8 Sublimating Sorrow

How to Embrace Contradiction in Translating the “Li Sao”

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Abstract

Focusing on Qu Yuan, known as “China’s first poet” (even though his life in the Kingdom of Chu predates the empire), this essay argues that the translator should not assume that the *li* of Qu’s “Li sao” always means either “to depart” or “to encounter,” but look for translation strategies that embrace the contradiction. This exemplifies an approach to the translation of poetry that will allow for or indeed invite a “double exposure,” a dialectical movement between different modes of interpretation.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, translation, Qu Yuan, auto-antonym, Hegel

in the bright wrinkle of a stretch of water the double exposure of his and your
footsteps a shaft of light tests the age of the ancestral hall
like the fire pit sentenced to a single lifelong last gasp
twilight is a tenseless opus too
burying his mitre scimitar orchids gorgeous poems
tinkling of jade pendants buried in the muddy shore that pillowed you
does childhood imply millennia? ...

一道水的明亮皺褶裡疊印他和你的
腳步 一道光檢測者祖屋的老
像被判決終身奄奄一息的火塘
暮色也是件沒有時態的作品
把他的高冠 長劍 蘭蕙 華章

玉珮之叮噹 埋進你枕著的泥岸
 小時候意味著幾千年? ...

– Yang Lian 楊煉

from *Narrative Poem* (2017, 132-133), translated by Brian Holton

Yang Lian's recently translated *Narrative Poem* (敘事詩) is a book-length poem cycle organized largely around different moments of Yang's own life. In one section entitled "History Elegy" (歷史哀歌), though, Yang instead selects seven pivotal moments in the lives of historical figures from China and abroad, ranging from general and historian Thucydides to cellist Pablo Casals. The first of the seven figures is the ancient Chinese poet Qu Yuan 屈原, and the poem dealing with him is entitled "Qu Yuan, 283 BC, the 15th year of King Qingxiang of Chu" (屈原, 楚頃襄王十五年). The date 283 BCE corresponds to the date when, according to one of the key twentieth-century Qu Yuan scholars, Jiang Liangfu 姜亮夫, Qu drowned himself in the Miluo River. The quotation above is merely the opening of a complex forty-six-line composition that reflects on Qu's death as a "double exposure" with another, present-day figure, perhaps the poet himself. Here the "scimitar," "orchids," "gorgeous poems," and "jade pendants" are all items closely associated with the romantic poet Qu Yuan, while the rhetorical question that follows them – "does childhood imply millennia?" – is Yang Lian himself pondering the difference between ages within a single person's life, and different lifetimes in different epochs.

Or so it would seem. One tension in the bilingual edition, between the poem itself and the translator's footnote to the poem, complicates this picture. Holton, citing the classic translation of Qu Yuan's poems by David Hawkes, provides a one-sentence biographical summary with the parenthetical dates: "*fl.* 4th-3rd century BC." So did Qu drown himself in 283 BCE or not? No early source provides any specific date, so modern Chinese scholars have offered a range of hypotheses, while Western and Japanese scholars prefer to see Qu as a semi-mythical figure, not necessarily the author of all or any of the poems attributed to him. We could understand this disparity in scholarly paradigms via the modern cult of Qu in the twentieth century, which is closely tied to the rise of Chinese nationalism; or via the opposing biases of non-Chinese scholars that lead them towards a skeptical stance regarding the historicity of key Chinese culture heroes like the Duke of Zhou, Confucius, and Qu Yuan.¹ This debate continues in the discrepancy

1 I specify the *modern* cult of Qu Yuan because the emphasis on authorial dating is only in part an organic extension from Chinese tradition; it also derives its motivation from Western

between Yang's specific dating in his poem and Holton's agnostic footnote to his translation of the same poem.

Regardless of one's answer to this kind of historical question, the stance we choose is important and affects our approach to translation. As a sinologist trained in America, my sympathies lie primarily with Hawkes, Holton, and their kin in Japan and the West, but as a lover of poetry I'm reluctant to quibble with Yang Lian. Should we read Chinese poems as historical documents of their author's time and place? Or should we remain skeptical of their authenticity, as evidence of some broader kind of mythical *Weltanschauung* that can be attributed to a range of centuries? How many thousands of years, though, are implied by a poem? Perhaps, as Yang Lian suggests, the answer is not going to be any particular approach but rather a "double exposure," a dialectical movement between different modes of interpretation. In the case of Qu Yuan and his poems, this would mean allowing at some level for the coexistence of both man and myth, seeing the uncertainty of Qu's biography and reception not as a crux to be resolved, but as a pivot by which to convey the multiplicity of historical experience.

