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READINGS OF THE TRANSLATIONS OF EZRA POUND

The prevalence or even dominance of the translated text in the study of the humanities in institutions of secondary and higher education in the United States and Europe notwithstanding, the practices of translation through which these texts come into being are rarely made the subject of scrutiny. On the contrary the translated text is often presented as equal or at least adequate to the original, even or perhaps especially when the original remains inaccessible to instructors and students alike. This tacit assertion of the parity of translation and original is not merely a matter of convenience or necessity. It is rather an instrument of ideology through which conditions of (mis)appropriation and narcissistic cultural reproduction are obscured and the self-evidence of the unproblematic and ultimately retrievable subject is (disingenuously) confirmed. Yet read as a translation, as an articulation of difference instead of sameness, the translated text, far from assuring the stability of the uncontested original, foregrounds its absence and exposes critical discourse as a discourse of values, rendering visible strategic practices through which the figure of the unitary subject is (often surreptitiously) constructed. Disengaged from the putative original, the translated text is freed from the dogmatism of allegorical reading (the interpretation of literary texts as figural statements about a literal reality) and allowed to open as a primarily figural articulation (not a figural elocution of literal language) that posits—rather than corresponds to—its own notions of literality.

As subject of ongoing dispute, Ezra Pound's *Cathay* offers occasion to interrogate ideological underpinnings of critical approaches to the reading of translations. The 20th century saw the birth or development of numerous theories of translation, but of the diverse and sometimes mutually exclusive tendencies two in particular are salient in evaluations

of Pound's work. These are an untheorized opposition between translation proper (to use Roman Jakobson's term[1]) and a literary text of value "in its own right" (to use an often invoked formula) and an insistence on the value of fidelity to the original, however defined, or not defined in many cases. Both approaches presume the (admittedly always unrealized) potential for equivalence, but while the first reads divergence from the putative original (the difference on which the classification adaptation instead of translation proper is founded) as improvement through which the text is made to correspond more closely to purportedly universal aesthetic standards, the second reads difference as a symptom of error or agenda and the mark of the irredeemable inferiority of the translated text. Both approaches serve the validation of the poetics of the target language, one by proclaiming the irrelevance of the source culture to the extent that it does not correspond to the values of the target culture (posited as transcendent), the other by obscuring the interpretative activity through which the translation came into being and the contingency of the critical practices according to which its alleged fidelity is measured.

Attempts in translation theory to move beyond what Susan Bassnett characterizes as the "arid debates about faithfulness and equivalence"[2] notwithstanding, the notion of self-evident fidelity remains a frequently invoked standard by which to evaluate the merits and shortcomings of a translation. The valuable translation continues to be read as a successful staging of a stable authorial voice. Thus George Steiner, even while rejecting conceptions of fidelity such as "literalism" or "any technical device for rendering 'spirit'," nonetheless maintains the distinction between "genuine," "authentic," and "real" translation and translation that does not merit these classifications. "The translator," Steiner asserts, "… is faithful to his text… when he endeavors to restore the balance of forces, *of integral presence*, which his appropriative comprehension has disrupted."[3] In an article entitled *The Politics of Translation*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a similar appeal to fidelity and the authority of the original, identifying perceived inadequacies of an English translation of a poem from Bengali by Mahasweta Devi and noting that Devi, "has

[1] Roman Jakobson (1959), "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," In Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge), 2000, 113–125. 114.
[2] Susan Bassnett (2002), *Translation Sudies* (London: Routledge), 7.
[3] George Steiner (1975), "The Hermeneutic Motion," In Venuti (ed.), 186–191. 190. (emphasis added)

expressed approval for the attention to her signature style" in Spivak's translation of the same poem.[4]

This faith in an integral (authorial) presence which can be recovered in a pure form beyond or prior to the translator's act of "appropriative comprehension" is corollary to Derrida's notion of logocentrism:

> an ethic of nostalgia for origins… or a purity of presence and self-presence … [which] dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes the play and the order of the sign.[5]

Indeed the alleged problems of translation, posed as a question of desired but unobtainable equivalence, both reside in and reinforce a logocentric presumption of the ultimate recoverability of the signified. As a gesture towards an otherwise inaccessible text (one text presenting itself as equal or adequate to another, the "same"), the translation alleges the presence of stable meaning and the possibility of the transfer of that meaning, thereby assuring at least the potential for the arbitrariness of the sign as label instead of its contingency as a function of contested and ongoing uses.

