

# Poems: From Translating to Rewriting\*

Ping Lin

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China;  
Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China

**Abstract**—The presupposition of meaning determines that the history of translation in China and the West is actually a history of transformation of meaning. Under the impact of deconstructionism and postmodernism, however, meaning changes from fixed to indeterminate, and the author and his subjectivity as the incarnation of reason and humanism are no longer deemed as valid. The “death of the author” fundamentally deconstructs the “inspiration theory” of the origin of poetry. With the questioning of the author’s original intention and the inherent characteristics of poetic language make the translation of poetry eventually lead to a path of rewriting.

**Index Terms**—metaphysics, meaning, uncertainty, death of the author, rewriting

On the methods of translating of poems, opinions differ. In accordance with the metaphysical way of thinking in the Chinese and Western philosophies, this article holds that the presupposition of meaning determines that the Chinese and Western history of translation is the history of translating meaning. Under the influence of deconstructionism and postmodernism, meaning has undergone the change from determinacy to indeterminacy; the author, long regarded as the incarnation of rationalism and humanism, and the authorial subjectivity as well, has been deconstructed to null; the death of the author deconstructs and overturns the “Afflatus Theory of Poems Translation” and the “Chinese Poetic Intention Theory” as far as the origin and heritage of poetry are concerned; the loss and deconstruction of the author’s original intention, the indeterminacy of meaning and the metaphorical language of poetry fail the attempt to translate poetry, hence poetry can only be rewritten.

## I. THE PRESUPPOSITION OF MEANING

The Western translation history, dating back to the very prosperity of the Septuagint and up to the modern age when translation theories witness their peak time of diversity, demonstrates itself, without any exaggeration, as the evolution of meaning translating. A good translation, or otherwise a bad one, is subject to the degree of fidelity to which the meaning of the SL text is rendered into the target language. The Chinese translation history, in the true sense, is by no means any exception. Meaning is also the first consideration through the ages. This can be easily proved if one simply has a look at the Chinese history of translation theories at all.

The primary importance of meaning in the Chinese history of translation can be easily demonstrated given a brief review of the history itself. The “Five Loses and Three Difficulties”<sup>1</sup> advocated by the Buddhist translator Dao An (314-385) in East Jin (317-420) Dynasty, the faithfulness to the semantic, phonemic, grammatical and stylistic meanings advocated by Monk Xuan Zhuang (600-664) in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the “3-character criteria by Yan Fu”<sup>2</sup> (1854-1921) in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), and the “Transmigration Criterion” (*hua* in Chinese)<sup>3</sup> by the great man of letter Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998), all emphasize the faithfulness in the rendering of meaning. No wonder that Eugene A. Nida says “translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style,” and “Meaning must be given priority, for it is the content of the message which is of prime importance.” (Nida & Taber, 1969, p.12-13) So it can be safely concluded that the history of translation, no matter in China or in the West at large, can never exist without the presence of meaning.

The presence of meaning and priority given to it in translation can find expression in the Western and Chinese philosophies and aesthetics. The Western philosophy, since Plato’s time, is run through by the metaphysics of being present. Philosophers will inevitably presuppose a final eternal presence, such as the presence of Supreme Being, Eternal Reason and Absolute Spirit, when discussing the world, beings, materials, consciousness and other philosophical issues. Only when such a presence is presupposed can the philosophers start thinking, observing the world, inducing and deducing, and making analysis. From such a presence, they will discuss the phenomena, abstract out the

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<sup>1</sup> “Five Losses”, according to Dao An, refer to the loss of the original SL grammar, the loss of its simple language, the abolition of redundant Buddhist scriptures, the cancellation of redundant Buddhist moral admonitions and the leave-out of fixed Buddhist story-telling layout. “Three Difficulties” refer to those arising from the difference between the old customs and the new ones, the distance in the accessibility of Buddhist language between Buddha himself and the mortals, and the intranslatability of Buddhist terms.

<sup>2</sup> Yan Fu’s 3-character criteria refer to faithfulness (in terms of meaning), elegance (in terms of language) and fluency (in terms of readability).