For the uncertainty about Qu Yuan's biography is only in part an artifact of historical change and the disparity of modern scholarly assumptions. There is a real ambiguity embedded in the text of his most famous poem, the "Li sao" (離騷), from the *Chuci* (楚辭, Elegies of Chu): the poem can be – indeed, often has been – read as a suicide note, or as a declaration of his determination to become a Daoist recluse, or as lacking any definite motive altogether. Moreover, the ambiguity begins with the very title of the poem, as the character *li* 離 has at least two diametrically opposite significations: "to depart" or "to encounter." It continues through the body of the poem itself, where *li* recurs some twelve times. The gap between these two senses is a kind of microcosm of different approaches to the poem as a whole, as well as to Qu Yuan's biography, and even to Chinese tradition in general. None of the tensions or contradictions is resolved in the "Li sao" or in its reception history, so in translating the poem the best option is to engage and to represent the contradictions themselves, with some help from G. W. F. Hegel.

historicism and the cult of individuality, instantiated in such artifacts of contemporary culture as the Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act or the author-date citation system. For alternative conceptions of the authorial role see Barthes 1977, Lessig 2005, or, for the medieval Chinese case, Williams 2015.

The meaning of *li* in the title “Li sao”

The first extant interpretation of the title is in Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (145-86 BCE) biography of Qu Yuan in the *Shiji* (史記, Historical Records), in an unusual passage that appears to be quoting another source. It follows the very brief account of how the talented young Qu was at first a successful advisor to King Huai 懷 of Chu, but later was “estranged” (疏) after suffering the slander of his jealous colleagues (Sima 1959, 84.2482).² It glosses “Li sao” as *li you* 離憂, recapitulating the ambiguity with the same word plus a synonym. On the other hand, the text goes on in a philosophical vein:

Qu Ping [i.e. Qu Yuan] followed the righteous path without deviation, and fulfilled the utmost of loyalty and intelligence in service to his lord. When slanderers created a divide between them, he must surely have been desperate. To be loyal but face suspicion, faithful yet endure slander, how can one be without resentment? Qu Ping composed the “Li sao” out of resentment over his own life ... What the text refers to may be minor, but its significance is extremely great; though it introduces categories that are nearby, they reveal meanings that are far-reaching. Qu Yuan's aspirations are immaculate, so the objects referred to are fragrant; his actions incorrupt, so he would die rather than make concessions. Estranging himself, so that rather than bathing in the muck or bemiring himself in the mud, he molted like a cicada departing from filth and pollution, so as to soar free beyond dust and dirt; thus he did not suffer the contamination or befouling of the world, but rose immaculate from the mire without a stain. When considering such a character as this, we must admit his brilliance was such as to contend with that of the sun and the moon.

屈平正道直行，竭忠盡智以事其君，讒人間之，可謂窮矣。信而見疑，忠而被謗，能無怨乎？屈平之作離騷，蓋自怨生也 ..... 其文約，其辭微，其志絜，其行廉，其稱文小而其指極大，舉類邇而見義遠。其志絜，故其稱物芳。其行廉，故死而不容。自疏，濯淖汙泥之中，蟬蛻於濁穢，以浮游塵埃之外，不獲世之滋垢，皜然泥而不滓者也。推此志也，雖與日月爭光可也。

This passage is by far our earliest dateable and in any sense reliable guide to the “Li sao.” The last few lines are probably from Liu An 劉安 (179-122 BCE),

2 See also the helpful annotated versions Jiang 2002 and Wu 2007, 815-847. Note that these events apparently took place before Qu Yuan's exile.

Prince of Huainan, who wrote a commentary to the poem that is no longer extant (see Fan 1991, 5.45; Jiang 2002, 18). Altogether, Sima Qian and Liu An seem to understand “Li sao” as meaning “departing from one’s troubles,” achieving a higher and more pure state of being. It seems to correspond loosely with the syncretistic thought of the *Huainanzi* (淮南子), compiled under Liu An’s auspices – extolling Confucian virtues, but also aspiring to a Daoist kind of personal purity, even if it requires removing oneself from society altogether. In other words, this earliest explanation of the meaning of “Li sao” turns out not to be a straightforward scholarly gloss, but very much part of the highly ideological interpretation of the poem that follows.

