

Translating Myth: The Task of Speaking Time and Space

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To hear significance is to translate.

—George Steiner

A text lives on only if it is at once
translatable and untranslatable.

—Jacques Derrida

MYTH is a mode of communication, which is by its very nature always already a translation. These primeval texts of humanity reach both backwards and forwards from and into diverse cultural narratives, illustrating social identities and complex configurations of community. Myth is not translation in the strictest sense, that is, the rendering of a text from one language to another.¹ Rather, its function is to bridge one spatiotemporal context to another and to grant continued and renewed significance to a time-tested cultural narrative. In Walter Benjamin's theory of criticism, the task of the critic is not to describe the work of art within its own time, but to describe his time within the context of the work of art. So it is with myth as with Benjamin's work of art—the translation from one epoch to another involves letting myth speak a people and a time.

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, it will examine the interrelations of mythopoesis and translation, whereby mythopoesis is defined as the creative means by which myth achieves its translation to new times and spaces.² I will argue that myth and translation share many fundamental debates such as the problem of originality and authenticity, the role of the foreign and the familiar, and the lasting nature of the text. Second, taking specific examples from the Greek myth of Electra in adaptations by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Ezra Pound, I will present the case that Attic tra-

gedians and modern dramatists alike use mythopoesis to demystify myth and to undo the “myth of origin.”

Translation simultaneously refers to and denies the authority of origin, and myth shares this same paradox. Myth is often viewed as a suspicious misrepresentation of the truth, a belief echoed in Max Müller's famous dictum: “Myth is a disease of language.”³ Yet myth is also often laden with the powerful truth-value that comes from its mystical, supernatural elements and its inherent associations with the origins of all literature and culture. Like translation, myth is haunted by the “myth of origin.” Mythopoesis in turn denies this privileging of origin. All mythopoesis can be seen as an attempt on the part of myth to transcend its own roots through translation.

“A good translation is like a pane of glass,” writes Norman Shapiro, “you notice that it's there when there are little imperfections.”⁴ This view of translation as faithful servant to an authentic original advocates the highest degree of fluency and transparency in the target language. However, it contradicts the project of mythopoesis, which seeks to incorporate new social configurations into the larger story of humanity. In *The Translator's Invisibility* Lawrence Venuti calls this obsession with transparency a blindness to the important ideological and political aspects of translation. Transparency is perhaps a form of blindness, but it is also a form of silencing—translations must speak their differences as a sign of the other, the previously unknown. The question of whether to translate allowing the foreignness of the original language to permeate the new text or to assimilate cultural as well as linguistic difference is central to debates in translation theory. The flavor of the arguments may be contemporary, taking into account the concerns raised by postcolonialism and theories of alterity; however the debates are as old as the notion of translation itself.

The practice of translation has been haunted by the shadow of taboo and prohibition, from the question of how and whether to translate Homer to the controversy surrounding the translation of sacred texts into the vernacular, to the philosophical postulations of the German Romantics and the cultivation of a national spirit through language. But before we pursue any of these aspects in depth, let us begin with a consideration of what we understand to be a translation. Cultural critic and literary historian, George Steiner, permits himself the provocative statement that “translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning, be it in the widest semiotic sense or in more specifically verbal exchanges. To hear significance,” claims Steiner, “is to translate.”⁵

While this declaration may seem radical, it has deep historical roots. Steiner echoes the sentiments of the German Romantics, specifically Wilhelm von Humboldt, who postulated that “all understanding . . . is always at the same time a misunderstanding,” making translation an inevitable act of everyday cognitive processes.⁶ And for Benjamin, too, translation can never be divorced from all thinking about language. In “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (The task of the translator), he maintains that the original is always already a translation of what he calls “pure language” and that translation can only ever be judged in accordance with the relative relationship of both texts to that distant pure language. He defines translation as taking the nameless purity of language and giving it a name in the language of man. Yet this pure language is also revealed and rescued through the interaction of the original and the translation. For Benjamin, “the essence [of a translation] is not the message, not the communication,” but rather the afterlife (“das Überleben, das Fortleben”) of the work.⁷ Indeed, the act of translation enriches and gives new life to the original, saving it from oblivion and even transforming the language of the source text in the process. Agreeing with Steiner, Benjamin sees language itself as a translation, the production of similarity through the great human mimetic faculty.⁸ All of these critics have in common that they view translation as the production of a text with its own validity and not the rendering of an inferior copy or double.

