

Figuring out the Untranslatable: Traces of Twombly

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Abstract: The intertwining of languages, such as writing and visual expression, can enrich our understanding of the translation process and also its limits and obscure areas – the untranslatable. Visual art can therefore become a fruitful resource for an inquiry into translation. Accordingly, an artist like Cy Twombly, one of the most literary visual artists, can provide clues about the enigmas of translation or at least attempt to uncover them in the form of images. Twombly includes words and phrases in his paintings with various degrees of legibility from a great diversity of writers, along with spots and scribbles that are not part of any code. All of this reveals a way of evoking texts and stories covering a wide range of different cultural groups although predominantly classic.

The poet Octavio Paz recognized in Twombly the attributes of a “universal translator”. It is also this path that we will explore and put to test in Twombly’s work but just to a certain extent, in which the search for universality becomes a myth, impossibility, or incomprehension. As Ricoeur says in his study on translation “we know that no universal language can be able to reconstruct its undefined diversity” (Ricoeur 2005, 45).

Twombly’s poetic dimension is probably not universal from the point of view of a perfect language but through the vagueness of the writing in his paintings, which leaves room for imagination and challenges the translation process. “Poetry, and not just poetry, but nature – seasons, vegetation – all of this is transformed, translated into image” (Paz 1995, 182).

Keywords: Writing, Cy Twombly, image, translator, visual arts

Art as an Inquiry

Can images and the visual arts help us to enrich our understanding of the translation process? The creative act, regarding the pictorial, can it enrich that complex process at the heart of language called translation? The answer is yes, and that is the goal of this text: to take as a starting point the visual expression of an artist, Cy Twombly, with the purpose of analyzing the theme of translation and the untranslatable in a singular approach.

The decision to search in the visual arts and in its “language” a way to enrich the concept of translation corresponds to understand it beyond the conventional sense of transposing written or spoken text from one language to another. In our proposal, we refer mainly to translation in its metaphorical sense. This perspective combines perceptions from different domains, for instance, when we state that the perception of nature, or the reading of a poem can be translated into the image of a painting or drawing.

Twombly’s work not only conceives metaphorical translations into images but also captures our attention to the untranslatable in a unique way. His pictorial language reveals a universality open to multiple observers able to translate the world in its diversity. This sort of universality differs from uniformity and mundialization which abolish differences. The position of Twombly becomes more clear regarding this matter, if we consider the various cultural references that appear in this work. The artist seems to put forward images and compositions which combine a series of perceptions and testimonials, together with geographical and temporal contexts but mostly literary and mythological issues.

From Possible Readings to the Untranslatable

At first Twombly's paintings invite an attempt to read the fragments of writing that occasionally appear in his canvases. Although, to decipher or interpret those writings is not actually the purpose of the paintings, or at least it is not its main intent. The fact that the degrees of legibility may vary favors this argument. Moreover, we can question ourselves if the erudite references to literature, poetry and classical antiquity that often appear in his paintings may suggest a certain elitism and ask for an erudite public. However this is far from the truth, Twombly uses the texts mostly as a motivation for himself. As an artist in love with poetry, the poetic text suggests directions to explore in painting: "Sometimes I like that a title gives me impetus or direction for the path I intend to pursue" ("Paroles d'artiste – Cy Twombly" 2019, 19). In short, whether the sentences are actually legible is not as important as its role as a catalyst for Twombly to penetrate the poetic sense these texts originally inspire. More than the desire to read a complete poem, the viewer is confronted with an untranslatable aesthetic experience, overflowing the text and immersing the viewer in a pictorial composition.

The words come to light dispersed in the paintings, and the lines of the verses sometimes appear in a cascade, in certain points legible in others replaced by a stain or transformed into lines, fused with the painting.

The references to culture are actually just an outcome of Twombly's close relationship to literature and writing. Besides, for this reason, Twombly's process of translation into images is unique and the books and narratives seem to follow the artistic process in an organic way, impregnating the very fabric of the work "I never really separated painting and literature because I've always used references" (Jacobus 2016, 5).

