

Beyond Fidelity: Translation as a Language that Doesn't Exist

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<Abstract>

Writers are artists and the translator is also a writer. Art is about being creative, and being creative means to imagine things otherwise. The compulsion to translate anything means transformation, meaning to imagine things differently or otherwise. Literary translation, is an art, and because all arts have a craft, translation must also incorporate considerations of style. And that is why translation necessitates a body of literature about the craft that is not only geared for specialists and academics, but also for a general audience interested in the generative process of how to translate.

As an educator who often teaches students who are just dipping their toes into the literary translation pool for the first time, I've found it difficult to find texts about translation practice that are as accessible and inspirational as those on the practice and craft of writing poetry or fiction. As the translation theorist Susan Bassnett has repeated in her work, while there is a large amount of material critiquing and analyzing translations of literature, there aren't a great deal of texts that deal with the generative process of translation. I have long felt that the discipline needs more texts about process and craft that are accessible, particularly to beginning students.

This paper is an evolution of a talk I gave at the 5th Yoo Yeong translation symposium. While the paper is mostly based on the craft and process of translation, because the theme of the symposium was Post-humanism and Translation, it also confronts ideas about the relationship between technology, literature, and literary production.

I will begin by discussing the attitude I take when I decide to translate and then go on to discuss the difference between technical and literary translation, and some of the economic and practical reasons for this difference. Next, I introduce a basic formula of my translation process and why I think translation is more than just bringing a source text into a target language. The third section of the paper will explain a hierarchical system of language that I apply to reading and producing language that can be applied to translation practice. The fifth

and final section uses Graham Harman's theory of the quadruple object to argue why we need to use the criteria of intensity and tension rather accuracy and fidelity when discussing and evaluating the translation of literature.

Keywords: translation practice, translation theory, object-oriented ontology, creative translation, poetics



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The translations will often be wrong But that doesn't matter

Since "Translate" is a made-up word For something that doesn't exist

- Liliane Giraudon translated by Lindsay Turner and Sarah Riggs

1. Introduction

There is a reason Italo Calvino begins his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* with an essay on "lightness." For Calvino, lightness is a kind of "weightless gravity." Gravity, everybody knows, is a constant. Physical weightlessness can be achieved under certain conditions. For instance, if you jump out of a plane and are in free-fall, then gravity is canceled out by your inertial force and you experience the feeling of weightlessness. But the feeling of weightlessness can be achieved in other ways as well. For instance, kissing someone you love might cause you to feel like you are floating up in the air like a cartoon. Consuming certain mind-altering substances and dancing like an octopus at a rave might create a sense of weightless. But no matter how you get to the weightless feeling, as long as you are in earth's orbit, the gravity of the earth is there and it will suck you into the ground.

At its very base, life is resistance to gravity. Gravity is always trying to pull us into our graves, deep into the ground. And, in some form, we do end up back there eventually. The lighter we make gravity feel, the less burdensome it will be. However, if you take yourself too seriously the gravity is very heavy. If you decide to translate art, and you fail, as all artists do, you will fall. If the gravity is too heavy, your vital organs or brain might get smashed, and that would be the end of your sanity if not your entire career. That's why I think it is greatly important that one should embrace lightness and not take themselves too seriously when they translate. That doesn't mean that the work should not be serious or done very seriously. The work always has gravity. What I mean is that the serious ego and the importance of the self can get in the way of serious work. Jill Costa for an interview in *the Paris Review* says that you

“have to be humble enough to accept that you’re secondary to the author, and yet have enough chutzpah to take that other language and transform it into your own, to put yourself on par with really great writers while never losing your own modesty. A strange combination.” What I think she is talking about is weightless gravity. This may seem like a contradiction, but balancing two conflicting thoughts in one head simultaneously is the first step in understanding paradox, which means understanding art. Paradox: translation is impossible, and yet it is done all the time. It requires of you to take the task extremely seriously, to be a writer, even if you are not *the* writer. And to be a writer, to be an artist, means that you have to submit yourself to the service of creation, which means play. And if you translate poetry, your task will be especially impossible, which means play will be all the more valuable. To seriously submit yourself to play, you have to let go of yourself and not yourself too seriously. Since I mostly translate poetry, that is how I approach the practice of translation.

Another reason not to take yourself too seriously is that by translating, and especially by translating poems, you will be facing a lot of rejection. If you take yourself too seriously this will be very painful. A big ego is easily wounded. But rejection is a good thing. Failure is a good thing. It means you are experimenting and putting your work out there. Being open to judgement means you are not averse to risk and failure. And risk-taking and failure means you are imagining things otherwise. To imagine things otherwise is another way of saying that you are making art.¹ If you receive any recognition, that is good, but ultimately failure is the default mode no matter how successful you are. Another paradox: You succeed by failing, and failing better, to paraphrase Beckett. So, you’ve got to know and to familiarize yourself with failure, make rejection your favorite drink, and keep it close in times when you succeed. Because success is scary. Success brings comfort. And comfort brings complacency.