Yet in a manner that is announced rather than concealed, the referent of the translated text is manifestly nothing other than another series of signs, their meanings subject to further divergent interpretations. Fidelity is not an objective norm or analytical tool, but rather a justification and validation of specific hermeneutical positions, and where infidelity is alleged (any "loss in translation"), the differences on which the allegation relies are never demonstrable *except as differing translations*. The original is never available to critical consciousness in any uncontested form. Invocations of the original must always be articulated as rephrasings and interpolations, and appeals to fidelity are merely pretexts for assertions of the absolute value of particular reading strategies.

The self-evidence of fidelity also operates in the allegedly unproblematic distinction between translation and adaptation or invention. This distinction presumes the transparent meaning of translation itself (paradoxically and contradictorily) as unmediated signification. Whereas the paraphrase (to use another term frequently invoked) is evaluated as

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[4] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1992), "The Politics of Translation," In Venuti (ed.), 397–416. 400.

[5] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," In *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 292.

the creative and interpretive work of the translator, the translation is read as equivalence, and the nature of this equivalence is posited as self-sufficient and absolute. Where competing forms of correspondence are acknowledged (correspondence to poetic form and correspondence to content, to cite another often mentioned opposition), one is deemed essential, the other dispensable. Thus Pound critic Michael Alexander maintains a distinction between "Copies, which stick close to the original, and… Remakes, which edit and reshape their original."[6] Yet all translations reshape their original, and there are no invariable criteria through which to determine where translation ends and paraphrase begins. What to one reader/culture is a superfluous feature of the original to another is indispensable. In this light one could consider the explanatory comments in Spivak's article on her translation of a poem by Devi an integral part of the translation itself, a paraphrase/translation of the perceived meanings of the original (an interpretive move to which Spivak might object), or for that matter the notes to Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* an integral part of his translation (a move of which Nabokov probably would have approved).

If, as Althusser suggests, the function of ideology is "the reproduction of conditions of production,"[7] the notion of fidelity is ideological in that it abets the effacement of interpretive activity and the naturalization of critical practices. The figure of unmediated (literal) signification functions as a guise for densely motivated figurative discursive practice, and the poetics of the target-language culture finds affirmation in a purported equivalence (the translated text) drawn from another culture. In cases in which the absence of fidelity is alleged and the value of the text is asserted as transcendent (a text in its own right), fidelity functions as a means of distinguishing between absolute value and culturally contingent (and therefore trivial) value. Where the text is unfaithful, what is lost is of no consequence; where it is faithful, it conforms to and validates target-language values posited as universal.

Paradoxically faith in the potential for equivalence, however defined, contributes to the continued marginalization of the translated text as

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[6] Michael Alexander, "Ezra Pound," In *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, ed. O. Classe (London: Flitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 1108–1110. 1108.

[7] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 127–186. 127.

translation, its aforementioned prevalence notwithstanding (one might think of Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, the authors of the Old and New Testaments, Dante, Chaucer, Locke, Goethe, Rousseau, Voltaire, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Freud, Kafka, and Camus, to mention only a few authors whose works are commonly read in translation in schools and universities in the United States and Europe). In part because of the enduring influence of Romanticism, the original text is treated with sanctity and the critical project still often aspires towards "divination of the soul of the author" (to borrow Herder's formula), Roland Barthes' displacement of the author as source notwithstanding.[8] Striking differences between varying translations betray the translated text as the product of interpolation. Read as instances of infidelity, these differences sustain the "post-Romantic assumption that original work is distinct from, and more important than, translation."[9] The translated text is either faithful, in which case it is not original, or original, in which case it is not translation. Eliot recognized this bias in the reception of Pound: "If Pound had not been a translator, his reputation as an 'original' poet would be higher; if he had not been an original poet, his reputation as a 'translator' would be higher."[10] The sanctification of the original implicit in appeals to fidelity further encourages disregard for the translated text by denying the possibility that the translation itself may exercise influence on the meanings of the original, and indeed may come to supercede the original as a starting point of interpretation through which the original is read (a practice encouraged by facing page translations).

