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Visual Translation: A Creative Tool for Practising Metacognition and Analysing Agency and Power

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Abstract

'Visual Translation: A Creative Tool for Practising Metacognition and Analysing Agency and Power' describes the design for a 'visual translation' project that I developed to help high school students in an advanced Ancient Greek literature course differentiate between literal and literary translation. This project could potentially be adapted for students at any level of Ancient Greek or Latin language studies, but would likely be particularly apt for the longer passages that are taught in intermediate and advanced language courses.

Key words: literal translation, literary translation, metacognition, reflective writing, agency, power

Introduction

The recent popular success of Emily Wilson's new English translation of the *Odyssey*, first published in 2017, has helped to highlight important discussions within the field of Classics about the role that translation plays in the study of Classical languages and literature. The umbrella of translation encompasses two very different approaches: literal translation, which serves to demonstrate language competency within the context of a language course or program, and literary translation, which is a creative and flexible practice. This essay includes references to scholars who refer to literal translation as 'translation', using quotation marks to distinguish it from literary translation.

While participating in an interview to promote her new *Odyssey* translation, Wilson made an illuminating comparison between the approaches to translation that students are encouraged to take while studying 'living' and 'dead' languages, respectively, highlighting the 'instrumentalist' nature of the approach often applied to translating 'dead' languages:

> …[the] translation of dead languages is often seen in much more simplistic, instrumentalist ways than translation of living languages; students who are in second year Ancient Greek may be encouraged to think of what they're doing as learning 'to translate', as opposed to learning to understand. The original text is seen as a problem to which a clunky 'literal' translation is a solution; as if there were a 'right answer' to what it means… (E. Wilson, interviewed by Giannarou, 2018).

Diane Rayor offered a similar observation about 'translation' while reflecting on her experience of co-organising the first panel at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies sponsored by the Committee on the Translation of Classical Authors:

> Classicists often undervalue translation due to a misunderstanding: it's all too easy to imagine that literary translation simply conveys the content of the original into a new language, as if tracing paper would do the job … A further misunderstanding unique to Classics is conflating the pedagogical tool called 'translation' in our language courses (used to show that the student can comprehend the Greek or Latin passage) with literary translation (Rayor, 2019).

Wilson, likewise, has observed that Classical language pedagogy 'tends to rely heavily on 'translation' as a tool that stands in for comprehension' (Runciman Award, 2018). Wilson and Rayor each make a useful distinction between 'translation' and translation.

'Translation' comprises only one of several possible approaches for helping students understand Classical texts in their original languages. Inspired in part by Wilson and Rayor, as well as by her own experience with publishing a new translation of selections from Thucydides' writing, Hanink (2019) has advocated recently for teachers of Ancient Greek and Latin to 'move away from 'translation' as a primary means of assessing linguistic comprehension' and 'start actively teaching about translation: both its ancient practice and modern theory' (Hanink, 2019). Lindgren *et al.* (2010) describes a translation project for an intermediate Latin poetry class that aims to strike a balance between literal and literary translation. Praet and Verhelst (2020) names the 'general absence of specialised programmes and courses that focus on *literary* translation from classical languages' as the motivation for the

development of a BA course at Ghent University (Belgium) that focuses on translation theory and practice. It is promising and exciting to see the interest in teaching literary translation within the field of Classics growing.

In this paper, I aim to add to the ongoing conversation about Classics and literary translation by describing the design for a project that I developed in order to help students take a more flexible and creative approach to translating longer passages of literature, drawing upon metacognitive strategies and reflective writing assignments to arrive at a deeper understanding of the ancient literature that they are striving to understand in its full complexity. My project, which I call 'visual translation', consists of guiding students through the process of creating a visual rendering of a passage of Ancient Greek or Latin literature that they have already attempted to understand. At the point when they embark upon visual translation, students already will have taken notes on unfamiliar vocabulary and complex syntax in the passage at hand, as well as have attempted to generate a complete translation of the text, in speech and/or writing. As students endeavour to create a visual translation, they will aim for accuracy and depth as they analyse the relationship between the content and the form of the passage at hand and account for its depictions of agency and power. The visual translation assignment is intended to form a bridge between the initial understanding that students acquire while first translating a passage and a deeper understanding of how its narrative strategies, style, and point of view create meaning for an audience.