The possibility of reading the words on paintings is thus something that remains open and varies according to the artworks and the receiver itself, moreover the most penetrating reading of this writing is the one leading to the language of the image, having as an outcome a sort of an ambiguous process of translation.

So there's uncertainty regarding our position in face of these artworks, since their rich content give rise to different reactions, as the artist Brice Marden testifies "I'm puzzled when I watch people looking at these paintings: they don't seem to be reading the writing. I find that reading it really informs the rest of the image, to the point where the way he works it, becomes so much a part of the image" (Varnedoe 1995, 172).

If we consider the content of the writings in the artwork in regard to the original book references, the viewer experiences the words and references of Twombly already transformed by the artist, and "translated" with a logic of his own, not always claiming a legibility in order to capture an emotion expressed in the untranslatable dimension of poetry:

"I like poets because I can find a condensed phrase...My greatest one to use was Rilke, because of his narrative, he's talking about the essence of something. I always look for that phrase" ("Paroles d'artiste – Cy Twombly" 2019, 32). So let's add a remark, although knowledge of the written references is not essential, they can still open the artwork to a reading of a different nature, more in tune with the meaning of the inscriptions.

As Roland Barthes pointed out about Twombly "When writing Virgil on the canvas, it is as if Twombly summed up in his hand all the greatness of this Virgilian world, everything that this name symbolizes" (Barthes 1984, 155) even if this ability for evocation can be mocked by some critics (for instance, in Robert Hughes' text on Twombly¹), it is important to retain here an aspect that seems clear to us, and that Barthes also calls our attention to (in his famous essay in late 70's, that helped, at the time, to place Twombly among the greatest artists of his generation):

The titles of the artworks or the words and phrases written on Twombly's canvases do not necessarily tell us what the canvas represents, that is, we do not easily recognize, at

least, representative elements of that title in the artwork. For instance, on Twombly's painting "The Italians", Barthes tells us that you shouldn't look for Italians except in their name. Barthes questions:

"The Italians? Sahara? Where are the Italians? Where is the Sahara? Let's look for them. Of course, we find nothing. Or at least - and here begins Twombly's art - what we find - namely the painting itself, the Event, in its splendor and enigmatic quality - is ambiguous: nothing "represents" the Italians, the Sahara, there is no analogical figure of these referents; and yet, we vaguely feel, there is nothing, in these paintings, which contradicts a certain natural idea of the Sahara, the Italians. In other words, the spectator has an intimation of another logic (his way of looking begins to operate transformations): although it is very obscure, the painting has a proper solution, what happens in it conforms to a telos, a certain end" (Barthes 1984, 158).

This hermetic "logic" that Barthes identifies in Twombly reveals that the artist translates titles and phrases into images without following an illustrative or representative scheme of the references. According to Barthes, this unusual logic has something labyrinthine, finally leaving a kind of trail or a ghostly impression that pervades the canvas. We also recognize in this way of approaching the poetic, something untranslatable dispersed in traces that sometimes result from attempts or approximations also characteristic of Twombly's process. Many inscriptions and poems seem faded or blurred by layers of white paint, with new words and strokes added again in a sort of palimpsest.

The Untranslatable as Image and Trace

The translation that Twombly operates during his image construction is therefore not an analogy based on similarity or representation, but rather a metaphorical analogy of the order of resonance, in which different languages communicate and overlap, through themes and meanings but without a full equivalence, and far from a literal translation.

It is difficult, however, to sustain that nothing of the order of representation is present in some paintings, and in fact Twombly's work comprises several episodes in which the relations between writing and figurative traces establish variable combinations, sometimes intersecting as in the series of "Four Seasons", or superimposing and condensing a message, as in the work "Achilles' Revenge", a painting in which a bloody triangle appears, which can be read as the blade of a Trojan war hero's weapon, or an A of Achilles. Twombly describes this "emblematic sign" as follows: "I wanted this, the A for Achilles. I always think of A as Achilles" (Lequeux 2016, 35).