The history of the reception of Pound's translations offers abundant examples of appeals to contrasting conceptions of fidelity as grounds for their affirmation or dismissal as translations. Read alongside one another, these contrasts situate notions of fidelity within interpretive frameworks, revealing ideological inclinations of critical subjectivities. By exposing the tentativeness of fidelity as criterion, moreover, such reading unburdens criticism of its pretensions of objectivity-through-accuracy and unmasks it as a constitutive (not descriptive), figurative discursive act.

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[8] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", In *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989), 49–55.

[9] Alexander, "Ezra Pound," 1110.

[10] T. S. Eliot (1928), Introduction to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*. Cited in *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology* (1970), Ed. J. P. Sullivan. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, Penguin Books Ltd), 106.

Modernist poetics have been credited with having spawned what Ronnie Apter characterizes as "a modern renaissance in English translation," according to which the work of the translator was an essentially creative act of intuitive identification rather than a derivative act of slavish imitation.[11] Thus the 1915 volume *Cathay*, for instance, which contained translations from Chinese based according to the original title page on "the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the decipherings of the Professors Mori and Ariga," contributed to the rise in the 20th[12] century of collaborative translation, a practice that deemphasizes knowledge of the source language in favor of resourcefulness in the target language.

The innovative translations of several poets (including Pound) whose names are associated with modernism notwithstanding, however, the modernist poetic of translation was in at least one respect more conservative than Apter's characterization suggests, and indeed represents continuity rather than rupture with dominant practices of translation in English. As Lawrence Venuti's rigorously documented *The Translator's Invisibility* argues, fluency in translation, in other words an adherence to and maintenance of the poetics of the target language culture, has dominated the discourse on and practice of translation into English since the early modern period. Venuti cites John Dryden's dedicatory essay to his translation of the Aeneid as one of numerous early examples of the privileging of fluency in the target language as a form of fidelity: "I have endeavour'd to make Virgil speak such English, as he wou'd himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present Age."[13] As T. S. Eliot's appraisal of the translations of *Cathay* illustrates, this emphasis on the value of fluency is by no means absent from the Modernist discourse on translation: "[Pound's] translations seem to be—and this is the text of excellence—translucencies. We think we are closer to the Chinese[.]" Eliot is quick, however, to qualify his praise, and his reservation marks a distinction between Modernist poetics of translation and those the Restoration:

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[11] Ronnie Apter (1984), *Digging for Treasure: Translation After Pound*, (New York: Peter Lang), 1.

[12]

[13] Cited in Lawrence Lawrence Venuti (1995), *The Translator's Invsibility* (London, Routledge), 64.

> I doubt this: I predict that in three hundred years Pound's *Cathay* will be a 'Windsor Translation' as Chapman and North are now 'Tudor Translations': it will be called (and justly) a 'magnificent specimen of XXth Century poetry' rather than a 'translation.'[14]

This opposition between translations and fine specimens of 20th century poetry implies that the value of the translation is determined by the extent to which it conforms to the reading practices of the target culture at the time it was written. In other words, the translation is necessarily unfaithful in order to be of interest as a "translucent" text in the target culture. Eliot concurs with Dryden that the task of the translator "is to make something foreign, or something remote in time, live with our own life,"[15] but unlike Dryden he dismisses the value (or the illusion) of fidelity *altogether*. According to Eliot, Pound's translations owe their meanings entirely to their intelligibility within Western cultural traditions, even while they pose as representations of China. But whereas Eliot saw this translucency as an effect of language rather than a fact of translation, the influence of Pound's renderings in Cathay have exerted such a strong influence on the subsequent evolution of English poetics that their alleged fluency has since been read as a successfully translated feature of the originals rather than as a consequence of a specific mode of translation. Eliot Weinberger writes in the preface to the 2003 collection *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry*, "*Cathay* was the first great book in English of the new, plain-speaking, laconic, image-driven free verse. And more: that which was most modern was derived from poems more than a thousand years old. The new poetry was revealed as an eternal verity."[16] Weinberger's assessment is contradictory. Cathay's success was due in part to the fact that the plain-speaking, laconic style was not an eternal truth, but rather (as Weinberger acknowledges) something new, a departure from the practices of many of Pound's most influential contemporaries.

In his book *Critical Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel quel* scholar of Chinese and comparative literature Eric Hayot situates *Cathay* and Eliot's appraisal of *Cathay* within the larger context of Modernism, Orientalism,

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[14] T. S. Elliot (1928), "Introduction to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*", In *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology*, J. P. Sullivan (ed.) (Penguin Books, 1970), 101–109. 105.

