

THE TURN OF THE TEXT? OPERA LIBRETTO AND  
TRANSLATION: APPROPRIATION, ADAPTATION  
AND TRANSCODING IN BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S  
*THE TURN OF THE SCREW AND OWEN WINGRAVE*

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HENRY JAMES AND OPERA

Henry James is a recurrent name in twentieth-century opera and has been a source of inspiration for several major composers. Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *Owen Wingrave* (1971) have become part of the standard lyrical repertoire but other less famous composers, such as Thea Musgrave, Philip Hageman and Douglas Moore, have also adapted some of his stories for the operatic stage: *The Wings of a Dove* (1961), *The Last of the Valerii* (1974), *Washington Square* (1976), and *The Aspen Papers* (1988).

This is perhaps surprising, in spite of James's recognition as a canonical writer. His intricate style and the complex psychological developments inherent in his work do not seem at first sight to lend themselves to opera libretto adaptation. So, why is James's writing suited to operatic expression? How successful are "semiotic transmutations" (Jakobson, 1959: 233) of his fiction into operatic forms? What salient issues are then visible in foreign translations of the libretti? These questions will be considered with reference to the two operas mentioned above, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Owen Wingrave*, and their French translation.

I shall start with the main reasons why James's work, essentially fiction, has been so successfully adapted for the lyrical stage. Henry James wrote what may be considered his most accessible work as short stories and novellas, of which he wrote more than one hundred. He was particularly attracted to the genre of the novella, used for some of his best known texts today: *Daisy Miller*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Beast in the Jungle*. He also enjoyed a form that allowed him flexibility since it could include several literary genres. *The Turn of the Screw* is a detective novel, an autobiographical tale and a ghost and horror story, as James himself admitted in the preface to his work (James, 2001: 3-9). A short, "hybrid form of narration" (Brumm, 2002: 93) written

with the brief “to improvise with extreme freedom” (James, 2001: 5) is bound to lend itself to adaptation into a different mode. Some of James’s novels, such as *Washington Square* (which inspired plays, films and an opera by Thomas Pasatieri) also border on novella proportions. This may be one of the major reasons why Henry James has been a favourite not only in opera, but also in cinema: *The Turn of the Screw*, *Ghostly Rental*, *Portrait of a Lady*, have inspired well-known film versions<sup>1</sup>.

Although libretti were initially written in verse in the Italian tradition, from the second half of the nineteenth century they were increasingly adapted from tales and short fiction. Novels, often long, tended to be problematic to condense. Britten put it prosaically in a letter written to Colin Graham (in Herbert, 1979: 51) and discussing the possibility of writing an operatic version of *Anna Karenina*: “It is a fabulous book and I have been very over-excited by it and had lots of ideas about a possible opera. But –oh, how *can* one completely compress it into one evening?”.

Unsurprisingly, he did not complete *Anna Karenina*. Even if some librettists did tackle novels successfully in the past (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Thaïs*, *La Traviata*, *The Gambler*), most opted for shorter forms of fiction: Massenet’s *Hérodiade* (1881), Offenbach’s *Contes d’Hofmann* (1881), Delibes’ *Lakmé* (1883), Janáček’s *Jenufa* (1904), for example, are all based on short stories.

The second reason for James’s success with lyrical composers resides in the cosmopolitan aspect of his work, which echoes the frequently multilingual and intercultural dimension of opera. James spoke fluent French, fluent Italian, some German and also read a range of books in translation, from Russian for example. His texts are not only peppered with foreign expressions, he himself also engaged in translation, albeit quite marginally. International literary influences in his life and work have been studied by Tintner (1991) who has investigated “the influence that opera, particularly opera as a social institution, has on James’s work” (Halliwell, 1998: 307). Opera libretti seem to draw most of their inspiration from “foreign” sources. Let us mention a few examples of famous operas of the nineteenth-century repertoire: Rossini’s *Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816) was inspired by Beaumarchais’ play *Le Barbier de Séville* and his *Cenerentola* (1817) by Charles Perrault; Gounod’s *Faust* (1859) was based on Jules Barbier’s and Michel Carré’s adaptation of Goethe’s first tragedy; Berlioz’s *Béatrice et Bénédicte* (1862) is adapted from Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*; Verdi’s and Boïto’s *Falstaff* (1893) is inspired by Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV*; Puccini’s *La*

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<sup>1</sup> Eighty cinema or television such adaptations are listed in the Internet Movie Database for the entry “Henry James” at <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0416556/maindetails>> (accessed 13th/9/2007).

