

Hermeneutics and the Text Translation: Interpretability, Probability, Impossibility

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Abstract

The original and the new translated texts are not similar; yet the second is the by-product of the first. The translator manipulates the first so that he gives birth to the second. But does the second contain the same entrails of the first? Does it contain the same voice as the original? Or just, behind any new text, there is intentionality of the translator! Can Hermeneutics be the adequate tool, which enables the translator/interpreter to find the authentic meaning of the original?

Key Words: Interpretation—Manipulation—Translation—Hermeneutics—Intentionality

Résumé

Le texte original et le nouveau ne sont pas similaires; cependant, le deuxième est un dérivé du premier. Le traducteur manipule le premier pour donner naissance au deuxième. Mais, peut-il avoir les mêmes spécificités que le premier ? Peut-il contenir la même voix que l'original ? Ou simplement, derrière chaque texte, il y a l'intentionnalité du traducteur? L'herméneutique, peut-elle être l'outil adéquat, qui aide le traducteur/interprète à trouver le sens authentique de l'original ?

Mots clés: Interprétation—Manipulation—Traduction—Herméneutique--Intentionnalité

Introduction

A translated text is another text with its own specificities and own entity. Though it gets its being and existence from the original, it still remains autonomous. Though the translator is trying to keep closer to the original, or at least what he ‘pretends’ to do, the new text exhibits its own style and expression. But translation is not a ‘logical’ process that looks at variations at different levels of meanings. Frequently, it cannot be done without reference to intentionality. But of whom is this intentionality? Is it of the writer, or of the reader? In other words: if the translator determines the meaning of the words of the text, he makes the translated text his own meaning-transfer. This means, he has given birth to a new text! “This itinerary of meaning,” Sarah Maitland maintains, “transforms both the culture of the foreign text and the culture of the translation because the work produced achieves more than communicate discrete and immutable ‘identities’ within the foreign text. [...] Translations from this view are ‘sites of displacement,’ neither original nor reproduction yet suggestive of both.” (Maitland,2012, p.55)

BUT: What do we translate of/from the text? : The form or the content, or rather the context? Where does meaning lie? Is it in these three elements, or beyond all of them? What parameter can we use to find the relevant key and the ‘right’ way to penetrate the text and decipher its meaning? Does the meaning, we get from our reading, conform to the authenticity of the text? Whatever we choose as a tool imposes a special meaning dialogically related to the tool chosen. So, where is the text, when transferred to another language by another interpreter? Does it hold its original specificities? Bryan Harmelink puts it well when he points out that “A word still has all the meanings, and context filters out the meanings which do not fit. A more refined and linguistically informed notion of context has indeed been helpful; the context certainly does play a significant role in interpretation, but some studies give the impression that context is the only determining factor in establishing meaning. Yet, exactly what the context is remains quite vague.” (Harmelink,2012, p.27)

In other words, it seems that in any literary text, there is no original meaning. Or put otherwise, there are countless original meanings within the same text: thus, authenticity seems to be farfetched. And so, the translator seems to translate what he interprets as an original. He, thus, transfers his original of the text but not the text’s original itself. It means that the original cannot be grasped and remains authentic to the text itself—being-in-itself. The critic Aiga Kramina (2004) raises the following question that is so pertinent: “Who is in the position to claim that s/he has understood the text ‘correctly,’ and that a translator has got it wrong. And why would a translator misunderstand and distort the text, which is so clear to a scholar?” (p.37) Kramina thinks of manipulation. For him, any act of translation is an act of manipulation since translation is a transfer of an interpretation among other interpretations. Interpretation is a bias, which could hold intentionality, ideology, culture and other external factors, besides, of course, the texture of the text-construction. Jacques Derrida opts for dissemination in the process of translation. But this process is questionable: “Who chooses what is disseminated and how is the translated knowledge used?” (Kim,2013, p.42)

A question imposes itself, here: What is a meaning? How can we get it before any process of translation? Is interpretation a must for any translation? Is meaning an interpretation derived from the text, or outside it? Who is the agent that generates meaning(s)? Pierce maintains that:

Besides the consequences to which the person who accepts a word knowingly commits himself, there is a vast ocean of unforeseen consequences which the acceptance of the word is destined to bring about, not merely consequences of knowing but perhaps revolutions of society. One cannot tell what power there may be in a word or a phrase to change the face of the world; and the sum of the consequences makes up the third grade of meaning. (Qtd in Kukkonen, 2012, p.132)

So, the meaning of the words is dialogically related to the reader's response to the word and the context in which it is put/used. In the words of Jonne Arjoranta (2011): "Interpretation always includes application, or how the understanding gained from the interpretation is going to be used, and to what end. Application guides the process of interpretation towards some ends, and away from others." (p.1) In the same vein Walter Benjamin maintains that: "[the Text] 'tells' very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations." (Benjamin, 1968, p.75).

One word could have a variety of meanings and could qualify and label a variety of things and objects. Thus, getting within the layers of a text necessitates a delving beneath the context. So, the translator/interpreter is in need of a tool that allows him to do such a job: It is hermeneutics. It is a means that enables the reader plunge within the text and what it hides through revelations. But what does it mean, and how does it booster the interpreter/translator to penetrate the depth(s) of a text?

1- Hermeneutics and the World Meaning in the Literary Text:

Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek term 'hermeneutikos,' which means the art of interpreting and discovering the 'exact' meaning, among the multiplications of meanings, of a text (Alain, 2010, *Dictionnaire Le Robert*). It is a process that enables the reader 'understand' and decode the message that the text holds in its secret depth(s). In the words of J. Ong Walter, "Hermeneutics is interpretation grown self-conscious." (Walter, 1995, p.13) or according to Paul Regan (2012): "[Hermeneutics] promotes human potential for understanding the meaning of language to expand the infinite possibilities of human thought." (p.288)

Hermeneutics possesses some sets of principles, which help the reader search for truth and what the text reveals through and beyond language. It is a dynamic activity, which is based on observation, exploration and interpretation of the texture of any 'creative' composition. But its exhaustion can never be evident. Martin Heidegger (1999) points out that: "The chance that hermeneutics will go wrong belongs in principle to its own most being.

The kind of evidence found in its explications is fundamentally labile. To hold up before it such an extreme ideal of evidence as ‘intuition of essences’ would be a misunderstanding of what it can and should do.” (p.12) In the same vein the critic Luis Garagalza (2013) maintains that: “the search for meaning is endless; it is an infinite adventure. It does not culminate in meaning. Rather, its evident result is meaninglessness, since, without the felt disquietude of the latter there would not have been any search whatsoever.” (p.1)

This endless search of meaning(s) is one of the qualities of the text. Hermeneutics takes such complexity of text and meaning resistance into account trying to get deeper within the core of its composition— its exegesis. Thus, no claim of authenticity is ever possible. “Hermeneutics takes the problem of complexity into account, which is why it does not claim objectivity in any other sense than that of horizontal fusion. [...] Since interpretation is always undertaken in the present and in tradition, which continuously evolves, there might in principle be other ways of questioning the text.” (Rasmussen,2002, p.3)

Having endless interpretations, the text resists and fences its core with language that reveals beyond what its tense, and structure, and sentences and expressions denote. In the words of N. Prasad Kafle (2011), “The researcher’s understanding of an essence is always ‘on-the way, partial, and particular to the experiences from which the interpretations were formed.” (p. 189)

2-Interpretation

Interpretation is a way to look at the text in order to find out its ‘accurate’ meaning so that it could be transferred without deviation from its core. Hermeneutics comes to be the adequate tool and method for such matter. It is the science of interpretation. Its purpose is to determine genuinely the true meaning of text. But whatever methods used, interpretation of a text is problematic and complex. Walter maintains that: “Again, total verbal explicitness is impossible. Awareness that all use of language is interpretative or hermeneutic connects with the awareness that truth can never be simply propositional. [...] Every propositional truth is limited in explicitness and thus demands interpretation.” (Walter,1995, p.18)

Accommodation of the text is in itself the cause of its mis/interpretation. Many parameters come into context: language, history, culture, intentionality and the process of re/generation of meaning that happen and develop within the mind of the reader/interpreter. There is no true meaning of a text. In its revelation, the text gives different auras of meanings and interpretations that seem to be paradoxical and dialogically related to the intention of the reader. Whoever is, the reader is always faced by text’s resistance and deviation. Yun Seong (2013) states that: “The reader (the interpreter) ‘in front of the text’ appropriates this through accommodating the new world of existential life that the text affords them. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the interpreter can totally control the text at their own will or intention.”(p.217)

