# Preface

Teaching from Eliot Weinberger's *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, I pointed the class to Burton Watson's translation "Deer Fence," from 1971:

> Empty hills, no one in sight,
> only the sound of someone talking;
> late sunlight enters the deep wood,
> shining over the green moss again.

One student, a young woman from Shanghai exposed to translation theory and a traditionalist sense of poetry in English, scoffed: "That's it?"

I remember a college professor of mine relating how her graduate advisor, a meticulous philologist whose translations overflow with annotation, also disparaged Watson's translations, saying he probably typed up his first drafts and sent them to his publisher without looking at them again. But I also remember William Butler Yeats, from "Adam's Curse":

> ... A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

For all the work it takes, Yeats says, to be a poet is still to be "thought an idler by the noisy set / Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen / The martyrs call the world." Throw certain readers of translation into that noisy set, for the fact is that beneath the surface simplicity of Burton Watson's lines hide not only years of

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accumulated scholarly expertise, but the internalized discipline of the contemporary American idiom, as well.

Since Chinese poetry started being translated into English, poets and sinologists have presented poetry and sinology as if they were locked in eternal conflict. In 1921 Amy Lowell said, "Chinese is so difficult that it is a life-work in itself, so is the study of poetry. A Sinologue has no time to learn how to write poetry; a poet has no time to learn how to read Chinese"; in 1958 George Kennedy said of Ezra Pound, "Undoubtedly this is fine poetry. Undoubtedly it is bad translation"; drawing a distinction between the "poet-translator" and "critic-translator," James J. Y. Liu wrote in 1982 that while the latter's "primary aim is to show what the original poem is like, as a part of his interpretation," the former "is a poet or poet manqué whose native Muse is temporarily or permanently absent and who uses translation as a way to recharge his own creative battery [and] write a good poem in English based on his understanding or misunderstanding of a Chinese poem, however he may have arrived at this"; and in 2004, against those who "believe that translations should consist of word-for-word cribs in which syntax, grammar, and form are all maintained, and in which the translator is merely a facilitator who allows the original poem to speak for itself in a new language," Tony Barnstone posited that the "literary translator is like the musician who catalyzes the otherwise inert score that embodies Mozart's genius.... *Fidelity*, true fidelity, comes from a musician's deeper understanding of the music." The genius of Watson's translations is that they reconcile the rift between poetry and scholarship.

As Weinberger points out in *Nineteen Ways*, Watson was "the first scholar whose work displayed an affinity with the modernist revolution in American poetry: absolute precision, concision, and the use of everyday speech," particularly impressive at a time when

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most Anglophone "scholars of Chinese ignored, or were actively hostile to modern poetry" ("Many still are," Weinberger adds). That precision, concision, and everyday speech deepened what T. S. Eliot called Ezra Pound's invention "of Chinese poetry for our time." Though Eliot acknowledged it to be an illusion ("an illusion which is not altogether an illusion either"), he explained that when "a foreign poet is successfully done into the idiom of our own language and our own time, we believe that he has been 'translated'; we believe that through this translation we really at last get the original.... His translations seem to be—and that is the test of excellence—translucencies." This is the quality that compelled my student, expecting more audible poetic devices, to scoff; but she should know that this quality is itself a poetic device, honed from Watson's own attentive readings in the entwined lineage of American and Chinese poetry, particularly as seen in Ezra Pound and Kenneth Rexroth. Pay attention, and you can hear it in the echoing *ohs* and whispering *esses* that turn "only the sound of someone talking," above, into something like onomatopoeia. Watson is perhaps the only translator of Chinese one can imagine writing an editor of a literary journal, as he did, to say, "I can't tell you how honored I am to be in the same magazine as Charles Reznikoff." Watson sent Pound some of his earliest poetry translations (Pound wrote back, but made no comment on the versions), and he had drafts edited by Joanne Kyger, Cid Corman, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg.

