

# Literature as Fetishism: some Consequences for a Theory of Translation

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Article abstract

This article looks at different attempts to define literary and poetic texts and the claim of untranslatability with regard to these. It studies the relationship between author, reader and text and concludes that every act of translation, and reading, implies the innate unpredictability of human relationships constantly driven by the desire to transform all things we create into some form of autobiography.

# LITERATURE AS FETISHISM: SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR A THEORY OF TRANSLATION<sup>1</sup>

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Forepleasure implies the possibility of fetishism, the interesting threat of being waylaid by some element along the way to the “proper” end, taking some displaced substitute or simulacrum for the thing itself, a mystification in which most literature deals, sometimes eventually to expose the displacement or substitution as a form of false consciousness, sometimes to expose the end itself as the false lure. (Peter Brooks, *The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Criticism*)

## **Résumé**

*Cet article aborde la question de l'intraduisibilité des textes littéraires et poétiques. L'auteur examine les relations entre l'auteur, le lecteur et le texte et conclut que toute traduction, toute lecture implique l'imprévisibilité des rapports humains, toujours motivés par le désir qui transforme toutes formes de création humaine en autobiographie.*

## **Abstract**

*This article looks at different attempts to define literary and poetic texts and the claim of untranslatability with regard to these. It studies the relationship between author, reader and text and concludes that every act of translation, and reading, implies the innate unpredictability of human relationships constantly driven by the desire to transform all things we create into some form of autobiography.*

The relationship between translation and literature has never been amicable. In the history and theory of literature — as well as in its teaching — “translation has not been a subject of the first importance,” as George Steiner reminds us (p. 269). Its place has been in the margins of scholarship and institutionalized disciplines, and only recently has it begun to fight for the recognition of its own place within the broader field of language studies.

In a culture which cultivates the myth of essences and stable meanings that can be encapsulated within objects, words and texts, translation is necessarily associated with what is not only marginal but also — and foremost — corrupt and destructive. Almost any discussion about the translation of so-called “literary” — and, particularly, “poetic” — texts inevitably ends up assessing the “losses” perpetrated by translation and its disastrous interventions. Although one could find a relatively abundant bibliography on the issue, the same arguments and the same complaints seem to be repeated throughout the ages. As a sample of such inertia, we could compare the opinions of two Italian writers, separated, however, by a few centuries. In *Il convivio* (written approximately in 1308), Dante Alighieri writes about the impossibility of transposing poetry from one language to another “without the rupture of all its sweetness and harmony.” That is why, for instance, “Homer cannot be transferred from Greek into Latin” and why the translation of the Psalms from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin has caused them “to lose all their sweetness” (p. 15, quoted in Kelly 1979: 214-215, my translation from the Italian). More than six hundred years later, in a discussion of the aesthetic role of language,

Benedetto Croce considered that “a form of falsification” is inevitable in translation, which he blames for “pretending to effect the remoulding of one expression into another, like a liquid poured from a vase of one shape into a vase of another.” In her or his unwelcome interference, the translator puts the original “back in the crucible and mingles it with [his or her own] personal characteristics” (p. 68, quoted in Kelly 1979: 216).

What seems to bother both Dante and Croce — as well as most writers and theorists who ever tried to tackle the question — is what they see as the harmful, undesirable contact that any translation inflicts upon the texts it touches, the unpleasantness of such a contact being directly proportional to the degree of the supposed literariness or “poeticity” of the original. In a culture that hopes to find meanings preserved in words and texts, literature and poetry are necessarily associated with (some version of) a privileged use of language which should strive to create an indissoluble bond between form and content. In literature, “form and content cannot be separated,” summarizes Cleanth Brooks, one of the American “new critics” who has taken this age-old issue to its ultimate consequences (see, for example, “The Formalist Critic,” quoted in Hall 1963: 174). What Brooks has not been able to come up with — nor any other theorist that shares his basic assumption according to which texts can be intrinsically literary or poetic — is an indisputable way of distinguishing the literary and the poetic from the ordinary. In such a context, I propose to look at two attempts — selected at random — at defining the “nature” of poetry. The first one comes from the canonical writings of Wellek and Warren (1956):

Poetic language organizes, tightens, the resources of everyday language, and sometimes does even violence to them, in an effort to force us into awareness and attention [...] Every work of art imposes an order, an organization, a unity on its materials. This unity sometimes seems very loose, as in many sketches or adventure stories; but it increases to the complex, close-knit organization of certain poems, *in which it may be almost impossible to change a word or the position of a word without impairing its total effect.* (p. 13, emphasis added)