*Bohème* (1896) from Henry Murger's *La Vie de Bohème*... There are of course exceptions, but even those libretti written and inspired by the source language of the composer/librettist often retain an element of "foreignness" in their texts, such as *Carmen* (1875), adapted by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy from Prosper Mérimée's novella. This attraction to the foreign prevailed throughout the nineteenth century and has been very visible in the twentieth.

Thirdly, let us note how James's expression of temporal and spatial displacement relates to modern opera. The author's dual sense of belonging to a sophisticated but often decadent Europe and to a more naïve, dynamic, yet brash America is evoked through themes of nostalgia, often associated with a lost innocence. Such themes are hauntingly present in twentieth-century opera, a genre steeped in nineteenth-century values and a sense of loss of the past. Gertrude Stein famously noted that Henry James is the "only nineteenth-century author who being an American, felt the method of the twentieth century" (Stein, 1993: 87). This remark could be applied to modern opera in a reversed manner, as its nineteenth-century features permeate its twentieth-century form.

Henry James showed considerably less interest in opera or competence in music than some leading literary figures such as George Eliot, Gertrude Stein or James Joyce. Yet an author caught in the dual allegiance to present and to past values and the moral dilemma of responding to both his European and American cultural roots would understandably seduce twentieth-century opera composers, who dealt with a genre caught between nineteenth and twentieth-century ideals and worked within multicultural and multimodal structures.

The fourth reason for the affinity of James's texts with opera lies in the priority the author gives to ambiguity and silence. The stories we shall consider, *Owen Wingrave* and *The Turn of the Screw*, since they are primarily ghost stories, bestow a particularly strong place to the non verbal. In her essay on "Henry James's Ghost Stories" Virginia Woolf states that the supernatural is not expressed through facts, but through the lack of them. She even suggests that, in James's texts, facts can hinder the power of expression of the supernatural. She notes for example that in *Owen Wingrave*, the poor hero "is knocked on the head by the ghost of an ancestor" and that "a stable bucket in a dark passage would have done better" (Woolf, 1921: 291). She pursues:

The stories in which Henry James uses the supernatural effectively are, then, those where some quality in a character or in a situation can only be given its fullest meaning by being cut free from facts. [...] Henry James's ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts—the blood-stained sea captains,

the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origin with us (1921: 291).

One could argue that while many operas relish white horses, headless ladies and other crude effects, perhaps twentieth-century composers and audiences had become wary of them, associating them with nineteenth-century clichés. The supernatural in music is best expressed through the contrast of sound and silence. Few authors offer a natural space in their text to suggest it. But, as Woolf perceptively emphasizes about *The Turn of the Screw*: “Perhaps, it is the silence that first impresses us. Everything at Bly is so profoundly quiet [...] it accumulates; it weighs us down; it makes us strangely apprehensive of noise” (1921: 292).

“It is unspeakable” (1921: 292) and this very quality makes it transferable through suggestions which are not necessarily verbal but through a music (and production) sub-text. Benjamin Britten, who stated that “Night and Silence [...] are the two things (he) cherish(ed) most” (Britten, 1984: 92), was undoubtedly attracted to this quality. The communication of silence and other non-verbal elements (such as natural and supernatural sounds) is one of James’s most powerful strategies but it does not always contribute to voice the uncanny; it can also be an agent of ambiguity. Several scholars have explored this dimension, first within a Freudian line of argument emphasizing the governess’s repressed sexual feelings (Wilson, 1934), then through other psychoanalytical interpretations (Samuels, 1971; Norman, 1977). The expression of ambiguity, which is also present verbally in James’s fiction, is of particular interest as it implies the possibility of polysemous interpretation.

#### INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSMUTATIONS

The posthumous reputation of Henry James’s short stories has certainly been enhanced by the wide range of adaptations for different media (theatre plays, films for television or the cinema, and operas) that have emerged since their first publication, respectively in 1898/99 for *The Turn of the Screw* and 1892 for *Owen Wingrave*. Balestrini, in her exploration of the relationships between American literature and the opera libretto, emphasizes James’s taste for theatrical discourse: “James’s interest in drama and theatre has inspired musings about the role of stage plays in his prose works. Some scholars posit that James intended to redeem melodrama through artistically manipulating it in his prose” (2005: 331).