Thus, this gloss preserved in the *Shiji* suggests a more mystical, other-worldly understanding of the “Li sao” than later scholarship, particularly the definitive edition of the “Li sao” dating from the Eastern Han, after the consolidation of Han Confucianism. The preface to the poem in the earliest extant commentary, the *Chuci zhangju* (楚辭章句, Chapter and Verse Commentary to the Elegies of Chu) compiled by Wang Yi 王逸 (c. 89–c. 158), glosses *li* as “parting” 別 and *sao* as “sorrow” 愁, suggesting that the title reads “The Sorrow of Parting” (Hong 2002, 1.2).³ This is hardly authoritative, though, considering that this preface makes the outrageous claim that *jing* 經 in the full title, “Li sao jing” (離騷經), ought to be glossed as its near-homonym “path” 徑 rather than “classic.” Slightly earlier, historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) glossed *li* instead as “encounter” 遭, while following Sima Qian’s gloss of *sao* as *you* 憂 ‘trouble’ or ‘worry’ (quoted in Hong 2002, 1.51). We do not have the full context of Ban Gu’s gloss, since it belongs to a “Preface to the Encomium to the Li sao” (離騷贊序), quoted in Wang Yi’s *Chuci*. Nevertheless, it is Ban Gu’s interpretation that justifies the most common rendering into English of “Encountering Trouble” (as in Hawkes 1985, 67; followed by Wu 2008, 41).⁴

The differences just among these three interpretations are considerable, and may in part be motivated by the political contexts of the interpreters rather than the text. For instance, the primary meaning of *sao* seems to be something like “turbulence,” metaphorically “trouble” or “anxiety.” Its use in the title here can be understood in a psychologized sense of “sorrow,” as with Wang Yi, but also in the more urgent sense of “anxiety” about looming

3 The commentary is a composite work, so it is risky to assume that any particular sentence in it was written by Wang Yi himself. See note 1.

4 Similarly, Mathieu 2004 gives “À la rencontre du chagrin” (440). Redoubtable translators Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys (1822–1892) and Stephen Owen both romanize without offering a translation per se (Hervey 1870; Owen 1996, 162).

disaster that both Ban Gu and Liu An (or Sima Qian) identify in the poem.⁵ The latter emphasis makes it easier to understand “Li sao” within the three-millennium tradition of Chinese poetry about political anxieties, but also removes some of the strange, otherworldly quality which Liu An praised in it.

In interpreting the title as a whole, the character *li* plays the pivotal role. Ban Gu’s first-century CE gloss relies on the homophony of *li* 離 and 罹 ‘to suffer’. This dual meaning of *li* has a long history before the “Li sao” itself (see Wang 2000, s.v. *li*, 1611-1612). *Li* 離 is glossed in the Eastern-Han dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* (說文解字), which does not attempt to provide all the denotations of a word, as “oriole” 離黃 (also known as *canggeng* 倉庚) (Xu 1998, 4A.142b). The graph was then borrowed, apparently, for the homophonous verb *li* ‘to divide, separate’. This verb was appropriate not just for personal but also for political contexts, as in Confucius’s *Analects* (論語) 16/1: “In his own territory there are divisions and downfalls, leavings and separations, and he cannot preserve it” (邦分崩離析而不能守也) (translation modified from Legge 1893, 1:309). Yet also from as early as the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Songs), it possessed the reverse meaning of “encounter, suffer,” with negative implications as in 70/1: “The pheasant got caught in the net” (雉離于羅).

In other words, *li* from the beginning is an auto-antonym. These words occur in languages around the world, as with “cleave” in English, which means either “separate” or “adhere,” not unlike *li* itself. Though the origins of the auto-antonym remain murky, the Freudian interpretation is suggestive. In his classic essay on “The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud discusses how *heimlich* ‘homely’, “is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (2007, 127). He further shows how this development reflects the return of repressed emotion, a phenomenon that may bear some relation to the topic under discussion. Some kind of ambivalence in regard to the primary sense of a term causes its meaning to develop in the opposite direction, but without ever replacing the original meaning entirely.

Though this linguistic phenomenon may be ubiquitous, in the Chinese case the double meanings of *li* and other key words are fundamental to the development of philosophy and literary culture. For instance, the term *luan* 亂 normally means “disorder” but can also mean order, an ambiguity suggesting the way that a state of anarchy determines the foundations of the new order, as in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義). These

5 One should note also the existence of the bold interpretation of the title as equivalent to the musical title “Laoshang” (勞商), forcefully criticized in Jao 2003.

auto-antonyms occur even more frequently throughout the *Book of Changes* (易經). In fact, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910-1998) has cited the polysemy of the *Book of Changes* precisely in order to rebut Hegel's disparagement of the Chinese language as being unphilosophical (Qian 2001, 3-4; see also Zhang 1992, 21). This polysemy begins with the very word *yi* 易 in its title, which can mean "change," "simplicity," or even "non-change." It extends to other vocabulary, such as *ge* 革, used as the name of hexagram 49 of the *Changes*, and originally meaning "leather," a tough material resistant to change; symbolically in the *Changes*, though, it represents total transformation, revolution (Qian 2001, 52).

