# On Translation and Rewriting

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**Abstract:** This essay argues that translations are shaped by the needs and expectations of the target culture, and given that aesthetic and cultural norms change over time, there is a constant need for retranslations. The creative translation work of classicists such as Anne Carson and Josephine Balmer serves to illustrate the divergency of translation practice where there is no reliable source version. Two examples further explore how ancient texts are reconfigured: Cieran Carson's rending of the Irish epic *The Tain* and Sioned Davies's version of the Welsh epic *The Mabinogion*. Translators today have more freedom to exercise their own creativity as we recognize the unreliability of source texts that have undergone countless changes over time.

**Keywords:** reinterpretation, rereading, retranslation, creativity

**CLC:** H059 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2025)01-0003-09

**DOI:** 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202501002

## Translations and Culture

In a book that has become one of the foundational texts of Translation Studies, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Gideon Toury sought a new, more useful definition of translation and came up with this important statement: "Translations are facts of target cultures; on occasion facts of a special status, sometimes even constituting identifiable (sub)systems of their own, but of the target culture in any event" (29).

The point that Toury was making is that translations belong to the target culture, since they are produced for consumption by a target audience and the success or failure of a translation is therefore dependent on that audience. Regardless of the prominence an author may enjoy in the source culture, it is the reception in the target culture of his or her work in translation that will determine whether that author will be well-received internationally or will fail to have any impact. What this means, of course, is that translation plays a vital role in shaping literary and cultural knowledge, something that Translation Studies had been arguing for since its inception in the

1970s.

When the late André Lefevere and I put together the collection of essays that has come to be seen as initiating the "cultural turn" in Translation Studies we argued that the operational "unit" of translation was neither the word nor the text but the culture into which a text was being transposed. We chose to highlight this through an example taken from Marcel Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, where the narrator's grandmother is offended by new translations of familiar works. Proust's grandmother dislikes changes and prefers the translations she has grown up with:

> "The" *Odyssey* for her is a translation in which the hero is still called by his Latinized name: Ulysses, and in which the goddess Athena is likewise still called Minerva. Other *Odysseys* or rather, other texts deemed to represent Homer's *Odyssey*, simply will not do, they are impostors, […] (Lefevere and Bassnett 2)

This example illustrates a simple yet common problem with regard to translated texts: changes in terms of aesthetics and cultural expectations are made more evident in translations which are, as we can now agree, products designed for the target language system. Such changes reflect broader changes in the target culture, and are a combination of the linguistic, the aesthetic, and the broader cultural context. Proust's grandmother has read a translation which she has enjoyed and which she views as representing the Ancient Greek; another translation, particularly one that changes the names of characters that she has come to see as familiar, is unacceptable, hence it is unfaithful. Proust's grandmother does not trust the translator who has altered a text she believes she knows.

But "faithfulness" is, of course, a highly problematic notion. In the advice given to translation scholars in his provocative book *Contra Instrumentalism*, subtitled *A Translation Polemic*, Lawrence Venuti condemns terms like "faithful" and "unfaithful" as moralistic and unhelpful, since they assume that translation is nothing more than mechanical substitution. Instead, he declares that translation should be seen as the establishment of a variable equivalence to the source text, as "an interpretation that demands writerly and intellectual sophistication" (ix). Venuti also points out that a source text can support multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations, and consequently there can be an equally wide variety of translations. Proust's grandmother may have had a preference for one translation over another, but her choice was purely personal.

The cultural turn in the study of translation broadened the field beyond the narrowly linguistic, and today it is generally accepted that the processes of translation are determined by the expectations and demands of the target culture. If we look at some of the recent publications in Translation Studies it is clear that issues of decolonization, migration, reparation, and cultural displacement are receiving a great deal of attention, which reflect wider social concerns in the Humanities of the global North.[1] Such concerns are also leading to some rethinking about how to define and how to practice translation, and in their recent book *Time, Space and Matter in Translation*, Pamela Beattie, Simona Bertacco, and Tatjana Soldat-Jaffe describe translation as "an all-encompassing process, like an organism, that feeds off many thoughts and theories, and is capable of growth and adaptation […] translation studies is a perfect petri dish in which ideas can be tested, examined, and encouraged to develop" (Beattie et al. 3).