[15] Cited in Venuti, Invisibility, 189.

[16] Eliot Weinberger (2003), The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry (New York, New Directions Publishing Corporation), XIX–XX.

and a recent trend of anti-orientalism that seeks to retrieve Western representations of the far-east as authentic in some form. As Hayot observes, while Eliot was content to dismiss the original as immaterial, much of the critical literature on Pound's translations from Chinese has focused on the question of Pound's fidelity to his sources and the authenticity of the poems of Cathay as representations of Chinese culture. In the critical framework of Orientalism, this is fundamentally an ethical question. Absence of fidelity is more than merely a matter of the disinterested craftsmanship of "translucency" in the target language, it is complicity in the fashioning of "a Western fantasy of the aestheticized, natural East."[17] In the readings of anti-Orientalists such as Zhaoming Qian, on the other hand, the discernment of correspondences between Pound and his originals restores China as an influence on Modernism and confirms that "[t]hings non-Western can … be converted into part of a Western literary heritage."[18] According to Hayot, debates concerning the (lack of) fidelity of Pound's translations have often returned to the differences between Pound's renderings and those of Arthur Waley, published in 1918, in the view of Pound scholar Hugh Kenner as an "implied rebuke" of *Cathay*: "This happens because where they differ marks a kind of epistemological fault-line between literature and science, poetics and sinology."[19] While the sinologist defends Waley "for having gotten the details correct," literary critics defend Pound "on the grounds that he, at least, wrote good poetry."[20] As Hayot's own responses to these translations suggest, however, the metaphor of a fault-line between science and literature as a demarcation between faithful translation and poetic rephrasing is misleading. The line separating the faithful rendering from interpolation is easily redrawn, and the differences between Waley and Pound (and their receptions) mark differences of value in poetics, not differences of epistemology.

Hayot's discussion centers around varying translations of a poem attributed to Mei Sheng and translated by Pound as "The Beautiful Toilet." Below is the original, followed by Pound's and Waley's translations:

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[17] Eric Hayot (2003), *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel quel* (University of Michigan Press), 8.
[18] Zhaoming Qian (1995), *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams*, (Durham, Duke University Press), 167.
[19] Hayot, 17.
[20] Ibid. 18.

青青河畔草
郁郁· 中柳
盈盈楼上女
皎皎当窗·
娥娥红粉妆
纤纤出素手
昔为娼家女
今为荡子妇
荡子行不归
空床难独守

Blue, blue is the grass about the river
And the willows have overfilled the close garden.
And within, the mistress, in the midmost of her youth,
White, white of face, hesitates, passing the door.
Slender, she puts forth a slender hand.

And she was a courtezan in the old days,
And she has married a sot,
Who now goes drunkenly out
And leaves her too much alone. (Pound)

Green, green,
The grass by the river-bank.
Thick, thick,
The willow trees in the garden.
Sad, sad,
The lady in the tower.
White, white,
Sitting at the casement window.
Fair, fair,
Her red-powdered face
Small, small,
She puts out her pale hand.
Once she was a dancing-house girl,
Now she is a wandering man's wife.
The wandering man went, but did not return.
It is hard alone to keep an empty bed. (Waley)

Hayot essentially accepts Waley's translation as "more literal" rendering of the Chinese, if however not necessarily valuing it as a poem. "[Waley] retains… the pattern of double characters at the beginning of each line," he notes, "perhaps at the cost of poetry."[21] Pound's translation mimics this repetition as well, Hayot contends, through for instance the repetition of the sound "ill" in the second line ("willows" and "overfilled") or "mi" in the third ("mistress" and "midmost"), but "as far as the word is concerned, Waley's poem actually has 'thick, thick;' ... a match closer to the Chinese than Pound's[.]" Hayot cites Waley's comment that he "'tried to produce regular rhythmic effects similar to those in the original" by representing each character in the Chinese with a stressed syllable in the English. Pound, by contrast, "never articulated any rules, and that difference more or less enacts the larger argument between the two men: Pound simply went farther and changed more."[22]

As is made clear by his comments on Herbert Giles' translation of the same poem, however, Hayot's conception of literality and "proximity" (as the opposite of going "farther") depends on the value of the perceived interpolation rather than on any objective criteria. Where it is consistent with his perception of the connotations of the poem, Hayot retrieves perceived deviation as a means of rendering not merely words but aspects of form and meaning. Hayot cites the first five lines of Giles translation:

> Green grows the grass upon the bank,
> The willow-shoots are long and lank;
> A lady in a glistening gown
> Opens the casement and looks down.

