
Translation with No Original: Scandals of Textual Reproduction

EMILY APTER

In a short story titled “The Dialect of the Tribe” by the American Oulipo writer Harry Mathews, the narrator ponders an academic article authored by an Australian anthropologist of the 1890s by the name of Ernest Botherby. The article is of interest because it offers the example of a mysterious technique, “used by the Pagolak-speaking tribe to translate their tongue into the dialects of their neighbors. ‘What was remarkable about this method was that while it produced translations that foreign listeners could understand and accept, it also concealed from them the original meaning of every statement made.’”¹ The narrator is immediately intrigued: “To translate successfully and not reveal one’s meaning—what could be more paradoxical? What could be more relevant? . . . What could be more extraordinary than a method that would allow words to be ‘understood’ by outsiders without having their substance given away?” (HC 8–9). “You and I might know,” the narrator confides with smug Eurocentrism to the reader, “that translation may, precisely, exorcise the illusion that substantive content exists at all—but what led a remote New Guinean tribe to such a discovery?” (HC 10). These ironic questions tap into primal truisms of translation: to wit: something is always lost in translation; unless one knows the language of the original, the exact nature and substance of what is lost will be always impossible to ascertain; even if one has access to the language of the original, there remains an x-factor of untranslatability that renders every translation an impossible world or faux regime of semantic and phonic equivalence. What makes Mathews’s story so clever, in the manner, say, of Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (in which the place-name “Uqbar,” presumed to be a variant on the name of the country of Iraq, is suspected of being an “undocumented country . . . deliberately invented . . . to substantiate a phrase”), is that it reveals the way in which translations are always trying to disguise the impossibility of fidelity to the original tongue.² In the Mathews story, it is the delusional belief that a possible world of translatability exists that induces the narrator to defect from his own language into a Pagolak-speaking world. Translation is thus revealed to be a special case of literature “hors de ce monde”—“Any where out of the world!”—to borrow Baudelaire’s famous phrase; that is to say, a literary world that is possible, indeed even plausible, only insofar as it actualizes a parallel universe in and on its own terms.

The narrator's election to enter a possible world of translatability brings to mind the contention of the language philosopher David Lewis that a plurality of worlds must be posited hypothetically, to exist, if the rules of the language allow for it. Lewis's truth-conditional theory of semantics is concerned to determine the conditions under which a sentence is true. Language, he has asserted, needs to be able to talk about things that may not exist, as in the sentence, "Someone seeks a unicorn." We know that the creature doesn't exist but the sentence can be understood. If the meaning of p is posited as true, by necessity, then Lp is true in given worlds in which p is.³ This grammar of necessity, positing the hypothetical grounds of linguistic and literary possible worlds, may well yield what Umberto Eco has referred to as "lunatic linguistics." Eco traces this language lunacy back to Gabriel Foigny's invention of a self-translating "austral" grammar, in his 1676 work *La Terre australe connue*, but one finds numerous examples closer to the contemporary period in those writers cherished by Deleuze and Foucault who created their own private worlds of syntactic and lexical "shizanalyse": J-C Brisset, Raymond Roussel, and Louis Wolfson.⁴ What these writers have in common is the ability to make standard language strange to itself—superimposing their own private grammatical logics and laws of homonymic and syllabic substitution onto the vehicular tongue, such that it remains quasi-intelligible; in a state, if you will, of semi-translation. For a recent example of this process, consider Jonathan Safran Foer's 2002 best-seller, *Everything is Illuminated*, narrated by a young Russian translator whose stilted English is riddled with malapropisms and American pop-cultural lingo. Here, the reader is entered into a possible world that could be characterized as the language limbo of the non-native speaker.⁵ In such cases of "lunatic linguistics" we discover an order of language that is not pure babel, but something between a discrete or standard language and a translation; a language-in-a-state-of-translation, that becomes "possible" according to the criteria of modal realism and counterfactual logic used by David Lewis to define the conditions of possibility.

What interests me here is not so much the argument, albeit a fascinating one, over whether possible world theory is useful to the analysis of self-translating private languages (languages that are cybernetic in their capacity to generate new grammatical logics for each new possible linguistic world), but rather, the ethical problem that arises when there is, strictly speaking, no "original" language or text on which the translation is based. The reader is either placed in a netherworld of "translatese" that floats between original and translation, or confronted with a situation in which the translation mislays the original, absconding to some other world of textuality that retains the original only as fictive pretext. In both instances, the identity of what a translation is is tested; for if a translation is not a form of textual predicate, indexically pointing to a primary text, then what is it? Can a literary technology of reproduction that has sublated its origin still be considered a translation? Or should it be considered the premier illustration of translational ontology, insofar as it reveals the extent to which all translations are unreliable transmitters of the original, a regime, that is, of extreme untruth?

Translation studies typically frame the ethics of textual infidelity in terms of a

translation's infelicitous rendering of an original (measured as lack of accuracy, formal and grammatical similitude, literary flair or poetic feeling), or in terms of the target text's dubious connection to its source; its status as pseudo or fictitious translation. As part of a larger effort to rethink the critical premises of translation studies,⁶ I will be concentrating on the latter case, taking up issues of how to interpret celebrated examples of texts that have turned out to be translations with no originals. My purpose is not to visit the scandal of pseudotranslation for its own sake, but to explore the broader ethical issues surrounding textual reproduction that such scandals bring into theoretical focus.