Many of the writers I translate have made good friends of rejection and failure and know the value of not taking themselves too seriously. I am attracted work that embodies what Deleuze called *minor literature*. These authors may write in a language

¹ Timothy Morton talks about this in several of his books, so this is not an altogether original idea on my part.

like Korean or Lithuanian, but they write in a Korean and Lithuanian that is not representative of the language or nation. If a text pushes culture in a weird way which doesn't quite fit an acceptable or easy narrative, if it problematizes our relationship with language as a tool of communication, then it fits some of the criteria of what I am looking for when I am looking for things to translate. I have always felt in good company with the rejects, outsiders, and weirdos who don't take themselves too seriously. They are doing the serious work. Writing from the periphery or on the outside of a culture forces the culture to expand in order to meet it. Of all artists, perhaps poets are the ultimate outsiders. They are the least visible and least understood artists, but they do the most important work. They revivify language, give new meaning to dead words. Josef Brodsky argued that because we are aesthetic creatures, and art is the driver of the development of our species, poetry "being the highest form of locution – is, to put it bluntly, the goal of our species."

Perhaps the only profession that is less visible and more misunderstood than a poet is someone who decides to make it their job to translate poetry. Many of the people that translate poetry are poets themselves. While it is not a prerequisite to be a poet to translate poetry, it is more economically profitable to translate anything other than poetry. Beyond the fact that there isn't a viable market for poetry, to translate a poem, or should I say, to translate a poem well, requires a commitment that is both time intensive and spiritually exhausting. Like the characters in Roberto Bolano's *The Savage Detectives*, one of the reasons why poets translate poetry might be that when a poet goes abroad they might feel a responsibility to translate the poets of different countries. This could be because they feel it is necessary to share work that is not available in their mother tongue. But for a more selfish reason, to translate means also to grow and expand the poetic language a poet can use in their own work. What I mean is that when you translate a poem, you are forced to expand your language in order to meet the demands of the poem in its original. This is extremely rewarding to a person whose vocation is to revivify language.

Originally this paper was written for the 5th Yoo Yeong symposium at Yonsei University. The topic of that conference was translation in the posthuman era. In

practical terms of translation, I assume that “posthuman” means machine translation, like Google translate or Papago, or editing software like, so help us G-d, Grammarly. It is true that the majority if not all translators are using computers and software and have been doing so at least for as long as Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” has been around. But I believe we do have to take our relationship to the machines we use very seriously. I am in the habit of often quoting Walter Benjamin, and probably misunderstanding him. But something he said about art in the age of mechanical reproduction, which is the age of machines, is that it gives humans the opportunity to display their humanity in front of the machine. When the actor steps in front of the camera, it is their job to prove their humanity by acting human in the eye of the machine. I’m not very good at using computers and I don’t know how to program or talk in their language, but one thing I know about machines is that they are always serious. They do all kinds of wonderful things, but they never laugh at your jokes.

I.

“How does someone come to South Korea not knowing any Korean or anything about Korean literature and become a world class translator 8 years later?” That’s what one of my colleagues asked me when it became public that Soeun Seo, Hedgie Choi, and I got nominated for the National Translation Award in 2020 for our translation of Kim Yideum’s *Hysteria*. The answer to that question is that there is really no way to answer that question. Although our culture of prizes and awards suggests mastery is a real thing, I don’t think that recognition or artistic achievement is a sign of mastery. Mastery achieved through rigorous study, scholarship, or training, might be something that happens in other disciplines, but in poetry I think it is good to go in the opposite direction. It is best to always be an amateur or a beginner. My idea of language, and in particular, the language of the text, is that it exists materially, organically, and independently of a single person. No one can master it, be master of it, because it is a being itself. Heidegger said language is the house of being. But the house is itself a being. We don’t live in it. We are enmeshed in it. Yes, we dwell in it. But it also dwells in us. A poem, enmeshed with and primarily existing through language, has being just as much as the person who reads it or writes it or speaks it. Whether you encounter it

or it encounters you makes no difference. The language of a text continues to exist even in the absence of people who can read it. It is a material fact, but also a spiritual presence. Like Mallarmé's *fleur*, a flower in the absence of all earthly bouquets, our language should aspire to be both material and revelatory. Paradoxically, the revelatory potential of our language will continue to nourish and sustain the roots of the inarticulable, ineffable, and of course, untranslatable. "Poet be like God," Jack Spicer once said.