Even more recent theorists who have had access to other conceptions of language do not seem to escape the same dilemmas in which the traditional distinctions between the literary and the ordinary are generally entangled. As John Reichert observes, one of Monroe Beardsley major goals is also one of the major goals of literary theory: “a determination of how to interpret and evaluate literature as literature, poetry as poetry.” Adopting J. L. Austin’s terminology, Beardsley defines a poem as an imitation of an illocutionary act. This, however, as he points out, “is to give a genus, not the differentia”:

Not all imitations of illocutionary acts are poems: for example, to mimic what someone has said, to tell a joke, to say something for the purpose of testing a public address system. What makes a discourse a literary work roughly speaking is its exploitation to a high degree of the illocutionary-act potential of its verbal ingredients — or, in more usual terminology, its richness and complexity of meaning. *And what makes a literary work a poem is the degree to which it condenses that complexity of meaning into compact, intense utterance.* (1970: 61; quoted in Reichert 1977: 128, emphasis added)

Although such attempts at defining the specificity of literature or poetry fail to provide us with the desired “objective” means with which we could clearly separate the literary from the ordinary, they do tell us of one of mankind’s oldest dreams, that is, the possibility of finding a realm of linguistic and artistic stability and of escaping the arbitrariness of the sign which is well expressed, for instance, in Plato’s *Cratylus*. If poetry could create the bond between what tradition has called content and form, it would also reunite us with a lost paradise, with a pre-Babelian state, in which word and thing could actually be one and meanings could therefore “stick” to words and texts, without slipping away at the touch of any interfering interpretation. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Philosophy

of Composition,” we can witness a common version of such a dream, as it is planned “step by step” by the poet himself. Ideally, for Poe, a poem is a space exclusively built by conscience, and under the complete control of the poet. As he declares, his goal is nothing less than to pre-determine the meaning of every element he adds to his composition — the well-known “The Raven” — in order to protect the poem he so carefully builds up against chance and against the intervention of any reading that would not “simply” recover what is consciously intended and “deposited” in the text:

It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem. (p. 452)

Each step and every detail (the poem’s ideal length, the intended effects, the impressions to be conveyed, as well as “the most poetical topic in the world” — that is, “the death of a beautiful woman”) are carefully calculated in order to ensure the untouchability of the poem, a protection against any interpretive invasion. For instance, regarding the “length” of poetry; Poe writes:

It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art — the limit of a single sitting — and that, although in certain classes of prose composition [...] this limit may be advantageously overpassed, it can never be overpassed in a poem. Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit — in other words, to the excitement or elevation — again in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect — this, with one proviso — that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all. (1846: 452)

This notion of the “special” character of poetry, as the realm of the non-arbitrary and of language under control, in which it may be impossible, or almost impossible, to change a word or the position of a word without impairing its total effect, coincides not only with the notion that the literary or the poetic is somehow distilled by the poet into the words and effects he chooses, but also with the claim for untranslatability made on behalf of this kind of text: the poetic has to remain untouched and in its original “mould” in order to survive. On which level does this plot of control and protection take place? Where can Poe — or any other poet — impose the ways in which his text should be read? What could be the story of such a will to power? In “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” Freud compares the “creative writer”’s activity to the child’s play:

Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood? The child’s best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? [...] The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously — that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion — while separating it sharply from reality. Language has preserved this relationship between children’s play and poetic creation. (1908: 25)

Behind the scenes of creative writing — behind the desire to produce a text that could be beyond chance and protected from the interference of any reading — Freud finds “His Majesty, The Ego, the hero alike of every daydream and of every story,” the author/hero who triumphantly proclaims “nothing can happen to me,” as he writes and determines a world of his own where he is and should remain the only master (1908: 26).

If we dare to take this comparison of the creative writer to the child at play a little bit further, specially with the help of other texts by Freud, we may be able to shed some new light on the age-old question of the alleged untranslatability of at least some literary texts. First, the narcissistic desire to create a world of one's own, which is shared both by "every child at play" and by creative writers (and which we can also read as a resistance to any difference), brings us to another essay by Freud, also published in 1908, "On infantile sexual theories." Of such theories, writes Freud, the first one, "the castration complex," is built upon "a neglect of sexual difference" and "consists in attributing to everybody, including women, a penis just like the one the boy knows of from his own body" (1908b: 215). Such "a neglect of sexual difference" is, for Freud, a direct consequence of the boy's narcissism:

The penis is already in childhood the key erogenous zone and the most important auto-erotic sexual object, and the child's appreciation of its value is logically reflected in his inability to imagine a person similar to himself without this essential part [...] If a little boy obtains a sight of his little sister's genitals, what he says shows that his prejudice is already strong enough to warp the perception; he does not remark on the lack of the penis but invariably says, as if to console and reconcile: the ... is still small, but when she gets bigger, it, too, will grow. (1908b: 215-216; quoted in Weber: 140-141).