The timing of when I envision students attempting a visual translation during the process of developing an understanding of a literary text distinguishes visual translation from other drawing-based techniques of language pedagogy. Piantaggini (2019) offers several examples of drawing-based techniques: having students draw what they hear as they listen to someone narrate a longer text ('Listen & Draw'), using storyboard templates to illustrate a story in discrete scenes as they listen to the narration of a story ('Storyboard Dictation'), or selectively drawing part of a written text and then giving the drawing to a classmate, so that the classmate can then connect the drawing with the portion of the text that it illustrates ('Draw-Write-Pass'). These drawing-based techniques correspond to the initial stages of attempting to understand a passage or story, whereas visual translation takes place at a later stage of seeking understanding and attempting to analyse a passage as part of a work of literature. Students are encouraged to develop more in-depth artistic visions of their own while working as visual translators.

Frauenfelder (2019) describes a 'storyboarding' project that has a similar aim to that of my visual translation exercise, asking students to engage in 'illustrating a text frame-by-frame rather than translating it line-by-line'. Frauenfelder's assignment differs from mine in that Frauenfelder takes inspiration from filmmaking and offers a narrower set of options for the format of students' visual representations. Students who are following the guidelines for my visual translation exercise may, for example, combine actions that take place at several different moments into one image, as sometimes happens in ancient Greek vase-painting iconography.

School and Student Profile

I teach courses in Ancient Greek, Latin, and Ancient History at a small, independent, co-educational elementary and high school in the United States. The school enrolls approximately 150 students in kindergarten through to the 12th grade. The school's standard curriculum for language study begins in the fifth grade with a course on 'Comparative Grammar' as well as a course on Mandarin

Chinese. Students typically begin studying Latin in the sixth grade, while continuing to study Mandarin Chinese. After students have taken one full year of Latin, they have the option of beginning to study Ancient Greek, typically in the seventh grade or later. All courses last for the entire school year. The school does not assign letter or number grades, determine class rank, or calculate grade point averages. Teachers compose detailed written assessments of their students' individual progress three times per year.

During the 2019–2020 academic year, I taught a seminar on Ancient Greek literature for five high school students. Three of the students were in their fourth year of studying Ancient Greek and two of the students were in their third year. The first and second years of Ancient Greek instruction at this school focus on teaching the fundamentals of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and techniques for translation. The third year of Ancient Greek instruction introduces a few additional grammatical constructions and points of syntax before transitioning to a focus on translating and analysing sustained selections of Ancient Greek texts that have not been adapted. By the end of the second year or early on in the third year, students have studied all of the grammar and syntax presented in Luschnig (2007). The two students who were in their third year of Ancient Greek had accelerated their study during the previous summer, independently studying the grammatical forms and syntax that are included in the typical third-year Ancient Greek curriculum.

The purpose of the fourth-year Ancient Greek course that I was teaching was to advance my students' skills in translation and interpretation, enhancing their precision and accuracy as well as their enjoyment and creativity. I also chose to introduce my students to the field of gender studies through my choice of course content. I designed a new seminar that explored literary works that depict various aspects of the life of Helen, whose abduction by the Trojan prince Paris from her home in Sparta, where she lived with her husband Menelaus and daughter Hermione, initiated the long and devastating Trojan War. Each text that we translated, analysed, and discussed afforded ample opportunities for students to consider how different ancient authors assign or deny blame, responsibility, power, and agency to Helen, Paris, and Menelaus. The design of the course was inspired in part by Ruby Blondell's *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (Blondell, 2013). We began our study of Helen's complicated legend by exploring the poet Hesiod's depiction of the creation of Helen's ancestor Pandora in *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Subsequently, we translated passages that bear witness to Helen's life in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Herodotus' *History*, and Euripides' *Helen*. If time had permitted, we would have concluded the course by reading Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*.

Defining Project Goals

It was Hesiod's depictions of Pandora's creation and its consequences *(Theog.* 570-616 and *WD* 60-108) that first inspired me to develop the idea of asking students to generate visual translations. My students were doing admirably well with learning new vocabulary terms, grappling with Hesiod's dialect, and striving to offer complete translations of the text at hand, but I wanted to come up with a way to help them internalise more fully how Hesiod makes specific choices as he tells Pandora's story. Juxtaposing Hesiod's two different accounts of Pandora's creation seemed to offer a fruitful starting point for considering the many choices that a storyteller makes while crafting a story. Hesiod's descriptions of Pandora's creation and its consequences are complex: they involve several people and a variety of actions.