Though aware of the "well-nigh inevitable Anglicization"[23] in the switch from iambs to trochees and the failure to mimic the repetitions in the original, Hayot nevertheless insists on an important form of fidelity in Giles rendering. The AABB rhyme scheme may have no source in the original, he observes, but the rhymes "are familiar to an English reader in the way that the Chinese patterns of rhyme and tone might be familiar to a Chinese reader."[24] Hayot points out that in 140 BC, the approximate year of the composition of the poem, China had no casements, only "places that function in literature more or less like casements, in that women who

[21] Ibid. 17.
[22] Ibid. 17.
[23] Ibid. 14.
[24] Ibid. 15

look down from them can be understood as occupying a particular cultural position." According to Hayot, "a native Chinese reader… would read storied house 楼 and understand it as occupying a certain temporal and cultural space." Thus in Hayot's view, "rather than follow the original's difference from English poetry, Giles 'effectively 'translates' not only the Chinese words but also the Chinese poetic form by putting them into their *cultural* near-equivalents in English."[25]

Hayot's reference to "a native Chinese reader" is problematic from both a practical and theoretical view. As the title page of Cathay announces, Pound based his translation on the notes of Fenollosa, "an American who knew no Chinese, who was taking dictation from Japanese simultaneous interpreters who were translating the comments of Japanese professors."[26] When Hayot poses the question, "Should the translation reproduce for its readers the experience of a native reader, who can read the poem without experiencing it as culturally 'different'?"[27] one might reply by asking to what extent Fenollosa, his interpreters, or the professors whose comments they were translating would constitute a "native reader." But beyond this, the notion of the native reader as a standard for judgment is itself a construct dependent on readings of texts contemporaneous with the poem under discussion. As a hermeneutic construct, it cannot be invoked as a standard through which to measure further hermeneutic constructs (such as the "faithful translation").

More significant, however, than this objection is the fact that in his own readings Hayot adopts contradictory standards of fidelity. While in the case of Giles' translation alleged deviation is described as consistent with the notion of fidelity, similar (perceived) departure in Pound's translation is characterized as infidelity. "It is not clear that the poem actually reproduces the meaning of the Chinese," Hayot contends, "…particularly as it opens itself to metaphor - the claustrophobic garden, 'close' and 'overfilled,' traps the mistress as neatly as does her domesticity."[28] Ironically (and contradictorily), Hayot emphasizes the aptness of the metaphor while at the same time characterizing it as an interposition of "ideas that are not 'there' in the original."[29] Giles' use of

[25] Ibid. 15.
[26] Weinberger, XX.
[27] Hayot, 15.
[28] Ibid. 16.
[29] Ibid. 16.

"casement" is read as an effective translation of social hierarchy through metaphor and cultural analogy, while Pound's image as a metaphor for social place is described as innovation rather than translation.

At the close of his discussion of "The Beautiful Toilet" Hayot concludes that the literary critics have won the debate concerning the value of the respective forms of (in)fidelity of Pound's and Waley's translations. As evidence he cites a 1969 translation of Mei Sheng's poem by Wai-Lim Yip, published in Yip's book *Ezra Pound's Cathay*:

> Green beyond green, the grass along the river.
> Leaves on leaves the willows in the garden.
> Bloom of bloom, the girl up in the tower.
> A ball of brightness at the window-sill
> A flash of fairness is her rouged face.
> Slender, she puts forth a slender white hand.
> She was a singing girl before,
> Now wife of a playboy.
> The playboy went and never returned.
> Empty bed! Alone! How hard it is to keep.[30]

As the differences between Pound's translation and those of Waley and Giles make evident, fidelity to the original does not suffice to explain the similarities between Pound's translation and Yip's. These similarities are rather proof of Pound's continuing presence in conceptions and receptions of Chinese literature in English translation. Beyond demonstrating the enduring influence of Cathay, however, Yip's translation serves as a reminder that the original poem is never available in any pure form. Rather it is read and reread through its (varying) translations. The notion of fidelity as an absolute standard of judgment assumes that the original is stable within its own tradition (not a malleable and shifting cite of contestation and reinterpretation) and discrete, impermeable to new readings prompted by new, possibly foreign influences. The translation, however, becomes a part of the intertext and alters the ways in which the original is reread, possibly even displacing the original, and an appeal to fidelity is never more than a gesture towards an absence filled (usually covertly) by interpretation.

