

Introduction

“CAN THESE BONES LIVE?”

The hand of the Lord came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “O mortal, can these bones live?”

—Ezekiel 37:1–6

For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”

I think of us as interpreters of the skeleton’s language.

—Clea Koff, *The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist’s Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo*

We are in the midst of a widespread rethinking of translation. This moment, not unlike the linguistic turn of the 1970s, signals a rise in translative consciousness everywhere in the humanities, but especially in comparative literature studies.¹ Such changes in awareness and appreciation of translation can be linked to paradigm shifts in critical and cultural theory across disciplines. The recent shifts in translation theory, as well as the rise in translation studies generally, are informed by and have benefited in different degrees from deconstruction, psychoanalysis, gender studies, and postcolonial studies, as does my own approach in the staging of translation in this book.²

My understanding of translation is indebted to Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator,” written in 1923, which prefaces his translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*.³ In this remarkably generative text, Benjamin posits that translation is a redemptive mode that ensures the survival, the living on, of an individual text or cultural narrative, albeit

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in a revised or altered form. Jacques Derrida's elaborations of Benjamin's view of translation as survival in "Living On: Border Lines," *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, and "Des Tours de Babel" have marked me no less than Benjamin's essay has.⁴ In these three interrelated texts, Derrida stakes a claim to a particular philosophical inheritance, asserting that the scene of translation is inscribed "within a scene of inheritance" and arguing that Benjamin's notion of translation as survival, whether in the sense of *Überleben* (outliving, outlasting) or *Fortleben* (living on, sur-viving), is to be understood as implying, not the extension of life, but an infusion, a transfusion, of otherness: "The work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of its author."⁵ Benjamin, Derrida, and others who have followed in their wake have forged my view of translation as a kind of critical and dynamic displacement: in an act of identification that is not imitation, translation hearkens back to the original or source text and elicits what might otherwise remain recessed or unarticulated, enabling the source text to live beyond itself, to exceed its own limitations.

Translations do not belong to a separate sphere of literary production (or as some would say, reproduction) but are embedded in an extensive social and political network of language relations, cultural practices, and perspectives. Translations are subject to and reflective of external conditions of reception and specific literary-historical contexts that are themselves always changing. Just as it has become impossible, for example, to explore authorship, agency, subjectivity, performativity, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, transnationalism, diasporic literacy, and technological literacy without considering the impact of gender as an intersecting category of analysis, so should it be inconceivable to overlook translation's integral role in every discursive field. More than ever, translation is now understood to be a politics as well as a poetics, an ethics as well as an aesthetics. Translation is no longer seen to involve only narrowly circumscribed technical procedures of specialized or local interest, but rather to underwrite all cultural transactions, from the most benign to the most venal. It is the purpose of this book to show how these broader conceptions of translation are embedded in the practice of translating itself.

Although the way was richly paved in the 1980s by such provocative collections as *Difference in Translation*, edited by Joseph Graham (1985), the 1990s was the boom decade for translation studies. At the start of this new century, all indicators point to the subject of translation and its glob-

alized frames of reference as central to the work of scholars and students of the humanities across traditional disciplinary boundaries.⁶ In the constantly reconfigured fields of comparative literature and cultural studies, questions of translation have inflected the most compelling and consequential debates on every facet of identity and representation, including how these fields define themselves, protect their borders, and justify their existence as distinct(ive) disciplines. J. Hillis Miller identifies “the question of translation as the central problematic in comparative literature.”⁷ In alignment with this position, I intend this study as a contribution to current efforts to situate translation within comparative literature studies, thus invigorating comparative literature in the process. As a comparatist, I find it nearly impossible to think along a single linguistic, national, or disciplinary line; at the same time, I believe that we must continue to foreground the specificity of individual languages and their literary and cultural productions whenever possible. At the nexus of the comparative literature project—indeed, of every project that thinks about its “others”—translation is the mode by which various discourses read each other, locate their commonalities, and name their differences.⁸

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It was while teaching Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, a language-obsessed memoir of growing up Chinese-American, that I recognized that I had found a literary paradigm for Benjamin’s theory of translation as afterlife.⁹ Kingston’s widely taught, much anthologized, highly mediated rendering of her mother’s confusing, contradictory “talk story” encompasses translation on multiple levels. But what resonates so profoundly in the Benjaminian sense is Kingston’s self-attribution as an “outlaw knot-maker” (190), a mythopoeic storyteller, who, through an act of imaginative identification with the dead, creates a textual memorial on her own terms and in her own right. *The Woman Warrior* is a fantastic cosmic drama played out within the parameters of an immigrant family, a parable about the fundamental ambiguity and violence of translation and its power to betray, disarm, and transform inherited, reified cultural scripts.

The concluding line of Kingston’s book is “it translated well,” which must be understood to mean that her mother’s “talk story,” despite its opacity and equivocalness, has been rendered usable, is deemed “translatable.” Book in hand, the reader may never have questioned the original’s translatability. Still, it can never be assumed. Moreover, although *The Woman Warrior*’s act of translation marks an act of poetic recovery, it does not

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achieve cultural communion or synthesis with the source narrative, even as it transmits more than specific content or subject matter. Rather, à la Benjamin, this translation signifies a life-sustaining act, a life-empowering moment shared between two generations in an ongoing process of carrying over the past into the present. Both languages—the Chinese of “impossible dreams” and the English of “waking life normal”—remain present in this transaction, in which coincidence of meaning is not attained; Babelian confusion will not be overcome and contradiction will not be resolved to the advantage of one or the other. The last section, “Eighteen Songs for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” confirms translation as the medium by which the viability of cultural forms throughout history has been tested through such exchange, indeed, often in brutal confrontation with others. From these clashes and rifts, traditions are revised, conceptual boundaries are inevitably expanded, and new art forms emerge, producing cultural change. Kingston’s translative performance in *The Woman Warrior*—an example of this very phenomenon—has itself redefined the genre of autobiography and reconfigured the world literary canon.