I particularly wanted to help my students recognise and contend with the ambiguities and impossibilities contained by the concept of 'literal translation': it is impossible to capture all dimensions of a source text (e.g., content, form, word order, sentence and/or line length, and sound effects) when transforming that text from one language or medium to another. Hesiod's accounts of Pandora's creation include a mixture of concrete details and more abstract, figurative language. I wanted to empower my students to engage more creatively with the relationship between content and form in Hesiod's versions of Pandora's story.

Thus inspired, I established the following goals for the visual translation project:

1. To enable students to recognise and express the differences between literal and literary translation.
2. To identify and interpret how agency and power operate in the passage(s) under consideration.
3. To practise metacognition and engage in reflecting writing practices.

Project Design

One of the guiding principles for the design of the visual translation project is that students must document various, specific phases of the process that leads to their development of a product (the visual translation), as well as document their reflection on the process as a whole. Another way to describe this principle is to define 'metacognition' as Susan Ambrose *et al.* do in *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*:

Metacognition consists of five core acts:

1. assessing the demands of the learning task at hand;
2. evaluating one's own relevant knowledge and skills;
3. planning an approach to the task;
4. monitoring progress on it;
5. adjusting one's strategies to be more effective. (Ambrose *et al.*, 2010, as cited in Gellar-Goad, 2018, p. 51).

To initiate the process of visual translation for a literary text that students have already sought to understand on some level, I recommend asking students to respond in writing to a version of the following questions, with the instructor adapting or eliminating questions as needed depending on the text that is the basis for the visual translation project:

1. What prior knowledge, if any, did I have of the story that is depicted in the passage that is under consideration?
2. Who is involved in the event(s) that this passage depicts?
3. Which details are central to the narrative at hand? What does the author of the passage emphasise?
4. Is there any speech contained within this passage?
5. Do I notice any repetition or other patterns in the content or form of the written passage that I am translating into a visual medium?
6. Where do I notice gaps in the narrative that I might choose to fill in somehow?
7. Which words or phrases will have the greatest influence on the overall format, composition, and arrangement of my visual translation? Why?
8. Are there any words for which I am struggling to come up with an apt visual representation? Why are those words proving challenging to render into English?

9. What sorts of power dynamics are at play in the narrative?
10. Who looks at whom or what? Where does the author of the passage want the listener's or viewer's eyes to be drawn?
11. Which types of sensation inform this passage (vision, sound, touch, smell, taste)?

Once students have assessed the demands of the project and evaluated their own relevant knowledge and skills by answering the types of questions that are listed above, they should be ready to respond in writing to another set of questions to help them plan for and make artistic decisions concerning their visual translations:

1. Am I going to use one panel (collage format) or multiple panels (storyboard format, as in a comic strip or graphic novel)? Why?
2. How will I represent the passage of time, if at all?
3. If I choose to divide the narrative into discrete scenes, what is the basis for the divisions that I am making?
4. Will I include any speech in my visual representation?
5. Will any figures in the visual representation make eye contact with the viewer? Why or why not?
6. What perspective will my viewer take? Will the viewer be entirely outside of and separate from the episode? Will the viewer see the episode through a character's eyes? In the latter case, through whose eyes will the viewer see the episode and why?

After students have answered both sets of questions, they will be ready to get to work creating their visual narratives, either individually or in partnership with one or more other students. (If in partnership, they should collaborate on the reflective writing assignments described above and come to a consensus with respect to their shared artistic vision.) Once students have completed their visual translations, they should reflect in writing on what they gained in the process that they undertook, answering the following questions:

1. Does my translation make sense?
2. What did I notice in the process of translating visually that I had not noticed before?
3. Which decisions became most essential to my process of translating visually?
4. Which decisions were the easiest ones for me to make? Why?
5. Which decisions were the most challenging ones for me to sort out? Why?
6. What did I leave out intentionally?
7. What did I leave out accidentally?
8. What did I add? What types of gaps was I trying to fill in?
9. Do I notice any outside knowledge influencing my visual representation in any way? Where did that knowledge come from?
10. What sorts of new insights did I gain with respect to the author's craft?
11. What changes, if any, would I make if I did this project again?
12. What advice can I offer to future visual translators to help them succeed?