Just as there are countless taboos regarding translation, so too are there significant cultural prohibitions surrounding myth. The word *myth* comes from the Greek *muthos*, meaning “a traditional story, either wholly or partially fictitious, providing an explanation for or embodying a popular idea concerning some natural or social phenomenon or some religious belief or ritual” (*O.E.D.*). Myth, then, is simultaneously a false, untrustworthy medium and a story carrying profound human truths. Inherent in myth is the association with the “origins” of all literature and culture, and both Freudian and Jungian psychology interpret myth as the collective unconscious, the psychic roots of humanity itself. It is the trip home we think we are taking in myth that is the key to its prestige. But this trip “home” to some imagined origin is also the source of controversy and concern.

This link between myth and origin or authenticity is an important one, for myth makes no pretense of having humble beginnings. The root holds all the clout. And for Steiner, this origin is tied to that of language, as he argues in his analysis of myth: “The principle Greek myths are imprinted in our language and on our grammars in particular. . . We speak the vestiges of myth when we speak.”⁹ Moreover,

he maintains, “language and myth develop reciprocally.”¹⁰ Following Steiner’s logic, if translation is already an integral component in every act of communication, we can conclude that speaking myth in language is akin to translation itself. Steiner is not alone, however, in postulating the close ties between linguistic structures and those present in myth.

The German Romantics with their program of *Neue Mythologie* advocated the regeneration of myth in language as the key to mythic transcendence in a dialectical relationship with nature and the human spirit. Thus myth becomes a kind of “tautegorical” absolute, to use Friedrich Schelling’s terms, neither allegorical nor euhemeristic, but autonomous and devoid of all secondary meaning.” In this sense, the Romantics’ understanding of myth is the direct opposite of their views on translation, which assumes human mediation. Friedrich Schleiermacher, one of the greatest enthusiasts of translation as an integral element in the German national cultural agenda, was adamant that translations not have an assimilating effect. They should bear the residue of their foreign nature so as not to “contaminate” the newly formed German language and culture with textual imposters. For Schleiermacher, Greek myth is not alien to the German cultural agenda; on the contrary, Greek civilization and language are for him the very etymology of the German language. But translations of myth should nevertheless reflect the historical and geographic distance of these ancient tales.

Indeed, Schleiermacher and Venuti come to the same conclusion that translation should not be a transparent reproduction of an original, albeit with different arguments. Venuti’s reasoning is a political and ideological commitment to avoiding what he calls the “ethnocentric violence of translation.”¹² Schleiermacher’s convictions are equally rooted in a cultural agenda, though one which seeks to keep the foreign apart and different, avoiding assimilation into a pristine German national literature. For Douglas Robinson, however, the impetus behind foreignizing the text is always more complicated than an external social contract. He brings it down to the fact that both the self and the other are always inherent within the original foreign text, what he calls the doubled soul. Robinson postulates that the forces surrounding translation are charged with the emotion of reducing the otherness in the self to “the same brown faceless depersonalized sludge that passes for ‘literature’ or ‘culture’ in every part of this debased society.”¹³ Transparency of translation, he concludes, threatens the integrity of the individual. Robinson also takes exception with Benjamin’s theory of translation and accuses him of having taken language prisoner. He argues that Benjamin’s favoring

of pure language is elitist and contradictory to his critique of myth.¹⁴ Somewhat sarcastically, Robinson suggests that the real task of the translator should be to free pure language from its magical spell. In Benjamin's defense, however, it should be noted that his writings on the philosophy of language date from an early period and that his critique of myth comes out of his later arcades project influenced by the historical materialist approach of the Frankfurt School.¹⁵

Much of the work on mythology in recent decades has been part of a project initiated by the Frankfurt School to eradicate the kind of powerful phantasmagoric quality of myth appropriated by the National Socialists in Germany. This is the impetus behind Benjamin's denigration of myth as "dream-kitsch," the kind of paralytic catatonia brought on by the mesmerizing images of capitalist consumer society.¹⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer dedicate their work in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* to waking up the public, shaking them out of the complacent slumber of myth. In their exhaustive social analysis, mass consumer culture becomes fertile territory for manipulating public opinion with powerful and dangerous totalitarian myths. For them, there is a direct link between myth and fascism.¹⁷ The one thing all mythographers seem to agree upon is that myth carries with it a discreet power, at once embodying creative energies and along with it the dangers of the misappropriation of the spirit.

The critique of myth begins long before modern times, however. It has been argued that literature since Homer has been nothing other than an attempt to free humanity from the dark chthonian underworld of myth. The mystic, ritualistic, nonrational aspect of myth is targeted for elimination. Plato is among the first to warn of the dangers of myth, the seductive side that threatens to implode in its own fiction. He views myth as lacking authenticity because of its transmission from oral culture, carrying no more truth-value than rumor itself.¹⁸ Plato is the first to distinguish between the two words *muthos* and *logos*, which had previously been used interchangeably to mean both "speech" and "word."¹⁹ The original semantic affinity of these two lexical roots of "mytho/logy" (the former meaning "fictional narrative account" and the latter meaning "reason" or "logic") accounts for the extreme dichotomy in our cultural understanding of myth as both an exaggerated story and an absolute transcendental ideal.