Douglas Robinson (following Anton Popovic) defines pseudotranslation as "not only a text pretending, or purporting, or frequently taken to be a translation, but also . . . a translation that is frequently taken to be an original work." As Robinson sees it, any work "whose status as 'original' or 'derivative' is, for whatever social or textual reason, problematic" qualifies as pseudotranslation.⁷ This broad definition creates as many problems as it solves by inviting controversy over which kind of texts should qualify as pseudotranslation. James MacPherson's 1760 "translation" of "Ossianic" poems, *Fragments of ancient poetry translated from the Gaelic or Erse language*, clearly warrant designation as such, but other examples—Longfellow's *Hiawatha* (putatively based on a Finnish scholar's transposition of Chippewa legends), or medieval glosses of Roman texts—inhabit a fuzzy zone between translation and transcription and become harder to classify as pseudo.

Pseudotranslation, as Robinson's definition suggests, invites emphasis on the exposure of fraudulent translations, with the critic's efforts concentrated on rectifying mistaken attributions in literary history, on drawing generic distinctions between model and imitation, or on refining criteria used in authenticating the status and value of an original work of literature. The literary scandals and accusations of forgery opened up by allegations of pseudotranslation are not unlike the connoisseur wars raging around the de-attribution of pricey masterpieces in prestigious museums and private collections worldwide. The drama of revelation—of fakery and forgery laid bare—is what drives this kind of interpretation thematically. By contrast, if the issue of textual fidelity to the original is defined in terms of a theory of textual reproduction, the focus shifts from questions of textual veracity and sham to the conditions of the original's reproducibility. The problem of authorial counterfeit is thus displaced by consideration of whether a translation is born not from a "real" original (an authenticated work by a given author), but from a kind of test tube text of simulated originality; a text, if you will, that is unnaturally or artificially birthed and successfully replicated. The idea of textual cloning—emphasizing, in a metaphorical way, literary analogues to genic coding, copying, and blueprinting—problematizes "the work of art in the age of genetic reproduction" in a way that brings Walter Benjamin's famous essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) into colloquy with controversies over the status of original identity in the age of the genome project.⁸ As a code of codes (a kind of HTML or master-code used in machine translation), translation becomes definable as a cloning mechanism of

textual transference or reproducibility rather than as a discrete form of secondary textuality predicated on an auratic original. Benjamin's equally famous essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923) also returns in another guise. His identification of translation as that which usurps the place of the original while ensuring its after-life, may be used to associate textual cloning with the idea of a reproductively engineered original, (comparable, say, to the replication of RNA molecules in a test tube), or with a translation that grows itself anew from the cells of a morbid or long-lost original. Under these circumstances, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between original and cloned embryonic forms; indeed the whole category of originality—as an essentialist life-form—becomes subject to dispute.

Pseudotranslation versus textual cloning: two paradigms that address problematic originality in the field of translation studies, two paradigms that are conceptually related, but emphasize distinctly different problems and questions. My particular interest here will be in exploring what the concept of textual cloning might bring to the age-old discussion of textual fidelity in translation studies; how it shifts the terms of translation studies, from original and translation, to clone and code.

PSEUDOTRANSLATION

There are few more flagrant cases of pseudotranslation than Pierre Louÿs's *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [Songs of Bilitis], published in 1894 with the subtitle *traduites du grec pour la première fois par P.L.* [translated from the Greek for the first time by P.L.] and marketed as the translation of works by a sixth-century half Greek/half Turkish poetess. Louÿs, as his biographer Jean-Paul Goujon notes, was educated in the manner of the great nineteenth-century philologists and historians: Michelet, Quinet, Renan, Mommsen, Taine, Littré, and Gaston Paris among others. Philological dogma was frequently marshaled in the service of translation. Leconte de Lisle, a mentor to Louÿs, was, from 1861 on, dedicating his energies to translations of Theocritus, Homer, Aeschylus, and Euripides.⁹ Claiming archeological as well as poetic value, the studies of antiquity that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century inspired Louÿs to follow suit: first, because he believed he could do better in restaging the past; second, because he suspected erotic censorship on the part of academic classicists; and third, because he was a proponent of Greek decadence, promoting Alexandrian Greek literature (deemed barbaric or obscene) over and against the privileged literature of fifth-century Athens (PL 92). Lucan, Meleager, Theocritus, and Sappho, each orientalized, homosexualized, and sensualized to the maximum, formed the canon of Louÿs's "other Hellenism" according to Goujon. Bilitis was billed as a writer of Turkish Greek origin, and Louÿs's translation of Meleager was acclaimed for its invention of a "hellenized Orient" or Syrianized Greece (PL 92).