James did not only insert dramatic elements into his fiction. He also adapted prose into drama. A short play, *The Saloon*, based on *Owen Wingrave*, was

first performed in London in 1911. The story and the play were both severely criticised for their literary shortcomings, most famously by Virginia Woolf, (quoted above), and by George Bernard Shaw in his correspondence with James on the theatrical version of the story (Shaw in Edel, 1990). The story itself might have fallen into oblivion, except that since it loosely fits the category of the supernatural, it has repeatedly been included in various collections of ghost stories and that Benjamin Britten chose it as the text for one of his operas. Many remain critical of Britten's operatic version *Owen Wingrave*, first broadcast on BBC2 on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May 1971. Yet, as one of the few operas commissioned for television, it was "transmitted in more than 20 European countries and the USA (... reaching) a far larger audience than any opera composer can ever have dreamed of" (Rosenthal, 2001). As for *The Turn of the Screw*, it is interesting to note that although many novels by James have been adapted for the screen (mainly for television), it is only after Britten's opera appeared that film versions became available starting with John Frankenheimer's TV version with Ingrid Bergman (1959) shortly followed by Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961). At least a dozen versions have followed since, most of which were for French, Italian or German television. Curiously, James seemed more aware of *Owen Wingrave*'s potential for dramatisation than of *The Turn of the Screw*, which he described in one of his prefaces as: "a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught (the 'fun' of the capture of the merely witless being ever but small), the jaded, the disillusioned, the fastidious" (James, 1908).

This aim to entertain through the supernatural may have played an essential role in gaining popularity with a wide multinational audience. Undoubtedly, although *Owen Wingrave* has joined the ranks of his ghost stories, "one can argue that the supernatural element is not central to the meaning of the tale (... and) can be seen to be used by both Britten and James as a metaphor for a much more complex examination of the human psyche" (Halliwell, 2005: 227).

The librettist of the two operas was Myfanwy Piper, wife of John Piper, who designed several of Britten's opera sets. Britten worked very closely with his librettists and said so throughout his life: "One of the secrets of writing a good opera is the working together of poet and composer. [...] The composer and poet should at all stages be working in the closest contact" (Britten, 1947).

One of the consequences of this collaboration may have been a clear tendency to use far more text than most lyrical composers. *The Turn of the Screw* as a story comprises around 42,800 words which were reduced to around 7,000 words; *Owen Wingrave*'s original 14,000 word story is reduced to about 7,500 words. If we do a similar count (sung words without scenic instructions) for a standard opera from the repertoire, such as *Aida*, which is longer than

either of Britten's operas, we come to a mere 5,200 and this includes repeats. To some extent this reflects a trend in lyrical composition over the last fifty years. Nevertheless, Britten's libretti tend to be larger than most other operatic texts, even though most of them are structured from traditional musical forms such as arias and ensembles, for which, on the whole, verbal economy and repetition are required.

Michael Halliwell's (2005) study of operas inspired by Henry James presents a thorough comparative analysis of how the stories are transferred into libretti. His analysis is particularly rich with regard to the respective message and structure of each work. I shall therefore restrict my comments on these matters to a few essential points. Britten considered *Owen Wingrave* as a "companion piece" (Mitchell, 1984: 91) to *The Turn of the Screw* written nearly fifteen years earlier: "In the number of characters it's comparable, in the intensity of it and in the short scenes and interludes" (*Ibid.*). Piper states that neither she nor Britten "intended to interpret the work, only to recreate it for a different medium" (Piper, 1979 quoted in Halliwell 2005: 123). This is equally true for *Owen Wingrave* where the libretto follows the original story even more closely, in spite of more visible structural and linguistic reshuffling and the deliberate repetition of "peace", rarely used by James, as a key word throughout the opera. The following tables summarise how the transfer structure was accomplished:

<b>Henry James – <i>The Turn of the Screw</i> (24 chapters)</b>	<b>Myfanwy Piper Act I, 8 scenes – Act II, 8 scenes</b>
Prologue Two narrators	Prologue One narrator
Chapter 1 From there on Governess present in the tale	Act 1 scene 1 "The journey": The governess
Chapter 1	Act 1 scene 2 "The welcome": The governess,
Chapter 2; Chapter 3	Act 1 scene 3 "The Letter": The governess, Mrs Grose, Flora, Miles
Chapter 3; Chapter 4	Act 1 scene 4 "The Tower": The governess, Quint
Chapter 5; Chapter 6	Act 1 scene 5 "The Window": The governess, Mrs Grose, Flora, Miles
Chapter 9	Act 1 scene 6 "The Lesson": The governess, Flora, Miles