Like Plato, the German Romantics turned to language to make their case for a new mythology. In "The Origin of Language" (1772), Johann Gottfried Herder denies the commonly held view that language is either divinely bestowed on man or merely contrived, instead proposing that through language humans do not imi-

tate nature but divine creativity itself.²⁰ Herder does not view mythology as a static medium but as a "New Mythology," which can be lived and revitalized in the form of poetic works. Goethe's conception of mythology closely follows that of Herder, and also holds that origin does not exist as an outside concept, but rather that it is revealed in the process of literary transposition of myth. Along with Karl Philipp Moritz, Goethe's mythopoetics rests on the distinction between allegory, for him a one-dimensional mode of reference, and symbol, a mode of truth, which cannot be reduced or referred to outside of itself or "general ideas given from nature."²¹ Thus the simultaneous autonomy and polysemicity of the symbol provide the means of expression necessary for the wild energy of myth to surge forth, as illustrated for example in Goethe's poem "Prometheus."

Mythopoesis seeks to harness this "wild energy" of myth, to translate and transpose it onto a new context in a careful balancing act between origin and invention. It maps its past and its future in the creation of a new text. A case in point is Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which tells the story of Agamemnon's homecoming from the Trojan war, where a trap awaits him and his concubine, Cassandra. The scarlet tapestry of honor is exchanged for the sordid red of a bloody bath, where the war hero meets his end at the hands of his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover-accomplice, Aegisthus. Electra must wait patiently for her brother, Orestes, to return from exile and revenge their father's death through matricide. In his rendering of the myth, Aeschylus departs from Homer to portray the struggle to free humanity from the hold of the gods in a shift away from supernatural forces to the powers of reason. The Attic tragedian carries the ancient world from darkness to light and celebrates progress through the "civic marriage of men and gods."²²

The mythopoesis at work in the *Oresteia* creates a humanist tragedy out of myth, separating it from its barbaric past. By the end of the trilogy, Athena has laid down the preliminary structures for a court of law, where justice prevails over the fancy of Zeus and his entourage. In the *Eumenides*, Orestes is acquitted for his crime, but Athena never declares his innocence. Instead, she justifies her decision by privileging civil institutions over divine law: "I honour the male, in all things but marriage . . . / Even if the vote is equal, Orestes wins."²³ Athena places the union of man and woman above the blood relations of mother and child, while Apollo argues that woman is merely a vessel for the man's seed. Civic, state law triumphs over the rule of the Olympian gods and the mythical powers of the earth. In this new world order, it would appear that *logos* ascends as *muthos* is defeated. But in the larger project of translating

myth, we find that the mysterious powers of myth cannot be repressed. The strangeness of the other continues to haunt these stories in spite of or perhaps because of their translation to new times and spaces.²⁴

The humanism apparent in this ascendance from myth to tragedy is found in both Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* tragedies, where the resolution that is sought has greater ramifications than the mere culmination of the Apollonian oracle and revenging of Agamemnon's unjust murder. On the contrary, the conclusion of the Sophoclean tragedy, which portrays neither Orestes nor his sister *Electra* as remorseful for their actions, shows the siblings liberated from the grip of the evil curse that had plagued their family for generations. The last lines of the chorus justify the brutal murders and laud brother and sister alike:

**Children of Atreus, from great suffering
You have won freedom at last
By what has been done here, today.**²⁵

Human reason again triumphs over the mystic powers of myth. Ironically, however, while tragedy can be seen to purify myth of its chthonian roots, it also harkens back to its own muthos, the language that speaks the narrative of humanity.

Mythopoesis, as the translation of myth, can be seen as a dialectical struggle between the foreign and the familiar. Myth is the translation derived from a source text, already a translation; it has no original or final copy. Rather it is in a constant state of flux and transition. Certainly Homer is not the author of his epic tales—we only name him this for lack of earlier extant versions of these narratives. Even the so-called *Urtexs* of Western civilization, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are in fact translations from oral culture.