When *Les Chansons de Bilitis* was initially published, Rémy de Gourmont bestowed fulsome praise: "A personal manner, that is to say, a new way of experi-

encing an old form of Greek poetry full of ideas and images that have passed into the public domain, restores to this poetry a beauty that it had lost or had relinquished when it was translated by a mediocre professor.”¹⁰ It was just such a “mediocre professor,” however, who ostensibly discovered the original manuscript of Bilitis’s poems and served as their first translator. When Louÿs published *Les Chansons* he included notes on the text’s provenance, claiming that the erotic prose poems were discovered by a German philologist by the name of G. Heim in the course of an archeological excavation in Cypress. When Louÿs delivered the manuscript to his editor Bailly, he maintained that it was a French translation of Heim’s German translation from the Greek. Despite allegations of error in his previous translations of Meleager and Lucan’s *Scenes from the Lives of Courtesans*, Louÿs’s reputation as a classicist passed muster and contributed to the favorable reception of *Les Chansons* when it was first published.

Initially, Louÿs confided the secret of the text’s true author only to his brother George Louis, but a number of friends detected the ruse, including Gide, Valéry, Debussy, and Hérédia. Gide may have unwittingly helped the hoax along by introducing Louÿs to the Algerian courtesan Meryem bent-Ali, thought to have been the live model for the figure of the Greek courtesan. Several critics suspected that the text had a fictitious origin, among them Camille Mauclair, who lauded the book as a “livre d’art” rather than as a translation, and Henri de Régnier, who wrote: “I do not know if Bilitis ever existed, but certainly she lives fully in these little poems that M. Louÿs has collected, and engraved on the walls of her pungent, imaginary tomb” (CB 327). Other readers, however, seem to fall into the trap; one sent Louÿs some “variants on the translation,” and the respected classicist, Gustave Fougère, to whom Louÿs had sent copies of both *Les Chansons* and his Meleager translation, wrote back: “Bilitis and Meleager were not unknown to me, for a long time I have considered them personal friends” (CB 322). Working closely with poems by Sapphic epigones, and putting literary sleuths off the scent by acknowledging his poetic license (especially in the most decadent sections of the song cycle), Louÿs took special precautions to guarantee that this paleographic mock-up would be received as an authentic translation. He suppressed his initial temptation to oversimulate the look of a scholarly edition by reducing the plethora of notes, providing a scaled-down yet plausible “Life” of Bilitis, and including an addendum of so-called untranslated verse. In the book’s preface Louÿs wrote:

I wanted this story to be Bilitis’s, because in translating the *Songs* I myself fell in love with this lover of Mnasidika. Her life was undoubtedly as marvelous as it seems. I only regret that the classical authors did not speak of her more, and that the records that survived were not so meager in providing information about her life. Philodemus, who ransacked her work twice, does not even mention her name.¹¹ (CB 25)

The success of Louÿs’s *supercherie* (even though it only lasted until 1898 when the text was “outed” coincident with the release of the second edition), was helped along by the vogue of Greek revivalism in fin-de-siècle erotic literature. The work’s reception was buoyed by the reading public’s keen appetite for

Baudelairean Lesbos and Parnassian pastoral love poetry. The same appetite was responsible for the later popularity of Natalie Clifford Barney's 1902 *Cinq Petits Dialogues grecs* [Five Short Greek Dialogues] and Renée Vivien's free translations of Sappho that appeared in 1903. Anticipating Rémy de Gourmont and Natalie Clifford Barney's reinvestment of the Amazon myth, and André Gide's appropriation of Platonic dialogue for gay polemic in *Corydon*, Louÿs placed utopian sexual politics at the heart of his agenda in using Greek conceits to express feminine same-sex love. In a letter to his brother he declared his intention to liberate the expression of lesbian desire from the shackles of the femme fatale stereotype, and he "respectfully" dedicated the *Chansons* "to the young women of future society."¹² Louÿs confided to his brother that he thought of lesbian love as a "deformation" not of love but of maternal instinct. Expressive of the essence of femininity unencumbered by Christian morality, lesbianism affords an ideal sexual paradigm of fecundity without biological reproduction. In "Hymn to Astarté," we find this idea of contraceptive reproducibility affixed to a figure of the sui generis Mother: "Mother, inexhaustible, incorruptible, creator, born first, engendered by yourself, conceived by yourself, issue of yourself alone, you, who pleasures herself, Astarté/O perpetually fecund, o virgin and universal wet-nurse" (CB 137). The apparent oxymoron of fertile sterility resurfaces in other poems in the cycle descriptive of lesbian love-making. "Les Seins de Mnasidika" for example, features Mnasidika making an offering of her breasts to Bilitis in lieu of offspring: "Love them well, she tells me; I love them so! They are dear ones, little children" (CB 101). Bilitis conflates maternal and erotic associations as she vows to play with the little breasts, to wash them with milk and put them to bed in wool blankets. Mnasidika enjoins her lover to become a wet-nurse to her breasts: "Since they are so far from my mouth, kiss them for me," she orders Bilitis (CB 101).

