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BETRAYAL AS MYTHOPOESIS: UNFAITHFUL TRANSLATION AS A MYTH-MAKING PRACTICE



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Abstract

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of the "afterlife" of the text, Lawrence Venuti's critique of invisibility and André Lefevere's theory of rewriting, this paper theorizes literary translation as a myth-making practice, which is grounded in productive unfaithfulness. Through case studies of Edward FitzGerald's "Rubáiyát" of Omar Khayyám, Ezra Pound's "Cathay", and Anne Carson's "Antigonick", the study demonstrates how deliberate deviations from fidelity, comprising formal rupture, anachronism, multimodal intervention, etc., reconfigure mythic authority and cultural memory and function as autonomous mythopoetic acts that shape the global circulation of literary canons. The paper argues that unfaithful translation is a central mechanism, through which myths endure, mutate, evolve and acquire renewed ideological force in world literature.

Keywords: *myth-making, productive unfaithfulness, translational afterlife, rewriting and patronage, translator visibility, radical literary translation, Anne Carson's "Antigonick", Ezra Pound's "Cathay", FitzGerald's "Rubáiyát", canon formation*

This paper proposes a reorientation of our theoretical framework for understanding the literary role of translations in cultural dynamics and conjectures that deliberate unfaithfulness constitutes a primary mode of mythopoesis, standing for the active making and remaking of cultural myth. Rather than simply circulating existing narratives, this practice establishes new hermeneutic constellations by generating, what this paper terms, productive unfaithfulness. The argument of this study synthesizes the translational metaphysics of Walter Benjamin, the ideological critique of Lawrence Venuti with the systemic analytics of André Lefevere to posit translation as a world-making practice. Through extended analysis of Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, and Anne Carson's *Antigonick*, this paper demonstrates how strategic deviations, comprising encompassing formal rupture, anachronistic grafting and multimodal intervention, reconfigure mythic authority and cultural memory and function as autonomous literary acts that decisively shape the global canon.

Theoretical Premises of Translatory Unfaithfulness

The departure point for this paper is Walter Benjamin's influential essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923), in which Benjamin liberates translation from the servile paradigm of reproducing meaning and argues instead for its role in realizing the "translatability" (*Übersetzbarkeit*) of the text and its destined "afterlife" (*Fortleben*): "In its afterlife the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process" (Benjamin, 1996, p. 73). This 'maturing' acts as evolution and a release of latent potentials, rather than a meager decay; hence, the task of the translator is "to find the intended effect (*Intention*) upon the language into which he is translating, which produces in it the echo of the original" (Benjamin, 1996, p. 76), which serves as a harmonic resonance and a transformation, essential for the continued life of the work. Benjamin, thus, provides the ontological ground for viewing unfaithfulness as the very condition of the survival and metamorphosis of the text.

Lawrence Venuti's critique of the translator's 'invisibility' in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995) provides the ideological and practical corollary, as he exposes the 'illusion of transparency' as an Anglo-American domesticating strategy that effaces the alterity of a foreign text to reinforce dominant cultural values. In opposition to this, Venuti advocates a 'foreignizing' translation practice, which "registers the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text" Venuti, 1995, p. 15) by disrupting target-language conventions. Such a practice is inherently 'unfaithful' to fluency and transparency, making the mediating presence of the translator and, thus, the act of rewriting visible. This visibility is the prerequisite for translation to function as a critical, mythopoetic intervention, rather than a passive transfer.

André Lefevere's systemic theory of 'rewriting', elaborated in *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992) furnishes the operational model, which posits that translation operates within constraints of "patronage" (Lefevere, 1992, p. 15) (ideological, economic, status) and "poetics" (Lefevere, 1992, p. 15) (literary norms). Lefevere asserts that "translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting and […] it is potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and/or a (series of) work(s) in another culture" (1992, p. 9). Rewriting, therefore, is an act of refraction, a reconstitution of the source according to target-culture imperatives, thus, turning into the machinery of canon formation and cultural mythmaking.

