The birds that embrace both illusions: an intersemiotic translation of All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace by Richard Brautigan

Veronika Yadukha

Dartmouth College, veronika.yadukha.gr@dartmouth.edu

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The birds that embrace both illusions: an intersemiotic translation

of *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* by Richard Brautigan

By

Veronika Yadukha

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The main figure for this essay is Richard Brautigan (1935-1984), an American poet and novelist best known for his novel *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), which sold over 4 million copies worldwide and propelled him to international fame. Literary critics called him the writer who best represented the emerging countercultural youth movement of the late 1960s. However, no one has said with certainty what exactly was his distinctive feature. The man who managed to capture the spirit of America in his book was involved in an unconventional worldview, which drew inspiration from a multitude of sources and was associated with the Beats, the hippies, and even the psychedelic movement. At the same time, it is impossible to call him a member of any of these groups, since he stayed away from active cultural processes all his life and was well-known but an outsider whose true language was a language of poetry. For Brautigan, poetry is the most important art to express his identity, and poetry is the material for this essay.

The title of the essay consists of two parts—a metaphorical and a descriptive one. The metaphorical part alludes to a line from Richard Brautigan's poem and is the ideological core of Brautigan's poetry and of my project in general. As for the descriptive part, it contains basic information about the project. I am working on Brautigan’s poetry collection, which is a compilation of poetry collections from 1958 to 1978, and in which one can trace the major themes and methods of Brautigan's poetic language. What I am doing is an intersemiotic translation, transposing Brautigan’s poems into ceramic tea bowls, and this component of the title is perhaps most in need of explanation.
In his essay “On Language as Such” Walter Benjamin wrote: “communication in words is only a particular case of human language.”\(^1\) The word-based languages are confined to linguistic borders, which often coincide with national or even regional borders, while non word-based forms of communication can transcend such borders, while of course still be influenced by cultural traditions’

The key word here is communication. Communication is the goal of any kind of art, as well as any analysis or reading. Of course, translation exists to enable communication, to help people understand each other, and to overcome linguistic, cultural, spatial, and even temporal boundaries because a text, fixed in one form or another, is a text that becomes alive or active every time someone reads it, that is, the essence of the text is to be performed in the present.

Reading as a performative act is already a translation because it is one of an infinite number of possibilities of sounds, pauses, and accents which occur exactly as a result of individual circumstances, and experiences that are constantly changing.

Translation is always something that happens at that moment, in a period of time, and translation can be done differently, depending on many factors, so translation is variable. A linguist Clive Scott calls his process of intersemiotic translation a “variational play” claiming that translation is a poetic field of possibilities and creative decisions, which happen in the process of reading, interpreting and ultimately responding to the source text.\(^2\) And therefore, translation is simply a captured creative impulse that is happening at the moment of time in a particular form.

This leads to two thoughts that are important for this essay: translation is a never-ending process, a target text can be revisited, edited, changed, revised many times, and never feels


\(^2\) Campbell, Vidal. *Translating across sensory and linguistic borders, Introduction*. 
complete; and translation is something that can be done many times anew and each time differently. So, this idea emphasizes the need for different translations because these are different views on the work of art that we translate and myriad possibilities to carry form and sense from one culture into another beyond the limitations of words. Such processes impact the source text, enriching it with new layers of understanding and giving additional opportunities to know it better, more fully, to explore the subject with which the text itself works.³

The source text is also the embodiment of a thought that has emerged at a certain time. Through translation, we discuss this topic, and we develop, first of all, our perception and ability to communicate in general, because translation is there to create opportunities for communication and understanding between people. Through different channels and methods of translation, we can think of productive ways of communication.

According to Roman Jacobson, for linguists as well as for ordinary word-users, the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign in which it is more fully developed.⁴

This view leads to a rather broad understanding of translation as a universal thought process inherent in every human being every second of their life, if by translation we mean the mechanism of sense adaptation. Translation reproduces the conceptual content of the original in its characteristic stylistic originality on a different linguistic basis, in a different language.

Ethymologically, translation means a ‘carring across’ or ‘bringing across’, from Latin translatio and transferre, namely ‘a rendering from one language into another’

According to this principle of rendering that defines translation, Roman Jakobson distinguishes three types of translation: intralingual translation, or rewording (an interpretation of

³ Campbell, Vidal. Translating across sensory and linguistic borders, Introduction.

verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language); interlingual translation or translation proper (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language); intersemiotic translation or transmutation (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems). 5

Having established these three types, Jacobson goes on immediately to point out a central problem in all types: that while the messages may serve as adequate interpretations of code units, there is ordinarily no full equivalence through translation, since each unit contains within itself a set of non-transferable associations and connotations. 6 Jacobson declares that all poetic art is therefore technically untranslatable and only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition—from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition—from one language into another, or intersemiotic transposition—from one system of signs into another.

Transposition is a term used in music theory. It is the process of moving notes up or down in pitch by a constant interval, so one might transpose an entire piece of music into a different key. To transpose a work of art, you have to change it in a certain way; to change it, you first have to perceive, experience, or know it. These transformations and modifications occur in different art forms, and they are necessary to convey an idea in a different medium, also following the rules of an entirely different language.

Intersemiotic translation carries a source text across sign systems and creates connections between different cultures and media. In my opinion, this is precisely what Richard Brautigan does in his poems when mixing cultures and meanings and creating bizarre connections between them. It is not easy to characterize Brautigan's poetry because he works with a variety of incompatible themes and styles. He does not fit into categories and does not belong to any of the


literary groups of his time, but we can come closer to understanding Brautigan’s poetry if we consider him as a translator in a broader sense.