Chapter 6 (Miss Jessel only named in chapter 7); Chapter 8	Act 1 scene 7 “The lake”: The governess, Flora, Miles, Miss Jessel
No equivalent in the tale where ghosts do not speak.	Act 1 scene 8 “At night”: Quint, Miles, Miss Jessel, Flora the governess, Mrs Grose
No equivalent in the tale	Act 2 scene 1 “Colloquy and Solloquy”: Miss Jessel, Quint
Chapter 14	Act 2 scene 2 “The Bells”: Flora, Miles, The governess, Mrs Grose
Partly Chapter 16	Act 2 scene 3 “Miss Jessel” : Miss Jessel, The Governess
Chapter 17	Act 2 scene 4 “The Bedroom”: Miles, The governess, Quint
No equivalent in the tale	Act 2 scene 5 “Quint”: Quint
Chapter 18	Act 2 scene 6 “The piano”: The governess, Mrs Grose, Flora, Miles
Chapter 19, Chapter 20	Act 2 scene 7 “Flora”: Flora, Mrs Grose, the governess
Chapters 20, 22, 23, 24	Act 2 scene 8 “Miles”: The governess, Miles, Quint

As Halliwell notes (2005: 230), whereas the libretto of *The Turn of the Screw* remains quite faithful to the original text, in *Owen Wingrave*, “Piper uses very little of James’s actual dialogue in the tale”. Since the latter opera was based on a text of much slenderer proportions, a more segmented structure than the original one was also required to suit the needs of a full-length opera. Interestingly, although James dramatised the original story (*The Saloon*), it is from the tale that Myfanwy Piper drew her libretto.

<b>Henry James – <i>Owen Wingrave</i></b>	<b>Myfanwy Piper</b>
Chapter 1 Chapter 2	Act 1 scene 1: Coyle, Owen, Lechmere
Chapter 2 Chapter 1	Act 1 scene 2: Owen, Coyle, Miss Wingrave
Chapter 2 Chapter 3	Act 1 scene 3: Lechmere, Mrs Coyle, Coyle, Owen

Chapter 3	Act 1 scene 4: Mrs Julian, Kate, Miss Wingrave, Owen
Chapter 3	Act 1 scene 5: Miss Wingrave, Kate, Sir Philip, Mrs Julian. Owen present but silent.
Chapter 3	Act 1 scene 6: Mrs Coyle, Coyle, Owen, Lechmere
Chapter 3	Act 1 scene 7: Sir Philip, Mrs Coyle, Kate, Lechmere, Coyle, Miss Wingrave, Mrs Julian, Owen
	Act 2 Prologue (addition of the ballad framing the second act) narrator, chorus
Chapter 3	Act 2 scene 1 Owen, Coyle, Mrs Coyle, Mrs Julian, Lechmere, Kate, Sir Philip, Miss Wingrave
Chapter 4	Act 2 scene 2 Mrs Coyle, Coyle, Lechmere, Kate, Mrs Julian, Miss Wingrave, Sir Philip, narrator, chorus

James's strongly ordered but flexible narrative in both stories allowed Piper and Britten to keep the original essence of the text from a structural point of view. This was also achieved stylistically through the sporadic use of original words and phrases, repeated or deliberately exposed in the opera. This strategy is particularly visible in *Owen Wingrave*.

James	Piper
"I'll talk to him and I'll take him down to Paramore; he'll be dealt with there, and I'll send him back to you straightened out" (130).	Send him to us—he shall be straightened out at Paramore (Act I, scene 2. Herbert 1979: 333) They'll straighten you out, she says, at Paramore (Act I, scene 3. Herbert 1979: 334)
Sir Philip Wingrave, a relic rather than a celebrity, was a small brown, erect octogenarian, with smouldering eyes and a studied courtesy (127).	"Grandfather looks quiet enough, a formal, stiff old man. But he has a smouldering eye, red-rimmed with the glint of far-off battles"; (Act I scene 3)
"Ah, we're tainted – all!" (138)	"Ugh! We're tainted all". (Act I, scene 3)



Common keywords, such as “ancestors” and “scruples”, present in both the original story and the libretto, contribute to maintain the original flavour of the text.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, although Piper follows the original structure of the text more closely than in *Owen Wingrave*, a different strategy is used to recreate the sense of eeriness of James’s story. Ambiguity and corruption, only suggested in the original text, are made very prominent. This is achieved in particular through the use of Latin. Indeed, Malo’s song, which plays a vital thematic and structural role in the opera does not exist in James’s text. An “incoherent, extravagant song” (James 2001: 243) is mentioned but not quoted. In Piper’s version it acquires a central role:

*Malo... I would rather be  
Malo... in an apple tree  
Malo... than a naughty boy  
Malo... in adversity*

It is derived from a Latin tongue twister, playing with the different meanings of *malo* —I prefer from *malle* to prefer; from *malus*, apple-tree; from *malus*, mast of a ship; and from *malus*, evil or scoundrel—:

*Malo malo malo malo.*  
I would rather be in a ship at sea than a naughty boy in an apple tree

