

The Translator's Daydream: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Guo Moruo's Translation of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

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Abstract

This paper examines the translational work of Guo Moruo, a prominent Chinese poet, who, like his peers in the New Culture Movement, turned to translation at the moment of national and personal crisis. It applies a psychoanalytic reading to Guo Moruo's translation of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and reveals how the poet/translator uses the medium of the original text to release his own repressed desires and unfulfilled wishes.

Key words: Psychoanalysis; Guo Moruo; Translation; *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

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INTRODUCTION

The core of Freudian theory about literature lies in its view that literary creation is the writer's daydream. Freud (1908) regards literature as egocentric fantasy, in other words, daydream, which shares with night dream the essential feature of fulfilling the desire of the subject through fantasy. In the state of dreaming, the conscious relaxes its censorship, thus enabling the repressed wishes of the unconscious to enter the conscious through disguise and transformation. However, Freud never specifically states whether literary translation is creation, or more importantly, whether literary translation is also daydream. In his analysis of creative writers,

Freud divides them into two groups: The first is ordinary novelists who rely completely on their imagination, and their protagonists go through a lot of trouble but always end up being triumphant or heroic, thus revealing the egocentric nature of literature. The second is epic poets and tragedy dramatists who don't completely rely on their own imaginations but instead use existing materials such as cultural and national mythology. Translators, if we can legitimately call them daydreamers, sound more like Freud's epic poets and tragedy dramatists, because translators also deal with preexisting materials, and their freedom and creativity will be revealed in their choice and revision of these preexisting materials.

After Freud, Jacques Lacan further illustrates the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature. Lacan's concept of the symbolic order, in particular, sheds new light on our study on translation from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Just as Freud believes that civilization exerts repression on the human race, Lacan thinks that the symbolic order imprisons us all: "Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him 'by flesh and blood'; so total that they bring to his birth, along the gifts of stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny" (1953, p.68). Thus imprisoned, the only hope for man, or the only creative opportunity for him, is to break out of the symbolic order and create his own new order of language. Like a newborn facing a world and its symbolic order predating him, a translator facing a preexisting text also feels restraint and repression. But a creative and imaginative translator, like Guo Moruo, whom I study in this essay, often manages to express himself consciously and unconsciously in translation and releases his repressed unconscious in the process of translation as in a daydream.

Even though there lies an obvious affinity between translation and psychoanalysis, the import of psychoanalytic theory has long been ignored by the

field of translation studies. In recent decades, however, thanks in part to Poststructuralism, scholars of translation studies have begun to turn their attention, nilly-willy, to psychoanalysis. As Gentzler (2007, p.199) points out, "Poststructural scholars have found thinking in that space between languages that occurs in the process of translation exceedingly fruitful—that space that occurs before the right word has crystallized—for the pursuit of such activities. In Freudian terms, that state has been characterized as a kind of dream state, occurring before conscious rational thought, and all its repressive, identity-preserving mechanisms. And it is in that space, often referred to by Derrida as the space of translation, that the elusive concept of *differance*, as close as might be possible, manifests itself." That elusive space of dream state, also called the translation zone (Apter, 2006), provides room for the translator to find new voices. Take Feminism or Postcolonialism for example, translation studies has uncovered the desires of translators who try to topple the authority of patriarchy or colonialism through the work of translation (Bassnett, 1992). The so-called new voices are repressed desires. Insightful as Gentzler's remarks are, his standpoint remains the macro, sociological study of translation culture rather than an in-depth approach that unravels the complicated process of how the unconscious functions in a translator's dream state. In this essay, I endeavor to show how the translator, under the yoke of a double burden—reality and the symbolic order of the original text—releases his repressed unconscious through textual means of self-disguising in translation.

1. GUO MORUO AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Before turning to Guo's translational work, I would like to comment on his long relationship to psychoanalysis, a Western import in early twentieth-century China. There are many indications that Guo accepted the psychoanalytic view on the commonality between dream and literature.