<sup>3</sup> Transmigration, pronounces as “*hua*” in Chinese, is a metaphorical usage of artistic reproduction. It is used in the sense that the meaning in the SL text is so perfectly reproduced into the TL text that it resembles the transmigration of soul.

universalities and find out the very essence of the world. Though failing to propose an Absolute Spirit or Eternal Reason, the Chinese philosophy, similarly, presupposes an eternal or presence called “*Tao* (way)”, as reiterated by Zhuang Tsu as saying, “The *Tao* (way) that can be *taoed* (spoken) is not the constant *Tao* (way); the name that can be named is not the constant name.” *Tao* and name, regarded as the symbol of “being present” in a certain sense, best reflect the regard that the Chinese people pay to the philosophical dichotomy of being present and absent, being and not being, right and wrong, and human and nature, etc. (Liu, 2001)

So far as translation is concerned, consequently, the Chinese and Western translation theories, as both are based upon the metaphysical way of thinking or logocentrism, define translation as the transference of meaning, message, or original intention from one language to another. Such a definition is obviously based on the presupposition that meaning, message or intention (in all as meaning, because the three are ultimately embodied by meaning) be present. It is in this sense that the American literary theorist, literary hermeneutical critic E. D. Hirsch claims that the development of Western philosophy and human studies lies in the pursuit and command of meaning in the true sense of the word. (Wang, 2001, p.251) Therefore, the ontology of translation can not be separated from the presence of meaning. If we have no doubt on this point, we can easily understand why Nida emphasizes the priority of meaning, i.e. “first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style”; why Yan Fu’s *xin* (faithfulness to meaning) dominates over *ya* (elegance of language) and *da* (fluency in terms of readability); why the famous Chinese translation theorist Zhi Qian in the East Han Dynasty (25-220) stresses that “all methods should serve for the clear translation of meaning”. (Chen, 1992, p.14) The presupposition of meaning being present, so to speak, is the ontology and the very foundation for the grand mansion of traditional translation theories.

## II. THE INDETERMINACY OF MEANING AND THE OVERTURN OF MEANING’S BEING PRESENT

Rationalism, the main stream of European culture and philosophy, comes to its first prime days at the Age of Reason (late 17th to 18th century, also called the Enlightenment Movement) after Plato and Aristotle. The advocates of enlightenment place their faith in human reason and human progress brought about by the gradual propagation of rational principles, trying to clear away ancient superstition, prejudice, dogma and injustice. Their encouragement of rational scientific inquiry and the preference of knowledge over ignorance are gradually put into a logical philosophical system by the great philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and the typical metaphysical way of thinking --- the subject/object dichotomy---- becomes deep-rooted in the Western minds. It is thought that the objective world, or the objectivity of the world, is a Supreme Being and an Absolute Presence independent of human knowledge. Truth is obtained by people’s observance and reconstruction of the world’s objectivity; and the world is subject to knowledge, which is the objective reflection of the objective world; knowledge is of no boundary, so there is nothing that can not be known; the world is unified, so it can be completely known as long as the unified construction is found. The development of natural science and philosophy in the 20th century, however, give fatal blows to rationalism.

The first blow comes from the development of science and technology. In 1927, the famous quantitative mechanics scientist Henrik David Bohr (1885-1962) put forward his Indeterminacy Principle, and in 1931, an American mathematician put forward the Incomplete Theorem. The former shows that our knowledge is relative and not always absolutely right because indeterminacy arises in light, electronics and other micro fields, while the latter demonstrates that any “complete” system must be based on a greater incomplete system. The above two developments undermine the edifice of rationalism for they deny the rationalists’ statement that the world is a unified and complete system.

The second blow comes from the development of modern philosophy. Friedrich W. Nietzsche (1844-1900) declares that “God is dead and man, as the incarnation of the Almighty God, is also dead.” The non-rationalists’ statements about the limits of man turns over the rationalists’ foundation that man’s knowledge is of no boundaries.

The blows that rationalism receives from modern philosophy and the development of natural science help people to broaden their horizons. They come to know that the objective world, as long as it is treated as the object of knowledge, is not always objective. Sometimes it is the object of knowledge for subjective reflections. The involvement of subjectivity in science and truth casts shadow upon their objectivity.