Still on the realm of the Trojan War, we can follow Eliza Holland's recent analysis of Twombly's series of paintings "50 days in Iliam". In her text, Eliza identifies Twombly's "attempts to translate the passion of Homer's epic into painting" (Holland 2020, 1). However, it is curious how the approximation between the reference text and Twombly's paintings cannot in fact be based on demonstrative thinking, since once again it is not a question of deciphering, or as the artist R.Serra once pointed out about Twombly, an analysis of his writing cannot lead us to anything literal². Possibly, by reaching a similar conclusion, Eliza Holland considers that "if such knowledge or classicist's explanation of the paintings were required, Twombly has failed in his mission to "translating" Homer" (Holland 2020, 10). Also acknowledging the well-known aversion of Twombly to talk about his work or reflecting on it. Indeed her approach seems to confirm that his paintings retain something untranslatable and unthinkable that we also find in literary work "*so, in many ways, his paintings will always be enigmatic, imbued with the complexity and ambiguity of the Iliad itself*" (Holland 2020, 10).

This sort of poetry secret language, inaccessible in its last stronghold to translation, is in turn also signalled by Mary Jacobus, in her book about poetry in the paintings of Twombly.

In particular, in a section where she discusses the late paintings inspired by the sonnets of Rilke's Orpheus, and in which the theme of the rose is worked with an effervescent energy that explores the lush flow of paint, the author recognizes a common aspect between Rilke and Twombly, so far as both make use of a language that the observer has not yet mastered, but which invites him to read, even though it bars the passage to its interior. As the author points out:

“these themes [of Rilke's poems] are signalled [in Twombly's paintings] by the inscriptions that occupy the right hand margins of Twombly's Roses paintings, gesturing towards what cannot be seen or easily unpacked, including the invisible painter and the paradoxical privileged inner eye. The poem that addresses the rose resembles it because it too can't be completely translated; each requires immersion in darkness and possesses a secret language” (Jacobus 2016, 222-223).

Despite these barriers, the unthinkable and untranslatable can be contemplated in images that ascend to the surface of Twombly's canvases, not through a reading but through the almost physical experience of writing turned into image, which discovers in the trace (lignes and spots, deployed in the canvas) an intermediate space of transaction between written and visual languages, each in its own way sometimes plunging into the domain of the unfathomable, by the hand of poets and artists.

A Path, Twombly as an Universal Translator

It is worth clarifying what sort of translation process into images actually takes place on Twombly's canvases. The poet Octavio Paz at one point used the name “universal translator” to describe Cy Twombly's creative process. Nobel prize-winner, poet Octavio Paz also has an important work as an art and literature critic, and this expression “universal translator” is a term he used before in the context of the essay “Baudelaire as Art Critic: Presence and Present”. In an interview with Paz in 1995, conducted by John Harvey, on the occasion of a retrospective of Twombly's work in the Menil Collection, Paz considers that “the Baudelarian sense of “universal translator” applies to Twombly in a very particular and precise way. Poetry, and not only poetry but nature – seasons, vegetation – all this is transformed, translated into the image” (Paz 1995, 182).

In the essay on Baudelaire, Octavio Paz introduces his specific concept of translation, in a context where he begins quoting Baudelaire's first essay on the visual arts, a text in which the idea of painting as an autonomous language stands out. Moreover, Octavio Paz adds that “the idea of language includes the idea of translation: the painter translates the world into visual images” in turn, “the critic is a poet who translates lines and colours into words. The artist is a universal translator” (Paz 1986, 51). Paz also considers that “this translation is a transmutation” (Paz 1986, 51). The meaning of this type of translation is therefore a two-way process, from non-linguistic signs to linguistic signs or the reverse. When speaking of transmutation Octavio Paz means that these translations ultimately result in new works and not mere copies, they are metaphors of the original. More than translations in the strict sense in a confined universe, Paz speaks of analogies between “languages” from different fields (painting, music, literature...), terms and comparisons that are retrieved from Baudelaire³.

Metaphor and wonders of the analogy

The analogy described by Octavio Paz deserves special attention since it reveals a unique sort of translation, as his essay states:

“Analogy is the highest function of imagination, since it fuses analysis and synthesis, translation and creation. It is knowledge of and at the same time transmutation of reality” (Paz 1986, 59).