In attempting to pass as the translator of erotic verse by a woman writer, Louÿs, one could argue, was to fin-de-siècle France what Kenneth Rexroth was to postwar America. In much the same way as his decadent forbear, Rexroth, the proto-beat poet, introduced the voice of a Japanese woman author by the name of Marichiko in an anthology that he edited, titled *One Hundred More Poems from the Japanese* (1974). Rexroth was active as a translator from the earliest stages of his literary career until the end, publishing collections of translations that included: *100 Poems from the Chinese*; *Love and the Turning Year: 100 More Poems from the Chinese*; *The Orchid Boat: the Women Poets of China* (with Ling Chung); *Poems from the Greek Anthology*; *100 Poems from the Japanese*; *100 More Poems from the Japanese*; *30 Spanish Poems of Love and Exile*; and *Selected Poems of Pierre Reverdy*. He apparently had serviceable knowledge of Chinese and Japanese, and worked in close collaboration with native speakers whose technical renderings provided the grist for his own compositional arrangements.

When it came to publishing these collaboratively produced translations under his own name, Rexroth seems to have evinced no qualms. In a preface to the first anthology of Japanese poems, he gave the impression that he was the sole translator: "In my own translations I have tried to interfere as little as possible with

the simplicity of the Japanese text. . . . Some of my versions manage with considerably fewer syllables than the originals. On the other hand, I have not sacrificed certain Japanese ornaments which some have considered nonsense or decorative excrescences."¹³ Characterizing his translations as literal, in the manner of Arthur Waley, Rexroth assures the reader that his respect for the poems has allowed him to preserve the integrity of the original Japanese in American English. Of course, there was nothing particularly unusual, especially at the time, for a poet-translator to take full credit for a translation that was only partly his or her own. But what makes such credit-grabbing stand out in hindsight is that it attests to a cavalier attitude toward authorship that was later confirmed by Rexroth's publication of his own "translations" under Marichiko's phantom imprimatur.

Rexroth's biographer Linda Hamalian treats the Marichiko hoax as a career curiosity rather than as a scandal of authorial counterfeit:

In the last decades of his life, Rexroth did a very curious thing: he published a book of his own poems but identified them as translations from the work of Marichiko, "the pen name of a contemporary young woman who lives near the temple of Marishi-ben in Kyoto." Marishi-ben is patron goddess of geisha, prostitutes, women in childbirth, and lovers. At first, he tried to fool his readers, his publishers and his friends into believing the writer actually existed. In the Marichiko poems, he explored every aspect of what he imagined to be one woman's psyche in order to come to terms with how he as a man who had professed great love for women, could at last acquire a rudimentary understanding of woman's nature.¹⁴

In his monograph, *Revolutionary Rexroth: Poet of East-West Wisdom*, Morgan Gibson glides over the question of the unacknowledged "invention," preferring to frame the Marichiko poems as Rexroth's way of paying tribute to Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), famous for her sexually daring love poetry and often deemed to be "the greatest woman poet of modern Japan."¹⁵ Noting the narrative parallels in the Marichiko cycle to "a Tantric parable of contemplative ecstasy, in which the goddess Marishiben unites with Buddha," Gibson reads the Marichiko poems as Rexroth's most successful representation of feminine "erotic enlightenment" (RR 84).

It remains to be seen whether Rexroth's "feminist" justification for his specious translation is particularly convincing. Some would say he used feminism opportunistically as cover for the expropriation of feminine literary voice, or as a means of eluding the radar of erotic censorship. Certainly Rexroth's performance of gender ventriloquism has been construed by his critics as a self-serving effort to whitewash his reputation as a predator on female students and admirers. However Rexroth's motivations are hypothetically construed, it is striking that he and Louÿs, both identified with two of the most flagrant cases of pseudotranslation, would adopt the genre of feminine erotic verse for their exercises in literary travesty.

Detection of Rexroth's forgery becomes easier the more closely the poems are examined. Superficial similarities can be found between a Yosano Akiko and a Marichiko poem: a shared hair motif, for example, allows parallels to be drawn

between Akiko's "Hair unbound, in this / Hothouse of lovemaking, / Perfumed with lilies, / I dread the oncoming of / The pale rose of the end of night," and Marichiko's "I cannot forget / The perfumed dusk inside the / Tent of my black hair, / As we awoke to make love / After a long night of love," which Rexroth writes disingenuously in a footnote "echoes Yosano Akiko."¹⁶ Further consideration, however, reveals the sexual realism of the Marichiko texts to be more graphic, more prone to Orientalist kitsch. Marichiko's verse XXXII grafts the decorative imagery of *japonisme* (flowers, boats) onto an explicit sex scene: "I hold your head tight between / My thighs, and press against your / Mouth and float away / Forever, in an orchid / Boat on the River of Heaven" (FWH 123). By contrast, an Akiko poem favors metaphorical reticence: "Press my breasts, / Part the veil of mystery, / A flower blooms there, / Crimson and fragrant" (OHM 16). Akiko's poems draw a distinct line around the autonomous object, as in this stripped-down image of a deserted boat symbolizing an abandoned woman: "Left on the beach / Full of water, / A worn out boat / Reflects the white sky / Of early autumn" (OHM 11). Rexroth's pastiche breaks down the isolationism of the lyrical "I," introducing pronominal games with gender and identity, that, knowing what we do now about the false identity of Marichiko, read like embedded clues:

Who is there? Me.
Me who? I am me, you are you.
But you take my pronoun,
And we are us. (FWH 116)