In this essay, I understand translation as creativity, which is a variant or inspired response of the translator to the source text. In this sense, the translation produced is not a final product. In general, translation is not a product, but rather a practice of using cultural experiences to create one of an infinite number of versions of a text. I explore how Richard Brautigan uses poetry as a practice of looking at the surrounding reality, and how he translates his experienced cultural and social narratives into writing. I seek to identify what elements and themes make up his writing in order to make my own translation of Brautigan’s poetry into pottery. I explore translation as an artistically productive and critically useful activity in two case studies – Brautigan as a translator of American culture of the 1960ies—1970ies and an intersemiotic translation transposing Brautigan's poems into ceramic tea bowls exploring the possibilities of translation studies as a method and practice.

**Embracing Multiple Illusions**

So, my project is in translation. But how does one begin to translate poetry into another art form? Where should one start? What elements in the poems should be considered and prioritized? How are these poems to be read and understood? From what perspective and tradition should they be interpreted in order to grasp the meaning and translate it to another dimension? These and many other questions immediately come to the mind of every translator. The translator is the most attentive reader, that is, we read the text first, and get to know it before taking the next steps. When we read Brautigan, there are many questions and doubts about form, meaning, presence or absence of humor, as well as a common question ‘is it poetry?’ In his poetry, Brautigan juggles several themes at once, which become revealed with repeated readings. For example, here is one of his poem called “Hansel and Gretel”:

*I have always wanted to write a poem about Hansel*
and Gretel going through the forest, leaving behind
them pieces of apple pie to form sort of a bridge between
dream and reality, and being followed by those gentle
birds that embrace both illusions like violins eating
pieces of apple pie.⁷

One can hardly read this poem for the first time and sincerely say that it does not confuse. I will try to deconstruct the poem according to Margaret Sayers Peden to re-construct it in translation later. As Peden says, we cannot translate until we “do violence” to the original literary work.⁸ To begin with, I will do just a little “violence” by pointing out the key elements of this poem.

It begins with the phrase “I have always wanted to write a poem.” The whole poem is a verbalized intention that he wanted to do something, while he is actually doing it. In this case, Brautigan seems to be ironic about the concept of postponing life, paradigmatic of the American Dream, where one day you will have something you want if you work hard enough. So the phrase "I have always wanted" shows fantasies about the realization of his desires, when in reality there is nothing preventing him from this realization, and even more, he is doing that at the moment. Hansel and Gretel is a German fairy tale collected by the Brothers Grimm and published in the 19th century. This subject matter alludes to the Old European culture that built up America. Apple pie, on the contrary, is a genuine symbol of the New World. During World War II, American soldiers told journalists that they fought for “mom and apple pie.”⁹ Apple pie indicates wholesomeness and traditional American values, which cannot be questioned because

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it appeals to universal beliefs. Another element of the poem is binary—\textit{dream and reality}—
which indicates the Buddhism tradition, and the realization that physical reality is not so real, but
beyond it lies the truth. In the poem there is a trigger word that ruins all the understanding of the
line—violins. This simile \textit{like violins} allows us to read Brautigan's poem as a Zen koan. Koan
has no meaning as such in the sense we mean by meaning. Koan is a way to point directly to
something, at a certain experience. The simile makes no logic in the line but serves as a sudden
obstacle, a break of the rule that can lead to satori or awakening, comprehension, understanding,
and enlightenment.

In fact, Brautigan once again ironizes the perception of the duality of the world, the clear
division into dream and reality, and he expresses it quite humorously through the image of birds
that accept both illusions or both realities, the birds don't question, they just happily eat pieces of
apple pie as true American Zen Buddhists.

In my opinion, this poem is an introduction to Brautigan's poetry, for it aptly shows his
optics, which include irony, humor, absurdity, Zen, and, of course, the wild and unfathomable
mix of what is called American culture, in which all sorts of illusions and realities have a place.
What Brautigan is doing is embracing and accepting so many things in his poetry while living in
the best time and place for this blending—America of the 50-70s. It was a time when the
counterculture juggled various popular themes, such as fascination with Japan, Zen Buddhism,
and European philosophy while finding its own response and interpretation to them.

The interpretation of these different themes or, metaphorically speaking, the different
illusions is a way of reading and translating the author's code for one's own understanding. By
doing this, the reader-translator who analyzes the poem prepares to create their own text—a
translation, and here I mean only one of the many possible versions of the translation.
Embracing American Poetry Tradition

In poetry, however, Brautigan is not an amateur; his mixing of themes comes from the joy of experimentation that fascinates a person who translates reality for himself and recreates it in his own poetic language. While experimenting, Brautigan deliberately builds a poetic form based precisely on tradition.

Roughly speaking, there are two strands in the American poetic tradition. The one that goes from Walt Whitman and continued by William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, etc., and characterized by long free verse celebrating life; and the other, one that starts from Emily Dickinson and continued by Thomas Stearns Eliot, John Ashbery, and others, who tend to write condensed, elliptical short stanzas.

It is interesting that Brautigan repeatedly mentions two poets in his poems—Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams—and combines in his style the very two American traditions to which they belong.

In 1959, Richard Brautigan published his poetry collection called “Lay the Marble Tea”, which he named referring to the poem by Emily Dickinson and included its first stanza as an epigraph:

*The grave my little cottage is,*

*Where, keeping house for thee,*

*I make my parlor orderly,*

*And lay the marble tea...* 10

Perhaps Brautigan is fascinated by the image of Emily Dickinson as a mysterious person who seemed not to belong to her time but was far ahead of it in the artistic expression of thought, a person who shunned contact with people but communicated through letters that, like poems,

were more self-expression of her incomprehensible mind than messages to addressees. Perhaps it is this image that leads Brautigan to personify poetry as his old lady, the only one he can truly trust. In his essay *Old Lady*, Brautigan writes, “Then I started going out with poetry again, but this time I knew how to write a sentence, so everything was different, and poetry became my old lady. God, what a beautiful feeling that was! I tried to write poetry that would get at some of the hard things in my life that needed talking about, but those things that you can only tell your old lady.”