No doubt, language vehicles thoughts; but these thoughts are beyond or behind the structure of language. Language is only a means, which enfolds them, but not an end or a result of such thoughts. In the words of Hans Georg Gadamer (2004): “The experience of making sense of text always includes application; listening, observing, testing, judging,

challenging, reflecting and looking for any bias whilst being-with-others (p.389). In the same vein, Paul Regan, in his article “Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics: Concepts of Reading, Understanding and Interpretation,” points out that:

The language used within the narrative acts as a middle ground between a search for understanding and agreement between the text and the interpreter.[...] The alien aspects of text are what is the unknown, challenging the interpreter’s familiar worldly horizons that assimilates old knowledge into new understanding, even if difficult to understand, especially relevant when reading the technical language of philosophy. (Regan,2012, pp. 292-293)

Jaco Dreyer (2011), in his article, “Public Theology and the Translation Imperative: A Ricoeurian Perspective,” suggests that the interpreter has just to look at the text in relation to its origin and, at the same time, in relation to the new context. He writes: “The ‘reader’ or interpreter of the texts and traditions has to try to understand the text in relation to the context of origin, but also has the duty to understand the text or tradition in relation to the new or different context.” (p.1)

In this quote, Dreyer seems to complicate more the matter of interpretation of a text. He speaks of the context of the origin, but, at the same time, he points out the importance of the meaning in relation to a new and different context imposed by the ‘now’? Still, the argument sounds paradoxical: Where is the meaning? Dreyer speaks about meanings of the ‘was’ and the ‘is’ of the text. In other words, he gives us the proof that the text is an ongoing interpretation, and there is, through times, no one meaning of the text.

Alienness of the text estranges the reader and makes him fail to find out its voice. Subsequently, whatever we get as a meaning or interpretation is only a meaning or an interpretation that is imposed by the reader, who wants to step beyond the text’s resistance and alienness. Meanings do not accord with the text because no adequate real voice of the text is detected. (Ricoeur,1976, p.75) In the words of Maitland (2012):

To attempt to construe meaning in any text, therefore, is to hazard a guess. Given what we might suggest is a lack of a common ‘situation of enunciation’ shared by reader and producer, he identifies two ways forward: As readers, we may either remain in a kind of state of suspense as regards any kind of referred to reality, or we may imaginatively actualize the potential no ostensive references of the text in a new situation, that of the reader. In the second, we create a new ostensive reference thanks to the kind of ‘execution’ that the act of reading implies. (p.61)

So, the subject who reads is the subject who generates the meaning—his meaning—from the text. He tries to make the structure speak, and he, in turn, tries to listen to some revelations. Jens Rasmussen (2002) maintains that: “The sense of the text, that is to say, its internal relations or structure, thus becomes meaning, it is realised, so to speak, in the discourse of the

reading subject. [...] Meaning is related to the identification of authorial thought in the text.” (p. 4) But the voice, the interpreter listens to, is only a voice among so many voices; furthermore, it is probably the voice that he wants to listen to because it responds to what he likes to find out. In other words, the text holds many voices and, thus, makes many readings and several interpretations. Walter(1995) points out that verbal interpretation is dialogically related to the non-verbal. He writes: “Any use of speech, any speech act, oral or written, itself is never free of the nonverbal. We must be aware of the nonverbal setting as a whole in order to know what any given verbal expression says.” (p.6) He extends further claiming that:

Words alone will not do: the unsaid, in which words are embedded, must be shared in interpersonal relationship. Communication in words-and-context will yield truth here and now, will satisfy the demands of the present quest for truth even though the context and the words themselves are incomplete and could, of course, absolutely speaking, be subject to further verbalization and the grasp of truth thereby enlarged or deepened. (p.7)

To grasp the meaning of/in the text, the reader initiates a dialogue with the text: he interacts with it. No doubt, the meaning is in the text, but the degree of penetration within the text is related to the nature of the dialogue taken by the reader with it. The meaning, he gets from the text, is dialogically linked to the degree of dialogue he partakes. Li You (2015) emphasizes the nature of interaction the reader has with the context of the text. He writes:

Only in the dialogue between readers and the texts, can readers grasp the meaning of the text. The result of the dialogical reader-text interaction is [...] where the limited horizon of a text and the limited horizon of the reader have generated a new, intermediary creation that can be called the meaning of the text in the readers’ minds. Understanding and interpretation is not a one-time behavior of the subject but a permanent process. (p.110)

So, interpretation is a sense-regeneration based on the text. It cannot be otherwise.