On close scrutiny the Marichiko poems fall apart as credible simulations of Japanese women's writing. But why should this matter if the Marichiko texts stand up as aesthetic artifacts in their own right? What difference does it make whether the Marichiko texts are received as genuine translations or as pseudo-translations that successfully advance the creative use of literary *japonisme* in western literature, and which place Rexroth in a continuum of distinguished writers—Mallarmé, Arthur Waley, Victor Segalen, Lafcadio Hearn, Ernest Fenellosa, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Henri Michaud, and Wallace Stevens—all of whom used literary Orientalism as a springboard to modernism and wrenched *japonisme* from the clutches of bad translation? (In a lecture on "The Influence of Classical Poetry on Modern American Poetry," Rexroth placed the brunt of blame for this tradition of infelicitous Japanese translation on the poet Sada-kichi Hartmann, who may have been "a bohemian of bohemians," and a "wise and witty man," but who was ultimately responsible for "a long tradition of vulgarization and sentimentalization of Japanese classical poetry in translation.")¹⁷

Rexroth loyalists have located him squarely in this modernist tradition as a transitional figure between the early twentieth century modernists and the Beats. The Marichiko poems may fail the authenticity test but, so this version of the story goes, they are acquitted by virtue of their adherence to Rexroth's iconoclastic philosophy of translation. A good translation, he held, should not be hobbled by fidelity to the original, but rather, motivated by "advocacy": "The ideal translator, he wrote in "The Poet as Translator," "is not engaged in matching the words of a text with the words of his own language. He is hardly even a

proxy, but rather an all-out advocate. His job is one of special pleading. So the prime criterion of successful poetic translation is assimilability. Does it get across to the jury?"¹⁸ This idea of a translation as a reception-driven "case" to be made in court is complemented by a principle of translational vivacity. H.D.'s poem "Heliadora" is exemplary, because instead of "being" translation, it is, rather, "of" translation, demonstrating "the poignancy of that feeling of possession and the glamour of the beautiful Greek words as they come alive in one's very own English" (PT 22 and 26). For Rexroth, how the text communicates translational aliveness is far more important than whether or not the text accurately translates from Meleager's Greek original. Truth value is supplanted by performative value. Having shifted the ethical imperatives of translation in this way, Rexroth inadvertently clears the way for authorizing the Marichiko poems as examples of alive translation.

Of course, reading the Marichiko poems on Rexroth's terms sidesteps the larger issue of what it means for a translator to pass as a native speaker. Was Rexroth covertly sending up the reader's transference relation to cultural affect, concentrated in a fetishism of the aesthetic codes of japonisme (haiku-esque brevity, blank spaces, ellipsis, understatement, imagism)? Was he using this exercise in textual counterfeit to reveal the reader's profound investment in conquering the other's language without actually having to learn it? However one might choose to answer these questions, the hoax illuminates the extent to which translation caters to the fantasy of having access to the foreignness of a language without the labor of the language lab.

The revelation of translational false coin leaves the reader aware of the dimension of epistemological scam or faked-up alterity inherent in all translation. The translation business is geared to keeping this scam from view, for it wants to convince readers that when it markets an author in translation, the translated text will be a truly serviceable stand-in for the original; affording a genuine translinguistic encounter with a foreign literature in the language of self-same. But cases of pseudotranslation reveal the fundamental unreliability of a translation's claim to approximating the original in another tongue.

According to this reading, the Rexroth case is scandalous not just by dint of its cultural appropriationism or caricatural Orientalism, but because it reveals the extent to which all translations qualify as a form of linguistic forgery. The implied ethics of translation presupposes a contract holding between reader and translator whereby the former assumes the good faith effort of the latter to deliver an authentic copy of the original. In breaching that contract, Louÿs and Rexroth exposed the ways in which all translators are to some extent counterfeit artists, experts at forgeries of voice and style.

TRANSLATION AS TEXTUAL CLONING

The Rexroth hoax, on first reading, highlights the case of translation as cultural forgery. But the forgery model—drawing on analogies to the connoisseurial practice of authentication—tends to reduce complex conceptual distinctions be-

tween plagiarism, counterfeit, and copy to a familiar discussion of “autographic” authenticity. According to Nelson Goodman, “a work of art is defined as ‘autographic’ if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine.”¹⁹ In the Rexroth case, where there is an “autographic” reproduction of an *absent original*, the forgery model breaks down. What might be substituted in its stead is a genetic model of textual reproducibility that defines the translation as the clone of a clone (or clone of a code), that has effectively severed its primordial connection to an original subjective signature. At issue here is the way in which the notion of originality is complicated by what scientists have referred to as replication parameters. These become clear in questions around whether a program that reproduces daughter programs (as in the case of the Tierra program, “born” of the “Ancestor” computer code 85), should be considered a form of life, or whether the notion of original life should be strictly reserved for metabolizing cells whose DNA is replicated in the clone. In fabricating a text out of the codes of “Japanese-ness”-in-translation, Rexroth, I would submit, experimented with the literary equivalent of cloning from code.