Dickinson is another lady in Brautigan's work. The one who inspires Brautigan to personify poetry, the one who would understand him, the one with whom some kind of special communication would be possible. Brautigan dedicates several poems to Dickinson, especially the poem *Feel Free to Marry Emily Dickinson*, in which, in addition to the palpable eroticism, he highlights his total intellectual admiration of Dickinson.

Emily Dickinson's poetry is known for its complex use of language, unconventional syntax, irony, and frequent use of dashes. She often explores themes of death, immortality, and the afterlife, and her poems often employ metaphors and allegories to explore these themes. Her poems are characterized by their deep sense of introspection and often express a sense of isolation or loneliness.

Richard Brautigan, on the other hand, often explores themes of love, sex, loneliness, and death, and his poems are characterized by their playful tone, ironic as well and whimsical style. Brautigan's poetry often takes an absurdist approach to the world, but a sense of longing or unrequited love is also present for him, even though Brautigan’s style is often playful.

Richard Brautigan has many poems that can be read as responses to Emily Dickinson. By using poetry as a space for sincere expression and timeless communication, since a word

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recorded on paper can be read at any time and is addressed to eternity, even to those who joined
the eternity centuries ago, Brautigan sends his coded utterances through a symbolic channel of
art, as if professing the axiom ars longa, vita brevis.

For example, here are two poems that look like a dialog between poets on the subject of
outsiders, unconventionality, and the true self:

   I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!
   How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

Emily Dickinson\footnote{“Emily Dickinson: Modern American Poetry.” \textit{Emily Dickinson} | \textit{Modern American Poetry}, https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/node/643#collapse\_views\_block\_poet\_pages\_block\_11.}

   For fear you will be alone
you do so many things
that aren’t you at all.

Richard Brautigan\footnote{Brautigan, \textit{All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace}, 120.}
The desire to be someone and not to do things that do not belong to oneself are themes very close to Dickinson and Brautigan. Both poems are about the courage to accept oneself despite one's status in society. Here again, the influence of Emily Dickinson is evident in Brautigan’s poetry. Just as Dickinson uses dashes, Brautigan transforms his lyrics into natural dynamics. Abrupt and unexpected transitions and the rapid striving of language are striking features of Dickinson's work that Brautigan embodies in his own way. These are also features characteristic of Zen poetry.

William Carlos Williams and Richard Brautigan are united under entirely different topics in poetry. The main motive where their styles intertwine is everyday poetry or poetry that expresses daily life.

William Carlos Williams was a key figure for many generations of poets in America. His poetry inspired the Beat Generation poets, especially Allen Ginsberg. I can trace how Williams influenced Richard Brautigan’s poems, whose language and style were definitely shaped quite significantly by Williams’ tradition.

Richard Brautigan even has a poem in which he speaks about Williams. He just mentions Williams’ name, and even though it is simple, we only remember the birthdays of people who are important and mean something to us.

*September 3 (The Dr. William Carlos Williams Mistake)*

*I had severe insomnia last night with

the past, the present and the future detailing

themselves

like: Oh, the shit we run through our minds!

Then I remembered that it was Dr. William Carlos

Williams’ birthday and that made me feel better*
until almost dawn.\textsuperscript{15}

The contemplation of ordinary objects once became a revolutionary technique of Williams, who recorded in his poems the objects we see every day and do not even notice how they hide entire worlds for the attentive observer. Here is one of Williams’ most famous poems:

\textit{The Red Wheelbarrow}

\begin{quote}
so much depends \\
on \\
a red wheel \\
barrow \\
glazed with rain \\
water \\
beside the white \\
chickens.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Indeed, it depends a lot, it depends because only when someone noticed this object in certain conditions, singled it out among all the others, and noticed its beauty and unusualness, only because of that other worlds open up, an understanding opens up that poetry is not separated from our life. It does not rise somewhere unattainably far away in intelligently honed perfection, but is simply happening around us every moment, it exists for all of us everywhere.

In turn, Brautigan has a humorous little poem that resonates with Williams.

\textsuperscript{15} Brautigan, \textit{All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace}, 146.

Nice Ass

There is so much lost

and so much gained in

these words.  

Indeed, it is not clear what is lost and what is gained in these words, but I am amused by Brautigan's observation about the properties of our thinking and how we give meaning to words. This poem can probably be read as rude and ironic if you focus only on the title, but one may also read a conflict in it, because there was someone who said the words "nice ass," and when you say those words, you never know if you are getting or losing something from the subject to whom they are addressed. In any case, it's funny to think that such an unpretentious and not very polite phrase serves as a basic and understandable code in our everyday life.

William Carlos Williams in his time by reducing it from philosophizing, emotional pathos, and stylistic complexity to the simplicity of words describing the lives of ordinary people. The everyday poems, engraved in laconic lyrics, convey both Williams' and Brautigan's personal stories. These poets record their everyday experiences in poems, and they do so sincerely, aptly, and beautifully because they know how to recognize the beauty in its simplicity.

Because Brautigan was influenced by poets from two leagues representing different traditions, his work is special even when analyzed only within the paradigm of American poetry. His work, however, incorporated many cultural processes that in one way or another influenced the formation of American countercultural identity in the 1960s and 1970s. It is these influences, which have developed into themes in Brautigan's poetry that I will discuss in more detail in this essay.