Thus the philosophical structure of the *Changes* can help us to appreciate the deeper significance of *li* and its polysemy. In particular, *li* could also mean "to attach," in which sense it was equivalent with yet another homophone, *li* 麗.⁶ This is its sense as one of the trigrams in the *Book of Changes*, a broken line intermediating between two whole ones, which is doubled to form hexagram 30, also Li:

The title of this hexagram is rendered by Richard Wilhelm (in Cary Baynes's retranslation) as "The Clinging." Wilhelm explains, "What is dark clings to what is light and so enhances the brightness of the latter," and quotes one of the earliest interpretations of the hexagrams, the "Commentary on the Judgments" (彖傳): "Thus sun and moon cling to heaven, and grain, grass, and trees cling to the earth" (1967, 119; Zhou 2011, 182). In other words, the Li hexagram embodies with special vividness the interdependence of things that is a central message of the *Book of Changes* as a whole.

The text of the full hexagram illustrates the drama that this interdependence entails. On one hand there is the triumphant victory of the righteous leader supported by the forces of light, as in the image text: "That which is bright rises twice: / The image of FIRE. / Thus the great man, by perpetuating this brightness, / Illumines the four quarters of the world" (Wilhelm 1967, 119; Zhou 2011, 182). Yet the middle lines of the hexagram tell of disaster and defeat. The third line reads: "In the light of the setting sun, / Men either beat the pot and sing / Or loudly bewail the approach of old age. / Misfortune"

6 Though *li* 離 is a level-tone word, it has a departing-tone variant, identified by Axel Schuessler as an "exopassive derivation" (2007, 348).

(Wilhelm 1967, 120; Zhou 2011, 184). And in the fourth line: “Its coming is sudden; / It flames up, dies down, and is thrown away” (Wilhelm 1967, 121; Zhou 2011, 184).

These two epigrammatic accounts of elegiac songs and abandoned glories could be summaries of the content of the “Li sao” itself, or translations of that long poem into a haiku-like form. For the “Li sao” is on one hand the first-person narrative of a “madman of Chu” (楚狂人), an exiled courtier singing to himself, primarily of his political woes, but also frequently of transience and the approach of old age. But it is also the heroic epic of a Chinese archetype, the good man whose virtue is only further confirmed by his humiliation and defeat. It is the archetype of Bi Gan ground up into meat paste for his wise counsel to the wicked tyrant of Shang, or Confucius nearing starvation on the road between Chen and Cai. Yet this epic narrative is relatable entirely in terms of the verb *li*: our hero *encounters* suffering, but remains *attached* to principle, and so manages to *depart from* his trouble and overcome it, “perpetuating this brightness,” the fire that is the Li trigram itself.

Below I will argue that we should indeed understand the character *li* in the title “Li sao” in both its senses of “depart” and “encounter” simultaneously. These dual senses can also be recognized in its various usages within the text of the poem itself.

The usage of *li* within the “Li sao” poem itself

Looking at the poem as a whole, *li* occurs throughout the text in both these senses as well as others, confirming that its narrative is not exclusively one of passive suffering or of determined departure. Instead, the poem enacts a kind of symbolic resolution between the two poles of opposition and escape.

There is one specific usage of *li* in the poem which is closely parallel to the sense of “encounter” in the title. This occurs towards the end of the long self-introduction that occupies approximately the first third of the poem, before Qu Yuan begins his journeys and encounters various divine or mythical figures. Summing up his troubles, he exclaims (ll. 111-112):

Advancing, I do not enter but only suffer blame –	進不入以離尤兮
Retreating, I will restore again my initial garb ...	退將復脩吾初服

It is worth noting that the grammatical structure makes the identification of the meaning of *li* somewhat redundant. One might just as easily render the first line, “Advancing, I did not enter, in order to avoid blame.” However,

the interpretation of *li* as “suffer” is confirmed by a related usage in another poem in the *Chuci*.⁷

Li is more commonly used as part of the romantic rhetoric that forms such a fascinating, in some ways inexplicable, component of the “*Li sao*.” This seems to be a direct borrowing from the shamanistic lyrics addressed to various ancient divinities, the “Nine Songs” (九歌), but within the longer narrative of the “*Li sao*” it becomes stranger and deeper. Close to the beginning of the poem, for instance, Qu Yuan speaks of “separation” – or perhaps better, “breakup” (ll. 45-48):