Similarly, although lessons given by the governess are a recurrent theme in the original text, they are not specified. In Piper’s libretto, the enumeration of Latin masculine words repeated *ad nauseam* by the children acts both as an evil mantra and as an instrument of ambiguity. Whereas ambiguity in the original story is conveyed through suggestions essentially made by the extradiegetic narrators, whose telling of the story is open to interpretation by the reader, in Britten’s version, it is conveyed to the reader/listener through repetition and verbal polysemy which s/he may or may not decode entirely, but which s/he perceives intuitively. The words of the libretto reveal corrupted innocence but also act as a cryptic praise of homosexuality, as Cunningham has pointed out (2002). The enumeration is also partially used as a perverted *benedicite* which opens the second scene of act II:

During his Latin lesson Miles sings a rhyming clutch of masculine Latin nouns [...*amnis, axis, caulis, collis, chunis...*]. Britten gave his librettist Myfanwy

Piper these words from the copy of Kennedy [‘s standard Victorian schoolbook, the *Shorter Latin Primer*...]. The *Primer* glosses these nouns of masculine into English: river, axle, stalk, hill, hind-leg, etc. These glosses are Kennedy’s cover, as well as his coy jesting. But hind-leg for *chunis*? *Chunis* my arse, you might say. *Chunis* is anus, arsehole (its plural, *chunes*, means buttock). *Caulis* (cabbage stalk) was Latin slang for penis [...]. This [song, the benedicite] has long been accepted as being in some way blasphemous. Exactly how becomes clear when you translate it: “O arsehole, scrotum, penis, bless ye Lord.” It becomes a gay Christian male’s earnest claim for a kind of sanctity of the gay male body, unrecognized by Britten’s church (2002: 4).

Latin, which is not mentioned or quoted in any form in the original story, is a language associated with religious rituals and with school textbooks (or at least was in Europe in 1954 when the opera was created). The polysemous meaning of words chanted by the children could only be understandable to a handful of initiates, but is at the heart of the dual notion of the corruption of innocence and of the innocence of corruption which is the central theme of the opera. Just as ghosts have invisible influence, words have secret meanings.

These remarks on the use of Latin and the distortion of ritual texts bring us to an examination of how intertextuality has been introduced rather than transferred into the operas in order to emphasize the arcane dimension of the stories and to stress the importance of key themes. As far as the original stories are concerned, scholars have differing views of James’s intertextual references. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Shakespeare are usually cited as the most influential authors. The object here is not to discuss other writers’ influences in James’s work but to bring to light the strategy that Britten and Piper used in creating the libretto. Piper describes her writing process while working on *The Turn of the Screw* and openly mentions that “she searched about for possibilities in books” (Piper, 1979: 12), eager to reflect the style and intention of the original text. Reminiscing on the strategies she used to establish an appropriate tone for *Owen Wingrave*, she wrote:

I had to do a great deal of reading in *Memoirs* and even in Clausewitz’s *Art of War* to find the kind of thing I might use. But I was grateful for it because I became so immersed in Napoleon’s battles and in tales of the Indian Mutiny that it became natural to me to use military metaphors and this led, I hope, to a certain poetic verisimilitude in the character’s use of language (Piper, 1979:15)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The first English translation of Clausewitz’s *Art of War* was published in 1873, nearly two decades before the publication of *Owen Wingrave* (1892).

In spite of a desire to mimic James's style, the text differs from the original, Piper's cultural background being very different from James's. Most of the authors she uses with the aim of establishing a degree of equivalence between her text and the original story, Clausewitz excepted, are English-speaking. Moreover, and sometimes in spite of Britten's suggestions, she seems to want to play down non English references, as we shall see later. She inserts some of James's original text and some quotations in a very visible manner, in order to emphasize a theme or a phrase, rather than suggest another voice, as James does so subtly. Her monolingualism is perhaps surprising in the light of her close collaboration with Britten. Although Britten is perhaps most famous for quintessentially British operatic works (*Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *Gloriana*), he often chose texts written in a variety of languages as material for his compositions. This is particularly the case with song cycles (*Michelangelo Sonnets*, *Hölderlin Fragments*, *Songs from the Chinese*...) but many of his sources for operatic works were also non British, sometimes surprisingly. His chamber opera *Albert Herring*, for example, a satire of early twentieth-century English society, is inspired by a Maupassant story, *Le Rosier de Madame Husson*. With Piper, rather than suggesting the foreign, the other, or the unknown, references tend to frame a central theme. For example, *The Turn of the Screw*'s key notion of corrupted innocence is expressed most potently in Britten's opera through a W. B. Yeats quotation taken from the poem *The Second Coming*, written in 1919 (Yeats, 1979: 210-211). In Britten's opera, it is accompanied by a powerful musical theme and evokes the evil powers of the two ghosts: "The ceremony of innocence is drowned". This verse is uttered by each of the two ghosts in turn and echoed by the governess with her ghastly realisation that her own integrity and sanity are at risk: "O Innocence, you have corrupted me... Lost in my labyrinth I see no truth" (Herbert, 1979: 243). The ghosts, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, are only mentioned in James's story. They may be interpreted as figments of imagination. In Britten's opera, they are given a voice and are not just an immaterial presence. Interestingly, Britten chose to include "a confrontation between Quint and Miss Jessel" and suggested that Piper "look at Verlaine's *Colloque Sentimental*, in which two lovers taunt each other with their past" (Piper, 1979: 12). The hint was not taken!