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17 Brautigan, All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, 102.
Embracing Absurdity

So how does one begin to read Richard Brautigan's poetry – what to focus on, how to interpret it, to take it seriously or not, literally or metaphorically, as irony or as sincerity, as mannerism or as authenticity? These and many other questions may arise. Brautigan's poems vary in form, themes, and mood; each collection has something different, but there is always a certain complex of features that unmistakably point to a particular, tangible style that cannot be confused with any other. I define this complex as a combination of the American poetic tradition, in particular, Dickinson and Williams; the influence of Zen Buddhism on representatives of the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s; admiration for Japanese aesthetic; and balancing on the border between absurdity and humor. In a way, Brautigan introduced foreign readers to American-style humor, absurdity, and social criticism voiced in the vernacular language of his texts.

Brautigan’s play of humor and absurdity can be described with a new term of Humoristic Absurdism. Philosopher Thom Hamer says that Humoristic Absurdism consists in the commitment to a humorous disposition (that is, a pattern of humorous responses) to the Absurd, which regards the absurd condition, as well as its manifestation in absurd situations, as a comical phenomenon. Humoristic Absurdism includes the humorous response to abstract absurdity, i.e. regarding the Absurd in itself as comical. Contemplating the endless dissolution of resolution, we may find ourselves diverted by this absurd condition of existence. This division of Humoristic Absurdism into the humorous enjoyment of concrete manifestations and that of abstract absurdity finds resonance in John Morreall’s striking remark that “a sense of humour doesn’t simply provide us with occasional moments of refreshment in life’s struggles”, for it also “gives us an approach to life as a whole.” This humorous approach to life as a whole is the cornerstone of Humoristic Absurdism. In this case, it is not a call for a tragic experience or

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some kind of “dramatics,” contrary to what Camus’ philosophy may profess, but a kind of ironic
laughter at the absurdity of it all.

It is quite possible to read Brautigan's poems with humoristic absurdism, especially when
there are metaphors and similes, as in the next two poems.

**Romeo and Juliet**

If you will die for me,
I will die for you
and our graves will
be like two lovers washing
their clothes together
in a Laundromat.

If you will bring the soap,
I will bring the bleach.\(^{19}\)

**The Ferris Wheel**

The world was opening
and closing
its insane asylums
and churches

\(^{19}\) Brautigan, *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, 95.
like a forgetful old man
buttoning up his pants
instead of unbuttoning them.

Are you going to go
to the toilet
in your pants,
old man?

The rain was a dark Ferris wheel
bringing us closer
to Baudelaire and General Motors.

We were famous
and we kicked
walnut leaves.\(^{20}\)

If we think through the prism of the occidental philosophical tradition, absurdism can be the answer to the peculiarity of Brautigan's style because he uses the verbal form to intensify the feeling of illogic, anxiety, irrationality of existence, and precisely because of the tension there is a sudden release of emotions through laughter. This effect fits perfectly into the Zen practice of koans and mondo to achieve satori, which occurs as a breakthrough of consciousness due to prolonged stress.

Embracing Zen Buddhism in America

Indeed, many themes and borrowed styles can be found, and it can be argued that Brautigan took advantage of the moment and used the vibrant cultural and literary trends that were popular in America in the years 1955-1970 in his work. Poets are often called brilliant thieves because they are constantly borrowing something from someone and adding it to their texts. However, such a view is only the next position resulting from the binary: original, new—plagiarism, used. And in Zen, binaries are only a fluctuation of the mind, another characteristic of the antithetical perception common to the West. There is a very apt haiku written by a Zen Buddhist monk Ryōkan:

the thief
left it
the moon at my window

True, real things cannot be stolen, they cannot be told about, they cannot be possessed, and the most valuable thing is that true understanding or comprehension cannot be feigned.

Floating Chandeliers

Sand is crystal
like the soul.
The wind blows
it away.

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Haiku is one of the most sincere forms of Zen. It is contemplative poetry of the moment, short and simple. Haikus are sincere because they are the captured moments and the manifestations of the surrounding world. If Brautigan was writing mainly haiku, he could be accused of borrowing and exploiting a fashionable form. However, on the contrary, haiku as a form seldomly appears in Brautigan's poetry, certainly not in the traditional sense. Brautigan writes many short poems, but the mood, the themes, and the play of seriousness and frivolity are so variable in them that as soon as one wants to accuse Brautigan of something like exploiting the style, he problematizes the stakes of predetermined styles, as we can see in his poem “Haiku Ambulance”:

**Haiku Ambulance**

*A piece of green pepper fell*

*off the wooden salad bowl: so what?*

Richard Brautigan experiments in combining words and phrases in his works. He improvises very naturally in comparisons; his poems are full of spontaneity and even childishness. One might call his poetry ridiculous. A leading San Francisco Beat poet, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919-2021), called him infantile. For their part, critics are careful to call Brautigan a beatnik, and beatniks were often all-out practitioners of Buddhism. Zen researcher Alan Watts (1915-1973) even created the term for American bohemian Zen: beat-zen. However, Brautigan himself does not literary say a word about Zen; he just continues his silent practicing, and he is practicing it in his “childish” way.

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Enthusiasm for Zen among intellectuals and artists had a strong base at that time, and furthermore, San Francisco was a place that had perhaps the longest Zen tradition in the United States.

Given the situation in America at the time, Zen becomes an understandable practice for people protesting the materialistic orientation of society (beatniks, hippies, students, and activists), which also has a place in a quiet everyday life.

Lacking a universal, comprehensive doctrine that would satisfy the needs of a people disillusioned with religion and philosophy and feeling the crisis of capitalism, Zen was given the opportunity to take a permanent place in the worldview system of America. Openness to new points of view and tolerance of others, successful economic development, high levels of education, and the establishment of links between the East and West contributed to the rooting of the teaching of Zen in Europe and America.