Included alongside the translations from Chinese in *Cathay* is Pound's translation of the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, originally published in

[30] Wai-Lim Yip (1969), *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (New Haven, Princeton University Press), 134. Cited on 18 in Hayot.

1911 in A. R. Orage's *New Age* and then in *Ripostes of Ezra Pound* in 1912. Based on the text preserved in the 10th century *Codex Exoniensis*, or *Exeter Book* as it is commonly known, *The Seafarer* has been the subject of fierce debate since its publication, with various critics invoking varying conceptions of fidelity in support of their assessments. As with critical appraisals of the translations from Chinese, however, these appeals to the original function as a guise for the corroboration of specific and often internally inconsistent interpretive practices.

Among the harshest critics of Pound's Seafarer's was Kenneth Sisam, who in a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* in June 1954 enumerated alleged mistakes betraying Pound's ignorance of or indifference to the literal meanings of specific words in the original.[31] Thus "stearn" in line 23 of the original means "tern," not "stern" as Pound had rendered it, "byrig" in line 49 means "towns," not "berries," and "þurh" in line 88 means "through," not "tomb." Below are the relevant lines from the original, followed by translations of the same lines by Burton Raffel and Pound. Raffel agrees with Sisam's readings of "byrig" and "stearn," though in the case of "þurh" he prefers "by":

> Bearwas blostmum nimað,
> byrig fægriað,
> wongas wlitigað,
> woruld onetteð;
>
> Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,
> Fields grow lovely as the world springs fresh (Raffel);[32]
>
> Bosque taketh blossom, cometh beauty of berries,
> Fields to fairness, land fares brisker (Pound).
>
> Stormas þær stanclifu beotan,
> þær him stearn oncwæð;
>
> Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed
> By icy-feathered terns (Raffel);
>
> Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten, fell on the stern
> in icy feathers (Pound).

[31] *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25 June 1954. 409.

[32] All citations from Raffel's translation are taken from Alexandra H. Olsen and Burton Raffel (1998), *Poems and Prose from the Old English* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 10–13.

wuniað þa wacran
ond þæs woruld healdaþ,
brucað þurh bisgo;

The weakest survives and the world continues,
Kept spinning by toil (Raffel);

Waneth the watch, but the world holdeth.
Tomb hideth trouble (Pound).

Sisam's verdict exerted considerable sway in the reception of Pound for some decades, reappearing for instance in Pound scholar Michael Alexander's *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound*. "These faux amis," Alexander contends, "have betrayed Pound." According to Alexander even an ironic reading of Pound's translation "cannot condone the mistakes on the grounds that they are all deliberate jokes, for some of them are clearly accidental."[33]

Both Sisam's and Alexander's conclusions, however, have been persuasively contested by Fred Robinson. In an article entitled "'The Might of the North': Pound's Anglo-Saxon Studies and 'The Seafarer'," Robinson observes that in his reading of Henry Sweet's 1876 *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, on which *The Seafarer* is partly based, Pound found alternative spellings and definitions that give good explanation for his translations. "Byrig," for instance, can be read as "town," but also as "mulberry," which Pound in fact jotted in margins of his copy of the *Anglo-Saxon Reader*. Robinson effectively dispels the image of Pound as sloppy translator or overly willful poet and retrieves *The Seafarer* as "the product of a serious engagement with the Anglo-Saxon text, not of casual guessing at Anglo-Saxon words and of passing off personal prejudices as Anglo-Saxon poetry."[34]

Yet like Hayot's criticism of infidelity in Pound's Beautiful Toilet, Alexander's censure of Pound's alleged divergence from the original is not part of a consistent method. Where they agree with his interpretation of the text, Alexander welcomes Pound's alleged infidelities. Pound's translation of "blæd" in line 89 of the original as "blade," for instance, while a deviation from the literal meaning according to Alexander, is nonetheless a faithful rendering because it harmonizes with the larger

[33] Michael Alexander (1979), *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 75.