Reading the Marichiko poems as models of genetic reproduction without origin points to the way in which Rexroth’s very notion of poetic creation was entwined with theories of eschatology, parthenogenesis, metempsychosis, and reincarnation. During the early 1940s Rexroth immersed himself in the writings of Meister Eckehart, English mystics of the late Middle Ages, St. John of the Cross, Ouspensky, Madame Blavatsky, and Jacob Boehme’s *The Signature of All Things* (the title of which Rexroth took over for one of his own collections of poetry). According to Linda Hamalian: “Since childhood Rexroth had experienced ‘occasional moments of vision . . . momentary flashes of communion with others’ where time and space did not exist” (H 125). This passion for Western mysticism provided a natural transition to Zen Buddhism. Rexroth discovered Arthur Waley’s *The Way and Its Power*, Chinese Taosim, Tantric Buddhism, hatha and kundalini yoga (H 125). The title poem of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*—the culminating masterwork of this period—is imbued with hybrid mysticism: the poetic subject acts as a conduit channeling the spirits of “ruined polities,” from ancient Greece to the shores of California, where the body of a dead Japanese sailor has washed up, confirming fears of what will happen in the internment camps that were set up in California in the wake of Pearl Harbor. The corpse seems to make eye contact with the poet, and as he watches with “open hard eyes,” the poet experiences a shock of self-identification: “Me—who stand here on the edge of death, / Seeking the continuity, / The germ plasm, of history, / The epic’s lyric absolute.”²⁰

Genetic models of textual reproduction might seem far-fetched if it were not for the fact that Rexroth’s own way of describing the creative process were not so eerily compatible with them. In his preamble to *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* he wrote: “I have tried to embody in verse the belief that the only valid conservation of value lies in the assumption of unlimited liability, the supernatural identification of the self with the tragic unity of the creative process. I hope I have made it clear that I do not believe that the Self does this by an act of Will, by sheer assertion. He who would save his life must lose it” (PT 9). The self-

perpetuating force of *bios* is introduced in a literal way as synonymous with poetic reproduction. Rexroth's evocative notion of "unlimited liability" suggests an ethics of responsibility to the future, with poetry operating as agent and guarantor of the work of art's reproducibility. And the phrase "he who would save his life must lose it," while obviously a kind of *tao*, also brings out that aspect of cloning that carries the megalomaniac dream of infinite self-preservation at the expense of an originary, signature identity. Consider, in this regard, an extract from Rexroth's epic poem, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, that defines "the person" as a condition of uniqueness, embodied in perfect surrogacy: "The fulfillment of uniqueness / In perfect identification, / In ideal representation, / As the usurping attorney, / The real and effective surrogate" (PT 19). The mystic self, infinitely iterated through history, is defined here as an original form of futural being whose signature is preserved in a copy or clone, itself characterized legalistically as a "usurping attorney"; a guardian, if you will, of the original trust. In this sense the clone succeeds in leasing rather than appropriating or fully embodying an original subject.

In the introduction to *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, Rexroth also claimed that the poem "proceeds genetically or historically" (PT 9). But the textual genetics described by Rexroth is less like developmental evolution or hereditary transmission, and more like what we might now, in a digital era, call sampling. Rexroth sifts through the classical archive, paraphrasing and pastiching Hellenistic, Byzantine, and Latin Roman sources. Sometimes he draws directly from Martial, at other moments he avowedly treats his source material more freely, inserting paraphrases from antiquity inside larger poems, and allowing the citation pieces to, in a sense, reprogram the new cell into which they have been placed. (As Gina Kolata reminds us: "In cloning, scientists slip a cell from an adult into an egg with its genetic material removed. The egg then reprograms the adult cell's genes so that they are ready to direct the development of an embryo, then a fetus, then a newborn that is genetically identical to the adult whose cell was used to start the process. No one knows how the egg reprograms an adult cell's genes.")²¹ This reprogrammed work, depending on where one stands on the ethics of cloning, could either be condemned as a tissue of plagiarized fragments,²² or hailed as a new translational form that, following Walter Benjamin's ascription, ensures the original's glorious afterlife.

Benjamin's theory suggests that the genetic paradigm extends the view of translation as literary testate or inheritance to a philosophy of writing that defines translation as a mechanism of textual reproducibility. In this scheme, the significance of origins and originality cedes to grander concerns over the work of art's messianic perpetuity. Rexroth's faux Japanese translations, might, in these terms, seem more legitimate: their inauthentic originality deemed the price worth paying for a form of japonisme that bequeathed new life to American poetry. According to this reading, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Cid Corman—all of whom credited Rexroth's Buddhist pseudotranslations as a source of inspiration—spawned the regional/ecological/spiritual aesthetic of California Beat poetry.

The diminished status of originality (long a fixture of avant-garde doctrine or

modernist credos of authorial impersonality), finds a limit case in examples of pseudotranslation in which readers are, in effect, urged to accept the clone of a code as a replacement for the original, or to give up conventional, essentialist notions of what the original “is.” As far as the ethics of translation is concerned, this demotion of originality accords the translator such license that he or she is authorized to invent an extramural or imaginary source. In this way, just as Rexroth ethically sanctioned his transcription of Japanese verse by a poet who never was, so the late James Merrill and his partner David Jackson, dedicated themselves to channeling the voices of those no longer there: Plato, Proust, Auden, Maya Deren, Maria Callas, Rimbaud, and Yeats. Alison Lurie’s *Familiar Spirits: A Memoir of James Merrill and David Jackson* describes the strange, life-long fascination of the pair with the spiritist messages of the Ouija board.²³ Merrill’s magnum opus *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1980) was, in the poet’s own estimation, not a work of self-inspired imaginative lyric, but the most *outré* form of prosopoeia, an address from the dead transcribed “en direct.” Lurie characterizes the way in which the poem “came” to Merrill and Jackson like a set of instructions in code that demanded transcription rather than an act of imaginative translation. For Lurie, this amounts to a downgrading of the poetic, a submission to the prosaic quality of code and a tragic sacrifice of lyrical talent on Merrill’s part.

Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover* constitutes an extreme case of translation without an original; an example of translation as language code transmitted from the beyond, of instructions express-mailed from an untenable source written as master-code or program. The text is rendered through the artificial assistance of the poet, now cast as the genetic engineer or technician whose primary challenge consists in transporting the work to its afterlife (Rimbaud will be rebirthed in T. S. Eliot in the phrase: “YET RIMBAUD? IN HIS GENES WAS A V WORK CUT OFF BY LIFE. . . . Rimbaud ghostwrote ‘The Waste Land’”),²⁴ or in preventing the garbling of instructions. Not unlike the processes of machine translation or digitally created sound; the text code is recorded, unscrambled, and recombined. Consider this excerpt from *Mirabell: Book 2*:

741 now dictates D’s and my
Vastly simplified *Basic Formulas*:
JM: 268/I:1,000,000/5.5/741
DJ: 289/I: 650,000/5.9/741.1 (S 143)

The poet of *Sandover* duly transcribes and decodes these numerological formulas: “Number of previous lives; then ratio / Of animal to human densities.” “At 5.1 Rubenstein, 5.2; Eleanor / Roosevelt, 5.3; and so on. The Sixes are / LINDBERGH PLITSETSKAYA PEOPLE OF PHYSICAL PROWESS / & LEGENDARY HEROES / Characters from fiction and full-fledged / Abstractions came to Victor Hugo’s tables” (S 143). If Victor Hugo is here transcoded as a kind of literary DNA, elsewhere in the *Book of Mirabell*, textual cloning is an explicit trope: “Is DNA, that sinuous molecule, / The serpent in your version of the myth?” (S 119) or “I AM A MERE MIXING AGENT WITH MY SUPERIORS” (S 155) or “CAN IT BE? DO WE FORETELL THE

CLONE?" (S 184). Cloning, in this instance, may be identified as a translational technology that banally reproduces poetic voice (repeating and unscrambling the codes by which it communicates) while providing the latter-day version of aesthetic reincarnation.

In "Task of the Translator," Benjamin defines translatability as "an essential quality of certain works." Certain originals have it—the Bible, Heine, Baudelaire—and others do not. Merrill's *Sandover*, according to Benjaminian criteria, would probably fall well below the bar of a text intrinsically worthy of translational afterlife. But what is perhaps most relevant to the ethics of translation is the way in which Benjamin implicitly devalues the original; suborning the source text (and its privileged status as *primum mobile*) to the translation (now elevated to the position of midwife in the obstetrics of translatability):

It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life.²⁵

Here, it would seem, translation reproduces not an original text, but an afterlife cloned from the (lost) life of the original. In shifting the ethics of translation away from questions of fiability and fidelity (crucial to determinations of pseudo-translation), and toward debates over the conditions of textual reproducibility, Benjamin provides the groundwork for defining translation in its most scandalous form: that is, as a technology of literary replication that engineers textual afterlife without recourse to a genetic origin.²⁶

NOTES

1. Harry Mathews, "The Dialect of the Tribe," in *The Human Country: New and Collected Stories* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), p. 8. Further references to this collection will appear in the text abbreviated HC.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," trans. Alastair Reid, in *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 18.

3. David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

4. Umberto Eco, *Serendipities. Language and Lunacy*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 80–81.

5. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002). The parts of the novel written in "translatese" are both weird and funny. English takes on the quality of a language learned word by word out of the dictionary rather than holistically. The narrator's diction, when not in flagrant violation of good grammar, opens up a

world of linguistic possibility precisely because it is off. “In Russian, he writes, my ideas are asserted abnormally well, but my second tongue is not so premium. I undertook to input the things you counseled me to, and I fatigued the thesaurus you presented me, as you counseled me to, when my words appeared too petite or not befitting. If you are not happy with what I have performed, I command you to return it back to me. I will persevere to toil on it until you are appeased” (p. 23).

6. The work of rethinking the terms of translation studies is, of course, well underway. The ethical considerations I am raising here are indebted to Lawrence Venuti’s work, particularly his book *The Scandals of Translation*.

7. Douglas Robinson, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ed. Mona Baker (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 183.