In Paz's words, this analogy allows for a variety of correspondences, operating not only in cognitive terms but also in creative ones. This would be the key to bring into dialogue different temporal and spatial moments, together with various artistic languages and a creative practice that this ambitious operation requires. In this procedure we can already recognize a vehicle for translations and correspondences that are difficult to establish, with the purpose of accessing works, images and figures that would otherwise be elusive and untranslatable in an impoverished sense. It is a maneuver of this kind that Paz also discovers in Twombly when he recognizes in him a universal translator in painting, like Baudelaire in poetry. At the heart of this artistic faculty, the analogy would begin by :

“articulate all times and all spaces in an image which, ceaselessly changing, prolongs and perpetuates itself. In a second instance, it transforms communication into creation: what painting says without telling, turns into what music paints without painting, and what – without ever expressly mentioning it – the poetic word enunciates” (Paz 1986, 59).

Therefore, we recognize an untranslatable which can evoke equivalents in the different arts, but does not uncover itself beyond the metaphorical sense. It is this part of the message, whose proliferation of meaning is irreducible to a literal translation, that Cy Twombly's work contributes to make us aware. Therefore, Twombly's painting is close to this modern sense of the analogy that Paz identifies in the artist as a universal translator.

Experiences of this sort, regarding creative “translation” between poetry and painting praised by Octavio Paz in Twombly's creation, favoured a joint project between the two of them. This project, a collection of eight poems by Octavio Paz was bound together with drawings by Twombly. Our interpretation of Octavio Paz primary interest and attraction to the work of Twombly can benefit from hearing in Paz's own words how he understands the artistic process of this painter:

“[his gesture is] a movement between the oral and the visual. Twombly captures this in his technique, which is new, alluding to the passing of time. Sometimes you see his inscriptions, figures and colors, like something that time has erased, but not entirely; you can see, you can guess, you can imagine” (Paz 1995, 182).

This explanation seems to testify what we have already been suggesting, namely that in this paintings meanings are not completely static, there is a fluctuation of meaning that opens up the realm of imagination.

If we go back to Paz's critical essays and once again to the text concerning Baudelaire, Octavio Paz develops this idea of a creative process that converts poetry into images or vice versa, which he calls analogue translation. This process, as in Twombly's canvases, in which images and phrases cross with various associations, also escapes a univocal meaning, favoring the dispersion of the readings and content.

Unlike the medieval artist who had only one code, writing, “the modern artist has a repertoire of heterogeneous signs and, instead of sacred texts, confronts a multitude of contradictory books and traditions. Thus modern analogy also flows out into the dispersal of meaning” (Paz 1986, 59).

In short, Octavio Paz considers that it is a flow of metaphors that governs this circulation between arts and languages.

“Analogic translation is a rotating metaphor which engenders another metaphor which in turn provokes another and another: what do all these metaphors say? Nothing the painting has not already said yet: presence is concealed to the extent where meaning is dissolved” (Paz 1986, 59).

This process of metaphor engendering, that also implies an increased autonomy of modern art foreseen by Baudelaire's critique and clarified by Octavio Paz, carries nevertheless that

negative element regarding loss of meaning since ultimately, the autonomy of painting ends up in a disembodied abstract language, and in contemplation of emptiness. Paz also recognizes this in art movements or actions related to the denial of art, the subversive side of some avant-gardes such as Dada, which in face of the loss of references brings irony forward.

In other articles from this period, Paz also warns to the danger of sterility regarding abstract art, which despite being an autonomous language, does not share the codes with which the public may have some familiarity. Artists such as Mondrian or Pollock are pointed out and belong to this group.

In Cy Twombly's case his art is only partially abstract, and from Paz's perspective he would not be exposed to the risks of sterility. This position on Twombly's art is confirmed by Octavio Paz in the Menil Foundation interview:

“John Harvey: In the same essay on Baudelaire's you write that “From Baudelaire on, painting thinks but does not speak, is language but does not mean; it is luminous matter and form, but it has ceased to be an image. You name this aesthetic of disembodiment.”