[34] Fred C. Robinson, "'The Might of the North': Pound's Anglo-Saxon Studies and 'The Seafarer'", In *Yale Review*, 71 (1982), 199–224. 220.

significance of the poem. Below are the lines from the original, followed by Raffel's and Pound's translations:

> Blæd is gehnæged,
> eorþan indryhto
> ealdað ond searað;
>
> All glory is tarnished.
> The world's honor ages and shrinks (Raffel);
>
> The blade is layed low.
> Earthly glory ageth and seareth (Pound).

"Blæd" is commonly translated as "glory" (see for instance the translations of Benjamin Thorpe (1842), R. K. Gordon (1926), and W. S. Mackie (1934)), but lest the reader think this merely "another mistake," Alexander observes that Pound "translates the same word literally in line 79 as 'blast,' a rather etymological but very acceptable poetic rendering."[35] He offers no explanation as to why "blast," a "poetic rendering," should nonetheless be read as a "literal" translation, but in the case of "blade" he situates this instance of infidelity or paraphrase within a broader interpretive framework, and in doing so recovers it as a form of fidelity:

> Pound understood the word, and his 'blade' is a synecdoche for heroic glory. Indeed, since the original is concerned here with the superiority of swords to ploughshares and of heroism to anxious survival, this is a happy translation.[36]

Thus the fidelity of the translation is measured not by its correspondence to a putative original, from which in this case it is explicitly purported to diverge, but rather by its correspondence to subjective interpretation, even when this interpretation relies on the overt assimilation of a literal meaning to metaphor.

Pound's *The Seafarer* was criticized not only for alleged failure to follow meaning, but also for failure to follow form. Poet and translator Christine Brooke-Rose disparaged Pound's use of alliteration and unusual metrics as a means of imitating Old English verse forms. His failure, Brooke-Rose implies, was one of ignorance and ineptness:

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[35] Alexander, *Poetic Achievement*, 73.
[36] Ibid. 73.

> Without actually obeying the complicated Anglo-Saxon rules of scansion (which would be undesirable in modern English and in fact impossible), [Pound's Seafarer] contrives nevertheless to remain close enough for absurdity, bringing in as well some serious faults such as alliterating on the fourth stress (which in Anglo-Saxon was always left non-alliterating…) or alliterating on the same sound two lines running[.][37]

As justification of a less than favorable assessment of Pound's work, this explanation is self-contradictory. Pound is rebuked for having failed to adhere to conventions of versification, but such adherence is simultaneously pronounced both undesirable and impossible.

In *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* Chris Jones recognizes the contradictions in Brooke-Rose's criticism of Pound, but he nonetheless shares her conclusion. Brooke-Rose is correct in her contention that Pound is "heavy-handed" in his use of alliteration, he argues, "[y]et the heaviness is due, not to a failure to follow rules, but to an overzealousness whereby the lines are loaded with decorative alliteration on several unstressed syllables."[38] Jones offers the following lines as an example (I give the lines from the original and Raffel's translation first):

> min modsefa
> mid mereflode,
> ofer hwæles eþel
> hweorfeð wide;
>
> And yet my heart wanders away,
> My soul roams with the sea, the whales'
> Home (Raffel);
> My mood 'mid the mere-flood,
>
> Over the whale's acre, would wander wide (Pound).

According to Jones, Pound's retention of "mid" instead of the more current "with" is motivated by his desire "to load the line with /m/ sounds, regardless of whether they in stressed or unstressed positions."[39] Crucially, according to Jones this represents an instance of infidelity to the sense but not the form of the original: "the original line also happens to contain incidental /m/ alliterations on unstressed syllables, although in

[37] Christine Brooke-Rose (1971), *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber), 86–87.
[38] Chris Jones (2006), *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 32–33.
[39] Ibid. 33.