In the West, the teaching of Zen takes root and undergoes its inevitable adaptation, having developed two main directions of development and practice of teaching—the so-called "square"—orthodox teaching involves service in monasteries, similar to traditional Soto schools (a school that uses sitting zazen meditation) and Rinzai (a school that uses a dynamic practice of enlightenment—riddles-questions koans and dialogues mondo) and "beat-zen"—a variant of the intellectual fad that is called a very wide phenomenon of direct practice in everyday life, using all possible methods for this. Both directions are aimed at achieving instant enlightenment—satori, a sudden revelation of a new truth, a kind of collapse of the mind, which suddenly discards all the old mental accumulations. The world after him appears in a completely new light, in it disappears any duality that is the fruit of the mind, and which in Buddhism is called illusion (maya).

The two different ways of achieving satori, salvation by work or salvation by faith, are built on the analogy of the path of the monkey and the cat from the Buddhist parable. A kitten makes no effort to live, because the mother carries it in her teeth, while a monkey makes an effort, since it sits on its mother's back and is forced to hold on to her fur. It is the latter version of Zen Buddhism that interests American culture the most, because no other teaching offers the path to enlightenment in this form.26

Zen Buddhism has the unique ability to adapt easily and quickly to a foreign culture, and has a ready-made ground for doing so, so that it can be found in various kinds of activities and thus enter Western life. Many in the U.S. paid special attention to Zen as an alternative to the American tendency to "put off" life, captured by the 'American dream,' which relies on the idea that success only comes after years of work. Western culture is a culture of constant preparation for life. A Western person focuses on the future and sometimes remembers the past, the moment of the present does not exist as such, because any duration (whether it is everyday work, education, or employment) is used as a planning opportunity, getting ready to live for something that has not yet happened. If a person's gaze is always directed to tomorrow, today remains unnoticed. For America, Zen was a reminder that unless we learn to grasp the mystery and beauty of our present life, our present hour and minute, we will not understand the value of each life, each hour and minute. Living at the present moment seems to be such a simple and obvious truth to the West that some have rediscovered and dared to accept it. The rejection of the pursuit of success and the search for meaning in any simple work became a point of reference for the Beat generation. Many of the Beats embarked on a contemplative path of Zen by taking such jobs as loggers, sailors, and fire look-outs—that apart from being manual labor, allowed to be mobile and perform the same tasks in different parts of the country without focusing on career

growth. In addition, such works allowed to travel as well as place a person in the midst of nature.\textsuperscript{27}\textsuperscript{28}

Gary Snyder once said, “In a way the Beat Generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed before, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum. We put them together and opened them out again.”\textsuperscript{29} The Beats also adopted some moods of American philosophical tradition—an Emersonian ethos of self-reliance and a Thoreauvian appreciation of solitude in nature—that were immediately echoed in their Zen practice.

The ability to "grab life by the tail," the neglect of excessive intellectualism, the attention to the empirical approach, the rejection of duality, and the focus on one's own strength, i.e., personal individual experience, seem to be spiritual components of the teaching very close for Americans and the Beat Generation in particular.

The activities of the entire American counterculture are imbued with the spirit of Zen Buddhism. Writers of the Beat generation, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, repeatedly depict in their works the path that a modern Western person is willing to take to enlightenment. They show situations that confirm the genuineness of the spontaneous realization of things—satori—that occurs in everyday life, and transfer well-known Zen parables on images for poems, thus largely playing with the particular form proposed by Zen. The quick recording of poems, texts, thoughts that suddenly come to mind is the main method of the beat poets, according to the principle that Allen Ginsberg chose as a motto for himself: first thought—best thought. However, Richard Brautigan is a nonconformist among nonconformists in his writing. His references to Zen in poetry are also very different from those of his colleagues. First, Brautigan's Zen is very implicit. He never mentions words that directly refer to spiritual


\textsuperscript{29} Tonkinson, \textit{Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation}, 15.
teaching. He does not even use the general words that go with that theme, such as path, contemplation, practice, etc. He never mentions the names of Eastern teachers. In this regard, Brautigan's language is simple, plain, and even poor, which is a direct embodiment of the Japanese aesthetic steeped in Zen Buddhism. There is much spontaneity, the immediacy of experience, the fleetingness of thought, presence, irrationality, childlike sincerity, and responsiveness in Brautigan's poems, and all of this is about Zen, or rather, not 'about', that is, not a description of Zen, but it is Zen itself. Brautigan's Zen is one of the incarnations of the American Zen that Alan Watts wrote about.

Second, for Brautigan, poetry is a constant practice that he has mastered throughout his life and that he values highly. Poetry is the language he speaks, and that language is diverse, confessional, imaginative, and mundane, simple and as mind-blowing as a Zen koan.

Brautigan's poetry embodies beat-zen with a childish quality through its cadence, style, and form. His poetry is a kind of koan and mondo, which have very unexpected sharp turns, comparisons, and similes that you do not expect to hear from an adult. A child can unintentionally speak that way. The thing that distinguishes adults from children is life experience. Adult minds are full of clichés, ready-made combinations of words, and ready-made phrases that we use. They are blocks that are easier and quicker for us to operate with; but they lack life, improvisation, and spontaneity. Also, children create comparisons in real-time, they live more in the present moment than adults do, and they take advantage of the moment, not of ready-made experience. Therefore, this ability to live more fully in the present makes it easier to be a Zen Buddhist if you are a child. Or if you are Richard Brautigan.

Brautigan responds very well to Zen in America. He does not pretend, he is an American with an innate Zen mind of the Rinzai School. He simply soaks up the atmosphere of San Francisco and speaks through poetry as the most intimate literary form.

Considering all above mentioned, we find the answer to why Brautigan's poetry is such a suitable candidate for 'translation' since he is not incorporating others' Zen teachings into his
work as much as practicing Zen through his work. This project, for its part, aims to reveal the 'practice' or process of intersemiotic translation as the main goal of the activity.