I recommend devoting class time at this point to having students share their visual translations and metacognitive observations with their classmates.

When I first introduced my students to the idea of visual translation, I had all five of them collaborate as one group during part of two class meetings to generate a visual translation of the

portion of Hesiod's *Theogony* that depicts Pandora's creation. Afterward, they reflected on the collaborative process both individually, in writing, and collectively, via discussion during class. Subsequently, I asked each student to work individually to create a visual translation that represented the portion of Hesiod's *Works and Days* that describes Pandora's creation. I did not share scholarship on translation with my students during that process, but would certainly consider doing so in the future, starting with having them read, reflect upon, and discuss Giannarou (2018), Runciman Award (2018), Rayor (2019) and Hanink (2019).

Outcomes

I introduced the idea of visual translation during the tenth meeting of the course in which I developed it. We had already begun discussing several concepts that were challenging to translate into English, such as αἰδώς [*reverence, awe, respect; shame*], παρθένος [*maiden, girl, virgin*], κόσμος [*order; ornament, decoration*], and θαῦμα [*wonder, marvel*]. We agreed that sometimes, while rendering those terms in English, we might choose to transliterate them and then be prepared to explain at greater length what our understandings of those terms are.

My students were quick to immerse themselves in the process of translating Hesiod's narrative into images on the whiteboard in our classroom. The presence of only green markers in our classroom did not hinder the students' creativity and palpable excitement. Once the students had completed a preliminary illustration, we began collaborating to revise their work. For example, I asked how they had decided to represent the adjective γλαυκῶπις [*with gleaming eyes*] that describes Athena (*Theog.* 573). One of the students immediately jumped up to erase Athena's eyes and replace them with something that looked a bit alien. It was unnerving and memorable. I also asked what the students had decided to do with the phrase Κρονίδεω διὰ βουλάς [*through the plan of the son of Kronos*] (*Theog.* 572). After some discussion, they chose to add Zeus off to the side of what they had already drawn.

I also asked what my students had decided to do to render the phrase θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι [*a wonder to see*]. In response, they decided to draw some men (but no women, since mortal women do not exist yet), as well as some gods besides those already named in the text. They got into quite a rhythm with this revision, cleverly choosing to draw the men clustered around the fire that Prometheus had stolen to share with them. As we continued to revise, a clear focal point emerged: the body of the *parthenos*. My students grew quite animated as they came to recognise with such clarity how many individuals are manipulating Pandora's body (e.g., forming her from clay; dressing her up) and/or looking at her body.

Feedback

After my students created a collaborative visual translation during a class meeting, I asked each student, as a homework assignment, to reflect in writing on what they gained from completing the activity. Two students specified that collaborating on the visual translation helped them to clarify the subjects of certain verb forms and to think critically about the narrative structure of the passage. Another student reflected upon how the experience had helped them recognise more clearly Pandora's striking lack of agency in Hesiod's narratives. One student said that the visual translation activity helped them to solidify certain vocabulary terms in Hesiod's poetry.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Teaching

Overall, the visual translation project seemed to provide a welcome and energising change of pace for students compared with writing down translations or translating orally during class. They recognised a difference between the types of 'translations' that they typically prepare for homework and the creative undertaking that visual literary translation constitutes. It also seems to be the case that students found it natural to analyse and interpret the passage at hand while making artistic decisions that shaped their visual translations.

The visual translation project described in this paper could potentially be adapted for students at any level of Ancient Greek or Latin language studies, but it would likely be better suited to the longer passages – especially ekphrastic ones – that are taught in intermediate and advanced language courses. It worked well both in a collaborative format (two to five students working together) and in an individual format. I look forward to incorporating variations of this visual translation exercise in future language courses and warmly encourage others to experiment with doing the same.

Jennifer Swalec earned her Ph.D. in Classics from Brown University. As a scholar, she specialises in gender studies and Ancient Greek religion. While writing this article, she was teaching Ancient Greek, Latin, and Ancient History at the Pierrepont School in Westport, Connecticut, USA. In August 2022 she will join the faculty of the University of New Hampshire as a Lecturer in the Department of Classics, Humanities and Italian Studies.

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