4-Translation

Since translation is dependent on interpretation, can we dare say that what is translated is really what the text is supposed to give as accurate meaning? Is it a kind of agreement, in the context and claim of Gadamer, between the translator and the author? Or is it just a kind of agreement between the text’s voice and what the translator listens to?

Radegundis Stolze (2012), in his article “The Legal Translator’s Approach to Texts,” underlines the problem of translation and considers it as a continuous hermeneutic sketch. He writes:

Due to continuous cultural and historical development, a translational solution can never be final. It is always a ‘hermeneutic sketch,’ the attempt to adequately express an utterance. At the same time, there is

always and inevitably also the potential of a further improvement: maybe one will find an even better formulation later on. The holistic nature is important in this process. [...] The meaning of a text is more than a simple addition of the single words and sentences. Holistic pre-understanding guides this textual analysis. (p.58)

Li You (2015) considers translation as a creation based on negotiations with the author. He writes: “The translator, therefore, can be said to be a creator, trying to negotiate with the author to reveal the hidden message in the source text.” (p.111) But the arguments, put forward by You, seem not to be convincing. They are, rather, contentious. First, the translator negotiates with the author not the text. Second, what we are supposed to translate is the text not the author. Third, negotiation means compromise and agreement with to partners: the translator and the author—not the text—though we know that the text is from the author but not, in any way, for him. In other words, the text is autonomous. Fifth, compromise means accepting some parts of the whole: Negotiation causes the loss of some elements of the unity of the text. Sixth, the author is disguised within his text; thus negotiation cannot be possible: To negotiate is to have your negotiator in front of you.

But You raises an important point during the process of translation: He considers that there are two horizons in the activity of translation: one is that of the text and its period of creation; the other is that of the translator and his period of interpretation. Both are different through time and space; yet, they are fused together –or rather forced together. They can bias the intentionality of the translator. That is, the new text we get is neither the original nor what the translator wants it to be! He writes: “There are two horizons involved in interpretation, one is the horizon of the translator and the other is the horizon of the text. While the text embodies some historical significance and features its own horizons in the situation when the text was produced, the translator also has his horizons and interprets the text from his particular prejudices.” (p.111)

As an activity, translation is a self-reflection of the translator to find out some equivalences and alternatives to the text he is reading. Heidi Gutiérrez (2012) states that:

Self-reflection is both action and notion at the same time. As an action, it enhances individual practices and helps to find out alternatives in complex situations, for instance when making decisions in the case of polysemy or a cultural gap between concepts of being, relations, processes, etc. As well, the action of self-reflection is a basis for the empowerment of the translator as a member of an academic and/or professional community; it is the first step to social projection of the translators’ activity.(p. 44)

The text is subject to interpretations. Subsequently, it holds many translations. No translation can stand as the best. Translation is based on an ongoing hermeneutic discovery of meanings. Thus, it becomes a must of its reincarnation within a new history and a new culture. The text will dress up new clothes within the cultural ground of the period it is translated in. You

(2015) puts it well when he claims that translation gives extinction—extensions—to the life of the text. He says:

Translation, as an extension of the life of the original text, can never transcend temporal and spatial barriers to exhaust the meaning and significance of the original. Different translators, embedded in different historical and social backgrounds, produce translations that bear distinctive traces of their prejudices. One translation only serves as one understanding and interpretation of the source text. [...] The translator, upon reading the text, deals with their understanding of the text in different fashions. Therefore, a translation by no means demonstrates only one horizon; instead, it should be a synthesis of all the possible horizons: translator's horizon, the author's horizon, and the reader's horizon, etc. From this perspective, classical literary translation is a product of the creative activity of the translator and plays a significant role in the making of the meaning. (p.113)