Even though Freud is dedicated to describe the castration anxiety of the "little boy", he already claims in this early essay that such "anxiety" applies to little girls as well. As Samuel Weber explains, it is only in a later essay, "The infantile genital organization of the libido," written in 1923, that Freud elaborates on his paradoxical conclusion by grounding the universality of castration in a theory of the primacy of the phallus, or of what he calls the "phallic phase":

... for both sexes in childhood only one kind of genital organ comes into account — the male organ. The primacy reached is, therefore, not a primacy of the genitals, but of the phallus. (1923: 142; quoted in Weber: 141)

Such an intriguing conclusion will necessarily raise at least two questions: 1) What is the difference between the "male organ" and the "phallus"? 2) Why should the feminine psyche be affected by the loss of something which it never had? In his rereading of Freudian psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan proposes an answer to these questions which he claims to have found in Freud's own text. The "phallus" is, for Lacan:

... not a phantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (partial, internal, good, bad, etc.), in the sense that this term tends to accentuate the reality obtaining in a relation. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes. And it is not without reason that Freud used the reference to the simulacrum that it represented for the Ancients. For the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function in the intersubjective economy of analysis is perhaps to raise the veil of the function it had in the mysteries. For it is the signifier destined to designate the effects of the signified in their entirety; *i.e.*, insofar as these effects are conditioned by the presence of the signifier. (1966: 690; quoted in Weber: 144-145; Weber's translation from the French)

Freud's phallogocentrism is, therefore, explained as "the intrusion of the signifier into the human psyche, which is strictly impossible to deduce from any pre-established harmony of this psyche with the nature it expresses." If the phallus is "the signifier destined to designate the effects of the signified in their entirety," it is also, in Samuel Weber's words, "the signifier of signification in general, the signifier of difference," of the duality between the signifier and the signified to which every speaking subject is subjected (p. 147). As such, the phallus "must be understood as that which marks the passage from

the imaginary to the symbolic, from demand to desire, as a discontinuous and conflictual one;" and this passage is precisely what can be called "castration" in psychoanalysis, that is, the loss of an imaginary plenitude, the awareness of an essential incompleteness (p. 147). In the mythology constructed by psychoanalysis, the end of the phallic phase coincides with the discovery of the mother's "castration," that is, the discovery that the phallus which was attributed to the mother and which made of her a perfect totality is forever lost. If castration marks the loss of a plenitude, to be castrated is also to be inscribed in the inevitable arbitrariness of language and to participate in the human community. To be castrated is, ultimately, "to be deprived of signifying the referent" and to have a language "doomed to never being more than a good translation," as Jane Gallop puts it (1982: 96).

Could we not think of the process of creative writing precisely as a way to escape the dramatic duality between signifier and signified which, in Lacan's rereading of Freud, is also the name of castration? Could we not see in Poe's attempt at "signifying the referent," at fixing his own meanings to the signifiers of his text, a way of avoiding the awareness of his linguistic castration? Wouldn't poetry be exactly the realm in which the mythic union between signifier and signified is supposedly attained, at least in its best samples? Consequently, as the process by which a signified has to be necessarily separated from its signifier, wouldn't translation be precisely another name for castration?

If translation is a form of castration — as that which puts an original in contact with difference and which makes it lose the alleged bond between its form and its content — any claim of untranslatability would then be an attempt at preserving the alleged control over that which cannot be controlled. From such a perspective, opened up by psychoanalysis, one could say that untranslatability is not an intrinsic characteristic of certain texts but the expression of a desire to keep the text untouched in the form and in the language consciously constructed by a poet or a writer, or by the canonical reading of a community or an age.<sup>2</sup> The need to control language, implicit in Poe's project and in most theories of poetry, would not welcome any transgression, any interpretation and, therefore, any translation that could undermine the carefully planned construction represented by the poem or any artistic piece. The alleged untranslatability of the so-called "literary" texts would be, in other words, a consequence of a process of fetishization of the "literary" signifier, that is, a process of worshipping something which is not really there, but which, nevertheless, fills a void, covers a hole. In yet another text by Freud, we learn that a "fetish" is "a substitute for the woman's (mother's) penis in whose existence the little boy used to believe, a belief the adult man does not wish to abandon for reasons that are familiar to us," that is, to avoid the fear of castration:

What happened was that the boy refused to face the fact that he had noticed that the woman does not have a penis. No, this could not be true for if the woman had been castrated, his own possession of a penis would be in danger, and against that rose that part of his narcissism which nature, as a precaution, associated to this organ in particular. (1927: 180)

By taking the place of that which was never there, the "fetish" remains "a sign of the triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it" (p. 181). If we accept that castration is ultimately an anxiety that involves language — which we can never master in its arbitrariness — we may think of writing in general (and also of reading in general) as a form of fetishism, in its attempt at fixing meaning, and as the expression of a desire to protect such an attempt.

