

# The Fall of Icarus (through mediums): Intersemiotic Translation from Painting to Poetry

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**Abstract:** The paper will discuss Pieter Bruegel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and William Carlos Williams' poem 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' through the conceptual lens of intersemiotic translation to explore how the poem's rendition of the painting departs from the more traditional concerns of interlinguistic translation, i.e., the focus on optimum fidelity between the source and the translated text. With a focus on the visual-verbal (a)symmetries, the paper will try to look into how intersemiotic translation between pictorial and linguistic texts throws into quandary the hierarchical relationship between source text and translated text by culling out different but complementary meanings by means of their respective signficatory codes to engineer an augmentation of meaning, rather than a faithful preservation of the same.

**Keywords:** Intersemiotic translation, Pieter Bruegel, William Carlos Williams, visual media, verbal media

## Introduction

What is the relationship between two (forms of) artworks? According to Roland Barthes, every "text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). Similarly, Julia Kristeva has observed that "[a]ny text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37). And since the semantic and formal threads weaving texts are various and varied, it is worth looking into the operative principles holding together the expansive filaments of textual networks. Intersemiotic translation is one such principle. Old texts often rouse new curiosities and therefore, the primary texts of this paper consist of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* painted by Pieter Bruegel in 1555 and William Carlos Williams' poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus", published in 1962 in the collection *Pictures from Bruegel and other Poems*. The method shall include a comparative reading of the two texts to discuss the "possibilities and limitations inherent in the two sign systems" (Cluver and Watson 70) and understand to what end they have been harnessed by the painter and the poet respectively in keeping with the distinct time and cultural periods of their production vis-à-vis intersemiotic translation. Derrida argues that "the irreducible multiplicity of tongues" (165) always "exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing" (165) in the practice of translation. Stretching this concept further, it could be argued that the multiplicity offered by the grammar of signification of different extra-linguistic media systems not only challenges the concept of a 'word for word' translational representation of the source text but also makes it possible to add alternate layers to it. Known mostly for his vast landscape paintings, Bruegel's text, produced during the Flemish Renaissance, could be read as a representation of the macroscopic commune where "man's position in nature seems inconsequential" (Lewis 406). The paper will investigate into whether Williams' Modernist poem, albeit bearing the same title as the painting, written in a world reeling from the two World Wars, re-semiotises the panoramic concerns of the visual text by giving it a more psychologically individuated emphasis, revising the mythic connotations of the figure and fall of Icarus.

Taking a cue from Lawrence Venuti's observation that "Modernism asserts the 'independence' of the translated text, demanding that it be judged on its 'own' terms... accepting the 'responsibility' of distinguishing itself" (189), there will be a discussion on how the poem distinguishes itself from the painting to explore the incompleteness in translation. The research paper will, thus, look into the means of convertibility from visual to verbal mediums in light of the idea that "the transfer can never be total" (Benjamin 18), to determine the "informational lacunae" (Gorlee 240) between the texts and determine what they signify about the exigencies of their respective times. The focus will be along two axes of representational aspects of the figure of Icarus across mediums – social and psychological. Rather than reading the deviances as a failure in translation, the paper will try to explore how through the verbal codes (syntactical, typographical, etc.), the poem differs, and by extension, adds nuance to the visual codes (colour, perspective, etc.) of the painting.

### Literature Review

The relation between Bruegel's poem and Williams' painting has been widely discussed but, more often than not, has been filtered through the lens of description or *ekphrasis* perhaps owing to the fact that they are titled the same. Critics have broadly ideated the relationship between the two texts in terms of their literality. For instance, Charlotte Kent argues in her essay "Ways of Seeing Williams' 'Pictures from Bruegel'" that Williams' poem "confirms his allegiance to Bruegel's version of the story" (71). Also, Joel Conarroe observes in "The Measured Dance: Williams' 'Pictures from Bruegel'" that the poem follows the painting "exactly" (571). Irene R. Fairley too points out in her essay "On Reading Poems: Visual & Verbal Icons In William Carlos Williams' Landscape With The Fall Of Icarus", that "there seems to be an isomorphism between the poem's visual and verbal icons, as well as structural correspondence to the Bruegel painting" (67). However, departing from such a stance, the paper will probe into the (im)possibilities of coherence between the two semiotic fields namely pictorial and linguistic to explore how intersemiotic translation, rather than maintaining a literality between texts, opens up greater possibilities of excavating meanings by making use of the semiotic codes associated with different media systems.