## Beyond Faithfulness

Toury's statement about translations being facts of target cultures remains a valid one, but thinking about translation has come a long way in the last few decades. The image of the petri dish is useful in that it helps us to understand the great variety of texts produced that claim to be translations and which have moved some distance away from the source. Once upon a time translations such as *Nox*, Anne Carson's hybrid version of a poem by Catullus, or Seymour Chwast's graphic version of Dante's *Divina commedia* where Dante is depicted as a Philip Marlowe figure and Virgil as Hercule Poirot, would have been dismissed by purists as "unfaithful" to the source. Anne Carson, a distinguished classicist as well as a poet, makes it clear that her translation technique eschews elementary notions about accuracy and faithfulness. She explains her working method as follows. As a classical scholar she pays close attention to the language and style of the source text, then introduces her own personal creative dimension to the translation: "I generally try to work first and most attentively out of the grammar, syntax, allusions of the original while keeping the language alive in a way that interests me, then later crazy it up if that seems appropriate" (King).

Carson is laying claim to the right of the translator to exercise her creativity, what she terms "crazying up," that is, playing with the source material and reconfiguring it to suit a new set of purposes. Today, as translators have become more visible, asserting their right to reformulate the source text to cater for the needs of a new audience, it is becoming increasingly the practice for published translations to include translators' notes, prefaces, or afterwords, which serve to remind readers about the necessary creativity that takes place in the gap between source and target texts. Sometimes these peritexts explain the translators' methodology, though in some cases they serve as additional material that enhances the translation itself. In 2005, for example, the Northern Irish poet and translator, Cieran Carson (no relation to Anne) published his translation of a work by the 18th-century Irish poet Brian Merriman, *The Midnight Court*. Carson's Foreword provides some basic information about Merriman and his poetic technique, before moving to write about the personal difficulties he encountered as a translator. Carson suggests that as he worked on Merriman's poem, he came to see the inadequacy not only of his knowledge of his native Irish, but also of his English. He depicts his search for alternative solutions as feeling like entering into a new world, pointing out that as he worked on the text, not only was his own understanding of the meaning of the words he was using changing, but inevitably the original too was changing. How could this be otherwise, he asks, for what the translator has to do is to enter a foreign country and learn its language anew.

Carson's Foreword ends by recounting a dream he had on New Year's Day, 2005, the 200th anniversary of Merriman's death. In the dream he is wandering around a dark hillside, when he sees a light in a distant cottage. He goes in and finds Merriman wrapped in a greatcoat sitting by the hearth. The two men talk, and Carson is enraptured by the old poet's intricate Irish but when he wakes, he is disappointed "to find my Irish restored to its former poverty." But, he concludes, "I felt I had been touched, just a little, by the hand of the Master" (*Midnight Court* 15). The suggestion here is that the relationship between a translator and the source sometimes can have an element of the magical. Moreover, by its very location in the book, the Foreword becomes the threshold to their encounter with 18th-century Irish verse that 21st century anglophone readers must cross.

Carson translates from several languages, including Old Irish and French and has also published a version of Dante's *Inferno*. In the introduction to his translations of Jean Follain, *From Elsewhere*, Carson muses on what the act of translating means to him. He views it as an act of fetching something from somewhere else, an act of borrowing from a source: "it is to derive etymologically. It is to go in quest of" (30). He stresses the importance for him of that verb "to fetch," which is quite distinct from "to bring," because fetching is an act that involves the fetcher who has to go and then return after accomplishing the task, hence fetching is proactive.