The position of the signifier — of the simulacrum that fills a void — is, in Lacanian terms, that of a fetish. And such a conclusion encompasses much more than just the so-called "poetic" or "literary" signifier. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, the very concept of truth inscribed within logocentrism, the very signifier that is chosen to be "truth" itself, is

nothing but “the normal prototype of the fetish” (1972: 105). Fetishism is, in other words, one of the many expressions of self-love. Or, as Michel Leiris (1929) phrases it, it is:

... the loving love of ourselves projected from the inside out and clothed in a solid carapace, thus trapping it within the bounds of a precise thing and situating it rather like a piece of furniture for our use, in the vast foreign room called space. (p. 38; quoted in Apter 1991: 10)

Leiris is referring to artistic artifacts — paintings or sculptures — but his words could very well describe Edgar Allan Poe’s loving construction of his poem which I examined above. The “solid carapace” which “clothes” and “traps” “the love of myself which I project from the inside out” is also the text-object which cannot be touched by the castrating interference of any reading or translation.

If Freud and Lacan have helped us relate castration anxiety and fetishism to the linguistic drama plotted by writing, reading and translation, it is Karl Marx who can help us understand how fetishism is not merely restricted to the psychology of an isolated individual writer or reader. It is Karl Marx who can help us build that delicate bridge between the individual and the collective which may explain why a certain object gets to be “fetishized” not just by an individual alone but by a whole community. In his discussion of commodity fetishism, Karl Marx writes about the “hidden value” attributed to objects, that is, about their “fetish character” in terms of a “secret.” According to Marx:

... value does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language. (1906: 85; quoted in Apter 1991: 1)

One could say then that “value” is a form of collective love, something which is collectively attributed to objects and which gives them their position within a community. It is not something that objects possess as an inherent characteristic that could define them outside the social environment where they belong. Following Marx, one could say that it is a form of “value” — that is, the attribution of “literariness” — which converts some texts into special social hieroglyphics that should be read in a certain way. The “secret” hidden behind any social product — including texts — is that their value is not intrinsic, but given by the “fetishistic” networks of meaning production which have the power to choose the objects and the kind of value they will be endowed with. As Michael Ryan observes, in the comparison he promotes between Marxism and deconstruction, Marx “condemned as fetishistic” those economic theories which “posit the economy as something natural, entirely ‘material’ [...] or purely objective”:

Capital is conceived [by capitalist ideology] as a thing, not as a relation [...] The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual — their mutual interconnection — here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a relation between things; personal capacity into an objective capacity [...] The crude materialism of the economists who regard as the natural properties of things what are social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, is at the same time just as crude an idealism, even fetishism, since it imputes social relations to things as inherent characteristics, and thus mystifies them. (1939: 258; quoted in Ryan 1982: 59-60).

As Emily Apter observes, the “fetishistic” relationship established between a subject — or a social community — and an object is basically underlined by ambivalence, and in this Marx’s conception of the fetish as a “socio-economic hieroglyphic” is “compatible with Freud’s sense of the strangeness of fetish consciousness: a state of mind