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Watson is not the poet-translator largely ignorant of Chinese as Pound or Rexroth were. Since the 1970s he has lived mostly in Japan; nearing ninety, he still spends hours each morning and evening on translation work. Born in 1925, he was first exposed to Asian languages growing up in New Rochelle, NY, when workers at the local laundry gave him litchi nuts, jasmine tea, and il-

lustrated Chinese magazines; later, a high school dropout in the Navy stationed in the South Pacific, he picked up some Japanese to help him on shore leave. After being discharged, he studied at Columbia University, both as an undergraduate and for his PhD (completed in 1956), under L. Carrington Goodrich and Chi-chen Wang, and was later colleagues there with C. T. Hsia. As a scholar, Watson is known for broad cartographies such as *Early Chinese Literature* (1962), ranging from the eleventh century B.C. to the third century A.D., and *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century* (1971). These books are authoritative and insightful as overviews and introductions from an era in which few students studied Chinese and fewer had access to it as a living language, yet they are still useable in or out of the classroom today. Nor is their authoritativeness authoritarian; in *Early Chinese Literature* Watson acknowledges his subjectivity when speaking of translation: "The reader should perhaps be reminded that when he reads these early Chinese works in translation, he is at many points reading not an incontrovertible rendering of the meaning of the original, but only one of a variety of tentative interpretations." In this way, he acknowledges the illusoriness of his translations' translucency.

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His translations, appropriately, also aim at readers looking for an introduction to literature in Chinese, rather than at specialists who want to test a fellow academic's mettle via footnotes and bibliographies. Yet even as the scholar in him acknowledges that he can offer nothing but "one of a variety of tentative interpretations," the translator in him nevertheless finds ways to make us, in Eliot's words, "believe that through this translation we really at last get the original." Of his many translations of classical Chinese philosophy, history, and religion—including the *Records of the Grand Historian of China* (1961), *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (1968), *The Tso Chuan: Selections from China's Oldest Narrative History* (1989), and *The*

*Lotus Sutra* (1993)—he says his "aim was to make the most famous and influential passages of these texts available in easily readable form so that they could be read by English readers as one reads Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, or Livy." About "Deer Fence," Weinberger notes: "His presentation is as direct as the Chinese. There are 24 English words (six per line) for the Chinese 20, yet every word of the Chinese has been translated without indulging, as others have done, in a telegraphic minimalism." Further, Watson's translation hints at Wang Wei's prosody: a five-character Chinese line contains a caesura after the second word; "Empty hills, no one in sight" replays that with a comma, using the Chinese rhythm as the basis for his English free verse.

Amazingly, Watson's suggestion of Chinese prosody and ability to make us believe "we really at last get the original" are just as present in the translations that make up *Chinese Rhyme-Prose* (first published in 1971 by Columbia University Press). Here, though, what Weinberger notes as the "absolute precision, concision, and the use of everyday speech" in Watson's writing meets the challenge of a form known to be opulent, ornamental, and exceptional. As Watson explains in the book's introduction, the *fu*, or "rhyme-prose," so named because the compositions contain passages both in rhyme and in prose, has its earliest origins in "the shaman songs and chants of the folk religion, incantations empowered to call down deities or summon lost or ailing souls." The incantatory quality remained in the genre, instilling in it a propensity for, in Watson's words, "exuberance and wildness of language." This exuberance does not translate easily into the idiom of poetry in English in the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries. And yet, Watson's ability to resolve the tension between poetry and scholarship is matched by his reconciliation of the demands of contemporary American literary taste and early imperial Chinese extravagance.

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In his introduction Watson narrates—and his anthology demonstrates—a history of the rhyme-prose progressing from the ornate to the unembellished (to culminate, centuries later, in the "'prose-*fu*,' which is so free in form and relaxed in diction that it is hardly distinguishable from ordinary prose"). In fact, this trajectory is the result of a central tension between the form of the *fu* and its social setting, where the opulence of the language was seen as too readily linked to court profligacy. As Watson explains, critics felt that the "element of reprimand, which was held up as the justification for such works, was too often lost in the torrent of verbiage, and that the effect was often quite the opposite, actually lending encouragement to the Han rulers in their costly and luxurious ways." But a tighter drama exists in his translations themselves. As Watson explains in his Translator's Note, "There have been times in the history of English poetry when men delighted in the rolling periods, rich and exotic verbiage, and carefully balanced tropes which characterize the rhyme-prose style, though we do not happen to be living in one of them." Though Watson also says that in translating *fu* he has tried first of all to capture "this quality of lushness and exuberance," what is perhaps most striking is the accessibility of this lushness.

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Consider his treatment of lists in Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju's "Sir Fantasy":

> Here too are precious stones: carnelians and garnets,
> Amethysts, turquoises, and matrices of ore,
> Chalcedony, beryl, and basalt for whetstones,
> Onyx and figured agate.
> To the east stretch fields of gentians and fragrant orchids,
> Iris, turmeric, and crow-fans,
> Spikenard and sweet flag,
> Selinea and angelica,
> Sugar cane and ginger.

