CHAPTER 3

Impersonation and the Art of Authorship

Thus translation, ironically, transplants the original into a linguistic realm that is more definitive, since the original can no longer be displaced by any further devolutions, but can only be raised up anew in other respects.

WALTER BENJAMIN, “THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR”

Already in the third century poets began to imitate the poems passed on to them from the Han dynasty, rewriting them to improve the style or to isolate an individual voice. In some cases they even construct an individual voice where one does not seem to be evident in the models. This creative act also helps to create an interpretation of the source that persists. Jiang Yan’s three Han imitations in the “Diverse Forms” thus rearrange the texts of the past and indicate their place in literary criticism, while simultaneously articulating some of his own sentiments and literary ideals. The imitation in a sense is what makes the original permanent, fixing its place in the tradition. Here it acts something like an intralingual translation, as translation is described by Walter Benjamin, “transplanting the original” into a new “linguistic realm” whence it can no longer be “displaced.” Imitation fixes its sources in place in a particular way by inserting a new kind of authorial persona, a process almost like the selection of pronouns in a translation from classical Chinese into English.

The organization of this chapter follows the scheme of the first three poems in Jiang Yan’s “Diverse Forms,” which seem intended to trace the early development of pentasyllabic verse. The topics are the “Old Poems,” Li Ling, and Ban Jieyu. The “Old Poems,” which are central to Han verse as we know it today, were some of the most widely imitated poems. Lu Ji attempted to improve the diction of the “Old Poems” he imitated, like Fu Xuan refining old songs, while Jiang Yan in his own imitation of the “Old Poems” maintains the original

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1 “Übersetzung verpflanzt also das Original in einen wenigstens insofern—ironisch—endgültigeren Sprachbereich, als es aus diesem durch keinerlei Übertragung mehr zu versetzen ist, sondern in ihm nur immer von neuem und an anderen Teilen erhoben zu werden vermag” (translation modified from Illuminations, 75; original text in Illuminationen, 63).

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diction. Next, Li Ling, like Ban Jieyu, has melancholy poems attributed to him, yet they have a curiously anonymous style, and Jiang Yan strives to copy this in his imitation. Reading Ban Jieyu's poem anew in light of this discussion and Jiang Yan's imitation of it, we can identify at least one consistent understanding of poetry throughout the period: like the wind itself, it passes back and forth among author and reader, or performer and audience, changing and being changed in its course.

In each of these cases, the original author is typically an abstraction more than a historical figure. An imitation is a hermeneutical investigation, not a historical document: it discovers the imagined author of a known poem and reconstructs him or her in yet another poem, melding two different horizons of understanding. The processes traced in the previous chapter continue to a new and more definitive stage. Where the Ban family and various song poems typically remained in a somewhat indeterminate state of authorship, the imitation poems discussed in this chapter, ironically, show the more explicit signature of an author. These poems and imitations show us poetic composition as a process in which an authorial persona is used and elaborated on as a vehicle for emotion, often independent of the particular poet who takes on that persona.

Old Poems and Less Old Poems

After Fu Xuan, the next major writer of imitations was Lu Ji (陆机, 261–303), who wrote a series of twelve imitations of “Old Poems” (古詩).

2 The models for these imitations were all later included in the “Nineteen Old Poems” (古詩十九首) of the Wen xuan (with the exception of “Lan ruo sheng chun yang” 蘭若生春陽).2 Out of these motley poems that combine colloquial diction and universal sentiments with classical allusion and well-concealed art, Lu Ji made

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3 For the text of the poems, see Wen xuan 29.1343–52. Some important treatments of the poems are Yoshikawa Kōjirō, “Sui'i no hi'ai—koshi jükyū shu no shudai”; Sui Shusen, Gushi shijiu shou jishi; Jean-Pierre Diény, Les dix-neuf Poèmes anciens; Ma Maoyuan, Gushi shijiu shou chutan; and Daniel Hsieh, “The Origin and Nature of the Nineteen Old Poems.”