The etymology of the word 'translation' originates from the Latin word *translatio* which indicates "carrying across" (Campbell and Vidal 7) of meaning or to convey a message. However, since its inception, Translation Studies has focused on linguistic concerns as the means of conveyance, and a faithful representation of the "original", as the end of conveyance - a condition that Dinda Gorlee terms as 'linguistic imperialism' (1994, 34). For example, Eugene Nida posits 'equivalence' as the operative tenet of translation. He argues that formal equivalence is concerned with the transfer of the message itself and dynamic equivalence aims at invoking the same emotion via the target language as was triggered by the source language (129). Echoing such a preoccupation with 'sameness', J.C. Catford defines translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" (20). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in his seminal work "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", although Roman Jakobson lists three types of translation namely intralingual translation, interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation, it is interlingual translation or the "interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (Jakobson 127) that he terms as "translation proper" (Jakobson 127). Although with the rapid digitisation of the world, multimodality or the presence of non-linguistic texts have found greater accessibility, Linguist Yves Gambier argues that "[t]here is a strong paradox: we are ready to acknowledge the interrelations between the verbal and the visual, between language and nonverbal, but the dominant research perspective remains largely linguistic" (2006, 97). One of the reasons for the sustained emphasis on operating within verbal semiotics could be the anticipation of a non-compliance of semiotic codes between media systems (in this case, painting and poetry), which poses a risk of the severance of a text from its "natural" environment, leading to a possibility of "distortion". This leads to a fear of "constrained translation", a concept that indicates an anticipated fear of

loss of creative freedom on part of the translator because it is almost pre-supposed that when a text is translated to a medium governed with alternate semiotic codes, the original text would not be able to fulfil its intended purpose because the semiotic codes of the medium in translation “would impose their own laws and conditions on the text” (Mayoral et al 365). Therefore, manifestations of texts across different modes have been sparsely accounted for which has given the practice of translation *per se* the connotation of a monomodal operation: whereby interactions among different sign systems have been removed from the ambit of the practice *proper* and understood as adaptation (Loffredo 44). Taking a detour from such a conservationist conception of translation, Theo Hermans, in his essay “What is (not) Translation?”, has argued against a fixed definition of translation suggesting that “translation is a complex thing and that a comprehensive and clear-cut view of it is hard to obtain” (75), undercutting the possibility of an ‘invariant signified’ (79) being transferred from one text to another. In line with his argument, Klaus Kaindl observes in “Multimodality and Translation”, that since “non verbal texts like music and paintings do not have precise semantics and generate meanings through association and connotation” (265), there is always a challenge of pinning down the “invariant signified” in the first place. Thus, Dinda Gorlee introduces the term “semiotranslation” which she defines as:

[A] growing network which should not be pictured as a single line emanating from a source text toward a designated target text. Rather, we must conceive of any number of such translational lines radiating in all directions from a starting text to end states of variable value...By steadily integrating new pieces of information on the object, the translations make the real meaning of the original ever more complete, detailed and continuous. Yet there will always remain informational lacunae. By this token, a translation is never finished and can always, however minimally, be improved upon (2003, 240).

Taking this observation as a point of departure, the paper will discuss if intersemiotic translation could go beyond the concerns of preservation of meaning to a critical compounding of meaning to better suit the interpretive demands of the target readership, thus revising the concept of equivalence in favour of supplementation. In this regard, Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Task of The Translator” discusses the concept of the afterlife of a text where, in the process of translation, the original text undergoes a “maturing process” (17) whereby there is a “de ontologisation” of the source text (Kaindl 259) or rather, a breakdown of the hierarchy between the original and the translated texts. As a result, Peeter Torop sums up that, “the same text may exist simultaneously in different sign systems” (273). Therefore, Gambier notes that intersemiotic translation departs from classical translation theories which look for an “automated correspondence” (2016, 888) between texts to a more “purposeful action” (2016, 890), and emerges as a two-way process where the new translation always also affects the source text (Campbell and Vidal 7). And through this research paper, there will be an attempt to look into how Williams’ poem translates Bruegel’s painting by employing alternate semiotic codes, and forges newer associations among the pictorial textual strands of the source text to incarnate one of its afterlives.