To go back to the question my colleague asked me, when we talk about translation excellence, are we talking about translation as a science or a technology? Are we talking about translation as an art? Are we talking about translation as a field of research? Does translation only require that a person be fluent in two languages? What do we mean by excellence?

Although it has become old-hat to debate whether translation is a science or an art, I think of my translation activities as either *techne* and *technik*. To come back to Heidegger, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, I think what he says is that *techne* is responsible for revealing truth in the world, as a form of poesis. *Technik*, on the other hand, is involved with manipulating and taking advantage and using resources in the world, as a form of negation. Although both is a making, they are productive in different ways. One is involved with the revealing of truth and one is involved with the manipulation and framing or enframing of resources. At first the romantic in me would like to say that all literary translation is *techne* and no *technik*, but this would be untrue. Although I aspire to revelation, a lot of my translation activities are reduced to nothing more than the most banal of consumer transactions.

The process between translating a poem I am invested in and translating a text I've been assigned to translate, is very different. Then there is the question of translating museum exhibition materials, critical essays on art or architecture, or translating lyrics for K-pop groups. I've done them all, and very few of the translation projects I do for money require of me to invest the time and energy necessary to try and give of myself what is needed in order to engage with the text in a deep and profound way. Although it is not as sexy to talk about as art, the social and material

conditions of a translation project matter just as much as the act of translation. If I'm getting paid to translate some lyrics by a K-pop group for what my bubby would call "bupkis," and I won't be getting any credit for my translation, and I have like 3-day window for a deadline, I am less interested in whether my translation of the lyrics owes any fealty to whatever "poetry" can be found in them.²

But if the conditions are right, then the work compels you to make an effort to make of the translation something more along the lines of *techne* rather than *technik*. The great American poet Edward Hirsch has an essay on how reading some poems is like discovering a letter in a bottle washed on the shore that is addressed only to you. Discovering a poem or a book you want to translate is something like that. It speaks to you directly, and compels you to translate it. And if it does, then you must aspire in your translations to reveal something truthful in the mode that they are done, in the attitude that you take in respect to the art. Translations can reveal borders or gaps between languages. They recreate or create something new within language that reveals truth *indirectly*, something in excess of the words on the page. Always the parts are more than the whole, and each bit can bring out weak implicatures that make up a style. The reason I say that truth is revealed indirectly is a philosophical matter that will require a much longer explanation that I'll provide later. First let's talk about style.

In her book *A Critical Introduction to Translation Studies*, Jean Boase-Beier says it is weak implicatures that signify to the reader that a text is a work of art rather than let's say an advertisement for beer or an instruction manual on how to assemble vacuum cleaners. Weak implicatures go beyond primary lexical or syntactic meaning, seducing the reader to put in a great deal of work to create meaning. Weak implicatures create depth, which require exploration. Some translations, even if they are considered fiction or poetry, aren't able to successfully carry over or create weak implicatures in the target language that signify to the reader that it is a work of art. When that happens, it is a result of the translator not developing a philosophy of style in the target language. For me, that relationship has a lot to do with the economics of

² Commissioned translations of literature lead more often than not to this kind of rushed, less-than-ideal translation relationships.

the relationship between the translator and the text. If the translator is in a strictly transactional relationship with the text, then the power of revelation will be diminished. If the translator thinks of the act of translation as just a carrying over of meaning, then the language will be less ideal, less a flower independent of all earthly bouquets, and more a store of bouquets filled with fake flowers. The sum will be more than the parts. When I read a poor translation of a poem, especially a poor translation of a poem that I know was paid for by some government agency, I am depressed not so much by a carelessness on the part of the translator, but by the fact that I am reminded that language is a tool to transmit content for sale and / or consumption. It is the nuts and bolts that hold together the world of commodity exchange, and is a product within itself. Instead of language aspiring to revelation, it is reduced to a bare commodity. Translation work is underpaid and undervalued. So, translation, even translation of great texts, is often reduced to this kind of activity.

II.

This brings us to the question of what is good literary translation exactly? And can it be taught?

I have a kind of lame analogy I like to use from the movies. In the early oughts my favorite movies were the Matrix trilogy. I'm a sucker for Kung Fu and dystopia. Anyone who has seen the film remembers how the Matrix appears as neon green 0s and 1s flowing vertically down a black screen. We are introduced to characters who can read the flowing language and by reading it, they can see what is going on visually within the Matrix. The world seems to be coded to have the same physics and dimensions as our world. But when Neo, the main character, is shown that others have powers like being able to jump between buildings, he is being introduced to possibilities in how to manipulate the language of the code. Morpheus shows him that it is possible, and Neo tries to jump across buildings like Morpheus. And he fails, over and over again, and he falls. It is because he has not taken a leap of faith, he does not believe completely. And yet he has opened up himself to the possibility that one