In 1921, merely thirteen years after Freud's conception of "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming", Guo adopted psychoanalytic theory in his criticism of the classical Chinese drama "Xi Xiang Ji", maintaining that "Literature is a symbol of spiritual rebellion, a revolutionary scream at the moment of crisis" (Guo, 1921, pp.321). He subsequently published a series of short stories full of psychoanalytic elements, and in an essay entitled "Criticism and Dream", he even compared literary criticism to dream, suggesting that critics and readers alike interpret his novel "Late Spring" the same way they would interpret a dream (Guo, 1923). In another essay published in 1938, Guo made even clearer his acceptance of the daydream theory of literature. This essay, entitled "The Sequel to the Ten Years of Creation", begins with an introduction of psychoanalysis and maintains that all writers in various degrees suffer from hysteria. "When

a whole nation lives under high pressure, writers suffer even more due to their more sensitive nerves", Guo writes. "Many unhappy things stay locked up inside their hearts and remain unspoken, like a chimney clogged up by smoky charcoal, a belly full of poorly oxygenated fire smoldering inside"(Guo, 1938, pp.171). Believing that literature has therapeutic functions, Guo suggests that "All writers should unburden as much as they can unhappy memories. It is a technique for healing oneself at the same time that it is a technique for healing the society" (Guo, 1938, pp.171). He also admits that his poem, entitled "The Song of a Misanthrope," is "a fantasy created under the burden of a painful life" (Guo, 1932, p.60).

The "painful life" that Guo refers to is no poetic exaggeration. One of the reasons why Guo seems so prone to the psychoanalytic persuasion is that he has lived a life beset by depression, mania, and possibly, bipolar disorder. Granted that the general condition of early twentieth-century China, with the three-thousand-year old feudal monarchy dying a hard death, was one of cultural asphyxiation and political repression and hence one might say, in the broadest sense, that an ordinary Chinese citizen in that historical period might share the common disease of depression, Guo was, however, a special, acute case of mental disorder caused in part by his peculiar life experience and manifested variously in his writings.

In 1914, Guo went to study medicine in Japan, where he abandoned his wife from arranged marriage and cohabited with a Japanese woman, Anna, with whom he had a son. Haunted by the guilt over abandonment, Guo also saw his love relationship with Anna turning sour as reality set in and money became a problem. To make matters worse, Guo at this point decided to give up medicine and focus on literature, a move unsupported by Anna and causing more domestic frictions. Guo's first magnum opus, *The Goddesses*, published in 1921, celebrates a poetic self that harmonizes with the universe and enjoys boundless freedom, but such a self was nowhere to be found in his real life. During this period, Guo was mired in self-pity and self-debasement, as indicated in his correspondence with fellow Chinese writers. In a letter to Baihua Zong on January 18, 1920, Guo (p. 16) claimed that he was "more degenerated than Goldsmith, more vexed than Heine, and more decadent than Baudelaire." He attached to this letter three earlier poems, written between 1916 and 1920, that all address the theme of death, "Looking for Death," "Crying at Night," and "Spring Chill." These are all poetic records of his suicidal thoughts.

In his poetic drama, *Xiang Lei*, written in 1920, Guo portrays Qu Yuan, ostensibly the first Chinese poet, as one who suffers from mania. In fact, as Guo (1932, p.70) later acknowledged, he was ventriloquizing through Qu Yuan: "What Qu Yuan said in that work were all my real feelings...They were reflections of my psychological state at the time...I definitely showed symptoms of mania then."

It was during this manic period that Guo translated Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." In the same letter to Zong in 1920, Guo (p. 19) confessed, "What I really want to do now is to be like a phoenix, gathering some fragrant wood and immolating myself. Burn off my present shape, burn it off in the midst of a sad elegy, so that a new 'me' can be reborn out of the cooled ashes! But I'm afraid that this is after all only a fantasy!" The fantasy experienced in his translation of Gray's poem, as I will show presently, seems to have fulfilled exactly Guo's wish to bury himself in order to be reborn like a phoenix.