**Embracing Pottery**

I would like to explain why I chose this particular art form as the language of translation for Richard Brautigan's poems. In this project, the choice of the language of translation is not accidental, but a continuation of thinking about the themes Richard Brautigan works with explicitly or implicitly in poetry.

One of the most important features of Brautigan's work is its simplicity. This simplicity applies both to the form of the poems and to the themes. His poems are often contemplative, when Brautigan literally describes what he sees—objects or people around him, adding a whimsical simile that is very spontaneous and characteristic of his language. However, the fact that he uses simple language is undeniable. His vocabulary in poetry consists largely of everyday things that fill the lives of millions of Americans. He is a poet of everyday life, a poet of America, a man who has succeeded in capturing the spirit of his generation in text, and paradoxically there is no excess of foreign words, fashionable philosophical terms, or strange archaisms in his lyrics. One can even say that these elements are generally not characteristic of Brautigan, who, on the contrary, constructs whimsical or very unusual meanings while using the simplest, most humble language. Pottery is called the humblest of arts. It is an extremely quiet, modest, prudent activity for which the word "humble" fits very well. In the book Zen and the Art of Pottery, Kenneth Beittel writes: “Pottery is the humblest of arts. It is best when it is most earth-honest; that includes process-honest, fire-honest, honesty of being itself.”

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Honesty or sincerity is another feature of Brautigan's work. Sincerity can easily be described as naiveté, as critics have repeatedly remarked about Brautigan. It is said that even in difficult times, he does not abandon his eccentric style, as if one wants to imply his artificiality.

Sincerity cannot be imitated. His style is not a deliberate strategy to create a language that is not understood by everyone but only by those as eccentric as himself; it is not a tribute to the mysterious image of the artist, but, on the contrary, the nature of the author, inseparable from each of his creative expressions. Brautigan's sincerity is felt almost immediately when one reads his poems. They have a lot of spontaneous, unexpected, strange, and childish elements, but they are not at all artificial. This idea of imitation also reflects the earlier distinction between referencing Zen versus practicing Zen, mentioned in the previous section.

Here is a good quote from the pottery world about the practice: “We imitate our masters only because we are not yet masters ourselves, and only because in doing so, we learn the truth about what cannot be imitated.”

Childishness, perception of pure consciousness, Zen worldview, and poetic worldview cannot be imitated, they are direct unadulterated honesty. Like poetry, pottery exists on the border between the mundane and the sacred, or rather, it is sacred in the everyday.

Kenneth R. Beittel in his book “Zen and the Art of Pottery” mentions: “A pot is made of nothing—and earth. One may interpret pottery as sacred as the everyday. Pots play the range of the everyday-sacred, reflecting the vitality of children as play as well as the silence of a holy day.”

The practice of pottery is imbued with the spirit of Zen, in which the mundane is inseparable from the sacred, the meaning of the part is inseparable from the meaning of the whole, and tradition is inseparable from life. When we think about pottery as an activity, the Western mind tends to label it as a job, a profession, or a hobby, something that can be called

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one's own identity. However, pottery as a Zen practice is not separate from the flow of life; it is a manifestation of archaic human activity in culture.

Interestingly, pottery is one of the first arts. It is known that pottery has existed in Japan for more than 4,000 years, but it is obvious that pottery is at the origins of human civilization.

“The hand itself is the earliest container. When something passes from hand to hand, we have the birth of ritual and sacrament. When a bowl or cup is freed from the human hand as a cupped hand of clay, we can take in hand or pass to another hand what the hand has freed from the hand.”

Poetry is written by hand, passed from hand to hand, and although it is recorded on paper, the form of existence of poetry is the spoken word, whether it sounds aloud or in the mind as it is read. Form is the foundation of poetry, it has the form of words, the form of language, the form of style, traditions, form is the building material of poetry. But poetry exists at the moment of performance, at the moment of reading and sounding, and it is at the moment of its existence that we understand that poetry is one of the elusive arts.

Pottery as a practice is also an art in time, but the fruits of that practice are physical products. The tea bowls are not just pieces of art, they are accessible.

In translating poetry into tea bowls, I am thinking primarily of the additional dimension of perceiving the message, of the conditional objectification of poetry in the language of pottery, of the tactile-visual reading of poetry, and above all the physical experience of poetry. When we take a cup and drink tea from it, it is an intimate experience of communicating with the object through a ritual that continues in the here and now. Reading poetry works in the same way—it is a personal experience that comes from understanding the text in the moment of reading. Poetry as narrative—conveys an idea in words, and the person reading it compares the text to their experience and reacts to the text accordingly. That is, as it seems to me, reading poetry is also a dialog of experiences, and that is precisely why we like different poems, or even perceive the

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same texts differently at different stages of life. In the case of reading poetry through interaction with tea bowls, it is an immediate bodily experience that also depends on our prior experience of drinking tea from the bowls, but it is not an experience that the author gives us through the text, but one that we receive independently through the practice of drinking tea and reading the vessel from which we drink it.

Creating a situation where readers of poetry can have their own physical experience of reading a translation of poetry into teabowls allows to get a broader look at translation methods and the understanding of poetry as such.

The very word poetry means creativity. It is a creation with the help of words, which is possible thanks to artistic and figurative human thinking. The sounds of nature, the babbling of a brook, or the smoothness with which a garbage truck turns a street corner can also be called poetry, but nature itself, the stream, and the garbage truck have nothing to do with poetry because artistic thinking is not their prerogative. As in the philosophical experiment about a tree falling in the forest, where there is no one around to witness the sound of the falling, so to the poetry of everyday life, for poetry to exist, it must be noticed by someone, it needs an observer.

Noticing, observing, and contemplating are the basis of Zen Buddhism, in particular, they are the basis of Japanese aesthetics and also of poetry.