### Discussion on non-literary correspondence between the two texts

In Bruegel’s painting, the visual lexicon underpins two kinds of movement – the agentic productive motion of the agrarian workers as they plough, herd flocks of sheep and catch fish and the uncontrolled spiralling downward motion of Icarus breaking the surface of the water. It is the former movement that is located in the foreground with the workers pointedly unaware of the titular character drowning in the background – the ploughman is turned leftward, the shepherd looks up and the fisherman looks down at the sea. The fecund activities in motion counter the moribund movement of Icarus as the ploughman literally ploughs away with his back towards him. The shepherd too drives his flock away from Icarus. The two ships with a distance between them suggesting the possibility of a locomotive trajectory could also be said to oppose the movement of Icarus –

a controlled navigational motion that is a foil to the plummeting trajectory of Icarus. Thus, the visual depiction of the myth positions the death of Icarus as a play of perspective rather than a grand tragedy, metonymically diminished by an array of agrarian production against which the flailing legs of the mythical figure lends little consequence. The celebrated hero is but mired in an “intentional quasi-obscure” (Lindsay and Huppe 377).



*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (Bruegel 1555)

This could be read in two ways – one, the overarching *apathia* in a world where quotidian concerns and lives nonchalantly go on, oblivious to the grandiose disaster where “[a]ll life is turned away from the tragedy” (Fairley 4). Alternately, it could be seen as an example of social realism where there is an enquiry into the politics and possibilities of performatively dealing with death and disaster in a life of privation and poverty, for the characters on the foreground belong to the working class.<sup>1</sup> This strategy goes against the Renaissance convention of focussing on classical heroic figures. Margaret A. Sullivan observes that there is no “classicizing interest” (129) in Bruegel’s work.

In 1558 it was not unusual for an artist to satirize the peasant or flatter the aristocracy, but the activities of ordinary people received only peripheral attention. Scenes of daily life were relegated to a subordinate position in the margin of a manuscript or inserted as an amusing detail within a traditional subject (128).

By offsetting the fall of Icarus with banalities far removed from lofty mythical narratives, the painting could be read as countercultural insofar as it demystifies the myth, revealing the economic infrastructural conditions that tales of *audacia* and *hubris* often elide over in their parable-like concerns. There is a juxtaposition of the material and the metaphysical – the toiling proletariat firmly rooted in the earthly realm sets off the mythic figure of Icarus as fustian; fissured from the quotidian exigencies. The grand endeavour of the mythic hero becomes the “amusing detail” in the painting. Bruegel’s concern remains with material conditions of the Everyman that (dis)qualify the possibility of indulging in grand narratives about heroic tragedies. In the represented social rung of the community, *audacia* resides instead in the ability of survival, as is exemplified in the blood red garment of the ploughman looming large in the foreground.

On the other hand, the verbal translation of the painting could be said to take a detour from social realism to focus on a more individuated psychological response to tragedy. While Irene Fairley argues that the poem “[t]hrough linguistic and typographical devices, strives for equivalence to the affects rendered by Bruegel in paint on canvas” (72), the paper will discuss how rather than striving for equivalence, Williams alters the focus of affective emphasis on Icarus by looking at formal

variations of the text. In Williams' own words in *The Wedge*, "[t]here is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning" (1988, 55).

The poem begins with a language of reportage – "According to Bruegel" (Williams 1962, 4), and then goes on to most radically depart from the journalistic style of writing by employing a fractured syntactical order.