divided between the reality of noncastration and the fear of it all the same" (1991: 13). Apter bases her commentary on the following excerpt from Freud's text on fetishism: "It is not true that the child emerges from his experience of seeing the female parts with an unchanged belief in the woman having a phallus. He retains this belief but he also gives it up" (1927: 200; quoted in Apter 1991: 13). This apparent paradox, whose "resolution" is necessarily grounded in ambivalence, rules the relationship that attaches a writer or a reader to what they claim to be the "real" meaning of a text. As Poe plans every detail of his text with the supposed rigor and impersonality associated with a mathematical problem — that is, as Poe "fetishizes" his own poem and entertains the illusion of being able to restrict the relationships other readers may desire to establish with his text — he seems to be caught up in a paradox similar to the one faced by Freud's young fetishist. In other words, as he implicitly denies that his poem is the manifestation or the expression of his own desire, he also unfolds his own "secret," his strong wish to shield his text from any reading that could be different from his own, a protection which would be obviously unnecessary if his text's meaning were in fact intrinsic and recoverable. Like Freud's fetishist, Poe is caught up in the realm of the simulacrum as he builds up a substitute for an original that cannot exist outside his own desire and his own perspective and which, precisely because of that, has to be protected from the revealing eyes of the Other. Like Marx's fetishist, Poe is also caught up in the illusory realm of inherent properties and values, as he conceives of writing and reading as relationships between persons and things and not among persons. In other words, we can say that the need to control and protect a text from the Other — that is, the conception according to which a text has to remain untouched in order to preserve its characteristics — is fetishistic in the sense that the writer or the reader who chooses "to deposit" or "to find" a special meaning in a given text is necessarily divided between, on the one hand, the inner, unconscious conviction that such a meaning is his or her own and not the text's and, on the other, the urge to deny and forget this conviction.

John Forrester explicitly associates the notion of untranslatability to fetishism. Assuming that it is in principle possible to translate anything from one language to another, "that there is no such a thing as an untranslatable word, phrase, ejaculation even," Forrester (1991: 99) declares his "strong opposition to the tendency on the part of some translators, aided and abetted by some authors (including Lacan), to leave certain words in the original language, on the grounds that they are 'untranslatable'." The fetishization of the signifier is not, therefore, restricted to literary or poetic texts. As Forrester shows, for those who find some special, "untouchable" meaning in some texts of psychoanalysis — that is, for those who fetishize such texts, or parts of them — at least some terms are "untranslatable." Forrester brings to his discussion two famous examples taken from psychoanalysis: Lacan's *jouissance* and Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*. As "fetishes of the arbitrariness of the signifier," and "treated with awe" by those who choose to leave them in their original languages, such terms also affect the whole text in which their "foreignness" is underlined, since their mere presence "leads readers into believing that the rest of the 'translation' — the bits that are translated, rather than left hovering in no man's land between [two different languages] — are more reliable than they actually are" (1991: 99-100).

Similarly, we can argue that by labelling whole texts as "poetic" or "literary" and associating this labelling with untranslatability, we are also implying that those other texts which we consider as "non-poetic" or "non-literary" are perfectly translatable, perfectly transportable from one language to another and from a culture to another without suffering from the "interference" of the translator's own circumstances. The notion of untranslatability necessarily implies, therefore, its positive Other: the possibility of translation as



a non-problematic, impersonal transferral of meaning, that is, the untroubled translatability of those texts in which the supposed bond between “form” and “content” is not an issue. Such conceptions of translation and translatability are perfectly compatible with logocentric notions of meaning as something that can be inserted in words and texts and that can be easily and antiseptically recovered from them by those who have the “adequate” instruments. Behind such conceptions, we can detect what Forrester calls “the ideal of a mathematical language, which has only one semantic dimension”:

Either in the form of a yearning for a means of expression which will not be subject to misunderstanding, which will not allow the reader the freedom to interpret, or in the excessive astonishment at the polysemy of language, at the fact that all terms have at least two meanings. (1991: 100, and note 3, p. 334)

It is not by chance, though, that we are again in Poe’s territory. The ideal of a mathematical language, as the ideal of the poem planned in every detail “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem,” is also the ideal of a language that could transcend the limits of any human language, which is necessarily constituted by the inevitability of perspectivism and difference.

A basic distinction between natural and mathematical languages revolves precisely around the questions of difference and sameness. Forrester draws attention, for instance, to “the primary communicative function of language — that is, [to] the fact that its primary aim is to make the same (communicate) that which is different.” Mathematical languages, on the other hand, “only aim to make the same (that is, place two ‘speakers’ of that mathematical language in exactly the same position), thereby excluding all reference to an actual or even possible difference” (1991: 100-101). Hence, we can say, with Forrester, that “if it is part of a natural language, then it can be translated.” In other words, any text or any word can be translated into a different language provided that we think of translation as a form of transformation, as an inevitable intervention which leaves untouched neither the text nor the translator. Any contact between a writer, a translator or a reader and the text with which they establish a relationship is aptly described by Derrida as a “*corps-à-corps*,” always inspired by “a certain love” — a certain form of “fetishism” — which dismisses any possibility of a “rigor” that could leave intact the “shape” or the “content” of the so-called original meaning (1984: 126). In other words, there is no translation, as there is no reading, without the unpredictability inherent to any relationship, always motivated and determined by desire, that most human of all feelings, which turns all the things we create into autobiographical forms.

#### Notes

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2. See also Arrojo 1990.

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