To synthesize these frameworks, this paper argues that the productive unfaithful translator operates as a mythographer, who engages in, what Benjamin calls, the "great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language" (1996, p. 259), but does so through Venuti's visible disruptive tactics and is governed by Lefevere's systemic forces. The result is a new mythic entity - an 'afterlife' with its own ideological charge and circulatory power in world literature.

Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* as the Fabrication of the *Carpe Diem* Sage

Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915) represents a different order of mythopoetic unfaithfulness, which is rooted in radical formal and methodological innovation. Work-

ing from the posthumous notes of Ernest Fenollosa, Pound approached classical Chinese poetry as a modernist sculptor, treating the Fenollosan ideogram as a direct presentation of an image-complex. Pound's method was an explicit rejection of scholarly fidelity, based on a theory of the Chinese written character as "a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature" (Fenollosa, 1936, p. 8). Pound transformed this into a poetics of parataxis and concrete imagery mixed with emotional restraint, which turned his 'translations' into creative extrapolations from an intermediary text that made his unfaithfulness a doubly mediated act.

An important example is "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter", which is based on Li Bai's "Changgan Xing" (pp. 701-762). Pound's version is a masterpiece of emotional concision, in which a character-for-character commentary reads as: "My hair barely covered my forehead then,/Picking flowers, playing by my gate" (Li Bai, 2005, pp. 98-99). Pound renders this as:

> While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
> I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
> You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
> You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums (1915, p. 9).

Pound's genius lies in his syntactic simplicity, the specificity of 'bamboo stilts' and 'blue plums', as well as his creation of a poignant and youthful voice. However, he omits the dense network of allusions to Chinese literary tropes of, for instance, a childhood betrothal (*meizhu*), thus stripping the poem down to its narrative and imagistic core and, by this means, recreating it as a universal lyric of personal loss. This act of stripping is mythopoeic, as Pound created the myth of Chinese poetry as the pure and ancient antecedent to Imagism. As a consequence, his "Cathay" is a realm of hard and clear images and unadorned emotion. Likewise, "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" - another Li Bai poem based on a subtly ironic courtly complaint, is rendered by Pound in the following manner:

> The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
> It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
> And I let down the crystal curtain
> And watch the moon through the clear autumn (1915, p. 11).

Pound's note to the poem is revealing: "Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of […] The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach" (1915, p. 11). Therefore, Pound translates more than just the words; he translates the *aesthetic principle* of indirection, making it a typical example of Imagist 'don'ts', as well as rewrites Chinese poetry into the foundational myth of Anglo-American modernism.

As a consequence, Pound's formal rupture, expressed through his use of free verse, parataxis and conversational rhythm, was, per Venuti, a profoundly foreignizing act against the florid Victorian poetic diction, as it made the translation visibly *other*, and in doing so, invented a new classical tradition for the modernist present, releasing from Li Bai's text its "intention toward pure language" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 81), or a language of concrete presentation, which then echoed po-

werfully in the poetic revolution of the target language. Hence, *Cathay* is less a window onto Tang China than a mirror reflecting and legitimizing the nascent modernist poetics in Europe.

Deconstruction in Anne Carson's *Antigonick* as a Mythic Palimpsest

Anne Carson's *Antigonick* (2012) represents the contemporary apotheosis of translation as a conscious and critical mythopoesis, characterised by a comprehensive, multimodal unfaithfulness, which treats the Sophoclean text as a palimpsest for philosophical interrogation, formal experimentation, as well as visual collaboration. Carson's project is announced as a 'translation', but is more accurately a 'rewriting', which incorporates deconstructive critique, anachronism, combined with graphic art. The text is presented in Carson's signature block capitals, printed on translucent vellum pages that overlay the bold, often surreal drawings of Bianca Stone, thus forcing a reading practice of constant interplay between text and image, in which neither is illustrative; rather, they are concurrent and often conflicting commentaries. This multimodal rupture physically performs the palimpsestic nature of myth, in which layers of cognition, interpretation, response and visual thinking are simultaneously bleeding through one another.