8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also drawn out the category of translation as a “life” code. In *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), she refers to the “irreducible work of translation, not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis, that incessant shuttle is a ‘life.’” In an earlier essay, “Translation as Culture,” quoted in *Death of a Discipline*, she uses psychoanalysis—specifically Melanie Klein’s theory of the good and bad object—as the basis for a theory of translation that in turn affords a digital model of conscience:

The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things. This grabbing (*begreifen* as in *das Begriff* or concept) of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a “translation.” In this never-ending shuttle, violence translates into conscience and vice versa. From birth to death this “natural” machine, programming the mind perhaps as genetic instructions program the body (where does body stop and mind begin?) is partly metapsychological and therefore outside the grasp of the mind. (pp. 13–14)

9. Jean-Paul Goujon, *Pierre Louÿs, Une vie secrète (1870–1925)* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1988), p. 90. All further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated PL.

10. Rémy de Gourmont, in a letter to Louÿs of January 7, 1899, as cited by Jean-Paul Goujon in his edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis (Avec divers textes inédits)* [Paris: Gallimard, 1990], p. 332). Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated CB. The original French reads: “Une manière personnelle c’est-à-dire nouvelle de sentir une vieille poésie grecque pleine même d’idées et d’images passées dans le domaine commun peut donner à cette poésie une beauté qu’elle n’avait plus et qu’elle n’as pas quand elle est sentie et traduite par un médiocre professeur.”

11. “Je voudrais que cette histoire fût celle de Bilitis, car, en traduisant ses *Chansons*, je me suis mis à aimer l’amie de Mnasidika. Sans doute sa vie fut toute aussi merveilleuse. Je regrette seulement qu’on n’en ait pas parlé davantage et que les auteurs anciens, ceux du moins qui ont survécu, soient si pauvre de renseignements sur sa personne. Philodème, qui l’a pillée deux fois, ne mentionne pas même son nom” (CB 35).

12. In a letter of December 22, 1897 Louÿs wrote: “jusqu’ici les lesbiennes étaient toujours représentées comme des femmes fatales.” As cited by Jean-Paul Goujon in his preface to *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, p. 14.

13. Kenneth Rexroth, ed. and trans., *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese* (New York: New Directions, 1955), p. x.

14. Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), p. 252. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated H.

15. Morgan Gibson, *Revolutionary Rexroth: Poet of East-West Wisdom* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986), p. 82. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated RR.

16. Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred More Poems from the Japanese* (New York: New Directions Books, 1974), p. 9, and Kenneth Rexroth, *Flower Wreath Hill: Later Poems* (New York: New Directions Books, 1974), pp. 124 and 143. Further references to these works will appear in the text abbreviated OHM and FWH, respectively.

17. Kenneth Rexroth, "The Influence of Classical Japanese Poetry on Modern American Poetry" (1973), in *The World Outside the Window*, ed. Bradford Morrow (New York: New Directions Books, 1987), p. 268. Rexroth wrote:

The translations and imitations of Yone Noguchi and Lafcadio Hearn, and of E. Powys Mathers, from the French, were considerably better, yet no better than the best sentimental verse of the first years of the twentieth century. They established Japan in the literary imagination as a reverse image of America, a society whose system of values had been moved through the fourth dimension so that left was right and up was down. Japan became a dream world in the metaphorical sense—a world of exquisite sensibility, elaborate courtesy, self-sacrificing love, and utterly anti-materialistic religion, but a dream world in the literal sense, too, a night-side life where the inadequacies and frustrations of the American way of life were overcome, the repressions were liberated and the distortions were healed. This isn't Japan any more than materialist, money-crazy America is America, but like all stereotypes some of the truth can be fitted into it. (p. 268)

18. Kenneth Rexroth, "The Poet as Translator," in *Assays* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), p. 19.

19. Richard Wollheim, "Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*," in *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 291.

20. Kenneth Rexroth, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944), p. 14. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated PT.

21. Gina Kolata, "Researchers Find Big Risk of Defect in Cloning Animals," *The New York Times* (March 25, 2001), p. 1.

22. In a 1948 letter to James Laughlin, his editor at New Directions: "I am working on the Chinese & Japanese poetry book—I think we will have an incomparably better book than anyone else. I plan to translate from [Judith] Gautier (use [Stuart] Merrill for her) and to translate from French versions of IndoChinese poetry. . . . You have some sort of block re the orient. You have no idea of how popular such subjects are in universities now." This remark to Laughlin is interesting not just because it identifies the cultural provincialism and distinct lack of interest in non-Western literature that prevailed in American letters in 1948, but also because it provides rather concrete evidence of what we are associating with textual cloning. For this letter comes accompanied by an editorial note citing Laughlin's "discovery" "of the source of KR's first Japanese and Chinese translations, rather to his chagrin." Laughlin, according to his own account, noticed marked similarities between Rexroth's Chinese and Japanese translations and French translations from the 1890s that were included in Judith Gautier's *Livre de Jade*, and later carried over into Stuart Merrill's anthology *Pastels in Prose. Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, ed. Lee Bartlett (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), p. 121.

23. Alison Lurie, *Familiar Spirits: A Memoir of James Merrill and David Jackson* (New York: Viking, 2001).

24. James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 217. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated S.

25. Benjamin, "Task of the Translator," p. 71.

26. Jacques Derrida's famous reading of Benjamin's translation theory, titled "Des Tours de Babel" engages the problem of afterlife as "sur-vie," a problem to which he returns in depth in an essay titled "Living On," devoted to Blanchot's "Arrêt de Mort" ("Death Sentence." See, Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 209–48).