

Yu Kwang-Chung vs. Yu Kwang-Chung: Untranslatability as the Touchstone of a Poet

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Abstract : The untranslatability of an established poet's tour de force is thoroughly explored by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888). In his *On Translating Homer* (1861), Arnold lists the four most striking poetic qualities of Homer, namely his rapidity, plainness and directness of style and diction, plainness and directness of ideas, and nobleness. He concludes that such celebrated English translators as Cowper, Pope, Chapman, and Mr. Newman are all doomed, due to their respective failure in rendering the totality of the four Homeric poetic qualities. Why poetic translation always amounts to being proven such a mission impossible for the translator? According to Arnold, it is because there constantly exists a mist interposed between the translator's own literary self-obsession and the objective artistic qualities that reside in the work of the original author. Foregrounding such a seemingly empowering yet actually detrimental poetic mist, he explains why the aforementioned translators fail in their attempts to bring the Homeric charm to the British reader. Drawing on Arnold's analytical study on Homeric translation, the research attempts to bring Yu Kwang-chung the poet vis-à-vis Yu Kwang-chung the translator, with an aim not so much to find any similar mist as revealed by Arnold between his Chinese poetry and English translation as to probe into a latent and veiled literary and lingual mist interposed between Chinese and English, if not between Chinese and English literatures. The major work studied and analyzed for this study is Yu's own Chinese poetry and his own English translation collected in *The Night Watchman: Yu Kwang-chung 1958-2004*. The research argues that the following critical elements that characterizes Yu's poetics are to a certain extent 'transformed,' if not 'lost,' in his English translation: a. the Chinese pictographic and ideographic unit terms which so unfailingly characterize the poet's incredible creativity, allowing him to habitually and conveniently coin concrete textual images or word-scapes almost at his own will; b. the subtle wordplay and punning which appear at a reasonable frequency; c. the parallel contrastive repetitive syntactic structure within a single poetic line; d. the ambiguous and highly associative diction in the adjective and noun categories; e. the literary allusion that harks back to the old times of Chinese literature; f. the alliteration that adds rhythm and smoothness to the lines; g. the rhyming patterns that bring about impressive sonority and lingering echo to the ears of the reader; h. the grandeur-imposing and sublimity-arousing word-scaping which hinges on the employment of verbs; i. the meandering cultural heritage that embraces such elements as Chinese medicine and kung fu; and j. other features of the like. Once we appeal to the Arnoldian tribunal and resort to the strict standards of such a Victorian cultural and literary critic who insists 'to see the object as in itself it really is,' we may serve as a potential judge for the tug of war between Yu Kwang-chung the poet and Yu Kwang-chung the translator, a tug of war that will not merely broaden our understating of Chinese poetics but deepen our apprehension of Chinese-English translatology.

Keywords : Yu Kwang-chung, *The Night Watchman*, poetry translation, Chinese-English translation, translation studies, Matthew Arnold

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