

# NEW MEDIA TRANSLATION THEORY AND THE ONLINE *BRAUTIGAN* BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses a theory of translating print-based literary texts for the web, called new media translation theory, and the principles underlying it as they play out in the online bibliography of writer Richard Brautigan.

**KEYWORDS:** New media translation theory, electronic textuality, Richard Brautigan, online bibliography

The “Psychedelic” 60s, a particular moment from 1967-1969, remains a time of great idealism in American cultural history—a period in which the youth of America sought to overturn old order through consciousness-raising drugs and “flower power.” One writer thought best to express the *zeitgeist* of this movement is Richard Brautigan, known for his easy-to-read, yet strange and idiosyncratic prose style. His work, often written by hand in paper notebooks, has been translated and published in nearly thirty languages. Current fans often include his stories and poems on their personal websites. While the concern for any translator is how best to retain the spirit and flavor of the original source text, when translating the work of someone like Brautigan who plays such a large role in a particular literary movement, the need to capture the work, as well as the author and period, loom large. Added to this consideration is a problem

even more daunting: translating Brautigan and his work and time between print and electronic media.

Moving text from print to a web-based environment forces translators to address the way print privileges stasis over dynamicism, words over images and sound, and durability over evanescence [1]. Thus, translating between

media, like translating between languages, requires the kind of forethought arrived at only from a sound theoretical base, one that takes into consideration the substantial differences between the two and addresses those qualities unique to electronic. N. Katherine Hayles points to media translation as articulated by one of the authors of this paper [2] as one such theory and argues for a particular quality of electronic media she calls “electronic textuality” [3], a textual state that attends to multiple “signifying components,” such as “sound, animation, motion, video, kinesthetic involvement, and software functionality among others” and appeals to multiple senses required in the interpretative act of those components [4]. Thus, attending to these special qualities becomes important if the translator wishes to create an effective rendering of Brautigan’s work and time. Along those lines, the online *Brautigan Bibliography*, an interactive, web-based annotated bibliography of Brautigan’s novels, poetry, stories, recordings, and non-fiction writing, exhibits these qualities of electronic textuality described by Hayles. To this end, this paper discusses a theory of translating media, called new media translation theory, and the principles underlying it as they play out in the online bibliography of writer Richard Brautigan.

## NEW MEDIA TRANSLATION THEORY

In brief, new media translation theory is concerned with issues related to the transmission of text, information, or message from print into electronic media and is derived, in part, from the basic principles embodied in translation theory for both literary and nonverbal “texts” as well as notions relating to electronic textuality. Translation theory holds, first and foremost, that “all acts of communication are acts of translation” [5]; second, that the translator is not just a conveyor of meaning between languages

but an artist in her or his own right [6]; and third, that translation is an art that relies just as heavily on process as it does on a product [7]. Nonverbal translation theory posits that while translation is transparent and leaves no trace on the work, the object of translation itself, whether it is the source text or artifact of the process, possesses a physicality that must be addressed in the translation process [8]. Thus as a literary theory, translation theory avoids some of the stickier issues [9] related to working with, reading, and interacting with texts that traditional theories of literature and textual studies involve [10] and, thus, lends itself well for application to new media texts, like webpages of digitalized literary works, where medium is integral to that “text.”

Extrapolating from the fourth principle of translation theory, it is the physical make up of the object of translation that defines its textuality. For books and other analog products, this physicality means that “the storage medium is the presentation medium” and “the storage signs are also the presentation signs.” For electronic or digital products requiring a mediating device, this means that the “presentation medium and the storage medium are two separate items and that the presentation signs are not the same as the storage signs” [11]. Put simply, code driving the instantiation of an electronic work makes access to that work less direct than that of a print text [12]. And because the computer translates ideas stored algorithmically into the words, images, and sound in a form accessible to the reader, it interprets the work and mediates our interpretation of it. Building upon Hans Georg Gadamer’s notion of the act of translation in which he claims that “reading is already translation, and translation is translation for the second time” [13], we see in translating between print and the web that reading represents the first translation; moving it into storage (i.e. scanning it, recording it), the second; and presenting it electronically, the third. Reading and interpreting that material in its presentational state adds additional steps to the process. To be certain, the way in which the computer or other electronic mediating device stores and presents the object of translation affects the quality of its rendering and the way we read and interpret it.

As we all know, one piece of HTML code mistyped can result in a significant change in the entire electronic text. So while a print translator addresses the transformative nature of language [14], accepts textual uncertainty [15] and maintains a sustained engagement with the text [16] to name just a few examples of good practice, electronic translators need to pay attention to these considerations plus those particular to electronic media [17]. Hayles hits the proverbial nail on the head when she writes: “Only if we attend to the interrelations of linguistic, bibliographic, and digital codes can we grasp the full implications of the transformations books undergo when they are translated into a digital medium” [18].