can jump between buildings, because he has seen it done. The moment in which Neo begins to believe he can jump between two buildings, when he tries to do it even if he fails, that is like the moment when the translator might become something like an artist. Some people never make that leap because they are scared. Some people see the people jumping across buildings, and they think, those people are nuts, and they walk past. Some people see that it is happening, and they try to build a bridge across the buildings, and they pretend not to see the jumping, because to see it would be to admit it might not be an impossibility. And some people just watch from a distance and take notes and try to explain it. And I guess this is what I want to talk about. Neo seeing that code can be manipulated and then trying to manipulate it himself is like a translator recognizing how a writer might create a weak implicature and then trying to mimic how that writer did that in a different language. Once you see that it is possible, and you have worked up some bravery to be willing to try to do it also, you can take risks in translations like an artist. The best translations are done by translators who try to jump between the buildings.

But not every craft choice is a jump between buildings. This brings us to something very important, which in a weird way also has to do with the Matrix. To address the topic of translation in the posthuman era, to answer the question whether or not machines will take over for human translators or even human writers, is not as important as answering the question whether there will be any human readers, or should I say, any human left in the reader. It is true that translators are writers, but we are creative readers before we are writers. To see someone jump between buildings is different to see that it is possible to jump between them. It is the difference between being caught in the suspension of disbelief, and realizing you too can create the conditions where belief can be suspended. In that way translation is an act of reading, reading in a different way, reading a poem in a language that doesn't exist yet. This may sound weird and what my non-academic friends call university fu-fu, but I will try briefly to make it clear. There are a million variations of this, but most translation scholars will have it that the diagram between a source and target goes something like:

Source Text → Target Language

And that sounds simple and fair enough, but I find it more useful to think of it like this:

Source → Imagined thing → Language that doesn't exist yet

Why does the language not exist yet? Because you haven't brought it into being. It exists only as a possibility. But is nevertheless not unreal. It is not a product, but a process. When we say target language, the only way we can see it is in hindsight. This is not particularly valuable for someone trying to imagine the future. To put it in a different way, when you read language on the surface, the language is like a flotilla of fishing boats floating around on the sea from a bird's eye view at night. The lights of the boats are what you see, but they are not the only thing there. There is the sea, the chopping of the waves, whatever the nets and traps have caught beneath the boats. Then there are the whales and birds and discarded tires in the sea and little plastic bottles floating around. It is everything that might be stated and necessary to create an environment, but it is also all that is unstated and imagined. Just because you only see the lights that belong to the boats, doesn't mean they are the only things there. You have to include the possibility of everything existing in that environment without saying it explicitly or explaining it all (unless you are going to do a thick translation).

But before we can even get there, the reader has to open themselves up, allow themselves to be moved in order so that they can imagine. Aesthetics is the power of feeling. Feelings create emotions and emotion has something to do with motion. No matter how powerful it may be, a text can never move someone who has shut themselves to it. And if they are never moved by it, their belief will never be suspended, and their experience of reading will always be less about experience and more about knowledge acquisition or transaction: it will always be more *technik* and less *techne*, more Source → Target.

Sometimes I think it would be good if we were able to plug our readers into texts the way that characters plug into the Matrix, through a cord that goes directly into the brain. These days I find that a lot of conversations about literature or translation are less interested in talking about the aesthetics and the revelatory power of literature,

and are more interested in talking about the politics of how literature is created, what service it has to society, the economics behind the literature, or the political representation or identification of the author or characters in the text. I find myself reading more and more having conversations about literature where reading is a form of extraction with the brain mining the text for political talking points. This impulse must be rejected.³ So, the first step to any translation is to not treat the text as a body of knowledge, but to treat it as experience, either in part or wholly, as an organic, aesthetic thing that exists and has a life of its own. I think an artful translation is one where the translator has first tried to enmesh themselves in the environment of the text and tried to embody themselves within its language. They are involved in reading imaginatively, producing the possibility of a language that does not exist yet. In short, by engaging in that act of imagination, they are creating a world, and that is also about inventing the future.