According to Brueghel  
 when Icarus fell  
 it was spring  
  
 a farmer was ploughing  
 his field  
 the whole pageantry  
  
 of the year was  
 awake tingling  
 near  
  
 the edge of the sea  
 concerned  
 with itself  
  
 sweating in the sun  
 that melted  
 the wings' wax  
  
 unsignificantly  
 off the coast  
 there was  
  
 a splash quite unnoticed  
 this was  
 Icarus drowning

(Williams 1962, 4)

The lack of punctuation marks, coupled with abrupt enjambments, creates a sense of disarray, almost mimicking the Modernist form of Stream of Consciousness. The undifferentiated trajectory could be said to reflect the vagaries and vacillations that inform the free association of thoughts which constellate the human psychoscape. The question that arises is whose psychological reaction is the poet tracing? One possible inference could be that while Bruegel, through the depiction of ongoing controlled and productive movement focuses on the macroscopic (non)impact of the fall, Williams offers an alternate microscopic perspective, capturing the haphazard motion of the temporal experience of Icarus himself during mid-fall as the poem charts the path which "descends from "when Icarus fell" to "Icarus drowning"" (Cluver 75).

Furthermore, vis-à-vis the typographical arrangement, the lines of the poem almost whoosh through, where individual lines do not begin with capital letters and are weaved without any break. It is literally one sentence breaking apart, and by extension, *falling*. Therefore, the typography reads not only as a reflection of the inchoateness of Icarus's thoughts as he falls, but also as the depiction of the fall itself, as exemplified in the columnar arrangement of the poem with short line running for seven stanzas. Therefore, harnessing the grammar of signification of the new medium, Williams appears to show the moments prior to the point where the painting begins, i.e., the moment at which Icarus breaks the surface of the water.

With regard to the idea of tracing the experience of the fall, the use of the figurative device of sibilance becomes significant in the fifth stanza of the poem. Speaking of sound symbolism, Marie Borroff observes that "An important mimetic role is played... by the kind of consonance sometimes

called sibilance, or hissing, whose three most important phonic elements are /s/, /z/, and /sh/ ... The word hissing, sound-symbolic in shape and in origin, calls up metaphorically the image of a menacing snake" (138). While depicting a pivotal incident of the myth, Williams writes "Sweating in the sun/that melted/the wings' wax" (1962, 4). The connotation of the 'ss' sound, redolent of hissing, could also be read as symbolising the rustling movement of the wind as an object cuts through it. The sibilant sound pattern produces an effect of synaesthesia wherein visual cues give way to aural stimulation so that the reader almost hears Icarus fall through the wind as they read the text. It could also be the sound of air rustling that Icarus *himself* hears as he plunges downwards. In the last stanza, Williams harks back to the sibilant pattern as Icarus falls with – a "splash quite unnoticed" (1962, 4). Here, both Icarus and the reader aurally register the death knell – the sound of the horrific "splash" as he breaks through the surface of the water. As sibilance is associated with Satan because of his serpentine disguise, the word "splash" augments and intensifies the hellish horror experienced by Icarus. Hence, the acoustic possibilities of the verbal medium facilitated by phonetic configurations add a different interpretive layer to the silent pictorial landscape through the process of intersemiotic translation. While Williams does *cite* Bruegel, he reconfigures the dynamics of *sight*. Icarus is presented in a magnified manner in contrast to the painting where around the drowning figure of Icarus, the greenish hue of water grows dim, reflecting an engulfment of his persona into obsolescence with his head submerged under water – neither seeing nor seen.

Additionally, in keeping with the idea of social realism, Bruegel clearly delineates the details of the characters on the foreground by portraying their respective vocational accoutrements which give them all an individual identity. The ploughman, the shepherd, and the fisherman are distinguished from each other. Williams, on the other hand, reverses the perspective as he relegates these figures into the background by collectively referring to them as "pageantry" (1962, 4), barring the token reference to the farmer. In fact, in the second line of the poem, he brings in the clause – "When Icarus fell" (1962, 4), bringing Icarus into focus at the very outset to make the event of his fall the framing narrative which qualifies all other strands. Icarus is no longer mired in "quasi – obscenity".