Hermeneutics, then, acknowledges that there are multiple interpretations, thus, translations, of the same original text. The original preserves its own-ness: its being-in-itself. And what we get from the original is only a version—a hybrid begotten from the text and the translator/interpreter

Understanding is an ongoing transformation that occurs in human mind. The 'now' is neither the present nor the past nor even the future: The 'is' is not the 'was' nor even the 'will be.' In the words of You (2015): "Human's understanding activity is like an endless circle in this way and the text meanings will be deepened and get new life again and again. Different translators, embedded in different historical and social backgrounds, produce translations that bear distinctive traces of their prejudices. Thanks to the multiple translations, the original remains its vitality and influence in the target culture. (p.112)

So, the translator translates only what is interpretable and translatable for him. The context, itself, is very dynamic: "It is always being modified and shaped as communication occurs." (Herminlink,2012, p.30). Hermeneutics is aware of this problem, but whatever is done cannot reach authenticity and accuracy of the original text.

5-Applicability and Illustration

Contextual dynamism is very illustrative in poetry. What procedure do we take to faithfully get what the poem reveals and tells for us? No doubt, the poem accepts to dialogue with the reader; but a dialogue that is subjective and biased. The translator generates and orchestrates a dialogue that is self-reflective and personal, even if the thinks of it as objective and neutral. Mohamed Ali Kharmandara and Amin Karimniab (2013), in their article, "The Fundamentals of Constructing a Hermeneutical Model for Poetry Translation," state that: "Considering the subjective, idiosyncratic, and deeply culture-oriented nature of poetry, the basic question is how to explain the phenomenon in translation: is poetry analyzable according to a scientific procedure or an aesthetic method?" (p.581). These two critics maintain that poetry is not a

production of an idea, but generates a series of ideas that are derived and stimulated by the aesthetic orchestration of its being—its existence. The aesthetic is not negligible in meaning-regeneration, and thus its transformation through transfer/translation makes the poem lose its effect and, subsequently, its originality. They write: “Since poetry is an artistic production of language, aesthetics, the branch of philosophy dealing with beauty, seems to be a more congruent manner of explaining certain phenomenon in poetry translation. Of course, although aesthetics is flexible enough to account for beauty in literature, at the same time it may involve certain complexities. [...] In other words, not definitive principle can be established to define what beauty is.” (p.584). Its beauty is not defined, but appreciated. Besides, the aesthetic flexibility allows intrusion, and, subsequently, translation distances from the original. This hermeneutic phenomenon dispossesses the poet from his piece of art—poem, and colours it with one’s intentions, conception and self-reflection. We translate what the poem means to us, but not, in any way, what is meant by or what the poet wants to say. In the words of Kharmandara and Karimniab(2013):

Literature is robbed of its true dynamism and power to speak when it is conceived of in the static categories of conceptual knowing. As experience of an event and not as mere conceptual knowing, the encounter with the being of a work is not static and ideational, outside of all time and temporality; it is truth that happens, emerges from concealment, and yet eludes every effort to reduce it to concepts and objectivity.(p.582)

Specific organic unity of a poem makes it typical and identical to itself. It allows flexibility, but not openness. To deconstruct it, in order to reconstruct it, is an act that provokes erosion and ‘derision.’ That is, you water down its aesthetic unity of effect, or further and worse, you create—or fabricate—another poem based on the relics of the original. In his article, “Vico’s New Science of Interpretation: Beyond Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” David InGram (2007) points out that: “It becomes self-evident that meaning arises out of a pre-rational act of poetic imagination. [...] Language represents a sedimentation of anonymous, meaning-creating syntheses that can never be replicated by human beings acting rationally and deliberately.”(p. 222)