At the beginning he had made a pledge to me –	初既與余成言兮
But later resented and evaded me, choosing	後悔遁而有他
another. ⁸	
I do not find this separation itself a hardship –	余既不難夫離別兮
But only grieve for his Divine Consummation’s	傷靈脩之數化
many changes! ⁹	

Or similarly, while Qu Yuan is seeking out the goddess Fufei 宓妃 (perhaps representing an alternative patron in another kingdom?), he complains again (ll. 225-226):

What tumultuous profusion of separations and	紛總總其離合兮
matches –	
Now our dire rift makes it hard to persuade her. ¹⁰	忽緯繡其難遷

There is wide disagreement among commentators about the referent of the first line here, which is repeated verbatim in another context where it refers to celestial forces (see below). It might best be understood as a kind of formula of *Chuci* poetics. The implications of the “separations and matches” are determined by the attributes *fen* 紛 and *zongzong* 總總, which seem to be synonymous here, describing both their frequency and also chaotic quality, as goddess and suitors are alternately separated and reunited.

7 “Rueful Remonstrance” (惜誦) (see Hong 2002, 4.127).

8 Huang 2011 points out that “other” here refers specifically to believing in slander.

9 *Xiu* 修 is one of the keywords of the “*Li sao*.” It can mean simply “long,” but more usually both physical and moral refinement approaching sublimity. Qian Zhongshu distinguishes two senses of “distant worthies” (遠賢) or “refined and pure” (修潔) (2002, 900). I translate it variously below. This proper name (by which Qu Yuan refers to his sovereign) might be rendered more literally “Spirit Sublime” or even “His Sublime Numinosity.”

10 *Weihua* 緯繡 (*waih-wrekh) is an alliterative binome also written 嫵嫵, etc.

Finally, near the conclusion of the journey, Qu Yuan again complains that there is no way to restore a harmonious relationship after divorce (ll. 337-340):

Drive on the flying dragons before me –	為余駕飛龍兮
Combine the carnelian and ivory to make	雜瑤象以為車
my chariot.	
What divided hearts can ever be united? –	何離心之可同兮
I'll travel far off and estrange myself.	吾將遠逝以自疏

In this critical passage, he decides to separate himself entirely from his former home and “estrangle himself” (自疏), precisely the same phrasing that occurred in Liu An’s appraisal of the poem. Thus Liu An’s emphasis on departing, escaping from trouble, is consistent with his overall interpretation of the “Li sao.” The primary theme is about moving away from political turmoil towards another, higher place.

Another passage employs *li* in a similar, though slightly distinct, sense, as in the following speech by Nüxu 女媧 (ll. 133-136):¹¹

Why are you so wholly forthright, so fond of	汝何博謨而好修兮
perfection –	
So magnificently solitary in your comely honor?	紛獨有此姱節
Caseweed, carpetgrass, and cocklebur now fill	賁蓁施以盈室兮
your chamber – ¹²	
Unlike, alone, and apart, you refuse to submit.	判獨離而不服

In this last line *li* is synonymous with the two words in front of it, employing the trope of “triple synonymia” which is quite common in the *Chuci*.¹³

That the word *li* appears quite frequently within the poem is already clear. But it is a long poem, so that a common word would appear five times is not surprising. Still, the following passage where the word appears thrice in rapid succession seems to confirm that the term is indeed a leitmotif in the poem (ll. 201-208):

11 Wang Yi makes the implausible claim that she is Qu Yuan’s sister, but in fact Nüxu simply means a female shaman (shamanka), as in Ban 1962, 63.2760.

12 Wang Yi claims that these are wicked plants. Perhaps they represent simply common weeds. The enumeration of three in a row may be another example of triple synonymia. Alternatively, *ci* 賁 could be a loan graph or miswriting of *zi* 資.

13 Identified in Tang 1984, where it is called *liandie* 聯迭 (346).

I command the Phoenix to fly out ahead –	吾令鳳鳥飛騰兮
And follow it through day and night.	繼之以日夜
The whirlwind gathers itself up and joins together –	飄風屯其相離兮
Leads the clouds and coronas and comes to	帥雲霓而來御
welcome me. ¹⁴	
In tumultuous profusion they split and	紛總總其離合兮
fuse together –	
In their multifarious, iridescent splendor they	斑陸離其上下
rise and plummet.	
I command the High Lord's watchman to	吾令帝閭開關兮
release the lock –	
He leans on Heaven's Gate and stares at me.	倚闔闔而望予

Note that line 205, 紛總總其離合兮, is duplicated verbatim in line 225, discussed above. Here, though, since it seems to describe the celestial forces, I translate *lihe* 離合 as “split and fuse together” rather than as “separations and matches.”