Though Watson acknowledges that "the rhyme-prose pieces are largely the product of a single class," thereby espousing "themes associated with the life of the court or the glorification of the ruling house," what impresses here is Watson's rhythmic recollection of the fundamentally democratic American catalogue, such as in "Song of Myself": "Over the growing sugar, over the yellow-flower'd cotton plant, over the rice in its low moist field, / Over the sharp-peak'd farm house, with its scallop'd scum and slender shoots from the gutters, / Over the western persimmon, over the long-leav'd corn, over the delicate blue-flower flax, / Over the white and brown buckwheat, a hummer and buzzer there with the rest, / Over the dusky green of the rye as it ripples and shades in the breeze." In other words, through his *fu* translations, Watson reaches beyond Snyder and Ginsberg, past Rexroth and Pound, back to Walt Whitman.

The accessibility of Watson's lushness also shows up in his translation of "The Owl," by Chia Yi. In contrast, David Knechtges titles his translation "Rhapsody on the Houlet," using an archaic English term to mimic the regional dialect in the Chinese title. Knechtges's version, from a decades-long translation-in-progress of an early medieval anthology, is a magisterial work of scholarship, with annotations *en face*, at the bottom of the page, and at the end of each volume; Watson's notes, on the other hand, are enough to remind the reader that his translations also constitute scholarly activity and that his stitching and unstitching is not only a moment's thought. Watson's translation begins:

> In the year *tan-o*,
> Fourth month, first month of summer,
> The day *kuei-tzu*, when the sun was low in the west,
> An owl came to my lodge
> And perched on the corner of my mat,

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Phlegmatic and fearless.
Secretly wondering the reason
The strange thing had come to roost,
I took out a book to divine it
And the oracle told me its secret

As the transcribed Chinese terms remind us we are dealing with writing from long ago and far away, the consonance of "Phlegmatic and fearless" alerts us of its being rewritten in the here and now. Knechtges's translation attempts at lushness, too, but it ends up at once fustian and banal: "Alighting on a corner of my mat, / Its manner very relaxed and tranquil." He follows this with, "A strange creature came to rest, / And I wondered the reason," which in second-century B.C. Chinese would have read as parallel with the previous two lines, but sounds redundant in English. Watson's reordering progresses the action, building drama.

The drama of the *fu* follows a tension between its message and the social expectations of the form, such as that it would praise the emperor and his reign. Though its beak, as Watson translates, "could utter no word," the owl nevertheless imparts its wisdom to Chia Yi. Watson explains that the poem, "far more personal and overtly philosophical than most of the early *fu*, stands somewhat apart from the mainstream of literary development, its tone too somber for the social uses to which the *fu* form was customarily put." It ends describing the "man of wisdom":

Limpid and still, the true man
Finds his peace in the Tao alone.
. . .
Borne on the flood he sails forth;
He rests on the river islets.
Freeing his body to Fate,
Unpartaking of self,

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> His life is a floating,
> His death a rest.
> In stillness like the stillness of deep springs,
> Like an unmoored boat drifting aimlessly,
> Valuing not the breath of life,
> He embraces and drifts with Nothing.
> Comprehending Fate and free of sorrow,
> The man of virtue heeds no bounds.
> Petty matters, weeds and thorns—
> What are they to me?

The tension in the lines between their philosophical content and the ordinarily ornate form resolves itself in a Taoist transcendence of the ego.

Though I have no insight into whether Burton Watson the man is so wise, Burton Watson the translator certainly attains such transcendence. As Chia Yi translates for an owl who cannot speak, Watson makes the words of rhyme-prose visible and audible for an audience to whom they could otherwise utter no word. The weeds and thorns of such obscure words and recalcitrant usage are sublimated into his English, limpid and still. His skill in giving his voice so thoroughly to others comes from his unpartaking of self.

The dissolution of Watson's self has developed for him a translational poetics that integrates poetry and translation where others have presented them as forces forever at odds. In an English that calls attention to itself primarily in how it barely calls attention to itself, Watson has translated broadly, translating more authors and poets than seems possible. For some, this range would overwhelm the translator's ability to represent so many different voices; as Weinberger put it, "Most translators are capable of translating only a few writers in their lifetimes. The rest is rote." Clearly an exception to this rule, Watson has explained that "one should not be too fussy about what sort of material one is required to translate.

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Any type of translating is good experience in both the language one is translating out of and into." Burton Watson's translations never read as rote. Effortless, translucent, yes. And beneath these illusions, which are not altogether illusions either, Watson gives us what Yeats called the stitching and unstitching, the parallelism of scholarship and poetry, within one simple act, which is never simple: translation.

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