Old English this does not produce the same strain that Pound's archaic preposition does."[40] Thus fidelity to an aspect of form in the original becomes infidelity to a hypothetical ideal (but absent) translation. Moreover, Jones' assumption concerning Pound's intention to alliterate leaves unmentioned the possibility that the value of the archaism lies specifically its distance from the contemporary usage and its ambiguity. Arguably Pound's use of a recondite word slows and frustrates the interpretive process, suggesting alternative meanings and rendering the substance of language more palpable instead of translucent. In this case fidelity to this feature of the original has the effect not of reproducing alleged meaning, but of signifying the distance and difference of the original from the poetics of the target language, an interpretation that Jones' criticism confirms. Whether this constitutes fidelity or deviation, paraphrase or translation, is again a question of value rather than a question of accuracy or correspondence.

The final criticism of *The Seafarer* as translation concerns Pound's omission of the last 21 lines of the poem, a homily that concludes with the exhortation (in Raffel's translation):

> Praise the Holy
> Grace of Him who honored us,
> Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.

Having deleted the epilogue Pound also translates references to Christian concepts in secular terms. Bassnett offers a comparison of Pound's translation and R. K. Gordon's (allegedly) literal rendering (I include the original below):

> Forþon biþ eorla gehwam æftercweþendra
> lof lifgendra lastworda betst,
> þæt he gewyrce, ær he on weg scyle,
> fremum on foldan wið feonda niþ,
> deorum dædum deofle togeanes,
> þæt hine ælda bearn æfter hergen,
> ond his lof siþþan lifge mid englum
> awa to ealdre, ecan lifes blæd,
> dream mid dugeþum;

[40] Ibid. 33.

> And for this, every earl whatever, for those speaking after-
> Laud of the living, boasteth some last word,
> That he will work ere he pass onward,
> Frame on the fair earth 'gainst foes his malice,
> Daring ado…
> So that all men shall honour him after
> And his laud beyond them remain' mid the English
> Aye, for ever, a lasting life's blast,
> Delight' mid the doughty (Pound);

> Wherefore the praise of living men who shall speak after he is gone, the best of fame after death for every man, is that he should strive ere he must depart, work on earth with bold deeds against the malice of fiends, against the devil, so that the children of men may later exalt him and his praise live afterwards among the angels for ever and ever, the joy of life eternal, delight amid angels (Gordon).[41]

As Bassnett observes, "Hence 'deofle togeones' (against the devil) is omitted in l. 76, 'mid englum' (among the angels) becomes 'mid the English,' 'dugeþum' (angel hosts) become the doughty."[42] According to Alexander, "[t]he cuts and changes Pound made in 'The Seafarer' amount to a complete purge of Christian words…. It is this indifference to the integrity of the text, more than the errors, that seems a *trahison*…. it makes his 'Seafarer" an adaptation rather than a translation."[43] Yet as Bassnett observes, Pound's omissions and alterations address a crucial question in historical scholarship: "Should the poem be perceived as having a Christian message as an integral feature, or are the Christian elements additions[.]"[44] As he indicated in the "Philogical Note" appended to the text of The Seafarer, Pound holds the latter view:

> There are many conjectures as to how the text came into its present form. It seems most likely that a fragment of the original poem, clear through about the first thirty lines, and thereafter increasingly illegible, fell into the hands of a monk with literary ambitions who filled in the gaps with his own guesses and 'improvements'.[45]

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[41] Cited in Bassnett, 98.
[42] Ibid. 98–99.
[43] Alexander, *Poetic Achievement*, 76.
[44] Bassnett, 97.
[45] Cited in Daniel M. Hooley (1988), The Classics in Paraphrase: Ezra Pound and Modern Translators of Latin Poetry, (Susquehanna University Press) 60.

Venuti cites Stopford Brooke's 1898 *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest* in support of Pound: "the Seafarer ends with a Christian tag, but the quality of its verse… has made capable persons give it up as a part of the original poem."[46] Thus Pound's alleged infidelities to the text in the Exeter Book can be read as an attempt to recover a lost original.

Considering the general neglect of the presence of translation (and translators) in education, it might be tempting to consider the reading of multiple translations of an absent or inaccessible original as an exceptional or even marginal practice. Yet if one accepts postmodernism's displacement of author as origin this approach to reading should in fact be thought of as paradigmatic. As the readings offered here are intended to illustrate, it makes manifest the plurality and fragmentation of the original and the situatedness of the critical project in the constitution (not reconstitution) of contested meanings. Moreover, as critical practice it presumes the primacy of the figurality of language and regards the construction of a discourse of reality through this figurality as a product—not a precondition—of textual practice.

[46] Cited in Venuti, *Invisibility*, 38.