The unity behind all of the local variations found in Japanese pottery can be attributed to the pervasive influence of Zen Buddhism on Japanese traditional art in general. This special form of Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the thirteenth century, but it is very much alive in the unique Japanese character today.

In a discussion of the influence of Zen Buddhism on Japanese art, a philosopher and Zen-Buddhism scholar Shinichi Hisamatsu lists the following characteristics:

(1) No rule (irregular, asymmetrical)

(2) No complexity (sparse, simple)
(3) No rank (seasoned, mature, austerely sublime)

(4) No mind (natural, unstrained)

(5) No bottom (subtly profound, implying rather than nakedly expressing)

(6) No hindrance (free of attachments to things and of expectations of others or of oneself)

(7) No stirring (inwardly oriented, tranquil)\(^3^4\)

Of course, the Zen tradition in art is much more than the sum of these abstract characteristics. And it is important that the traditional arts of Japan are a blend of Zen and Shinto, the native Japanese tradition. This has produced a love of nature and a “presentness” as well as different types of noticing specific to Japanese aesthetics.

Throughout history, Japan experienced periods during which no outside countries interacted with Japan, whether due to either their geographical separation or their preference for cultural division. These extended periods of isolation allowed a traditional, “Japanese-ness” to develop. The aesthetic ideals that emerged from this process “are expressed in situational categories of which the most important are makoto (truth, natural sincerity), aware (enchantment), okashi (charm of playful humor), yugen (mysterious beauty), sabi (veil of antiquity), wabi (restrained beauty), shibui (aristocratic simplicity), en (charm), miyabi (tranquility), hosomi (subtlety, frailty), karumi (lightness), yubi (elegance), sobi (grandeur), and mei (purity, nobility).”\(^3^5\)

The Japanese developed a distinct sense of aesthetics, which was embodied in idioms that reflect the worldview, including wabi sabi, mono no aware, and ma, to guide their feelings in regard to nature and its influence in their art and culture. Each of these aesthetics depicts a

\(^3^4\) Beittel, Zen and the Art of Pottery, 11.

different kind of beauty, often describing beauty found in unexpected forms. Wabi sabi represents rustic and desolate beauty, imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete; mono no aware, a fleeting, varying beauty, the awareness of impermanence; ma, an empty or formless beauty, a pause in time, an interval or emptiness in space. By defining beauty through these aesthetics, Japan has generated an awareness of the beauty of nature not typically found in other societies. It is incredible how much these aesthetic categories reflect the spirit of Zen. Probably this meeting of worldviews was the basis for the acceptance of Chan Buddhism, which came to Japan from China, and its organic transformation into Zen.

Tea bowls are made of clay and emptiness, just as poems are made of words and spaces between them—pauses. Ma in poetry reflects pauses between phrases—the space that allows for contemplation of what the poet was experiencing at the time. It offers space to fully contemplate the meaning of each word and to add emphasis to the prose, leaving space for personal interpretation.

Wabi-sabi and mono no aware are aesthetic principles that are incredibly aptly embodied in pottery, where the beauty of imperfection, the naturalness of form, and the marks of time can be seen on products that have been in use. For Brautigan's poetry, these categories are also important because they further express the form of the poems, their simplicity, imperfection, spontaneity, and contemplativeness. In addition, Brautigan has written a cycle of poems in Japan in which he records his experiences with communication and its absence, with words and pauses.

When making translations and designing tea bowls, I use these aesthetic categories and idioms as a guide for working with form. At the same time, I focus on different techniques of Japanese pottery art and intuitively try to combine traditional elements with modern ones or add elements to the tea bowls that are not part of any tradition but rather experiment with form and

combination of different narratives that continue the line of different themes in Brautigan's poetry—America, American poetic tradition, popular culture, Zen, absurdity, childishness.

**Embracing practice**

What is translation if not reading? One of the myriad ways to respond to a text, a statement, a poem. What is translation if not the experience of the reader reproducing and constructing their original version of the message, in the present? What do we get from reading if not reading itself and communicating? Translation is not only the result—the text transposed into another language—but also the process itself, the activity. In Zen Buddhism, daily practice is the path to enlightenment, and moreover, it is not the practice of prayer or a particular ritual, but the practice of being in the present moment, through which the fullness of life is revealed. Poetry, pottery, translation can be this practice, and it is these activities that this essay focuses on.

Poetry for Brautigan is, on the one hand, a reflection on the changing nature of American tradition, inspiration from the works of classics such as Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams, an exploration of form and style, admiration for the East, especially Japanese aesthetics, but above all, poetry for Brautigan is a mode of life and a manifestation of existence.

Brautigan's poetry can be read as absurdity and irony, or as Zen koan, or as a lyrical contemplation of nature and life in the city, or as a mystical fantasy of a vulnerable personality—in either case, it is a captured moment of the present in words, in texts on paper. Poetry is a text for which the form is significant, poetry has its own architecture, and it is the only component of poetry that is thought in the physical dimension. Poetry is sonic creativity, and pottery is the dominance of form, but it is not only the form itself. Japanese pottery is imbued with the spirit of Zen and therefore contains much poetry. Pottery is a form-giving practice that contains many allusions that also act as a riddle, like a koan that awakens the consciousness of the viewer.

In this project, I see Reading not as a purely interpretive act, but as an experience that is configured pragmatically in time and space. Any literary image cannot be visualized in its
entirety. Speaking about the translation of a literary image into a visual form, we mean mostly an impression with no relation to any optical picture. Translating a poem into a physical form or image would result in the reduction of the complexity of a poem and of the reader’s imagination. That is why intersemiotic translation serves the best in combination for a viewer-reader to read and see, touch or feel the artwork, to be able to experience a multi-sensorial and holistic reading.\textsuperscript{37}

In this project, I propose to understand my translations not as something that reinforces or complements the original, but as something that is a conditional reflection in a different medium. Scott emphasizes that translation must be allowed to open up and develop its own multimedial discursive space. Written lines and pictures or forms never say the same thing. They do not know the same things as their nature is different, but they can live together and interact.\textsuperscript{38} I offer the texts of the poems together with the bowls, not to compare and contrast them, but to look at these texts together, to have a broader view of the poetic language used by the author and to feel it in another dimension.