All three usages of *li* are distinct. First, *li* is most likely intended in the same sense as in the *Book of Changes*, as “clinging”; second, in the compound with *he* it certainly means “separation”; finally, it appears as one element of the alliterative binome *luli* 陸離. This same binome occurs early in the poem as well, where it describes the splendor of Qu Yuan's adornments (ll. 117-118):

High stands my crown, poised precipitously –	高余冠之岌岌兮
Broad sweep my pendants in iridescent splendor.	長余佩之陸離

This final usage is not technically a usage of the same word; it may simply be a loan of the graph *li* to write the second component of another word. Whatever the linguistic relationship, within the composition of a poem the reuse of the same graph seems significant. Likewise, a final usage of *li* is in the name of an aromatic plant, 江離 ‘river lovage’. This plant appears twice in the poem, close to the beginning (l. 11) and near the conclusion (l. 324). In this case *li* certainly represents a different word, *li* 離, but again the graphical echo is significant, particularly as this is one of Qu Yuan's avatar-like aromatics. “Lovage” is a fitting translation not just botanically but also etymologically, since it derives from “love-ache,” parallel to the paronomastic usage of *li* as the “flower of separation” in Chinese.

14 For the usage of *yu* 御 (often read *yà* in this sense), see *Shijing*, 12/1.

One further piece of evidence is helpful. Though the authorship and dating of all the poems traditionally attributed have rightly been contested, or at least qualified, in modern scholarship, it is reasonably clear that beyond the “Li sao” itself, one of the pieces most likely to date to the earliest stratum of the anthology, and that most closely associated to the historical Qu Yuan, is “Embracing the Sand” (懷沙), whose text is quoted in its entirety in Sima Qian’s biography of Qu. That poem employs the word *li* twice, both times as part of the compound *li min* 離愍 ‘meeting with melancholy’ (ll. 8 and 55). In both cases *li* can only be understood as “suffer, endure.”

This examination of the usage of *li* in the “Li sao” is broadly consistent with the complex meanings of the word itself. The two senses of “suffer, meet with” and of “separate from, depart” are both in active use, both inescapable elements of the word’s meaning. Beyond those two senses, though, *li* is also employed in a range of complementary ways, as an herb emblematic of Qu Yuan’s virtue, in its *Changes* sense of “attaching,” and also as part of a binome descriptive of beautiful appearance. In nearly every case within the text of the poem, *li* has to be translated differently. Even within the single repeated line (205/225) it should be translated in two different ways based on the different subjects.

The varying usages of *li* correspond to the countless transformations of the poem’s narrative itself, in which the political, religious, and romantic threads all interweave with one another. Qing critic Qu Fu 屈復 already remarked on the “stylistic transformations” (文法變換) of the poem’s long narrative: “In the several sections on searching for a bride, the style is transformed. First he seeks her but finds no one, then he meets someone but ultimately is separated from her” (2014, 1.17a/b). It is a fundamental technique of the poem to present its narrative in multiple stages, with declaration, journey, or dialogue gradually evolving into the next one, which presents a different perspective on Qu Yuan’s fate. On a lesser scale, the leitmotif of *li* itself transforms throughout the poem, being used to describe both Qu’s sufferings and his escape.

Li and aufheben

I can think of no word in English that could capture each of the senses of *li* effectively throughout the poem, as well as in its title. In German, however, there is at least one word that can be used to capture the internal tension of *li* itself, the self-contradictory significations of “departing” and “encountering” – this is the verb *aufheben*, or its nominal form *Aufhebung*, used in the

philosophical writings of Hegel. As Hegel explains in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*), “*Aufheben* brings out and lays bare its true twofold meaning which we found contained in the negative: to *aufheben* is at once to negate and to preserve” (translation follows J. B. Baillie in Hegel 1910 [163-164], but replaces his translations of *aufheben* with the word itself).¹⁵ It is important to note that *aufheben* is not originally a technical term, but an ordinary German verb whose meanings can include “to pick up,” “to preserve,” or “to cancel.” Hegel’s wordplay has transformed its meaning, though, so that the word has become a major concept of Western thought ever since. Hegel’s usage is technical and metaphysical; he speaks, for instance, of the task of “actualizing the universal, and giving it spiritual vitality, by the process of breaking down and superseding (*aufheben*) fixed and determinate thoughts” (Hegel 1910, 94). He employs *aufheben* throughout his *Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der Logik*) as well, and it is a key part of his whole method of dealing with concepts through qualification and negation, using his analysis of a given concept to move forward onto another, contrary one.