*Owen Wingrave*, "the story of a house and family haunted by the past" (Piper, 1979: 13) where the ghosts can be interpreted as a metaphor for this haunting past, lends itself more naturally to textual references. Britten's desire to structure the opera with traditional music forms (arias, ensembles...) also makes references to the past appealing. The ballad used in the second act to

recount the legend of the Wingrave family, although reminiscent of a traditional folk song, also opens with the line of a Wordsworth poem:

There was a Boy; ...  
 This boy was taken from his mates, and died  
 In childhood, ere he was full twelve years old.  
 Pre-eminent in beauty is the vale  
 Where he was born and bred: the churchyard hangs  
 Upon a slope above the village-school;  
 And, through that church-yard when my way has led  
 On summer-evenings, I believe, that there  
 A long half-hour together I have stood  
 Mute-looking at the grave in which he lies!

Although Wordsworth's poem does not recount the bullying of a child, but rather, self recollection of childhood, it is written in the form of a ballad and its main theme is the death of a child. It also echoes the Shelley poem on war quoted at the beginning of the opera, an excerpt from the fourth book of *Queen Mab* quoted literally by Piper. This poem is inserted as an evocation of Owen reading "a volume of Goethe's poems" (James, 2001: 124) in the original story, but the librettist justifies the substitution, perhaps not as convincingly as we would expect: "Well, I don't read German, and I didn't see any special merit in having Goethe in translation. I knew the Shelley, and [...] Shelley was exactly what that young man would have been reading, and reacting to" (Piper in Halliwell, 2005: 241).

Just as she had done in *The Turn of the Screw*, she chooses to insert a well known quote to reinforce an essential theme, here the theme of peace, actually much more prominent in Britten's opera than in James's story. Shelley's verse (seventeen lines from *Queen Mab*, a long philosophical poem in nine parts, composed in 1812/1813) is used for Owen's aria at the end of the second scene, in a similar way to Yeats's quote, deliberately exposed in a central position in *The Turn of the Screw*. A strategy of thematic reinforcement, based on the presence of these salient quotes, contrasts with what McClatchie (1996: 62) has identified as a "strategy of connotation, which [...] allows homosexual meaning to be elided even as it is elaborated" and which is present through cryptic references such as the ones we identified in *The Turn of the Screw*.

#### INTRALINGUAL TRANSFERS

More could be said about the intricacies of intersemiotic transfer, particularly as regards how certain notions are suggested verbally and translated into non

verbal forms of expression. This, however, goes beyond the brief of this study, and I would like to devote the last part of this paper to issues regarding the libretto translation into French. Britten's publishers, Boosey and Hawkes (before 1963) and Faber Music (after that date) systematically included a German singing translation in the orchestral scores of all the composer's operas (*The Beggar's Opera* excepted). The choice of German reflected the fact that, in the second half of the twentieth century, Britten's operas were performed in German-speaking countries more than any other non-English speaking countries. Although "Britten's operas continue to be increasingly programmed in the German-speaking world" (Britten-Pears Foundation, 2004), they have been present on most European stages in the last two decades. *Owen Wingrave's* first performance in a non English-speaking country took place in Hanover in German (translated by Claus Henneberg and Karl Marz) two years after the initial television broadcast and only a few months after its first stage performance at Covent Garden. France, in comparison, has been lagging behind and the first French version of the opera was only offered in October 1996 in its original English version.