However, before one can invent the future, they have to go back or step sideways to the past. That is why it is incredibly important to read what I will refer to as parallel texts. Originally a parallel text is when a translation appears next to its source text, hence parallel to it, so the source is made visible. However, a text does not get invented independently. As Octavio Paz once said, a translation is a translation is a translation. All texts are unique, but are never original, and therefore be considered a translation of another text. Beyond the source language, there are other, invisible, parallel texts that will give the reader a greater understanding of the text. I mean, it is not that you cannot experience or be moved by great texts without having read the philosophical, historical, or theoretical contributions of other texts it might have emerged from and is in dialogue with, but reading these parallel texts will greatly contribute to the depth of a reader's relationship with the work they are reading and wish to translate. You can also consider all the texts you have consumed throughout your life to be parallel texts. They will not only affect your reading of the source text, but the future language that will be born out of it. That is why it is so important to read

³ My argument is not that texts don't have political or social meaning, only that, to paraphrase Graham Harman, that we shouldn't reduce literature to being the handmaid of politics.

and experience widely. Not just with books. But other artforms as well. So just to revise the formula:

Parallel Texts→ Source→ Imagined thing→Language that doesn't exist yet

So how is translation different than just writing poetry or as a form of critique? We can break down the difference here. An "original" poem also has a source. Some sources are what's known as "the muse." Some poets I work with, like Kim Yideum, say there is no muse. And they work from their world and from experience. So, they say, their source text is material reality. The difference between the source text of a translation and the source of a poem is the relationship between a source text and the language that doesn't exist yet of a translation cannot be broken or forgotten. The language of a poem doesn't evolve out of a source text, it can't be identified or misidentified as a double, imposter, or copy like the language that doesn't exist yet of a translation. Traduttore, traditore! A priori, the translation is seen as suspect, as the doppelganger or twin, as the imposter or traitor. The poem, on the other hand, from the moment it is born, it grows further and further away from its source in the world. Does anyone really care if William Carlos Williams actually saw a red wheelbarrow? Poems are not intrinsically and forever linked to whatever they are born out of.

Criticism or analysis, which is also an art form, engages with a source in the same way a translation does. Both require a "reading" of a source text, and therefore cannot be disentangled from it completely. Translation differs in that it nurtures the life of its source text, continues to add to its durability, while criticism and theory can continue to gain strength and exist even if the sources they talk about have long withered away. Moreover, they can usurp and destroy the lifeforce of their sources.⁴

III.

Now to go back to the Matrix analogy. You will recall that Neo, once he learns he can jump across buildings realizes over the course of the film that he has other

⁴ A prime example of this is Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon's book is much more relevant, discussed, and widely read than the majority of the novels that Fanon discusses, save for Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

powers. He can move quick enough to dodge bullets, he can fly, he can jump into enemies and make them explode. He has all these powers and grows stronger as the narrative of the trilogy progresses. At some point he is able to blow up everything in his path like some demi-god. Obviously, in the service of storytelling, he cannot immediately become some all-powerful superman. There has to be some restraint. It should not be a point of debate that the translator is a writer. And if the translator is a great stylist, the translator has a lot of powers like Neo in the Matrix. This should be evidenced by the fact that some of our greatest translators are also themselves great writers in their own right. But just because the translator has these powers, does not mean that they should use them all the time. This gets to my next point: the translator, as a writer, often needs to employ restraint. This is because what we are shooting at is not pleasure, but the sublime. To paraphrase Shelley, we need the sublime in order to free us from the slavery of pleasure. And the sublime is achieved through a kind of “plane radiance,” to quote Harold Bloom, and therefore requires restraint. As someone who has been writing and translating poetry for a long time, I have a strong compulsion to fly around and do some miraculous, demi-god, miracle spectacle making. It is pleasurable to do so. In order to control this pleasure compulsion, I feel I need some method of control to reign myself in. A strategy of restraint creates tension, and the sublime is a ship that sails on the subtle winds of anxiety, and tension, so, I have this rudimentary system of reading and identifying ways of signifying. It is a system of identifying and utilizing craft in order to create a style. It is also a system that I use so that my translations don’t deviate too far from the source text in terms of the way they speak, the kind of affect they create.

The system is what I like to call the ladder of language. It’s a hierarchy of sorts, and I believe was first introduced to me by my wonderful teacher, the great poet Jane Miller. Here is a kind of model for it:

- Icon
- Symbol
- Metaphor
- Simile

- Image
- Description
- Cliché

A longer explanation of this system deserves its own talk, but I will explain some of the elements of the system very briefly.

- Description is the very base of language. It is a fact or thought or concept or idea put directly

le. It's very cold outside.

- Images create a sensory environment for the reader to enter the world of the text. The difference between descriptions and images is the same as that time-honored cliché, showing versus telling.

le. In the alley outside my house I heard footprints being made in the snow and I shivered.

- A simile is used for when regular language cannot encompass the meaning that is trying to be conveyed, and therefore a basic comparison is needed.

le. In the alley outside my house I heard footprints being made in the snow and I shivered. The sky was dark like moonlight on a crow's back.

- A metaphor is used not to compare, but to stand in for and amplify the effect or meaning of a thing. It is more powerful than a simile. It often introduces unnatural and difficult associations of meaning.

le. In the alley outside my house I heard footprints being made in the snow and I shivered. The sky was dark like moonlight on a crow's back. At dawn that lack of light was my heart. It disappeared.