### **THE BRAUTIGAN BIBLIOGRAPHY**

The *Brautigan Bibliography* is an interactive website consisting of ninety-five distinct subject nodes (18 primary level, 73 secondary level, and 4 tertiary level). Most of these nodes are further divided into chunks of thematic information. All nodes are designed to facilitate internal navigation, as well as movement throughout the entire website. The overarching content strategy is to present large amounts of information efficiently to scholars and Brautigan fans within an organized yet intuitive context. While its genesis can be found in *Richard Brautigan: An Annotated Bibliography* [19], the online *Brautigan Bibliography*, by the same author, has been constructed and continues to evolve as a media-rich, multisensory site that takes into account the transformative nature of language and textual uncertainty, a site built on and requiring from the reader a sustained engagement with the text.

### **Multiple textualities and sensory perception**

Descriptive text(s), reviews, critiques—words written by multiple authors—form the bulk of the information presented in the *Brautigan Bibliography*. These multiple texts are often cross-linked and cross-referenced in ways not possible using print technologies. In addition, they are augmented, elaborated, and expanded upon with sound and images. Sound files featuring Brautigan reading his poetry, short stories, and selections from his novels are provided. One sound file features eighteen individuals reading, separately, Brautigan's

"Love Poem," each voicing his or her own interpretation of it. Other files capture Brautigan's everyday activities: brushing his teeth, removing his clothes, and talking on the telephone, to name a few. Together, these seemingly disparate texts combine to show Brautigan as the quirky writer that he was. Brautigan's many publications are presented as both static images and images parading across the webpage as a way of juxtaposing the solitariness of the man with the celebratory essence of the times. Images of photographic covers for his early books feature Brautigan and women with whom he was involved. These portraits help contextualize Brautigan in relation to his life and times. Additionally, links to internal or external resources showcasing his literary contributions; his life in San Francisco, Haight-Ashbury, and the counterculture scene of the 1960s; and literary groups he associated with help promote a multivocal textuality—that is, a textuality built upon multiple authorities addressing Brautigan's work across multiple perspectives and from multiple directions. In sum, making readily available some of the leading voices of the time along with images and music adds to the ambience of the period and situates Brautigan's writing. Through the use of multiple types of texts, the *Brautigan Bibliography* aims at compelling readers to see, hear, and feel Brautigan, his work, and time. More than encountering data, readers "touch" and are touched by text through vision, hearing, and motion. This approach to design corresponds to the notion of haptic perception and visuality as described by Laura Marks in her discussion about the multisensory experience of electronic media [20].

### **Transformative nature of language**

Where print literary translations may be concerned with transformations wrought by changing words, sentences, or passages, the *Brautigan Bibliography*, by virtue of the web's interconnectiveness, addresses the transformative nature of language by showing its iterations across a large body of knowledge. For example, a separate information node is devoted to each of Brautigan's works. In each of these nodes, information is collected, combined, and presented in ways not possible in print bibliographies. This information covers first

editions, subsequent and previous editions, translations, background, dedications, and reviews of the particular work. This broad treatment of knowledge has resulted in a significant change in not only how Brautigan is viewed but also how his literature is defined. For instance, previously categorized by some scholars as a Beat poet [21], Brautigan, writing in a direct and blunt, yet poetic, prose style, emerges from this site as a bridge between the Beats and "hippie" writers and culture. Specifically, we see an ironic humor more akin to the LSD induced fantasies of hippies than the biting social satire of the Beats.

### **Accepting textual uncertainties**

Many details about Brautigan's life and work remain elusive and uncertain. Any bibliography must accept such information gaps and address the textual uncertainties they present. Traditional print bibliographies address such uncertainties in three ways. First, they may dodge them by using qualifiers like, "It has been reported" or "Sources suggest." Second, they may label them as "unknown" or "incomplete." And third, they may ignore them, dropping them from the bibliography altogether, often under the guise of economizing available space. The *Brautigan Bibliography*, instead, embraces textual uncertainty and attempts to turn those that emerge into vehicles for the acquisition of new knowledge. For example, it was previously unclear exactly when Brautigan began his literary career, important information for collector's of Brautigan writing and memorabilia. By presenting multiple sources side by side in pages of the site, each containing some bit of evidence, and inviting readers to contribute missing and correct existent information, the *Brautigan Bibliography* makes it possible to reconcile this question: Essentially, Brautigan began his career twice—after his high school graduation in Eugene, Oregon in 1953 and again, after having failed miserably in that first attempt, in San Francisco in 1955. This approach to scholarship transforms the seat of authority across a broad, rich network of knowledge regarding Brautigan's *corpus* of work and place in literature, deemphasizing a single authorial voice or simple answer.