As one of the embodiments of rationalism, human subjectivity, however, always goes along with language, with which the subject knows the object in the typical metaphysical system of subject/object dichotomy. It is thought that truth is obtained through language. Up to the 20th century, however, it is from Saussurean structuralist linguistics that the formalist critics split apart the unified relationship between the signifier and the signified, pointing out that language and meaning is indeterminate.

Hans Gadmer, one of the most outstanding figures of modern philosophical hermeneutics, says that “understanding is a conversation-like event which goes beyond subjectivity; it is a historical consciousness.” (Gadmer, 1998, p.19) Gadmer’s historical view implies that meaning varies with the change of time. He fully realizes that meaning’s changeability with the change of time and context. Hans Robert Jauss, founder of the reception aesthetics, holds that the interaction of one’s aesthetic expectancy of experience and the structure of behavior will inspire and encourage the reader to fill the “blanks” in texts and connect the “gap” therein, transcending the indeterminacy of meaning and producing new meanings. (Lü, 2000, p.53) Further explanations of meaning’s indeterminacy can be found in Jacques Derrida. The signifier and signified, Derrida argues, is not so unified as the two sides of a coin. The appearance of a signifier does not mean that the signified is present, and its presence is deferred. In terms of space, one sign is always

subject to the limit of other signs, so a sign is not always unified. In this sense, the meaning of one sign is also determined by other signs, so meaning is so indeterminate that it can only be determined by the context where it occurs. In terms of time, the presence of the signified is often delayed by the signifier, so there is no determinate meaning. (Liao, 2000, p. 76) The relationship between the signifier and the signified is further split by his coinage of the word “*differance*”. “In any signifying system,” he says, “meaning is the result of numerous choices available. As the mystery of meaning’s being present is broken, the unified direction of a sign is thus *differed*; it is cast away to all directions like the seeds. In this sense, text is not a unified and determinate structure any longer, but a far more complicated and wider world of deconstruction.” (Lu, 2000, p. 30) Thus, the determinate and unified relationship between the signifier and the signified, *langue* and *parole*, is deconstructed; language is not a self-sufficient system. Instead, the former determinate relationship becomes indeterminate, vague, opaque, metaphorical and obscure. The indeterminacy of meaning results in the deconstruction of the authorial subjectivity and the death of the author.

### III. THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

The 20th century is a tumultuous one in which the development of modern philosophy (especially that of non-rationalist philosophy) and natural science brought forth an unprecedented revolution to rationalism and humanism. Naturally, the author, as the incarnation of genius and reason, falls victim to the revolution. Regarded as an objective being, Man is the strongest and firmest human fort in the Western literary heritage and metaphysical tradition since Plato’s time. As meaning becomes indeterminate under the attack of literary criticism and the Western formalist literary theory, the author, which is long regarded as the incarnation of reason and subject in humanism, undermines its authoritative status. At the end of the 19th century Nietzsche’s declaration that “God is dead” marks the end of the human and rationalist heritage, and in 1960, Roland Barthes declared the author is dead. The death of the author denies the author and the authorial creation, deconstructing the author as being present from the theoretical angle. (Huang, 1997, p. 55).

Writing deconstructs meaning, and at the same time, it produces meaning. The monopoly of meaning and the limitation brought forth by man is shattered into pieces; the very essence of writing is to “weave” a network of the pluralities of meaning. It is by no means an ultimate activity but a revolution and emancipation of the monopoly of meaning. It is in this sense that Roland Barthes proclaims that the author is dead. Here the author is not only the subject of writing activity but also the subject that monopolizes meaning. In his further clarification, Barthes further classifies writing into two groups: transitive and intransitive. Transitive writing treats writing as an implement through which the reader is led from the text out into another world. Intransitive writing, however, is for writing’s own sake, and it leads the reader to the revelation of signs and language and the network where meaning is produced for pluralities. It is writing in the true sense. Meanwhile, texts can also be divided into two groups: legible texts and scriptable texts. The former refers to classical texts while the latter refers to modern texts. The difference of texts results in the difference of readers. In legible texts, the reader is a passive consumer. In scriptable texts, however, the reader is the producer that is destined to discover and produce meanings. Meaning is not something objective that is always there any more. It is what the reader gets by rewriting the meaning of the present text. (Zhou, 2000, p. 380-84) The scriptable text is not an isolated work, nor is it closed. As a matter of fact, it is a large network. Every text demonstrates and refers to each other, which forms into intertextuality. Text is not the coexistence of diverse meanings, but a message and an interweaving of messages. So it does not fall into the fetters of one interpretation; it faces an explosion and a semination. The death of the author means the birth of the reader. The reader steps into the very forefront of reading where he communicates, conciliates and converses with the text to produce new meanings.