- Symbols in a poem usually happen when the author creates a metaphor that repeats and builds and comes to symbolize something socially or historically significant beyond the realm of the poem. For instance in the poem “달나라의 장난” by 김수영 (“Moon Country Mischief” by Kim Soo-young), there is the

repeated metaphor of a spinning top. Over and over again the top spins and repeats and because a symbol for destiny, and man's inability to control their destiny.

- Icons are symbols that have come to accrue so much social and historical meaning that they have come to represent things that are much larger and of greater weight than a symbol. For instance, the golden arches of McDonald's is a brand, but it also has come to represent globalization, American hegemony, etc.. So if I put some golden arches into a poem, then many people will associate it with McDonald's or globalization. Some other examples of icons are the wings that Yi Sang's characters spreads at the end of his short story "wings," Tarkovsky's horses, or Basquiat's crowns.
- A cliché is what happens when someone says something like "that lack of light was my heart." Or it tries to do something like comparing a translator to a science fiction hero. A cliché is when the language is transparent, worn out, and has distanced itself from its original meaning. A saying that has gone into use which no longer has the same kind of analogous meaning, like "the frog in the well" or "the early bird catches the worm" has become cliched. Have you ever seen a frog in a well? Have you ever seen the early bird catching the worm? In both cases the metaphorical language has ceased to have the power it once had and now these expressions simply stand in for the meaning.

I use this language ladder when I translate in order to identify the kind of language that is used in a source text so I can attempt to recreate the way it signifies. The translator has a lot of wiggle room, but if the source text uses a metaphor or a simile or an image or description, I usually try to do the same thing in the target language. I also use this system as a way to read and compare translated texts to original texts. Some translators feel free to take the source language and replace a description with an image or even go up the ladder and use a metaphor or symbol that doesn't appear in the source language. That requires some major chutzpah. Some translations don't carry over metaphors or similes and replace them with descriptions or images. The higher you go up the ladder, the riskier the climb, the lower you get, the less impactful.

Word for word meaning is less important than the way in which things are said. Translators have different approaches to how they deal with language. If you consistently make choices as a translator that move up and down the ladder, you are illustrating artistic intent, and therefore are developing a philosophy for your craft. The important thing is that you can recognize when you are doing it and have a good reason for it. When you take big chances, you risk having an author chasing you around, wanting to beat you with a stick for having changed her images to similes. You also risk having academics dissect your choices, risk them calling you an impostor or hack, and you need to have a good defense at the ready.

IV.

My last point on style is this: even if translators are demi-gods like Neo, language can break, be broken and do strange, inexplicable, and miraculous things in a source text that can't be replicated in a target language. At these moments, what is required of the translator is surrender. Recall the last fight scene in the Matrix trilogy. The quasi-god Matrix thing asks Neo to have a showdown with Agent Smith. Agent Smith has become so powerful that even the evil robot civilization that created the Matrix has become afraid of Agent Smith's power. Neo uses his flying Kung Fu and attempts to destroy Agent Smith with violence. However, at some point Neo realizes this is futile. He surrenders and allows Agent Smith to infect him. Briefly Neo disappears, becoming another Agent Smith. However, it is in his surrender, after Agent Smith has absorbed Neo, that all the Agent Smiths crack and explode in a burst of light. Neo has won. Not by fighting, but through surrender.

I think even more than creative or magical solutions, the parts where a translator has to accept that the target language might be inadequate to represent everything that is going on, when they have to take a step back and say English is lame, when they have to surrender, like Neo surrenders to Agent Smith, these are really important, human moments. I think there is a desire to be really heavy handed. To re-write things, or remake things, to upgrade or downgrade or side grade or explain.

But the times in which you accept failure or inadequacy or imperfection, where you let the original language just be, where you let the wound between languages fester, these moments are moments of respect and love. So sometimes you have to be proactive. But sometimes you have to let the thing be, and that requires absence, or silence, or space, which is not unlike death. You have to give language a lot of affection, but sometimes you have to give it space. Or else you might suffocate it. And this is another difference between the human and the machine. The machine will never surrender. Because the ideal of the machine is perfection. But the human condition is imperfect. The human thing to do is to learn when to abandon or call it quits.

V.

Now that we've briefly discussed style and craft and developing an artistic philosophy for translation, we should get back to the greater philosophical point that artistic forms of language such as fiction or poetry reveal truth, but reveal it indirectly, and why this is of critical importance not only for translation, but also for the evaluation and criticism of translations.