Intersemiotic translation is a good tool for exploring this topic because it allows for the use of different art forms, different media. When a text is transferred from one art form to another, hidden meanings and new modes of perception emerge. In this case, it is also important to me to translate from an abstract symbolic art form — poetry — to a form of applied art that is much more physically observable. Therefore, following the basic principle of Zen Buddhism about an experience that one cannot transmit but can only obtain in personal life, I create conditions for obtaining this physical experience for others. Ceramic bowls, as a translation of poetry, are physical objects, and one can have a kinesthetic feeling of them. That would be the directly acquired experience of people’s interaction with this project.

\textsuperscript{37} Campbell, Vidal. \textit{Translating across sensory and linguistic borders}, 42-59.

\textsuperscript{38} Campbell, Vidal. \textit{Translating across sensory and linguistic borders}, 89-90.
In order not to spoil the experience for readers, I do not add comments to this essay on my translation into ceramics. However, I feel the need to explain the mechanisms of translation between language systems as different as writing and pottery. To provide a framing, I return to the poem “Hansel and Gretel” to mention the transformations I used in my intersemiotic translation, and “do violence” again, but now for my own target text.

To transpose this poem, I use the image of two realities that I convey in the shape of the cup that unites two spheres. I replace the image of the apple pie with a straw placed at the junction of the two spheres, continuing the metaphor of "accepting two realities.” The straw as an object was invented thousands of years ago and can be found in various cultures. Nevertheless, it was the American Marvin C. Stone who patented the modern drinking straw in 1888, making it an American invention.39 In my opinion, this is a close substitution for the image of the apple pie, which is described as a "purely" American tradition. This translation decision is echoed in Humoristic Absurdism, if we understand it as a method. One may wonder why the straw has a square shape. Here I allude to Allan Watt's description of two main directions of Zen development and practice—so-called "square" Zen or true orthodox practice, and beat Zen—a very broad phenomenon of direct practice in everyday life using all kinds of activities. In this case, I am ironizing this idea of true square Zen and claiming that true Zen is still the one practiced by the birds that embrace both illusions.

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Appendix

Hansel and Gretel

I have always wanted to write a poem about Hansel and Gretel going through the forest, leaving behind them pieces of apple pie to form sort of a bridge between dream and reality, and being followed by those gentle birds that embrace both illusions like violins eating pieces of apple pie.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha

All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace

I like to think (and the sooner the better)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky.

I like to think
(right now please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.

I like to think
(It has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our animal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha
Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha

**The Chinese Checker Players**

When I was six years old
I played Chinese checkers
with a woman
who was ninety-three years old.
She lived by herself
in an apartment down the hall
from ours.
We played Chinese checkers
every Monday and Thursday nights.
While we played she usually talked
about her husband
who had been dead for seventy years
and we drank tea and ate cookies
and cheated.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha

**Star Hole**

I sit here
on the perfect end
of a star,

watching light
pour itself toward
me.

The light pours
itself through
a small hole
in the sky.

I'm not very happy,
but I can see
how things are
faraway.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha
A Mid-February Sky Dance

Dance toward me, please, as if you were a star with light-years piled on top of your hair, smiling,

and I will dance toward you as if I were darkness with bats piled like a hat on top of my head.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha

California Native Flowers

In this spring of 1968 with the last third of the Twentieth Century traveling like a dream toward its end, it is the time to plant books, to pass them into the ground, so that flowers and vegetables may grow from these pages.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha
Shasta Daisy

I pray that in thirty-two years passing that flowers and vegetables will water the Twenty-First Century with their voices telling that they were once a book turned by loving hands into life.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha

Yes, the Fish Music

A trout-colored wind blows through my eyes, through my fingers, and I remember how the trout used to hide from the dinosaurs when they came to drink at the river. The trout hid in subways, castles and automobiles. They waited patiently for the dinosaurs to go away.
Your Catfish Friend

If I were to live my life
in catfish forms
in scaffolds of skin and whiskers
at the bottom of a pond
and you were to come by
one evening
when the moon was shining
down into my dark home
and stand there at the edge
of my affection
and think, "It’s beautiful
here by this pond. I wish
somebody loved me;"
I’d love you and be your catfish
friend and drive such lonely
thoughts from your mind
and suddenly you would be
at peace,
and ask yourself, "I wonder
if there are any catfish
in this pond? It seems like
a perfect place for them."

A Boat

O beautiful
was the werewolf
in his evil forest.
We took him
to the carnival
and he started
crying
when he saw
the sta.
Electric
green and red tears
flowed down
his furry cheeks.
He looked
like a boat
out on the dark
water.
Night

I went to the castle to see the queen. She was in the garden burning flowers. “I see you are here on time as always,” she said, striking a match to an orchid. The petals caught on fire and burned like the clothes of an angel. I took out a knife and cut off my finger. “These flowers,” she said smiling, “don’t they burn with a beautiful light?”

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha

Kingdom Come

The world has a magic direction in the twilight. It is a place of spells and visions. Look out of the window. Do you see the old woman with the plum tree on her back? She is walking up Hyde Street. She appears to be lost and I think she is crying. A taxi comes along. She stops the taxi and gets in with the plum tree. She is gone now and the evening star shines in the sky.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha
Floating Chandeliers

Sand is crystal
like the soul.
The wind blows
it away.

Richard Brautigan, Veronika Yadukha
Bibliography


