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The Mask of the Translator

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ABSTRACT

The translation of poetry and literature has a history of being overlooked and discounted as a valid art form—even today academic institutions do not acknowledge a translated work as worthy of consideration in the tenure process. In the world outside of academia, translation is still often seen as an impossibility or an exercise in invisibility or inferiority, or both. In this essay I investigate, through discrete connections and lyrical inquiry, some of the qualities that define the art of translation. While Walter Benjamin so eloquently expressed the translator's task a century ago, I have echoed his original title with a luminous rhyme, and consider the figure of the mask as a vital aspect of the translator's art—a mask that manifests the difference between translator and writer, faithfulness and interpretation, self and subjectivity. At the heart of the essay I have attempted to translate a poem by the Southern Song poet Lu You brushed repeatedly by my grandfather as way to discuss the strategies and choices, doubts and questions, involved in the process of translation. A co-translation of a contemporary Chinese poet by one who doesn't know the source language brings up sticky issues of over-identification and paradox. Certain subjective examples of vibrant translations are considered as models to emulate and learn from. Whatever ineffable mysteries mold the mask of a translator substantiates its art.

KEYWORDS: translation, poetry, Lu You, classical Chinese literature, masks, interpretation, subjectivity, philosophy of translation, hermeneutics, art

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Translators can nod happily with Friedrich Nietzsche's famous pronouncement, "There are no facts, only interpretations"—a sentiment at least as old as Aristotle's *Organon*. Susan Sontag quotes it in her equally famous essay where she equates a certain kind of interpretation detrimental to art ("the revenge of the intellect upon art") as translation.

> Directed to art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work. The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really—or really means—A? That Y is really B? that Z is really C?

It is a passing analogy, not meant as a critique of translation but as an illustration of her underlying argument, namely that our "modern style of interpretation" has become "reactionary, stifling" and "poisons our sensibilities." Translation can relate to almost anything today, and has been used as a metaphor for everything, from globalization to psychoanalysis to computer game programming, as well as various sorts of displacement. Naturally, the translator as actual translator is faced with a series of choices to make, guided by the original language of fact we call a text, or the original, but unlike the narrow operation of translation analogized in the passage above, translators need a deeper sense of the whole line, whole sentence, whole work to do the best job. For one, what happens when X can mean A, B, and C, mutually? One could, instead, relate translation to the brighter side of interpretation that Sontag brings up elsewhere in her essay: "In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act . . . a means of revising, transvaluing, of escaping the dead past." Or one of revivifying the dead past, to expand and extend the ancestral continuum, to reveal differences and disparities, to stretch the original language, and so on. For the translator, interpretation ends where subjectivity begins. And each has no beginning or end. Subjectivity as the process of reflection that leads to recognition and understanding. The mask of the translator shaped in the relation between the creative subject and the original.

Paul Blackburn, who worked on his anthology of troubadour poetry *Proensa* for almost three decades, puts it simply, "I do enjoy translating, getting into other people's heads."

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All art betrays in the sense of showing, indicating, disclosing "that which might otherwise be concealed or is not obvious at first view"—that which has been handed over and across to be evidence of. Every language betrays its own excesses and limitations that translation transcends with temporal delight. What we call style, as the poet Basil Bunting once noted, "is something that must be learned by pains and practice." Bunting thought of his translations of classical Persian poetry as "overdrafts"—that which embraces the ever-changing nature of language and translation.

A translator wears the style of the original text transformed in a new language. If the work of divergent authors one translates start to read the same, sound the same, the translator has lost sight of the object. We must listen with more subjective resolve, ponder other models and precedents, their risks and ingenuities. In art, objectivity can be another word for the subjectivity of others.

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To echo Friedrich Hölderlin, poetry is, by necessity, subjectivity translated. And translation then the poetry of subjectivity? The translator's self a double of Hölderlin's conception of the poetic self as "a positive nothing, an infinite standstill" ("*eines positiven Nichts, eines unendlichen Stillstands*")?