Unlike Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault (1926-1984), the French philosopher renowned as the “thinker of power”, deconstructs the author as subject from the relationship between power and discourse. In Foucault’s eyes, power is an evil immanent force which can not be got rid of. Power and knowledge are a symbiotic pair where knowledge appears as the phenomenon whose essence is power. Power is the basis instead of the product of superstructure. It is spread into all the social relationships, covering economy, sex, knowledge, politics, emotions and other realms of social existence. All relationship can find its expression in the tyranny of power. Power is purposeful but void of subjectivity. When power encounters any resisting force, subjectivity can only exist in the random and infinite game of power relationship. The eternal and constant existence of power results in the deconstruction and disappearance of subjectivity. Meanwhile, power is not only a compressing forth but a constructing force. The deconstruction of subjectivity reduces the author, the incarnation of God and the reason of works, into the author-function. By this term, it means that the author is not a general term, but a function of discourse. It leads the vivid man from inside the discourse out into the outside (Zhu Liyuan, 1997, p.337-38). Foucault holds that writing is a constant process of negation where the author is negated and the authorial subjectivity disappears for good sake. Furthermore, he points out that any work has the right to create eternity, and at the same time when such an eternity is achieved, writing gets the right to kill the author. (Foucault, 1986) It is in this sense, as Nietzsche declares that “God is dead!”, Foucault claims that “the man demises” and that the concept of an “author” be replaced by the “author- function”.

As discussed in the foregoing lines, Barthes holds that the author is dead and Foucault argues that the “author” should be replaced by the “author-function”. J. F. Lyotard, one of the most famous French philosophers in the 20th century, arrives at the conclusion that there is no general subject, let alone the “intellectual”, after his thorough investigation into

the situation of knowledge in the postmodern era. (Zhou, 2000, p.171) Moreover, Lyotard's compatriot Paul Ricoeur, also a great thinker, argues for the death of the author. "Whenever we read a book," he says, "we take for granted that the author is dead, and the book is the one after the death of the author. Only when the author dies, is the reader's reading of the book complete or entire, because the death of the author breaks the command of the author's original meaning, and what is left is the reader's reading of the work itself." (Wang, 2001, p.235)

The deconstruction of the authorial subjectivity by philosophers, thinkers and theorists like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, J. F. Lyotard and Paul Ricoeur makes it easy and natural for us to cast doubt upon the author's original meaning and writing intention. Such a skepticism is strongly characterized by the postmodern literary tradition. As shown by the following demonstration, the doubt cast upon the author's original meaning and writing intention paves the way for poems to be rewritten as far as the rewriting theory is concerned.

#### IV. FROM THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE "AFFLATUS THEORY" AND THE "CHINESE POETIC INTENTION THEORY" TO THE REWRITING OR TRANSLATING OF POEMS

Whether poems should be translated or rewritten long remains controversial in the translation circle. The solution to this controversy depends on the origin of poetics. Therefore, we must first have a look at the origin of poems.