## Prismatic Translation

The two Carsons, Anne and Cieran, in their different ways are both fetchers who seek out, find and then carry texts across barriers of time, language, and cultures. What they do in their translations is much more than replacing one set of signs with another in the classic binary notion of translation which is being increasingly challenged today. Matthew Reynolds, for example, proposes that we think about translation as a prism which opens up the plural signifying potential of the source texts and diffuses it through multiple versions. The idea behind prismatic translation according to Reynolds is to reconfigure the field of translation, so that the relationship between source and target texts becomes a matter of interactive discovery. It is that interactivity which both Anne Carson and Cieran Carson provide through their translations.

Both Carsons are scholars, poets, and translators and both engage with ancient works which they reconfigure for contemporary audiences, not because they are seeking parallels across the ages or trying to demonstrate the relevance of the ancient world for their own time, but rather because of the challenge such engagement poses for them. Anne Carson likens translating to standing on the edge between different linguistic universes: "Translation gives one to think, in a way that no other practical exercise does, because you come to a place where you are standing at the edge of a word and you can see across the gap to the other word, the word that you are trying to translate and you can't get there, and that space, between the word you are at and the word you can't get to is unlike any other space in language […]" (Jansen 4). Translation here is presented as a hugely complex task, with the translator poised between two worlds, standing on the edge as she puts it. Here what Anne Carson is saying is reminiscent of Cieran Carson's reflections on how translating throws his knowledge of both source and target languages into disarray. But this is not the way in which translators have tended to be seen, as the dominant discourse in literary studies has been to downplay both the difficulties and the impact of translations. What seems to be happening today, however, is a re-evaluation of the creative power of translation and of translators, a process accelerated by the self-reflections of translators themselves. Reynolds argues that rather than asking the usual question about why some literary translators feel able to take liberties with the source text, the question to pose is why the inherently proliferative potential of translation should be subjected to regulation. Of course, certain kinds of texts—commercial, legal, medical etc.—demand a particular kind of translation, but where literary texts are concerned it should be acknowledged that the translator has a very specific role to play, given that any translation can only be one individual translator's interpretation of the source text.

## Beyond the Definitive

In his famous essay "The Homeric Versions," Jorge Luis Borges makes a strong case for the importance of translations. He refers to the inferiority of translations as a "superstition" deriving from "absentmindedness." There is no such thing as a definitive text, he declares, and "to assume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that draft nine is necessarily inferior to draft H- for there can only be drafts" (Borges 15). Borges compares six versions of a passage from Book IX of the *Odyssey*, three in verse and three in prose, from different moments in time and asks which of these versions is a faithful translation. This is the question readers will ask, he says, but answers it by declaring that either none of them or all of them is the answer, depending on how the notion of faithfulness is interpreted. As Borges reminds us, the events of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* survive, we know the stories of the ancient heroes, but we have no idea of what Homer thought about them. What this means is that "the present state of his works is like a complex equation that represents the precise relations of unknown quantities," and consequently, there is no possible greater richness for a translator to explore.

## The Unreliability of Ancient Sources

Borges's essay was first published in 1932, and his valuable insights into translation anticipate much of contemporary thinking. Today, one of the most interesting developments in the field of literary translation studies is Classical Reception Studies. The CRSN (Classical Reception Studies Network) was founded in 2004, bringing together reception studies, cultural translation studies, and Classical studies. A number of publishers now publish monograph series, principle of which are the Oxford University Press "Classical Presences" series and the Bloomsbury "Studies in Classical Reception" series. As knowledge of Ancient Greek and Latin has radically declined in the West and in the Anglophone sphere particularly, at the same time interest in the ancient world has been expanding in all kinds of ways, including film, television, gaming, popular fiction etc., a process of what Stephen Harrison terms "democratization," that is, a new sense of freedom from the canonical and establishment status which classical literature and culture once exercised. Harrison points out that writers such as Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney have been able to use classical material for their own concerns through a sophisticated intertextual approach, which ensures not so much the survival but rather the rebirth of ancient cultures that had seemed on the verge of decline (1–18).