Don Mee Choi, who is probably the most, if not one of the most famous translators working from Korean to English talks about translation as a process of intensification. When most people compare and criticize translations, they use terms like equivalence, domestication, fidelity, and taking liberties. While those terms all have their appropriate place, I think in terms of translation as a generative process, it is less about those things, and more about assessing and creating tension and intensity. This holds particularly true when we are talking about the murky, abstract and metaphorical language that is characteristic of art.

For the way I think about art and translation, the branch of philosophy known as object-oriented ontology (OOO for short), and the work of the Graham Harman in particular, has helped me immeasurably. For OOO, art and philosophy are disciplines that deal with aesthetics and distinguish between objects and their qualities. This is because real objects are, to use a Kantian term, *noumena*, or things-in-themselves.

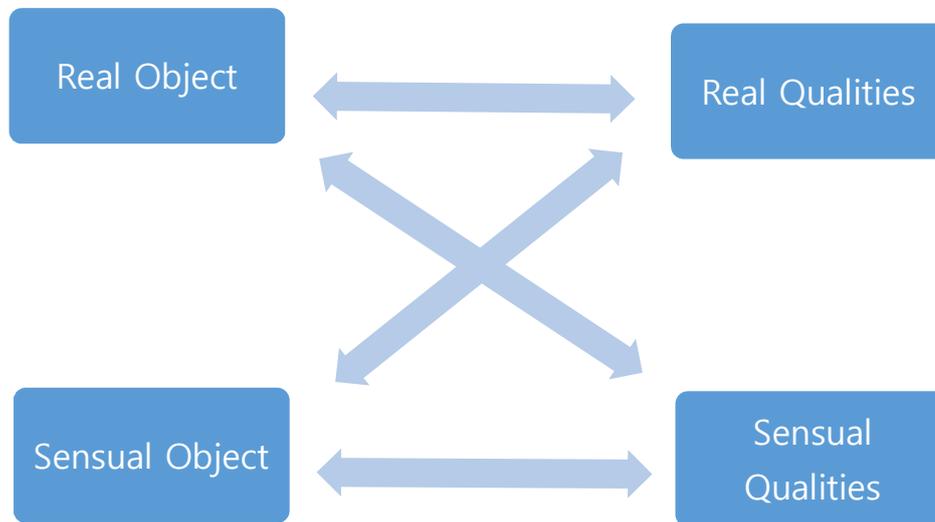
They exist in their own right, equally and separate from other things. For OOO people, real objects of the imagination exist just as much as real objects in the “real world”. This is what is known as flat ontology. So, Barack Obama, a microwave oven, a seagull flying in the sky, and the monster in Frankenstein are equally real. However, we do not have direct access to noumena, we only have access to their sensual qualities. That is because they exist independently of human perception. What art does is make it *seem* that the inwardness of these real objects opens up to us through sensual qualities, seemingly revealing their truth.⁵ However, *noumena* are never open to us, as they exist in themselves, independent of our perception of them, and they retreat inwardly. So, a real object is always retreating inward, away from us no matter how much we think we know it. However, the sensual qualities, the perceived qualities of that object that make us believe we know them. That is why, at best, art gives us an indirect truth. We only are able to experience the sensual qualities of a thing, not the thing itself.

Before we go further, it is important to explain briefly, a little bit more about Harman’s theory of the quadruple object as it pertains to translation. In OOO, as I said earlier, objects are distinguished from their qualities. In addition, objects exist as both real objects and sensual objects. Qualities also are broken down into real qualities and sensual qualities. The easiest way to understand this is to think of sensual objects / qualities existing in time and real objects / qualities as existing in space. If, for instance, I visit Gwanghwamun at 4 o’clock in the afternoon in December and see the front gate illuminated by the blinding light of the reflection of the snow on the ground, I am seeing the sensual object of Gwanghwamun through its sensual qualities in that instant. The scene of Gwanghwamun would be different at night, in the summer, in the instant that I perceive it. I would be viewing another sensual object created by the sensual qualities of that environment. The single, real object of Gwanghwamun exists in both instances, even though there are two sensual objects with two different sets of sensual qualities that I experience. A sensual object is perceived in that brief instant whereas real

⁵ Originally this idea comes from an essay by Ortega y Gasset in *An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface*.

objects exist even if no one is there to witness them.