As far as the tradition of Western poetics is concerned, the origin of poems can be dated back to ancient Greece. Plato talks about the origin of poems in one of his earliest dialogue with Ian, the storyteller. This is the most ancient record concerning the origin of poems. In *Ian*, Socrates asked the famous storyteller Ian: "When the poets are singing for wars, they do not have specialized military knowledge; when they are describing the shoe menders, they do not have specialized knowledge on shoe mending, so how can the poets speak? By what do they speak?" Plato attributes this strange and miraculous phenomenon to afflatus, as the "Afflatus Theory" goes. Poets are the spokesmen of the Goddess of Poetry Muse, who gives the poet afflatus. The poet, on the other hand, tells the afflatus he gets from the Goddess. Whichever poet it is, Iliad or Homer, he is in a state of being mad when he is speaking on behalf of the Goddess. Muse is the true source of all poems. Therefore, according to the "Afflatus Theory", poems do not originate from the poets. They are neither the brainchildren of the poets nor that of their conscious and spontaneous use of language. The "Afflatus Theory" has exerted great influence upon the western poetical heritage, especially on the Renaissance and the Romanticism Movement.

The origin of Chinese poetics can be best summed up by the "Poetic Intention Theory". It is recorded in the Book of History (*shang shu*), one of the ancient Chinese classics, that "Poetry deals with the poet's intention while songs sing for knowledge." Confucius once said that "Books are designed to narrate things while poems are designed to convey meanings." Similar ideas are expressed in the Preface to Poetry (*shi da xu*): "Poems are what the poets intend. They are intentions before being put into lines, otherwise they are poems." On this point, the famous Chinese scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) of the Northern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) was once quoted by the contemporary aesthete Zhu Guangqian as saying: "The nature of human beings is of tranquility; human heart is prone to be moved. ... This is where poems are supposed to originate." (Zhu, 1997, p.5) In this sense, poems are the exterior expression of interior intentions and language serves as the medium. The "Western Afflatus Theory", however, differs from its Chinese counterpart in that it holds that poems do not originate from the poets, and that they are not the result of poets' conscious and spontaneous use of language. The "Chinese Poetic Intention Theory", on the other hand, presupposes the existence of the author's original writing intention, no matter what they are understood, whether as something rational or emotional, an ambition or a strong desire, even as something real or empirical. Meanwhile, it presupposes the existence of a subject that intends. So according to the "Chinese Poetic Intention Theory", the poets are the creator of meanings and are the very original source of poems. The author's original writing intention should be the only ultimate reference for all interpretations. (Zhang, 1998, p. 222-23)

In the realistic poetic tradition, the author (poet) manifests absolute authority and right of interpretation to his text, no matter in accordance with the "Western Afflatus Theory" or the "Chinese Poetic Intention Theory." Owing to such a right and authority, any criticism, no matter how convincing it is or from whatever famous critic it is, will irretrievably remain silent as long as the author stands out and says, "Hey, man! It is not the case!" Under the attack of deconstructionism and postmodernism, the author turns out to be dead, the "author" comes to be replaced by the "author-function", and meaning undergoes the change from determinacy to its opposite. Since the illusion of meaning's being unified has been broken into shatters, the author's original intention and original meaning are thrown into the pit of boundless doubt. Gadmer claims that the author's original intention does not exist at all, and all effort to find out the intention is doomed to fail. (Xie, 2000, p.54) In the "Western Afflatus Theory", poems exist beyond the poets, the Goddess of poetry Muse expresses poetical language by means of the poet's mouth, singing, eulogizing or describing. What is spoken from the poet's mouth is unique, particular in the employed language and irreplaceable in another. In the "Chinese Poetic Intention Theory", the poem, owing to the deconstruction of the author's original intention, becomes a self-sufficient existence as a work outside the author. Any effort to reproduce the author's original intention is to be a castle in the air. This situation is made even worse by the poetic utterances that are so unique and particular in one language that it is impossible to reproduce them in another. No wonder that Robert Frost (1874-1963) claims that "a poem is what gets lost in translation." The statement justifies itself and can be manifested in the well-known Italian saying "Traduttori traditori." (Translation is treason.)