Carson's textual deviations are systematic. Thus, she introduces a silent character of Nick, who "WHO CONTINUES MEASURING" (Carson, 2012, p. 46), serving as a personification of measure (*metron*) and perhaps the Nick of time (*chronos*) - a mute and relentless presence, embodying the quantifying, categorizing impulse that Antigone's act of singular doomed piety defies. This is a radical, interpretive addition that rewrites the philosophical stakes of the play. Carson's language, in its turn, is a studied anachronism, which grafts contemporary idiom and philosophical jargon onto the ancient frame. Indeed, when Kreon confronts Antigone, his speech is inflected with bureaucratic and psychoanalytic language: "You do you're [*sic*] like your father stubborn he was/always looking for the weak point the irreconcilable/message the nonzero sum" (Carson, 2012, p. 24). Later, the Chorus delivers lines that echo modern political anxiety: "We're born we're here we're gone / we're waiting in the hallway of the police station of the universe" (Carson, 2012, p. 41). It is evident that this anachronistic grafting aims to expose the timeless structural conflicts of the play, namely between law and justice, individual and state, family and polity, within the discursive field of the present, thus making the myth immediate and critically urgent.

Furthermore, Carson engages in a paratextual dialogue with philosophical rewritings of the Antigone myth, notably with those by Hegel and Lacan, transforming her translation into a site, in which these critical afterlives are made visible within the primary text itself. For instance, the ode on man administered by the Chorus, "Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man" (Carson, 2012, p. 10), is rendered with a disruptive and questioning cadence that echoes postmodern critiques of humanism. Therefore, this translation acts as a critical metacommentary, enacting Venuti's visibility to the highest degree, while fulfilling Benjamin's vision of translation integrating many tongues into a new constellation, comprising tragedy, philosophy and contemporary critical theory.

As a result, *Antigonick* demonstrates that in the twenty-first century, mythopoetic translation must act as a deconstructive and interdisciplinary practice, making Carson's unfaithfulness to Sophocles a fiercely loyal engagement with the endless capacity of the myth to generate meaning. Carson creates an 'afterlife' for *Antigone* and a new mythic object for an age of intertextuality and media saturation, which is deconstructive, self-reflexive, visually entangled and philosophically dense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these three case studies reveal a consistent pattern: unfaithfulness is the conduit of literary metamorphosis and canonical endurance, since FitzGerald's Victorian Omar, Pound's Imagist Li Bai, and Carson's deconstructed *Antigone* turn into potent new myths, each serving as an 'afterlife' that secures the place of the original in the global imagination through transformative rewriting. This practice significantly reassigns mythic authority, which migrates from a fixed sacrosanct source to the dynamic generative process of transhistorical and transcultural reinterpretation. Hence, the myth functions as a potential activated, indeed, created, in the translational encounter, governed by the pressures outlined by Lefevre.

This framework forces one to reconsider the constitution of world literature, since the texts that achieve truly global circulation and canonical status are often those that have been most daringly and productively rewritten. Hence, world literature is nothing but an ecosystem of transformative afterlives, while the unfaithful translator, as mythographer, is a central agent in this ecosystem, ensuring that literary works evolve, mutating to retain their relevance and ideological charge for new audiences in new times.

Consequently, to insist on a narrow fidelity is to advocate for a museum culture of literary preservation. Yet literature is a living force, with its life lying in its translation, in its capacity to be reborn in other forms. The 'task of the translator', in its highest mythopoetic form, is, therefore, to enact a productive betrayal, or, to be more precise, to be unfaithful to the letter, so as to be faithful to the ever-unfolding, ever-mutating spirit of the text, its relentless drive to become, and become again, our myth.

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