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If only everything were as easy to translate as Facebook 臉書. But then staleness would spread and translators would gradually stop translating and their daily dose of Facebook would increase along with the proportionate mindlessness of our minds targeted and tracked with advertisements. Subjectivity would wither and artificial neural networks could take over, happy in a world of *international synonyms*.

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Each age projects its disparate translations as it does with anthologies of verse. Guillame IX, *Farai un vers de dreyt nien*: "Box or vers, the key to it."

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I was recently asked to review the typeset proof of a new translation of contemporary Chinese poetry in a bilingual edition, the poet's first published volume in English. The first line of the first poem of the collection consisted of eleven characters in the original language; only two of the words (an adjective and a compound noun) appeared in the corresponding line in English—the other words seemed to have vanished with their connotations into the gutter that divided the two versions like an abyss. Numerals ignored, syntax ignored, repetition ignored, structure abandoned, a personal pronoun invented, along with two nouns and two verbs (no verbs in the original); an exclamatory fragment turned into a flat, abstract sentence. Nor were any of the elements of the first line integrated elsewhere into the translation. As the translator noted in her preface, she didn't know the original language and relied on a co-translator to present her with a "literal translation" which she would then "re-envision and re-situate" according to "feeling and logic"—all done with the author's consent. A bold, somewhat anachronistic translation practice for our vibrant age of literary translation—an age in which a number of talented poetry translators fluent in Chinese labor in the secrecy of their dens. Although one must acknowledge an enduring paradox of translation: that proficiency in the source language cannot guarantee a good translation, and lack of proficiency doesn't necessarily result in a bad translation. No doubt a deeper, more expansive, knowledge of the language is the ideal (or requirement, according to Achilles Fang) for every translator, while missteps in a translation often arise from misreadings of the source language. No doubt learning other languages is more useful in our world than translation.

To merge the sensibilities of Lu Ji and Sun Yat-sen into one, the difficulty of translation lies both in understanding and doing.

Another question worth pondering: could the process of translation noted above justify itself for a book of contemporary poetry written in Spanish or French? With the cultural context and life-giving particulars of the poetry overshadowed by personal "feelings of image and intention"? Unfortunately, the result wasn't an instance of Lin Shu "turning dross into gold"; or of Louis Zukofsky adapting the canzone form of Calvacanti's "Donna mi priegha" and running it through the mill of Marx and Spinoza. The rest of the text continued in a similar vein, sensuous details and shades of meaning replaced with

reimagined metaphors and phrases of inspired rewriting, like "a snap of the fingers" traded for "the rap of a fist." Why? A temptation to poeticize and sublimate into an expectant context? Rarely would a phrase nail an exceptional solution and when it did, the effect jarred the motive, casting suspicions on the shortcomings of the whole.

Perhaps we can recognize this as an example of a translator's passionate, over-identification with the translated poet? The absence of a mask. A kind of overactive subjectivity that misguides and diverts and doesn't realize the inherent dangers through the path of the forest—dangers all translators must face in different guises. What the translator refers to with ingenuous sincerity as the "faithfulness" of her translation in the preface of the proof—an ambiguous mix of "spirit, tone, and impetus"—could be defended with no evidence, seen or unseen. Would it be more fittingly defined as a "retelling," or a variation on Coleridge's *not translated but transferred*? (Coleridge: "One criterion of style is that it shall not be translatable without injury to meaning.") I'm reminded of what the blues singer and pianist Little Brother Montgomery once said about playing music, here transposed: "There's a right way to translate and there's a wrong way. You can't just translate the way you feel. The music has to come from within, yes, but you have to translate right."

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Unlike Confucius, the translator is both a transmitter and a maker. Because translation is a *Form*, to use Walter Benjamin's term meaning "form, mode, shape, mold, type, design, style," and only the creative subject can convey the "inessential" ("*Unwesentlich*") at the heart of "poetry" ("*Dichtung*").