One of the pioneering scholars of this important field, Lorna Hardwick, argues that what is happening is a recombination of ancient and modern material that is creating a new map to shape the way forward for modern audiences. The traditional polarities between source and target languages are inadequate, and none of the existing theories of translation is sufficient as a model for a new approach to the translation of ancient texts (172–193). Another scholar-translator of ancient texts, Josephine Balmer, points out that when dealing with texts from the ancient world it is important to recognize that there is no such thing as a reliable source text. Ancient texts, as she puts it,

> have been copied over and over again throughout the centuries, with the originals long lost. As with any process of this sort, mistakes occur; often lines do not make grammatical or metrical sense and have to be amended by scholars who then cannot agree on how to resolve the problem. (186)

What this means, as Borges too was suggesting, is that now the translator has the freedom to fill in the gaps, to interpret in the light of the place and time in which the translation is taking place. Balmer argues that translators of ancient texts have to construct from the rubble of a long-vanished world and that process of construction inevitably involves a creative approach that prioritizes the target audience.

## Democratizing the Epic

As we saw with Proust's grandmother, ancient texts are constantly being retranslated as aesthetic norms change rapidly over time. Dr. Johnson supposedly said that Alexander Pope's version of Homer written in heroic couplets was a masterpiece, but some 50 years later it had faded into obscurity and there have been countless other translations since then. One of the most successful Homeric translations in English was the translation by E. V. Rieu of the *Odyssey*, the founding translation in the Penguin Classics series of which Rieu was the general editor. This series was a first step in the democratization of classical literature, and Rieu's version is a prose retelling that sold over 100,000 copies in the first months of publication.

Other epics are less well known than the poetry of Homer, but in 2007 two important English translations of early medieval epic cycles appeared, Sioned Davies's version of the Welsh *Mabinogion* and Cieran Carson's version of the Old Irish epic, *The Tain*. Both these translators faced similar problems in that the source material is, as Thomas Kinsella who translated *The Tain* in 1969, commented, "the work of many hands and in some places little more than the mangled remains of miscellaneous scribal activities" (xi). Both the Irish and Welsh texts consist of a series of stories, originally transmitted orally and preserved in various manuscripts. In both these cases, the impulse to translate the texts for 21st century readers is linked to the broader ideological issue of the role these texts have played in both the Welsh and Irish national revival. However, translators of Old Welsh and Old Irish texts encounter the same difficulties as those facing translators of Ancient Greek and Latin with regard to the fragmented nature of the source texts and the multiplicity of interpretations over time.

In his preface, Cieran Carson refers to the description of *The Tain* by the historian Frank O'Connor as "a simply appalling text … endlessly scribbled over […]" and interpreting it is "a task better suited to the archaeologist than the literary critic, because it is like an excavation that reveals a dozen habitation sites" (xiv).

What makes both these texts important is their status in the history of both Irish and Welsh national culture. They are foundation texts and many of the stories they contain have passed into popular culture. The exploits of the wild Irish hero, Cu Chulainn, and those of the Welsh hero, Pryderi, King of Dyfed and Gwydion the shape-shifter have been endlessly retold. Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* and Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* are just two of the

highly successful versions for young adults of stories from the *Mabinogion*, as is Rosemary Sutcliffe's version of the story of Cu Chulainn in *The Hound of Ulster.* Although the manuscripts are medieval, it is generally held that the stories derive from a much earlier period, and in both the Welsh and Irish works there are suggestions of a pre-Christian culture.