*The Turn of the Screw*, a successful opera both in the UK and in the rest of the world, was first performed in France in the original English Opera Group production in 1956. A French version by Louis Ducreux was performed in Marseille in 1965<sup>3</sup>, but most French productions have used the Piper text. This is surprising perhaps if we consider that these two operas are chamber operas, traditionally performed more often in translation than their full scale counterparts. However, the omnipresence of surtitling in opera houses explains that more performances are currently taking place in the original language (even in the German-speaking world). For these reasons, we'll consider the French translations of *Owen Wingrave* and *The Turn of the Screw* offered as optional subtitles in DVD format. There are four available DVD recordings of *The Turn of the Screw*. We chose to focus on the *Bel Air Classiques* version (2005), as it is a French production based on an Aix-en-Provence festival performance, more likely to be bought by a French audience. Only two DVD versions of *Owen Wingrave* are available, both produced in 2005. Slight variations occur in the two products; one of them is aimed at the American market, while the other was created for European audiences. But it is essentially the same production, transposed from its original setting in the late nineteenth century to 1958. No version of the original television production is for sale commercially. The version we shall discuss was produced by *Art Haus Musik*. The DVDs

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<sup>3</sup> Figures presented here are taken from *L'Avant-scène opéra* no. 173 (1996), where Josée Bégauud gives a summary of performances until 1996, for *Owen Wingrave*, p. 80, for *The Turn of the Screw*, pp. 158-161.

considered here for both *The Turn of the Screw* and *Owen Wingrave* offer subtitles in English, French, German and Spanish. Although translators are acknowledged for their version of the accompanying page booklet, no mention is made of subtitlers in either DVD. The programme of the Aix-en-Provence production of *The Turn of the Screw* mentions surtitlers but no individual surtitler is named.

At the beginning of this article, I listed four essential features which may have determined James's popularity with twentieth-century opera composers: the genre used in his fiction; the cosmopolitan nature of his writing and the importance of intertextual elements in his fiction; the sense of temporal and spatial displacement inherent in his fiction; and his affinity with ambiguity and silence. We have seen that in the intersemiotic transfer of both *The Turn of the Screw* and *Owen Wingrave* operated by Britten and Piper, loss occurred as regards the presence of cosmopolitan features and that intertextual functions differed from those that could be identified in James's texts. I would like briefly to consider in this last section how these issues have been dealt with in the French subtitled version.

A large discrepancy in quality is visible in the two subtitled versions. *Le Tour d'écrou* shows consistency in the choices made, proposes a polished version of the opera in French, while some errors appear in *Owen Wingrave's* subtitles (e.g. subtitles no. 106, 108, 192, 297) and translation choices made are not always convincing. Let us examine how intertextuality is dealt with in *Owen Wingrave's* translation.

The first reference we come across is a famous folk song set by the Irish early nineteenth-century poet Thomas Moore on a traditional Irish tune:

The Minstrel boy to war has gone  
In the ranks of death you'll find him

The song is frequently played at military funerals and remembrance ceremonies and has been used widely in films. Although it deplores the death of a soldier, it is not a pacifist song and is quite appropriately sung in the opera by the enthusiastic, budding soldier Lechmere<sup>4</sup>. Discordant chords accompanying the words and Lechmere's heroic tone evoke disharmony. The Anglo-Saxon viewer, familiar with the song, will interpret this discordance as a bitter parody, as the song is immediately followed by Owen's ironic remark:

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Britten made an arrangement of this song in 1960, as part of a volume of Moore's Irish Melodies which he arranged.

The Wingraves all went too...  
And didn't they love it!

The French subtitles only propose a literal translation and whereas single quotation marks were inserted in the libretto and in the score to suggest the song, they are not used in French, preventing an audience who does not know the song from perceiving the allusion.

In the passage, two quotes from military men are given. The first is from the Duke of Wellington, a line supposedly uttered after the battle of Waterloo, "Next to a battle lost, the greatest misery is a battle gained". The second is a quotation from Clémenceau which remains in French in the original: "la Gloire, c'est tout!" Both quotations are acknowledged with inverted commas, but Wellington's aphorism is clumsily transferred. In James's text, Spencer Coyle admits that Owen's decision to opt out of a military career was informed by "a lot of reading" and quotes Owen's own definition of war as "immeasurable misery" (James, 2001: 132), which echoes Wellington's well known quote used by Piper. The excerpt from Shelley's *Queen Mab* on war which follows the second interlude is more successfully rendered. Some translation choices have a very contemporary tone (the lawyer's jest / *la plaisanterie de l'avocat*) but this may be justified by the decision to transpose the setting from the end of the nineteenth century to 1958.