This may seem unrelated to the “*Li sao*,” which, though it has its reflective moments, is not a philosophical poem; but the similarity is not so much one of content as a formal one regarding the usage of the word *li*. Like *aufheben*, it is a common and not particularly striking word, but Qu Yuan’s creative, dual employment of the word achieves an effect parallel to that of *aufheben* in Hegel’s work. Translator Baillie there finds the word challenging enough that he renders it variously, often by paraphrases like “breaking down and superseding.” Like *li*, it seems to reach out in opposite directions that are unlikely to be suggested by a single word.

It would probably not be effective to use the German *aufheben* itself in an English translation of Chinese poetry today (though it would not have exceeded the creative scope of Ezra Pound). Nor would it be effective to adopt the standard English translation of the term, the awkward and rare English *sublate*, which is confusing in that its meaning is to “take away” and its etymological sense “to take down,” both of which are purely negative. A better choice is *sublimate*. Sublimation implies a change of state that destroys the original (as in the sublimation of a solid into a gas) and in the process elevates it into a higher state, making it sublime. It is no significant objection to point out that Hegel could have used the German

15 The German text reads: “Das Aufheben stellt seine wahrhafte gedoppelte Bedeutung dar, welche wir an dem Negativen gesehen haben; es ist ein Negieren und ein Aufbewahren zugleich” (Hegel 1968, 72).

Sublimierung but did not, because it was one of Hegel's avowed goals to write philosophy using Germanic terms, so he preferred the colloquial *aufheben* over the Latinate *sublimieren*. In English, by contrast, Latinate terms are common, and *sublimate* is not overly technical. It has in fact been popularized post-Hegel through its usage in the works of Freud, so much so that it is necessary to keep in mind that its Hegelian sense is different and more abstract than the psychological sense of Freud. With this point in mind, though, it is a more natural and appealing rendering of *aufheben* than the alternatives in English.¹⁶

It might seem at first that *sublimate* is overreading the *li* of the “Li sao,” but if so, it is overreading in a very traditional way. For, as shown above, Liu An's interpretation of the poem, with its aspiration for Daoist purity, suggests already this sense of transcending worldly experience to attain something higher, just as a sublimation in the Hegelian sense is a negation that also attains a loftier goal (in a philosophical sense). This reading is a bit different from the dominant, politicized account of the poem, but it fits rather well with the ending, in which Qu Yuan chooses to “follow Peng Xian” (彭咸). As several modern scholars have shown, this is probably not a single Shang nobleman who drowned himself, as Wang Yi would have it, but rather two ancient shaman-heroes, Peng and Xian.¹⁷ For instance, the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas) mentions both of these separately as the names of shamans (Yuan 1993, 7.200, 11.263; see also Williams 2018). In this sense, then, “Sublimating Sorrow” is not just a fitting rendering of the two characters *li sao*, but also a better description of the poem's contents than the alternatives.

Nor is this the first time that a translator has opted to follow Hegel in prioritizing the self-contradictory over the narrowly semantic. Jacques Derrida in his revelatory essay “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” argues for translating the verb “seasons,” in Portia's famous speech on the “quality of mercy” from *The Merchant of Venice*, as “relève,” precisely by reference to Hegel's *Aufhebung* (Derrida 2001, 196). For when Portia asserts that “mercy seasons justice,” Derrida argues, mercy is both a relief, a relaxation, but also a lifting-up and exaltation, thus employing both senses of *relever*: “Mercy is a *relève*, it is in its essence an *Aufhebung*. It is translation as well. In the horizon of expiation, redemption, reconciliation, and salvation” (Derrida 2001, 197).

16 Garrett Green uses “sublimation” for *Aufhebung* in his translation of Barth 2006. He has a convincing defense of this choice in his “Translator's Preface” (ix), which I have borrowed here.

17 This was already appreciated before the twentieth century. Yu Yue pointed out that Peng Xian “cannot be identified” 無可考 (1902, 1b). See overview in Chan 1972, 132–136.

Following both Hegel and Derrida, then, the double meaning here is not an abstract play on words, but a matter of justice and expiation, of death and reconciliation. Hegel's understanding of philosophy is as an activity that ends up fulfilling its own ambitions only by using itself and passing on into another mode of existence: "But the life of the mind is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being. It only wins to its truth when it finds itself utterly torn asunder" (Hegel 1910, 93). His grandiose and totalizing rhetoric is not a bad match for Qu Yuan, who says (l. 84): "Though I face nine deaths yet will I never repent!" (雖九死其猶未悔).