Paz: I think about the abstract painters who tried to dissipate the image, to provoke a new reality or sense of reality. Mondrian painted archetypes of this work. This is not the case with Twombly. On the contrary, he tries to recover life and its appearance, its movement, its chance, through the act of painting” (Paz 1995, 182).

According to Octavio Paz, Twombly therefore retains the faculty of recovering the real into an artistic production. In its reaction also to abstract expressionism it maintains a link with nature, but according to an impulse and purpose which preserves the mystery to which we have been referring. Ultimately, even the image presents itself as the threshold of that untranslatable to which the artist paves the way, a place where mainly sensibility dwells.

“It's very difficult to talk about an artist, always we are talking about another way of trying to understand a secret, and the best thing to do is be content with the enigma of the painter; still, with this reservation, I would say that Cy Twombly wants to be able to see through the image. He wants to be able to see the invisible in some ways, so his paintings have to do with light” (Paz 1995, 183).

Language and the Utopia of Universality

By highlighting the notion of universal translator evoked by Paz, it is important to deepen the sense of universality in the scope of language. As we shall see in the case of Twombly this concept diverges from the doomed project of universal languages.

With regard to the utopia of universal languages, Jean-Luc Baudras refers to this 18th century ambition as a desire to go “beyond the diversity of human languages corrupted by use and time” (Baudras 2009, 163). For the apologists of this project, it is about “rediscovering the logical language that, devoid of all ambiguities, allows to say the essence of things, thus reducing the possibilities of errors of judgment and making it easier the communication between scholars” (Baudras 2009, 163).

However, this research faced various difficulties affected by an excess of rationalization that turned it above all into an instrument of knowledge, but failing in the field of communication. In short, the project of a perfect universal language would have the ambition of removing ambiguity but also the importance of the “other” in the process of communication, as soon as a foreign element is recognized. Although, eliminating this foreign element looks like an impoverishing act regarding the base language. As Ricouer recognizes in his work on translation, “without the proof of the foreigner, would we keep sensitive to the strangeness of our own language? And, finally, without this proof, wouldn't we run the risk of closing ourselves in the bitterness of a monologue, alone with our books?” (Ricouer 2005, 52).

In regard to this idea of the perfect language that failed (due to excessive formalism), Ricouer counters a living language that preserves the “other” and the diversity within the empirical language without hiding inaccuracies, and not discarding the historical heritage.

The universal nature of Twombly’s attitude (related to the translation of human culture sentences into images) is in tune with Ricouer’s perspective, as it preserves the ambiguity of the gesture of writing. In fact, Twombly’s artworks presents a poetic dimension that probably isn’t universal from the point of view of a perfect language but through the vague behavior that informs his paintings, which leave room for the imagination and challenge understanding, similarly to the obstacles of translation process. As Ricoeur says, we know “that no universal language is able to reconstruct its undefined diversity” (Ricouer 2005, 45).

It is important to acknowledge that the project of universal perfect languages which failed, sought to exclude the ambiguity that makes part of natural languages, this same ambiguity, that is a trace of the untranslatable.

Ultimately, the universality of Twombly’s mark is above all a search that does not belong to communication in the common sense. On the other hand it is through myth and the secrets of human language and culture that the artist sets in motion a new construction, having as building blocks fragments of civilization. In this case, these sort of universality is different of a process of standardization, as it preserves and reaffirms cultural diversity. What is at stake is a specific “Access to the Universal” well-defined in the texts of Michel Serres: “As in the natural example of climate, there is a human language system that locally produces the mosaic diversity of languages. It is also proof that the Universal does not necessarily induce uniformity; only a force based on stupidity does it.(...) If globalization is opposed to differences, the Universal, on the contrary, favors them” (Serres 2005, 243).

Contrary to the static and uniform apriorism that would characterize a perfect language, Twombly’s artworks makes us reflect on language, and recall the organic appeal and breath underneath it. This becomes more evident through the gesture of the free mark and trace, a sort of vital force that writes without a plan beyond his allusions to poems and places in human culture. So in a way, Twombly’s writing and artistic process brings with it a movement similar to that of a living language. It is in a text by Demosthenes Davvetas that the author recognizes in Twombly’s writing precisely a “writing of living beings”:

“The graphic subject is this line which neither wishes to ruin the pictorial surface nor aims to destroy the already-existing historic material. Rather, it seeks to disperse this material beyond familiar areas and employs a strategic exercise – beginning the journey by which “writing” becomes language” (Davvetas 1989, 93).