Produced almost more than four centuries apart on opposite sides of the Atlantic, the (a)symmetries of the texts are also informed by the distinct cultural milieu of the times of their production. The 16<sup>th</sup> century visual text, at the peak of Renaissance Humanism, and on the cusp of anthropocentric Enlightenment, offers a semblance of assuredness – of life progressing in spite of death in its midst<sup>2</sup>. The flock of sheep ambling away in the direction opposite to Icarus could be read in terms of Biblical connotations – the Lamb of God frolicking in the verdure signifying a sacred regeneration.

In the verbal text, while on the thematic level, Icarus overtly appears as an oblique entity, the imagist terseness of the verse adds to the pathos for it almost reads like one of many obituaries of the mass casualties of the Wars. In a world reeling from the atomic fracas of the two wars, the mythical figure is transformed into an Everyman, rather than a fustian anomaly in the bucolic setting in the painting. Here, he is caught between the paradox of the inevitability of scientific progress (as is symbolised in the wax wings) and the ineluctable cost that accompanies it. With reference to the last words of the second and third lines of the poems i.e. "fell" and "spring" respectively, Mary Ann Caws detects a pun on the word "spring" and observes that there is "a contrary convergence between the motions of falling down and springing up" (326) which underscores the wartime connotation of Icarus' endeavour. Almost in anticipation of the plight and flight of Icarus, in the poem "Catastrophic Birth", written during WWII, Williams had evoked, "[e]ach age brings new calls upon violence/ for new rewards..." (1988, 56), emphasising the imbricated nature of advancement and disaster. Thus, Icarus could be seen as a 20<sup>th</sup> century topical human embodiment of this paradox.

Unlike the painting, the poem finds no proverbial closure as it ends with the line "Icarus drowning" (Williams 1962, 4). The verb in its present continuous tense intensifies the incessant sense of the trauma of falling. The lack of a period at the end anticipates an interminable duration of the trauma which is almost elegiac. In his reading of 20<sup>th</sup> century elegies, Jahan Ramazani observes that while in

traditional elegies “the poet redresses loss and overcomes grief...the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (xi). He terms this as “anti-elegiac”. Therefore, the implied interminable traumatic drowning of Icarus could suggest an anti-elegiac ode to Icarus, making him the centre of the text unlike Bruegel’s painting.

### Conclusion

Clive Scott understands translations not as a means to “solve” the source text but to optimally grasp the dynamics of the reader’s encounter and interactions with it which requires the translator to see the source text in all its insolvability and indeterminate glory (88). He argues, “[w]hat is at stake is not meaning, but the play of sense, the interactivity of senses” (89). It is precisely the sensory multiplicities afforded by the two semiotic systems that rebut the notion of untranslatability to rather see it as a scope for expanded expressivity. Various translations are often in conversation with each other albeit unbeknownst to the artists who create them. In the Bruegel/Williams intersemiotic translation, there is a negation of a singular authorial centrality because it is precisely in a shared reading of the two texts that there emerges a tension between the “social” and the “personal”. To use a cinematographic analogy, Williams’ poem appears in continuation to Bruegel’s painting – a high angle shot that cuts to a close-up, in an intersemiotic montage of the myth across time and space. Visually, the Alpine scenery of the painting, with its dominant greenish hue and an abundance of life, obfuscates a singular death by relativising it against the continuation of the species; verbally, the poem disavows the anonymous nature of personal suffering by telescoping into the peculiarities of the fall<sup>3</sup>, going beyond the concerns of literal equivalence. And as intersemiotic translation cannot be conceptualised as a linear, teleological and finite practice connecting the source and the translated text through a literal conduit, the poem’s re-semiotisation of the painting remains open to yet more afterlives.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Jacob Wisse, “Bruegel’s paintings focus on the lives of Flemish commoners, which earned him the nickname “peasant Bruegel” (Wisse 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Piotr Kolodziej observes that the Netherlandish folk proverb “No plough stops because a man dies” was “well-known in Bruegel’s times” (Kolodziej 2016, 68) which further obliterates the import of Icarus’ death.

<sup>3</sup> In his Introduction to *The Wedge*, Williams had pointed out, “But through art the psychologically maimed may become the most distinguished man of his age” (Williams 1944, 53).

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