2. THE TRANSLATION OF ELEGY

Published in 1751, Thomas Gray's famous poem went through different drafts. According to Frank Ellis (1951, pp.971-1008), the earlier draft of the poem contains clear self-referential elements. But the later drafts all experienced what Ellis has called a process of depersonalization, with many of the key pronouns changed from the first-person "me" or second-person "thou" and "thy" to the less intimate, third-person "they," "their," etc. Such a tendency of depersonalizing and objectification in the English poetry would eventually culminate in T. S. Eliot's notion of "impersonality" (Eliot, 1919). Guo's translation, by contrast, goes in the opposite direction. The key passages in which Gray had already exercised depersonalization by changing pronouns in different drafts were rendered by Guo with much more personalized effects:

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate. (Gray, 1969,
p.135)

Guo's translation reads:

诗人呀，你在心念无名的死人，
在这些诗章中咏出了他们的情性，
等待那机会来时，偶被沉思导引，
会有同类的精神把你的生世探寻。(Guo, 1954, p.124)

Here "thee/ty" refers to the stonecutter who carved epitaphs on the gravestones. The poet/narrator is engaged in an imaginary dialogue with the stonecutter. Guo's questionable rendering of "For thee" into "Ah, you poet" may still retain some ambiguity because the "poet" can refer either to the stonecutter who carves words or the poet/narrator himself. But Guo added a footnote, which completely disambiguates the reference here: "The second-person pronoun in this stanza, 'thee,' is the poet Thomas Gray's self-reference. In Western literature, it is quite common to address oneself as an object, although it is very rare in Chinese literature." It seems that Guo's footnote goes hand in hand with his own misreading of the reference of the pronoun in Gray's original. Whereas Gray tried to write the subjective "I" off the poem, the

translator managed to invite the subjectivity back into the poem, turning a lament for the stonecutter into the poet's self-pity. It appears that what caused this so-called error was the translator's own grief. Guo was speaking through the work of translation, trying to battle depression and hysteria which have long dogged him.

Psychoanalysts believe that every misreading is driven by the unconscious, a notion best illustrated by Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901, 1975). This belief provides translation studies with an important hint, that is, that finding the cause for mistranslation may be more meaningful than critiquing mistranslation, and that the process of explicating the cause for mistranslation is also a process of discovering the subjectivity of the translator. The original work is the writer's daydream, which becomes part of the translator's consciousness as it becomes an object of recognition for the translator. But the original also constitutes what Lacan has called the symbolic order, which represses the translator's unconscious, which in turns tries to escape self-censorship through disguise and enters the conscious through translation. Granted that most of the translator's work is done in a state of consciousness, the self-censorship exercised by the translator must be more severe than that by the original author. The translator usually does not self-consciously allow himself the luxury of daydream and fantasy. As a result, the textual transformation produced by the translator, however subtle and hidden, may conversely be even more revealing of his unconscious.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1899, 1998) believes that dream often experiences various kinds of deformation, such as condensation, displacement, symbolism, and secondary elaboration. In the case of Guo's translation, I would maintain that the deformation of the text is similar to the deformation of dream. Here Guo's misreading of one pronoun leads to the radical change of the entire poem. The original "thee," which has a singular reference, is translated into "you poet," thus acquiring double references. This is a process similar to the condensation of dreams. It may appear that the signified for the "poet" does not conflict with the signified for "thee," but in fact the signified has been switched to the narrator/poet himself, a process similar to the displacement in dreams. The translator then inserts a footnote, fashioning a fictional contrast between Western and Chinese literary traditions in their different uses of pronouns, a procedure looking strikingly like the secondary elaboration of dreams.