Zahra Amiri, et Al (2014), in their article “Applicability of Steiner Hermeneutic Motion in Coleman Barks’ Translation of Rumi,” give us a good example for the difficulty, or the impossibility, of translating a Persian poem into English. They point out that all translators of the poem of Malawi Rumi have failed. They write: “Melawi’s poems have metaphysical and deep meanings; he posited different spiritual concepts in his poems. Barks explored and extracted those meanings and brought them to his home. Before him, some translators such as R. A. Nicholson, A. J. Arberry, Annemarie Schimmel, William Chittick, and Franklin Lewis have translated Rumi’s works literally, but none of them could leave the effect that Barks’ work had. He frequently avowed that he does not know Persian, and he has used the translation of Arbery: ‘I translate it into American free verse.’” (p.43) Barks, according Amiri et al, recognizes that he has never consulted or referred to the original work, because he does not know Persian. So, his translation seems to be evasive. This act of translation does not

seem to be a translation in itself because how can we translate what we do not read in the original?: “Considering this fact that he has never touched the original work and just interpreting his own interpretation from the translation and rendering them to his language shows an invasive act.” (p.43)

Domesticating a poem without preserving its own ‘dress’ and the way it is dressed up is an act that deludes the poem. Hermeneutically speaking, interpretation has to be at the head of any translation; and interpretation has to delve beneath the surface of the word trying, at least, to be closer the voice of the text and get its unity of effect. In other words, and in this context, the translator has made himself visible and infidel. Barks, according to Amiri et al, has failed because he ‘not only frees’ Rumi from the historical context and bounds of his time, but he also alienates him from his society and his mystic refuge within the Persian language. This is somehow absent in English. (p.44)

Rumi’s poems are no doubt very difficult to approach and domesticate because of the nature of their mysticism and visionary aspect of their concerns. Mystic poems, themselves, are written with special language—a high mystic use of language, which is very different from everyday use. On the other hand, the love the mystic uses is not the love of desire—the earth love—but the one that makes him approach the Absolute: The love that annihilates the body. Translators misunderstand or fail to grasp such difference. Amiri et al state that: “Melawi’s love poems are of a sort of spiritual love not the earth one; but Barks showed it as an earth love and his mistranslations have caused a lot of misunderstanding about Melawi’s character; and made some homosexual people think that Melawi’s love to his professor and friend is of that kind.”(p.44)

So, liberalism is not really the adequate way to translate a text. This act, though it gives some freedom to the translator, it, nonetheless, makes that text alien and foreign and, subsequently, loses parts of its being-in-itself—its own-ness: It ‘uproots’ the original from its linguistic structure and makes it adopt a new one suggested by the translator. In other words, this act hinders its originality. For Antoine Berman(1995), this act must happen in every act of translation. Every translation is subject to textual deformation.” (p.278)

But Berman accepts such deformation because it is a must to extract the original from its originality and domesticates it. It is the hallmark of transfer. He puts it forward claiming that the translator’s role is much needed than the author of the original text. The language he uses—the pure language—is based on the dialogism between the text and the translator. (Benjamin,1968, p. 22) But Berman’s claim is very contending. It seems that he wants to make us accept the translator as the author of the original text. Hopelessly, he cannot be in the place of the other. In the words of Jens Rasmussen(2002): “A good interpretation actually requires that the interpreter be able to discern the thought within a text in the same way that the author of the text did, that is to say, the interpreter must transform his own self into that of the other and thus prevent misunderstandings.(pp.1-2) . So, the problem remains.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the role of hermeneutics in the interpretation/translation of the literary text. It has shown that it is not easy to translate without interpretation and not easy to interpret without taking into account the fluctuation, flexibility, and the recurring changes of meaning of/in the same text. On the other hand, the translated text cannot, in anyway, be the original. It is an original in itself and is specified by being-in-itself. In other words, the more you try to domesticate the original, the more you foreignize it. Dialogically speaking, the negotiation between the translator and the text, and to some extent the author, is only a kind of agreement where the text and the translator and probably the author cede something of/to their authorities. The translated text, then, is an outcome of such negotiation. This agreement makes it create its own autonomy. It becomes another original without author; yet, it holds the original text, the author and the translator. So: what do we read? And who is referred to, when we try to read the translated text: its original author, who is, in a way, excluded from it, or the translator, who has forced it into his new bath and new context?

The interpretation of a text holds many horizons. Subsequently, it cannot be what the text is, but only an answer to what the interpreter has raised as a question. Hermeneutics seems to play the role of the theory of comprehending. The truth is that the text cannot hold one objective and static understanding. Understanding is a bond between the interpreter and the text: the text's meaning is the outcome of the act of reading, which is a perspective, related to the intention of the reader and the voice he intended to dialogue with.

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