If Twombly combines different visions of human history, it is because his universalism cannot be certified as in the structure of a uniform language, there is a relativism in the action of gesture, of “writing” turned into a pictorial sign, whose dispersion approaches not only the dispersal of meaning that Paz and Davettas refer to, but also the rich contingency of the translating act described by Ricoeur:

“Yes, it must be confessed: from one language to another, the situation is really one of dispersion and confusion. And yet, the translation is part of the long litany of “in spite of everything”. Despite the fratricides, we militate for universal brotherhood. Despite the heterogeneity of languages, there are bilinguals, polyglots, interpreters and translators” (Ricouer 2005, 34).

Conclusion

At the end of this theoretical trajectory, we can compare our path to an intriguing experience that follows the liberating insights of Twombly’s marks and words, while trying to get close to his art through a particular lense, enlarging the inscrutable images of his artworks.

This aspect is characterized by our topic, the untranslatable, which could only be accessed by approximations, having as a resource the contribution of art as an inquiry.

In short, this work was aimed to understand what is at stake in the scope of language, translation and the untranslatable, when this problem intersects with the visual arts, having the privilege of addressing it through the work of a painter with a strong influence of literature and writing. We developed a conception suggested by Octavio Paz of visual art as a language in the metaphorical sense with regard to Twombly, an approach that employs a language of visual sensations which translates in a unique way perceptions of nature and poetry. Supporting this approach, we explored a sort of analogic translation that allows various correspondences and welcomes different temporal/spatial moments into to the visual field. Still, with the insight of Octavio Paz's we testified the unique approach of Twombly to nature and to the world, which is different from the detachment that is possible to recognize in some abstract art. Without adopting a totally abstract strategy we stated nevertheless that his sort of translation isn't related to representation either. Twombly's marks try to recapture nature and life through a sort of transfiguration, this act is about recovering the human path without becoming trapped in the past. The artist rewrites life, since the weight of human culture in his back turns into the desire to overcome it, inventing it once again with his unique approach.

We also testify how literature increases its scope through Twombly's appropriation of words, as it inspires the artist beyond the text, relating forms with the untranslatable in a sensitive realm. Most of the time this sensibility is bound with a visceral energy in which was recognized a sort of animal and living language, so, in a way, more than an equivalence with a sentence, Twombly's feverish pictorial inscriptions circumscribe the poetic space of the untranslatable through a sort of virtual outline, figuring out this untranslatable dimension.

Afterall Twombly stands as a kind of creative translator in the realm of the arts, signaling emotions and desires that cross borders, scenarios and epochs, with a torrent of mythologic and literary references. His lively free gestures, more than often provoke the dispersal of meaning, as we noted in our analysis while his images arise; this seems like a consequence of Twombly's strategy to counter the unapproachable dimension of his themes.

Finally, his ability to stand as a universal translator has nevertheless a non-uniform appeal. Twombly moves in a sort of universal mosaic that generates scribbles, spots...and singularities everywhere, through the impulse of a fable or poem not restricted by reality.

I would like to close this text persisting on the reference to the poetic since it supposes connections with the untranslatable, which has more similarities to a major experience without clear limits than to a concrete message that requires a careful reading. As Fernando Pessoa wrote through Álvaro de Campos, and transcribed by Twombly in a sculpture: "To feel all things in all ways".

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Notes

¹ See Robert Hughes <https://fishplay.wordpress.com/2007/10/08/robert-hughes-on-cy-twombly/>

² I refer to an intervention of Richard Serra in a conversation among artists moderated by Kirk Varnedoe. See *Cy Twombly: An artist's artist. Res – Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 28, Autumn (1995), p. 176.

³ See Octavio Paz essay, Baudelaire as an Art Critic in *On Poets and Others*. New York, Arcade Publishing, Inc. (1986).

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