Double exposures

Dealing with complex words is not just a technical problem, but also a matter of dealing with intellectual and spiritual contradictions. The ambiguity of the word *li* can be represented lexically by recourse to Hegelian *Aufhebung*, in its anglicization of *sublimate*. But this is just one step in dealing with the manifold contradictions of the text, such as alternations between the shamanistic and the political, or the literal and allegorical planes. The "Li sao" makes calculated use of lexical ambiguity, as of other poetic tropes, in order to place in productive tension multiple dimensions of reality. These tensions and ambiguities cannot be resolved by translation, only represented by creative translation practices that mimic their complexity using all the intellectual tools at our disposal, from horticulture to dialectics.

The second character in the title "Li sao," for instance, originally has a physical sense of "turbulence." According to Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735-1815), it becomes interchangeable with *you* 憂 because they share a rhyme group, and also "because turbulence brings about worry" (騷動則生憂也) (Xu 1998, 10A.467b). That is to say, *sao* actually has both physical and psychological referents which are intimately linked. Translating the title as "Sublimating Sorrow" does not do justice to these other implications. On the other hand, taking into account the alternate sense of *li* suggested by its usage in l. 136, discussed above, parallel with 判獨 'unlike, alone', one might render the title as a hendiadys, "Division and Discord." Even though the emphasis of the title is on *li*, and "Sublimating Sorrow" seems to me to strike the right balance, identifying these intriguing alternatives is an important stage in the process of translation as well. A translation, ideally, goes well beyond selecting among alternative possibilities, and aims to represent multiple levels of signification from the source text; the representation of multiple

possibilities may not be comprehensive, but that is not so much a problem of translation as of the limits of interpretation itself.

In general, translation can benefit from more explicit and engaged negotiation with linguistic norms, treating the denotations of words more as sociopolitical compromises than as objective facts. The conceptual motion inherent in the word *li* cannot be captured statically; in responding to the multidimensional quality of classical Chinese, we ought to employ a range of different translation strategies, and reject a foolish consistency. Scholarly translators of classical Chinese texts, whether historical, philosophical, or literary, sometimes propose to translate a single Chinese word in the same way throughout a given work. This approach is fine, maybe even desirable, for legal documents, obviously, and perhaps for some relatively inane philosophical texts, but is pure insanity for poetry – and not the kind appropriate for the “madman of Chu”! Words evolve not just in history but in the very course of a poetic argument; their different hues deepen and pale, or blend together in different ways. Moreover, when rendering challenging words into a foreign language, we should use all the tools available in the target language, including obscure or technical terms as appropriate.¹⁸ Haun Saussy has recently celebrated the role that *Zhuangzi*’s “extravagant” language has played in translations into Chinese throughout history (2017). In a similar vein, we ought to make use of the extravagant resources of English to translate classical Chinese literature multifariously, and perhaps even to suggest the dialectical oppositions of *yin* and *yang* that lie within the semantic range of a single word.

For the “Li sao” from the beginning contains multitudes. Just as the word *li* occurs within the text in five or so different senses, the poem also presents its narrator in several different guises: as a loyal minister, as a romantic hero, as a magic-wielding shaman with a range of divinities at his beck and call. Even though one reader might emphasize one dimension of the poem, or one particular gloss of the word *li*, this would not erase the coexistence of all the other possibilities within the text. Thus translation is not, in its first instance, a task of communication between cultures, but rather a matter of interpretation. Any reader of the “Li sao” will struggle with the same multiplicity, and the task of a translation is primarily to convey an interpretation, multifaceted and self-contradictory just like the original text, while achieving its own kind of unity at least at a stylistic level. Yang Lian’s

18 I have objected in print to the use of “sashimi” in translating the poetry of Du Fu, and I would still be cautious of straining the bounds of historical plausibility (2014). But “sublimation,” if it means anything, is an aspect of human experience in any period.

poem on Qu Yuan offers us the invaluable metaphor of the “double exposure” for the position of the reader/translator/poet looking back at Qu Yuan, but Yang’s double exposure is implicit already in the poem’s original setting, in “the bright wrinkle of a stretch of water” of the Miluo river. The figure of Qu Yuan is already manifold, already containing both glittering reflections and a dark abyss. A translation continues to reconfigure these images of an irretrievable past, at best a double exposure of an already fragmented vision.

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