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They are the standards stored in heart and mind with each new task. They are the only standards and can ensure no safe transmission. They are objects of beauty and beautifully endless. They all share the imprint of their subjective attentiveness, each one a guide through interconnected stretches of wilderness; each one the subject of another's praise or reproaches. It can be a single line, like Peter Boodberg's philological "the thronging subliminaria's gate" for Lao Zi's line "眾妙之門" *Zhong miao zhimen*. Or a whole new vernacular, like

Edwin Morgan's translations of Mayakovsky into Scots. A structural invention, such as Achilles Fang's insertion of headers in Lu Ji's "Rhymeprose on Literature" that he correlates with the *fu*'s rhyme scheme. A matter of punctuation and meter, as with Paul Celan's use of colons and stressed syllables in his German translations of Emily Dickinson. There is the dialogic concision and grace of P. Lal's transcreation of the Gita. My children read Barbara K. Walker's two-volume *Art of the Turkish Tale* over and over again, across the years of their early childhood. Walker translated the tales using oral-narrative recordings and literal drafts. I was introduced to Nathaniel Tarn's translation of Pablo Neruda's *Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu* in a college poetry class and was swept away by its *awesome spiral way*, to a distant new world intertwined with elegy and archaeology.

They are objects of beauty and beautifully endless, validating Ezra Pound's observation still true for our age: "English literature lives on in translation, it is fed by translation; every new exuberance, every new heave is stimulated by translations. . . ."

The first poem of Danish poet Inger Christensen's "alfabet" consists of one line:

> abrikostræerne findes, abrikostræerne finds.

Susanna Nied, who started to translate Christensen in the 1970s as a university student "just to try to understand what this unknown writer was doing and how she did it," said in the same interview with *Circumference* magazine that she initially wanted to translate the verb as "is there/are there." After months of back and forth with the poet, the line eventually took root: "apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist." The verb at the center of the book's incantatory rhythm multiplies through the whole like a cry from Mother Earth.

"alfabet" first came out in Denmark in 1981; "alphabet" first came out in the US in 2001. In 1931, *Poetry* published its "Objectivists" issue, edited by the twenty-six-year-old Louis Zukofsky, who included a poem by William Carlos Williams, "The Botticellian Trees," that opens with the lines:

> The alphabet of
> the trees

is fading in the
song of the leaves

Such chance/not chance echoes are not uncommon in poetry, across cultures and ages, unearthed and revitalized through translation, poetry's natural language.

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Translation says, "Other tongues exist, other tongues exist." It infects the host language with other tongues. And so betrays inequalities and hegemonies and even its own host.

Social, political, economic, environmental, colonialist forces kill languages. Translation is helpless to prevent such death, but it can resist it and prolong the hope of revitalization and transformation. Like Washington Matthews's translation of the songs and prayers of the Navajo ceremonial Night Chant. "In beauty (happiness) may I walk," the singer chants before the patient after the shaking of the masks of the gods. Of his account and translation Matthews writes at the start, "I merely have done my best to search carefully for the truth." Translation exists as a continual acknowledgment of the existence of the original language, even if the original doesn't exist anymore, or is threatened with nonexistence.

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I am talking to the Uyghur poet Ahmatjan Osman as he drives on a highway in Toronto and he says to me, "In fifty years our language will be gone."

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Each translation is as unique as its subject—one translator's disastrous practice can be another's road to Damascus.

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Soon after my grandfather passed away, a few family members gathered at his place in Los Angeles to help my grandmother clear out his belongings. She wanted to throw away everything—personal objects, photographs, clothes. I saved several scraps and rolls of his calligraphy and ink paintings. One piece stamped with his seal eventually found a place on our living room wall. My grandfather had brushed the second of two poems of Lu You's "Feeling the Cold Upon Leaving the Gate as Autumn Night Dawn Breaks" (秋夜將曉出籬門迎涼有感 Qiuye jiang xiao chu limen yingliang yougan). Lu You (1125-1209), the Southern Song dynasty poet and scholar-official and more prolific than anonymous, sought the source of life's meanings in poetry and measured his life through his words. He wrote many poems, mostly later in life, about everyday experiences, the ordinary moments of daily living, travel, farming, pastoral leisure, reading. He also wrote many powerful, impassioned lyrics that mourned the loss of the Central Plains to the Jurchens of Jin when the poet was just an infant; much of his early childhood was shaped by being on the move with his family, eluding the violence that spread to the south. For his entire life Lu You longed for the recovery of the northern heartland that would make the country whole again—an ardent desire that he dreamed to accomplish in service of the state; a dream he held onto until his death at age eighty-five. At different points in his life, Lu You served as an advisor to two emperors and fulfilled various official duties, though his military plans for a northern reclamation always ended in failure.