Besides, the metaphorical usage of poetic language decides that the translation of poems is going to meet its Waterloo. As is known to all, the metaphorical usage is the internal linguistic feature of poetic language. As pointed out by Zhang Longxi, an American Chinese scholar, things that are simple and clear do not produce sublimity and profoundness, which are both based on obscurity. (Zhang, 1998, p.255-56) Such an idea is supported by Renoto Poggioli, who argues that "obscurity and opaqueness are the poets' natural response to the mediocrity, looseness and banality of everyday language, where the amount of everyday communication destroys the quality of expression." (Poggioli, 1968, p.37) Similar ideas can be found in the Chinese philosophy, which advocates that speech is the echo of heart and the form that meaning takes, so meaning is metaphysical while speech is physical. Besides, meaning is the oneness while speech is of plurality. Such an idea conforms with Zhuang Tsu's philosophical statement that "The *Tao* that can *taoed* is not the constant *Tao*, and the name that can be named is not the constant name." As far as the language of poems is concerned, there is always conflict between the poet's thoughts and the speech through which the former is conveyed. Whenever the poet's inner thought bears the form of language, what is to be expressed inside is always in conflict with the language to be used outside. So what is to be expressed is not fully expressed and what has already been expressed is not what should be expressed. In this sense, once the words are put into lines and form a text, the relationship between the poet's inner thought and exterior speech is unique and particular, and allows for no replacement or reproduction into another language.

To sum up, the indeterminacy of meaning, the doubt cast upon the author's original intention, the conflict between the poet's inner thought and exterior expression, and the uniqueness and particularity of the metaphorical usage of the poetic language all add to the impossibility of translating poems from one language to another. In this sense, poems are doomed to get lost in translation. The translation of poems is indeed a treason.

The Waterloo that poems meet in translation does not mean that poems can not be transferred from one language to another. For the sake of transcultural communication, poems can be rewritten to satisfy the curiosity of readers in different languages. As discussed above, the poetic language is full of obscurity and connotations. Nevertheless, just because of this, blanks in literary language, especially in poetic language, are larger than those in technical or everyday routine language. Though the signifier is usually in harmony with the signified in the second group of languages, there is a different story in literary language. The unity between the foregoing two is split up. So literary language is more opaque, indeterminate, vague, metaphorical and obscure. From the perspective of text, the gaps and blanks between the semantic units provide much space of creation for the reader. In interpretation, the blanks of meaning and the indeterminacy of the author's original intention will inspire the reader to fill the blanks and connect the gaps. By doing this, the reader converses, argues and even protests against the author. In this creative process of reading, new meanings are created.

During the process of rewriting poems, the rewriter (similar to the translator in the traditional translation theories) approaches the text with his own experience and cognitive model. He fills the blanks in the text, interprets the text as it is, come up with his own understanding and transfer his understanding into the receptor language. Ezra Pound, one of the greatest American poets and translators of last century, can be the best representative of such rewriters. His rewriting of the Chinese poems in the Tang Dynasty, *Cathay*, into English is not translation in the true sense. But it is well accepted by the American and European readers. Its unique, fresh and simple style and exotic flavor added vitality and new energy to the banal Victorian literary circle.

As a matter of fact, Frost has granted us, on behalf of the other poets, the right to rewrite poems when he said that "A poem is what gets lost in translation". Now that it is impossible for the reader in a different language to appreciate what is called 'poems' provided by the author, the rewriter is duty-bound to enable him to have a touch of what is similar to the thing that is called 'poems' provided by the author. As the rewriter can only rewrite or recreate according to the "poems" of the original author, he is a "writer of writers" and a "poet of poets". The poets and the rewriters are none but those invisible who are hired by the great memory of poems. Rewriting is a process in which the rewriter forgets his own self and reproduces what is called or what is similar to 'poems' for the reader in a different language. What is eternal and remains poetic is poem itself.

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**Ping Lin**, female, Ph. D. student of Shanghai International Studies University and associate professor of Sichuan International Studies University. She mainly studies British literature, comparative literature, literary and translation theories. Her recently published papers include "The Interrogation of 'Britishness': A Postcolonial Reading of *The Remains of the Day*" in *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (1)2018, "Disenchantment and Critique of Post-colonial Diasporic Writing" in *Comparative Literature in China* (1) 2018, and "Reliance on Western Discourse and Deconstruction of National Identity: A Critique of Rushdie's 'Cosmopolitanism'" in *Foreign Literature Review* (3)2018.