### Sustained engagement

When working with the text, the translator must give it “the closest reading one can possibly give” [22]. Thus, this kind of sustained engagement with a text emerges as a hallmark of good literary translation practice. In the same token, it is also good practice for a translator to create a work that maintains the liveliness of the original work in order to sustain the reader’s engagement with the text. Print texts, particularly literary ones, have, over the course of the history of print technology, refined the qualities that immerse the reader in the text [23]. Translators of electronic texts are, likewise, learning methods for sustaining the reader’s engagement. In that vein, the *Brautigan Bibliography* experiments with the layout and design as way to engage the reader. For example, looking at the page for *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*, a reader would encounter images of six different editions of the book. These images are placed beside a full textual description, many of which provide further information by way of an “on click” message resembling a question mark. Color further enhances the ability to locate desired reading paths. Thus, the site involves the reader through “sensory and kinesthetic” means—“modalities” that Hayles attributes to the “pleasure” produced by print texts [24].

### CONCLUSION

A generalization often made about translation is *traduttore e traditore*—that is, “The translator betrays” [25]. The idea behind this statement is that in every translation there is something of value lost. For print texts digitalized for the web, that “something lost” may be the indelible smell of leather binding, the feel of vellum against one’s fingers, or even the ability to read the book in the bathtub. Yet, astute and effective translators recognize that in every good translation there is something also gained. In the case of the *Brautigan Bibliography*, the “something gained” is the richness of information, connected and synthesized; the enlivening of readers as active participants in the knowledge making process; and the appeal to senses, like hearing and kinesthetic not generally touched by print texts, recreated in new ways—enduring qualities, all of them, in their own right.

### NOTES

- [1] N. Katherine Hayles delineates the differences between print and electronic texts in the forthcoming “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis.”
- [2] In her essay, “Translating Media,” Hayles takes up Dene Grigar’s new media translation theory to argue for a new approach to working with electronic texts.
- [3] Although the term, “cyberspace textuality,” has been previously used to refer to qualities of electronic text, Hayles shifts “electronic textuality,” which refers to both the qualities of electronic texts as well as the field of study she is working to found.
- [4] In *Writing Machines* Hayles fleshes out her theory of electronic textuality more fully.
- [5] See John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte, pp. ix-x.
- [6] Hugo Friedrich traces the origins of Western literary translation to the Roman period, making a strong case for the idea that translation has been a recognized art form beginning with the ancient period. See “On the Art of Translation,” pp. 11-16.
- [7] Edmund Keeley describes the translation process as a “moveable feast.” See “Collaboration, Revision, and Other Less Forgivable Sins in Translation,” p. 63.
- [8] Translators have long argued for the materiality of text. Even those who work with nonverbal translation, like Fernando Poyatos, talk about the physicality of books and the spoken word. See “Aspects, problems, and challenges of nonverbal communication in literary translation,” pp. 17-47.
- [9] Mats Dahlstrom provides a good explanation of the difficulty scholars face when using print-based literary theories for electronic texts. Drawing on the work of Espen Aarseth, Dahlstrom outlines two approaches to textuality: textological and textonomical. The former, a common approach in postmodern literary theory, disallows the materiality of electronic texts; the latter, common to textual studies, embraces the physicality of an electronic text but does not recognize text as art. It should be noted that Dahlstrom, a textual studies scholar, favors a textonomical approach to text, while we, as new media translators, see problems inherent in both views. For us any object of translation, whether that object is a print poem, sound file of a recitation of a poem, or website consisting of

multiple poems, constitutes a “text” that is both material and a work of art.

[10] The argument for using translation theory as a method of critiquing electronic work was first made by Dene Grigar in her presentation at the Computers and Writing Conference in May 2002 though the issue of exploring web-based texts as objects of translation has been raised by multimedia translation scholars. See Yves Gambier and Henrik Gottlieb’s *(Multi)Media Translation*.

[11] See Anna Gunder, “Forming the Text, Performing the Work—Aspects of Media, Navigation, and Linking.” 106-8.

[12] Hayles made this argument a decade ago in “Virtual Bodies, Flickering Signifiers,” p. 77.

[13] Hans Georg Gadamer, qtd. in Biguenet and Schulte, p. x.

[14] See Gregory Rabassa, “No Two Snowflakes Are Alike: Translation as Metaphor,” p. 2.

[15] *ib.*, 12.

[16] Biguenet and Schulte, p. xii.

[17] Hayles argues for “media specific analysis” in “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep” and in her recent book *Writing Machines*, pp. 29-34.

[18] From Hayles, “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” np.

[19] See John F. Barber, *Richard Brautigan: An Annotated Bibliography*. Though out-of-print, the book remains a standard reference for researchers and scholars as well as a sought-after item for Brautigan collectors.

[20] See Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Perception*, pp. 2-3.

[21] Ann Charters, author of *The Portable Sixties Reader*, introduces Brautigan as a “Bay Area” poet who “shared the West Coast hippie ethos of the Beat writers.” She goes on to say that he “rejected Kerouac’s autobiographical approach to ‘true story novels’ and his spontaneous prose style” and instead wrote “surreal fantasies.” See p. 429.

[22] See Rabassa, p. 6.

[23] For a good discussion about the immersive quality of literature, see Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, pp. 97-125.

[24] See Hayles, *Writing Machines*, pp. 15-16.

[25] This is an old maxim reiterated by Keeley, p. 54.

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