Having stared at my grandfather's calligraphy of Lu You's poem for so long, I felt it a good occasion to try and translate it for *The Wenshan Review*. I've taken the liberty of translating both poems, each a heptasyllabic regulated quatrain (七言絕句 *qiyan jueju*). "Regulated" meaning the verse follows a specific pattern of tones and rhymes, often altered, while a caesura falls before the last three words of each line. Each quatrain consists of two units of paired lines, while paired words tend to fall in parallel construction. "Feeling the Cold Upon Leaving the Gate as Autumn Night Dawn Breaks" also follows the traditional regulated quatrain (絕句 *jueju*) thematic development of an external opening in line 1, a deepening of the external in line 2, a turn inward in line 3, and a widening resonance in the last line. Lu You has extended the form to echo

across two poems so that images, ideas, and emotions radiate between, back and forth, in the light of the same cold dawn.

Lu You wrote the two quatrains in 1192 at age sixty-seven, while living in his hometown, Shanyin, which would become part of Zhejiang province at the turn of the Ming dynasty, almost a century and a half later. He had unhappily retreated to Shanyin in 1176 after an optimistic stint as a border officer and assistant to the minister Wang Yan, who shared Lu You's aspirations of expelling the occupying forces and reclaiming the Central Plains region. He would be summoned by the court multiple times but he would always return to his home in Shanyin. The original I've picked up from Qian Zhongshu's *Anthology of Song Poetry* (宋詩選注 *Songshi Xuanzhu*, 1958), reissued in Taiwan in 1990 by Bookman Books 書林出版有限公司 as volume 5 of Qian's *Collected Works*. In a new preface to this edition, Qian describes the experience of looking at his gathering of Song poems again as staring into an "ancient hazy, dark bronze mirror" (古代模糊黯淡的銅鏡 gudai mohu andan de tongjing), reminding us that an anthologist's subjectivity and a translator's subjectivity are one.

秋夜將曉出籬門迎涼有感

迢迢天漢西南落，
喔喔鄰雞一再鳴。
壯志病來消欲盡，
出門搔首愴平生。

三萬里河東入海，
五千仞嶽上摩天。
遺民淚盡胡塵裏，
南望王師又一年。

Feeling the Cold Upon Leaving the Gate as Autumn Night Dawn Breaks

So far faraway the Han River in the sky fades to the southwest
wo wo wo wo the constant cries of chickens nearby
Great resolve dissolves with illness wants dreams gone
leaving home head-scratching life- filled sadness heartache

For thirty thousand *li* the river flows east to the sea
mountain peak touches the sky five thousand *ren* high
Tears of the loyalists left dried up in the dust of the Hu
another year looking south for the sovereign's troops

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I think of the form of these translations as a "field-or-chop style"; it's a form I happened upon over twenty years ago and one that still feels fresh and forgiving to me. The spaces give a measure of syntactical and grammatical flexibility and signify different durations of stillness or pause while letting breath/energy circulate between words and lines; the visual structure emulates, however faintly, the rectangular arrangement of calligraphic characters brushed on a scroll.

As a translator, the coincidence of rhythm, sound, and cadence with meanings guides the pattern of words. The permutations of language are almost infinite; each word choice, whether in the writing of a poem or in its translation, connect to the connotations of the part and whole with very little, if any, room for like alternatives in the soundscape of meanings. Each possibility moves in a different centripetal direction, however minutely. The length and concision of Lu You's titles, for one, posed particular challenges. There are at least five verbs in it—modal, active, helping—and a lot of information about time, place, and movement conveyed. Constructed clause after clause didn't seem right until I hit upon the half-rhyme between "gate" and "breaks" and the active units could build on a rhythm of their own through a variation of three four-beat phrases, though with the inexorable addition of five more syllables than the original.