The translation of some elements of James's text which remain in Piper's libretto is more problematic. As we have seen, these elements were deliberately chosen to reflect the spirit of the original text. Let us take one example, the rendering of "he shall be straightened out at Paramore" (Act I, scene 2). The expression "straightened out" is only used once by James, while it is repeated twice in the opera, emphasising the inflexible attitude of the Wingraves, but also, within the context of homosexual repression discussed above, highlighting the ambiguous nature of the "straightening out". The subtitler first chooses to render the phrase in French with the expression "remettre sur le droit chemin". Loss occurs with the chosen equivalent, particularly regarding sexual connotations, but the solution is acceptable. However, effect is lost with the repetition of the idiom. Not only is it not repeated accurately, but it uses an incorrect preposition ("dans" instead of "sur"), distorting the established phrase unnecessarily. "Nous saurons, à Paramore, le remettre sur le droit chemin" becomes "Elle dit qu'ils vous remettront dans le droit chemin". More examples could be given to illustrate the fact that Piper's dual use of intertextuality as a strategy to emphasise some themes and as a device to reflect James's original style in the libretto is not effectively transferred in the subtitles. Although a

certain amount of loss is expected in subtitling, the text meant to guide French viewers is mostly cumbersome and too often inaccurate.

The translation into French accompanying the DVD of *The Turn of the Screw* is more successful in its rendering. From the very beginning of the film, it attempts to set the atmosphere through a consistent, sober style which evokes nineteenth-century literary English discourse and accounts for different narrative voices. For instance, the narrator's introductory monologue occupies the top and the middle of the screen at first. It is also presented in larger font. The translated text only reclaims its usual place and font half way through the prologue, as the camera starts focussing on the narrator. The change is effective and operates sensitively: initially, the viewer hears a faceless narrator and reads text which is visually prominent, but as the subtitles recede to the bottom of the screen, the focus shifts from the text to the face and voice of the narrator. Forms of address are carefully chosen and implemented consistently, so that the French viewer is immersed in the English context of the scene. They can feel antiquated (my dear / ma chère, not so common in French as its English equivalent), but remain in line with the spirit of the opera. Piper's stylish text is elegantly and concisely transferred. The central W. B. Yeats quote for instance is poetically and accurately rendered ("La cérémonie de l'innocence a sombré"). The literal translation of "is drowned", which would have been clumsy in French, is avoided. Instead, the intransitive verb "sombrier" is used. It allows a natural silence at the end of the sentence, since no object is expected after an intransitive verb. It also heightens the feeling of darkness and deprivation associated with the ghosts, as "sombre" means "sinks", "lapse into" or "dark" in French. In addition, the quotation, which is sung slowly and repeated three times, is given weight visually as it is split each time in three subtitles: "La cérémonie / de l'innocence / a sombré."). Other intertextual references do not pose many translation problems since they can be transferred literally, as in the Latin song and lesson. The only serious criticism that can be made concerns the absence of translation at the very end of the opera. The last few lines of the libretto are devoted to the governess's hysterical questions to the child who died in her arms. *The Turn of the Screw* can be interpreted as a text where the living insatiably ask questions for which only malevolent ghosts have malevolent answers. The last question of the governess is perhaps the most poignant and the most ambiguous of all: "What have we done between us?" Was the governess an accomplice of the ghosts? Or did she mean that the child was not able to bear the tension between living human beings and spirits? Piper's text leaves us with this essential question of which French audiences are deprived.



## CONCLUSION: TRANSLATION AS REAPPROPRIATION

To conclude, let us go back to our initial questions and review the answers we have given. James's writing is essentially suited to operatic expression because it suggests as much as it tells, because it prioritises textual ambiguity over a single meaning and because part of its beauty is to leave space for silence, for the untold, for the unknown. One of Britten's most extraordinary gifts, as an operatic composer was his capacity to fulfil his creative desire that "A poem should not mean / But be" (Archibald MacLeish in Neale, 1992: 161). In Britten and Piper's version, James's text *is*, in operatic form. Inevitably, some features of the original stories are lost in the transmutations, sometimes intentionally (text condensation, different role or weight given to characters), sometimes not so deliberately or less successfully (loss of intertextual references). Nevertheless, with each opera, a new version of the text, reappropriated and transcoded, emerges. It allows its audience to see and hear a new creative work but also to have a different perspective on the original one. I would argue that Britten's operatic transmutations of *The Turn of the Screw* and *Owen Wingrave* contribute to Henry James's success in our era. The translation of libretti into foreign languages for DVD format is governed by very different constraints and operates within an economic framework requiring rapid delivery of the translated product. The aim of these translations primarily consists in conveying the essential message of the story, unpacking the semantic meaning of texts in which semantic meaning is far from being the only component. With *The Turn of the Screw*, we have seen that a sensitive, informed rendering is possible. Yet this form of translation can only guide the audience through an unknown linguistic territory. But as George Steiner (1998: 447) perceptively expressed,

(In vocal music), transformations can proceed from linguistic to meta-linguistic and non-linguistic codes. The Homeric text (*Odyssey*) can be set to music in its original wording or in translation. [...] It is up to us to recognize and reconstruct the particular force of relation (between the original work and its transformed version).

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