The translation history of both the Welsh and Irish texts is worthy of note. The first complete translation of the *Mabinogion*, which remained the most widely read version for over a century, was done by an Englishwoman, Lady Charlotte Guest, who published her translation with scholarly notes between 1838 and 1846. Her work was translated into French and German and aroused considerable interest in Celtic literature, which chimed with the revival of interest in Arthurian romance that was a notable feature of 19th-century European cultures. There have been three subsequent translations (1929, 1948, 1976), but in deciding to produce a version for 21st century readers, Davies explains her decision-making process with regard to the extant manuscripts and points out that her overriding aim was "to convey the performability of the surviving manuscript versions" (xxxi). Her argument is that what we call the *Mabinogion* is a collection of stories deriving from an oral tradition, and unlike poetry from that same period, there is no indication of authorship in the two surviving manuscripts, the *White Book of Rydderch* (c. 1350) and the *Red Book of Hergest* (c. 1342 and c. 1410). The stories will have been performed by medieval storytellers, the *cyfarwydd*, hence the need to stress performability in the language of the translation, which means dealing with formulaic phrases, patterns of repetition, rhetorical passages linked to medieval public declamation and above all dialogue, since dialogue forms a large part of the narrative. Davies's translation was published by Oxford University Press in their World Classics series, and so there is an introduction and extensive footnotes. There is also an Index of personal names and an Index of place names, a necessary help for the contemporary reader, since in the Old Welsh oral tradition audiences would have been familiar with both the names of individuals and the topographical references.

Topography and personal names are also a prominent feature in Old Irish epic poetry. Cieran Carson sees *The Tain* as obsessed by topography, by place names and their etymology. He also says that thinking of landscape as a mnemonic map is a mode of thinking that still prevails in Ireland. Kinsella, whose version of *The Tain* came out in 1969 provides maps of the key places where events took place, and a list of names of the places along the route travelled by the Connacht army. In his Introduction, Kinsella states decisively that his is not a literal translation—he has restructured sentences, changed tenses, used pronouns instead of names at times; in short, he has compromised with the prose parts. However, with the verse elements he has opted for a different strategy, partly because these elements are more archaic, but also because they are sometimes incomprehensible. Kinsella has used his imagination to produce passages of verse that "more or less match the original for length, ambiguity and obscurity," though such passages "are highly speculative, and may reproduce little if anything of the original effect" (xii).

Carson introduces his own translation with a homage to Kinsella's. He points out that before Oxford University Press reprinted it, the first edition was with Dolmen Press in a small print run. The translation was an immediate success, which Carson explains:

> Kinsella's radical decision to combine the English definite article with the key Irish word offered a parallel with national epics such as the *Mahabharata,* the *Mabinogion,* the *Iliad* and the *Odessey*, and so on. Other parallels were made: appearing as it did at an especially violent

> period of Northern Ireland's history—the current Troubles having begun in 1968—*The Tain* seemed to speak not so much of an ancient past, but of an urgent present. (xxiv)

Carson explains what he has done differently in his translation, which he hopes will be taken as a tribute to Kinsella's version which had had such a profound impact on him. Without Kinsella, Carson argues, there would have been no public consciousness of the great Irish epic. The principal difference between the two versions is in the translation of the verse, for while Kinsella used free verse, Carson has tried to keep to the original syllable count of the lines, improvising at times and trying to preserve the syntactical ambiguity of the original. He acknowledges that some of his derivations "may be the product of wishful thinking," but sees this as in the tradition of fanciful etymology of the ancient Irish world and adds that his amalgamation and re-ordering of the material reflects *The Tain*'s history of being rewritten and edited by various hands. Carson concludes his short note on the translation with a bold statement: "There is no canonical *Tain*, and every translation of it is necessarily another version or recension" (xxvii).

## Conclusions

Translators of ancient texts today have more freedom to exercise their own creativity, given that we now recognize the problematic nature of the source texts. Nevertheless, as can be seen from the translators considered here, that creativity is balanced out with serious scholarship. Anne Carson's "crazying up" is not an "anything goes" approach, but derives rather from her in-depth knowledge of her sources, and the same can be said of the translators of the Old Welsh and Old Irish epic cycles. What all these translators share is a combination of respect for the source combined with a desire to create something for a new audience in a new cultural age. The needs and expectations of the target culture are what drive the translations, not paying homage to an ancient canonical text. Proust's grandmother would probably not have approved, but 21st century readers have good cause to be grateful to the courage of translators.

### Note

1. See, for example, Nergaard; Chambers and Demir; Vidal Claramonte.

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