And then "gate" (籬門 *li men*) in the title becomes "home" in the last line of the first poem with the reappearance of the now active "leaving home" (出

門 *chu men*). The former compound word refers to a bamboo fence, hedge, or gate, as well as a secluded residence. The character "籬" (*li*) alone is also a type of sweetgrass, herb, or *Eupatorium fortunei*. Usually I'd try to repeat the word "gate" (門 *men*) in the poem, to echo the title, but context persuaded me to go with the deeper meaning of "home," as well as the big plus of the mournful "o" vowel sounds that lead up to it with "so," "*wo wo*," and "gone."

The phrase "great resolve" (壯志 *zhuang zhi*) in line 3 of the first poem can be glossed with this line from *The Great Preface* (詩經 *shi jing*, ca. the first century BCE/CE): "Poetry resolve moves that which moves in the heart becomes resolve issues forth words become poetry" (詩者，志之所之也。在心為志，發言為詩). An old definition of poetry that one can still wear like a halo.

"Hu" (胡 *hu*) in the third line of the second poem was used as far back as the Warring States times to refer to any non-Han Chinese peoples in the north and northwest. The "gone" (盡 *jin*) that precedes it across the caesura and describes exhausted tears is not an accidental homophone for the Great Jin (大金 *dajin*) of the Jurchens.

A last note about the fourth line of the second poem. There were a number of pieces among my grandfather's calligraphy of this quatrain, most of them obviously practice drafts. Why did he choose to brush this single poem over and over again? *Gong Gong* was certainly warm toward his grandchildren but he hardly spoke to any of us; his past was mysterious and his daily life hardly apparent to us. I don't recall seeing any of his calligraphy or paintings in his lifetime, save for a couplet he had given to my father as a wedding gift that hung in our living room. We did know that he worked for the Kuomintang and retreated to Taiwan with his family and the rest of the Nationalist refugees in 1948. For those who supported Project Guoguang, those who expected nothing less than the ROC's eventual reclamation of the northern country, Lu You's line "another year looking south for the sovereign's troops" (南望王師又一年) was literary shorthand for the Republic's future reunification and their return home. Of course, such a sexy interpretation equates the Hu with the CCP—definitely a life-sentence offense in today's PRC. The line, though, is too melancholy, too emotionally complex with its resignation mixed with hope, to come across as conventionally patriotic, the way, say, Ōtomo no Yakamochi's Nara-era line turned WWII *gyokusai* song rings out: "Our wish is to die by our

Sovereign's side with no looking back." My grandfather must have felt the grief of Lu You until his death from lung cancer in a Los Angeles hospital in 1995.

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Sontag ends her essay "Against Interpretation" with an appeal: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." Translation, in fact, walks a road between hermeneutics and an erotics of art.

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The object of the translator's carved block: not a puppet with strings but Pinocchio. Or Frankenstein, if it be the Creature's will. Translation being the amative reanimation of words.

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The title of Yoko Tawada's story *Wound in the Alphabet* (*Arufabetto no kizuguchi*) is a translation of a different story titled "Der Wunde Punkt im Alphabet" by Anne Duden. Tawada later decided to change the title of her story to "Transplanting Letters" (*Moji-ishoku*), while the translator Margaret Mitsutani chose the title "Saint George and the Translator" for her translation of the story. The medieval legend of the Crusader knight who slays the dragon and saves the princess is central to the fiction of both stories.

The protagonist in Tawada's story struggles to translate Duden's story, which appears in sporadic excerpts of stammering fragments. She is alone on the Canary Islands, not as a tourist but a translator, having accepted an invitation from her friend's brother to use the place to work. During one of her friendly exchanges with the postman, she tells him that sometimes the original work has disappeared and only the translation survives. "If there's only the translation then how can you tell it isn't the original ?" the postman asks her. "Oh, you can tell right away," she replies, "Because translation itself is something like a separate language. If the writing feels like pebbles falling down then you know it's a translation."

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I translate to reach another shore of understanding. To gaze into the wound of our understanding.

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The translator sees a mask in the mirror. The mask is the face of the subject—their one true face.

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