushing results in an effect like a lightening flashing in the sky. And the verb "streak" in its present progressive form illustrates a sense of acting. Thus the addition of the word ruins the motionless quality of the original picture.

Yet it is vivid to translate "到" in the last line into "break". For one thing, the verb "break" is followed by two objects--- "dream" and "midnight still", which expresses both the surface meaning and the deep meaning of the original line. Secondly, the verb "break" is a word with strong expressive force. More examples can be found in sentences like "Day breaks." or "The red flowers break the green of the picture." Therefore, when we read this line, we may visualize that the roamer is suddenly woken up and gets up to hear the bell tolling and his getting up ripples the river. It is certainly the bell tolling that "breaks the ship-borne roamer's dream and midnight still". The verb "break" does convey the dynamic feature of the original line and present before us a vivid "midnight picture".

5. Conclusion

The translation of poetry in the sense of picture reproduction is to evoke similar aesthetic sensitivity and emotional response in target readers. This article aims to discuss in target text how an original poem is visually reproduced in the light of painting because both poetry and picture similarly focus on perceiving pictures and projecting emotion. Therefore, it requires considering a poem as an aesthetic whole and trying to reproduce the aesthetic integrity by uniting various factors in a translated poem to their "should-be" positions according to the original's "artistic conception".

According to the study presented in this article, the writer dares to sum up the paper with some points for attention in translating poetry from the perspective of picture reproduction.

- 1) Try to keep the formal beauty, i.e., word layout or arrangement of a poem, which is the most direct and impressive aesthetic feature of a poem and much easier than the content in evoking emotional resonance in target readers. But this should not be at the cost of changing the original spirit of the poem.
- 2) The static or motional properties should be kept consistent with the original picture. The static-motional balance should be maintained as the original because both static and motional properties express and convey something. Breaking the balance will destroy the aesthetic balance of the original and deviate from the original writer's intention and emotion.

The investigation presented in this study only cast a slight glimpse on the phenomenon concerned. With this study, the writer sincerely hopes that more attention and interest from others will be paid to this area for the purpose of achieving better translation and appreciation of poetry.

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