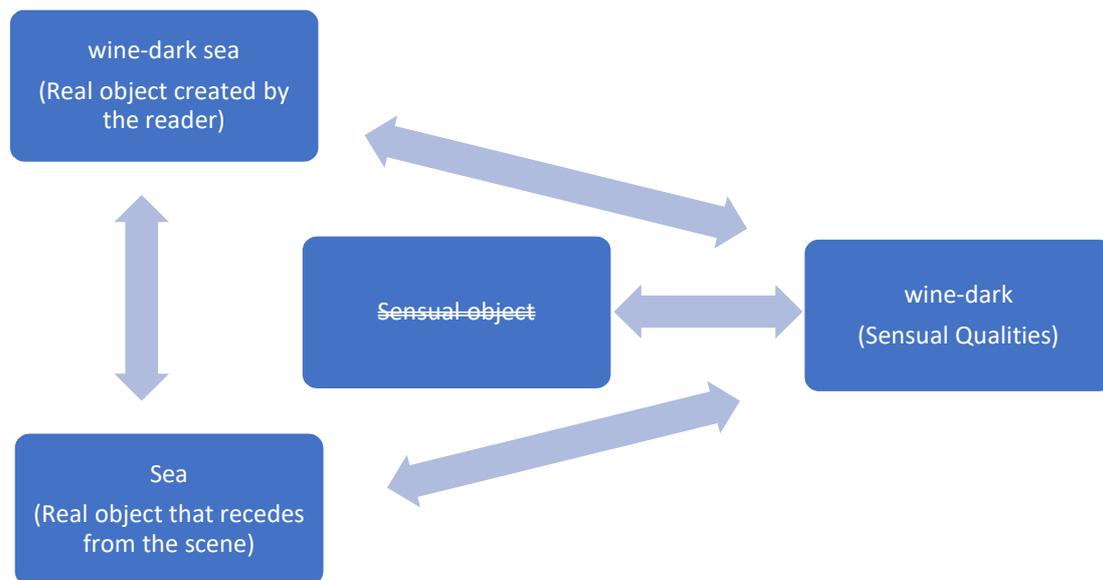
Harman uses the following diagram to illustrate the quadruple object.



I've argued that translators are first and foremost creative readers. I've talked about how real objects, as noumena, or things-in-themselves retreat so that we cannot have access to them directly. We only have access to them through their sensual qualities. Human beings are aesthetic creatures and our ability to create relationships between objects such as ourselves and other objects requires imagination. This is because real objects recede away from us. To connect the real object that we are to other real objects, because we can't touch them, understand their truth, or know them completely means we have to use our creative and imaginative capacity to connect. I think this thought is most clearly articulated in a section of Graham Harman's 2018 book *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*.

In the book Harman illustrates how metaphors operate, and I think this can have special significance for literary translation. In order for metaphors to work, they require an interlocutor not just to witness them, but to perform them. This is because the sensual qualities of a metaphor, particularly a complex metaphor, are such that the sensual object is not able to uphold the improbable sensual qualities of the metaphor.

He uses Homer's "wine-dark sea" from *Ulysses* as a prime example. Seas can be dark or deep, but a darkness that is wine-dark requires an act of imagination, or creative reading. So, because the real object recedes into itself, and because the sensual object cannot uphold these improbable sensual qualities, it is up to the reader to theatrically stand in for the object and perform the sensual qualities, bringing another, real object into being. This is the reader as the experiencer of the metaphor.



However, not all readers are equipped equally for this job. In order for reader to finish the metaphor, the reader must make themselves available, and then they must also be imaginative enough to enact that language. Metaphors are felt differently by different readers based on their sensitivity to experience them. This is why Harman advocates for students to be educated in taste, "so that they can become connoisseurs of the subtle background, rather than literal foreground." In terms of translation, we can say that the intensity of the original metaphor must first be first felt by the translator as reader. But not all translators feel metaphors equally. That is true also of those who judge the criteria of translations. This is why taste is such an important criteria for the judgement of aesthetics.

Another thing that becomes problematic if we consider the quadruple object, is

that because no two objects can touch directly, it goes without saying that the original real object and the real object in translation have no direct equivalence. So what would be the evaluation criteria for accuracy of metaphoric language? If the sensual qualities of the original language are felt through tension and intensity through an interlocutor, one could begin to assess the sensual qualities of a translated metaphor versus the sensual qualities of an original in terms of tension and intensity. If a translator doesn't feel the metaphor, then the intensity of the original sensual qualities will be almost impossible for them to relay in the new language. And even if every translator as a reader is sensitive and imaginative enough for the metaphor to land when they read it, that does not guarantee that they are able to produce the same amount of intensity in the translation. The sensual qualities of a translation of a metaphor might even exceed the intensity of the original language metaphor. However, because both the real object in the metaphor in the original language and the real object in the metaphor in the translated language are two separate objects, it goes without saying that the sensual qualities of said object will not be exactly commensurate to each other. And the level of intensity felt in both circumstances will depend upon the evaluator of a translation being able to have the sensitivity and imagination to complete both metaphors. If they are up to the task, then I suggest that instead of discussing the original language metaphor and translated language metaphor in terms of fidelity and accuracy, it would be more productive to compare them in terms of intensity since each, as noumena and things-in-themselves, have separate existences.

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