After the change of pronouns and subsequently of the primary intention of the poem, the reader can sense the difference in mood and emotion between the original and the translation. This is a difference between the sobriety of a self-distancing meditator and the sentimentality of a self-pitying poet. In his original, Gray celebrates the simplicity of the village life:

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed. (Gray, 1969,
pp.120-121)

Even though the poem is an elegy, the first three lines of this stanza present a vivid image of the lives of the people before they die. The words "call," "incense-breathing," and "cock's clarion" are all cases of simile, which, according to psychoanalysis, is the work of dreams. In the poem, Gray seems to have walked into a dreamland, with his wings of fancy hovering above the morning village. His description of the morning scenes contains elements of memory as well as fantasy, as he resorts to simile. But in Guo's translation, all similes are destroyed:

清晨的微风吐放清香，
茅檐之下燕子噪晴，
雄鸡啼，牛角鸣，
再也不能呀把他们唤醒。(Guo, 1954, p.116)

The similes of "call" and "clarion" are replaced by simple verbs 啼 and 鸣, and the descriptive adjectives such as "shrill" and "echoing" have disappeared. The addition of 呀 in the last line further increases the effects of sadness and pity, thus shifting the weight of the stanza from the first three lines to the last line.

It is also worth noting that even though the Chinese word 挽歌 ordinarily translates the English for "elegy," the key title word in Gray's poem, Guo adopted instead 哀歌 for the title of his translation: 《墓园哀歌》. The Chinese 哀 literally means grief, sorrow, and mourn. Such a choice of word goes hand in hand with Guo's overall tendency of rendering the poem into one of poetic self-pitying, thus ignoring or downplaying happy scenes in the original. When the symbolic order of the original represses the different belief systems of the translator, the latter can either consciously and radically rewrite the original in translation, or try to follow the original faithfully and conduct self-censorship in translation. As we see, Guo did not choose the first option of consciously rewriting the original. But in the process of translation, his repressed unconscious, his own melancholia and hysteria, did not stay repressed, but instead found a way to express themselves through textual transformations.

The translator's self-pity, ingeniously disguised as the poet's self-pity, reaches the apex at the end of the poem. Gray's lines "Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth/ A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown" were rendered by Guo as "一个薄命的青年全无名望，/息着头颅在这地之膝上". The Chinese phrase 薄命, meaning "born under an unlucky star," was added by Guo to increase the effect of pity and self-pity, as 薄命 is often used by Chinese writers to such an effect. And in these two lines as below, we can literally hear the weeping of the translator, if not the poet:

He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wish'd) a friend. (Gray, 1969,
p.127)

Guo's translation:

哀矜之人他雪与一切的泪浆，
他博得了一个友人在那天上。(Guo, 1954, p.120)

All the penniless stonecutter owns is a tear and what he wants is also very little. He gives the single drop of tear to Misery, but gains divine love. Gray affirmed such a life from a religious point of view. But Guo changed "a tear" to "all tears" in translation. Here as if the reader could hear the weeping of the poet at the country churchyard, and only death can help the poet end the misery brought on by poverty and hardship and thus put an end to his luckless life. If not a real death, then a virtual death in fantasy, in poetry. I must point out, however, this poet is not Thomas Gray, nor the stonecutter in Gray's poem, but the translator Guo, who hides behind the mask of Gray and daydreams in translation.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Guo's translational experience is not only personal but also national. Among his fellow writers in early twentieth-century China, Guo is but one of the many case studies we can conduct to unravel the entangled history of translation and China's New Culture Movement. One may even say that the zeitgeist of that age, as the old monarchy crumbled and the new nation had yet to form, was one of the translational drive, a strong cultural instinct to transform itself through what Antoine Berman (1992, p.47) has called "the experience of the foreign." Like Guo's phoenix, China was ready to burn off its old shape and to be reborn. Whether or not it was a cultural fantasy, it would await a study of much larger scope and greater depth.

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