As is clear in *The Woman Warrior*, translation is an intercultural as well as a translingual phenomenon, a transcultural as well as an interlingual process. It involves the transfer of a narrative or text from one signifying form to another, the transporting of texts from one historical context to another, and the tracking of the migration of meanings from one cultural space to another. Because translation is a movement never fully achieved, both *trans*, meaning “across,” and *inter*, meaning “between,” are crucial to an understanding of the breadth of the workings of translation. We are most accustomed to thinking of translation as an empirical linguistic maneuver, but excavating or unearthing burial sites or ruins in order to reconstruct traces of the physical and textual past in a new context is also a mode of translation, just as resurrecting a memory or interpreting a dream are acts of translation.¹⁰ In the process of being transferred from one realm or condition to another, the source event or idea is necessarily reconfigured; the result of translation is that the original, also inaccessible, is no longer an original per se; it is a pretext whose identity has been redefined.

The significance of this point as an idea, and its implications for understanding the relationship between survival and cultural memory, will be reiterated throughout this study. Even if, hypothetically, it were possible to excavate a body, a text, a narrative, an image, or even a memory intact, the

necessarily delayed, translated context of such an excavation would be transformed in the interval between the moment of production and the moment of its translation.¹¹ As Benjamin states in the sixth of his eighteen “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” a testament written not long before his suicide in 1940 in Port Bou at the French-Spanish border, as he fled the Nazis:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it actually was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.¹²

This is memory resurrected and reconstructed in the breach, rescued from the breach. Benjamin conceives of remembrance as a corrective flash of insight that emerges in times of crisis, and in response to political and cultural persecution, to the threat of erasure of the voices of resistance, disruption, and heterogeneity by totalitarian regimes. Arguably, the idea that a seamless continuity of the past exists or should be desired could itself be taken as a sign of crisis (of conscience): a deliberate or enforced concealment or forgetting that requires redress. Recent accounts by forensic anthropologists who have retrieved, extricated, identified, and reconstituted the corporeal evidence of mass slaughter, on behalf of those who mourn the victims and to promote social justice, explain how the reading of human remains can “give a voice to people silenced . . . to people suppressed in the most final way: murdered and put into clandestine graves.” But before bodily remains can be read, they claim an irrefutable form of evidence. Clyde Snow explains: “Bones . . . are often our last and best witnesses: they never lie, and they never forget.”¹³

I proceed, then, by linking translation to a concept of survival—“survival” as a cultural practice and symbolic action, and above all as a process that extends life, but one that also prolongs the meaning traces of death-in-life, life after death, and life after life. Both bodies and texts harbor the prospect of living on in their own remarkable ways.¹⁴ Echoing the haunting, unanswerable question about the possibility of resurrection in the biblical book of Ezekiel, my title *Can These Bones Live?* seeks to affirm survival’s ongoing poetic and political significance and rhetorical power. Despite its

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usual connotations, prophetic speech is not only annunciatory; it involves recovery, too, which is another kind of revelation. To cross the threshold from life to death and from death to afterlife is *to be translated, to be in translation*. Translation is the mode through which what is dead, disappeared, forgotten, buried, or suppressed overcomes its determined fate by being borne (and thus born anew) to other contexts across time and space, as famously asserted by Salman Rushdie: “I, too, am a translated man. I have been borne across. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion . . . that something can also be gained.”¹⁵

This project presumes what Richard Terdiman calls “the memory crisis”: the cultural stress or perturbation that is marked by a loss of faith in one’s own inheritance.¹⁶ Whereas Terdiman’s *Present Past* concentrates on the period from 1789 to 1920 (“the long nineteenth century”), my historical frame is the second half of the twentieth century and the advent of the twenty-first. I connect the current obsession with memory—its functions, institutions, and productions—to the redemptive work of translation. Through the act of translation, remnants and fragments are inscribed—reclaimed and reconstituted as a narrative—and then recollected collectively; that is, altered and reinscribed into a history that also undergoes alteration, transformation, in the process. *Can These Bones Live?* aspires to be testimony to the power and persistence of cultural memory as a challenge to the degradation of both matter and discourse.

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That translation is both a self-reflexive feature intrinsic to writing and an extrinsic operation performed on a text is not news to writers. Throughout literary history, authors have always aspired to reach constituencies beyond their own linguistic borders and historical moment. It is not hyperbolic to say that the history of literature is to a determining extent the history of literary translation—or, perhaps, the history of *translated* literature. In most cases, the translation history of a particular writer’s oeuvre or even of a single literary work has had a make-or-break effect on its canonical status in and outside its own literary tradition; that is, on what gets read and taught around the globe. Having said that, in David Damrosch’s analysis of what defines world literature, for example, translatability remains a crucial variable. Though, of course, translatability is not a direct index of value; it indicates a trait, a capacity for both retention and renovation, across time and space.