Like the translation, then, the tragic text of mythopoesis is always at least doubled. Humboldt claims that we all find ourselves in a doubled relationship to language by virtue of the fact that all understanding is a misunderstanding, and that the concept has no sign save for an ideal imaginary one. Schleiermacher, too, adopted the notion of translation as “going doubled like a ghost” (where ghost implies the German *Geist*—ghost, intellect or spirit in the larger sense). Robinson interprets Schleiermacher's words as an indication of the magical otherness of translation, the double that it conjures up inside each of us, either reader or translator: “A ghost or a double that translates, traps supernatural reflections and projections in a prison house or a paradise of language.”²⁶ This magic of the ghost

is not a replacement for the original text, nor does it belong to the category of replica or copy, but is a residual extra. In other words, there is no loss when it comes to translation. Jacques Derrida confirms this when he states that “Übersetzung and translation overcome, equivocally in the course of an equivocal combat, the loss of the object. A text lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable.”²⁷ The retention of the German *Übersetzung* aptly illustrates this doubled nature, which semantically alleviates the mourning of the lost object. The implication here is that the otherness of the double, like the foreignness in a translation, is the key to the survival of the text as such.

The concept of the stranger in the translation as the agent of rescue can be equally applied to mythopoesis. Hofmannsthal's 1903 version of Sophocles' *Electra* inserts a strangeness of psychic and erotic tensions into his text, thereby saving it for a new era. Once the boy-genius of the Viennese coffee house literary scene, Hofmannsthal wrote one of the most influential dramas of the *Electra* myth since the Attic tragedies. Entitled *Elektra: Tragödie in einem Aufzuge frei nach Sophokles*, this one-act play is more of an adaptation than a translation.²⁸ By his own admission, Hofmannsthal's classical education was somewhat irregular, although his erudition with regard to the classics of European literature is legendary. He read the Greek tragedies in the original, but he probably knew them better through contemporary commentaries.²⁹ Hofmannsthal likely used Georg Thudichum's 1838 translation of Sophocles' *Electra* as a guide, from which he took words and phrases for his new version.³⁰ The poetry of this new *Elektra* is breathtakingly beautiful despite the violence and brutality of the action. But fidelity to the Greek is not Hofmannsthal's priority—dramatic innovation is his motive.

Composed at the height of the tumultuous fin-de-siècle period, *Elektra* introduces several strikingly daring innovations. Unlike in the Greek tragedies, the heroine's role here is not eclipsed by the shocking matricide committed by Orestes. In fact, *Electra* upstages her brother's actions by performing an ecstatic Dance of Death, with which she mesmerizes her audience and destroys the tragic unity of the drama all at once. As the curtain falls, *Electra*'s dead body lies inert upon the stage.³¹ Hofmannsthal thus shifts the emphasis away from the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus to the courageous and defiant Atrean princess. Agamemnon's mourning daughter is not the meek and submissive slave girl of Euripides, disheveled and dressed in rags. Instead, she becomes a dominant force in the Atrean court, terrifying all those who cross her path.

This mythopoetic renewal of the Greek source text is further com-

plicated by its simultaneous translation of Freud's theories of hysteria. Hofmannsthal's *Electra* bears a striking resemblance to the hysterical patient in Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer's first famous case study: "Fraulein Anna O."³² While *Electra* suffers from the memory of Agamemnon's cruel murder, Freud and Breuer's Anna O. is plagued by her father's recent death. Both women have an unnatural attachment, bordering on obsession, with the memory of the father, the consequences of which manifest themselves in somatic and psychic disturbances. Freud's major theoretical breakthrough in his analysis of these early case studies is the fundamental link between the repression of memory and the ensuing hysteria. It is precisely the recovery of the original trauma that becomes the cure for the disorder. Freud labels this process a translation: "'Repression' is the clinical term we use for a failed translation."³³

The translations in Hofmannsthal's text are multiple and overlapping, beginning of course with the revision of the Sophocles text, but compounded by the translation of Freud's theories on hysteria via "Anna O." The scenario is further complicated by the transference of repressed memories, which are the cause of *Electra*'s suffering. With so many elements of translation, more than doubling any notion of source text, one might ask if the "strangeness" of mythopoesis leads to a forgetting of the myth altogether. Freud might call the aspect of the foreign in the translated text the unconscious—perhaps this is where translation ends and myth begins.

While Benjamin's concept of myth is entirely different from mythopoesis, his theory of the storyteller might shed some light on this problem. For Benjamin, the value of a "story" (in the sense of narrative with overarching significance—i.e., myth) is not present in the moment of inception. Unlike information, which is fleeting and momentary, story transcends temporal-spatial limitations and has an ever-growing aura: "[A story] does not expend itself. It preserves its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."³⁴ Like Benjamin's story, then, myth is the other of all narrative—in Freud's terms, a repression present only as an unconscious. If we compare these considerations to Derrida's assertion that the translatable untranslatability of a text makes for its survival, then it becomes clear that it is this incommensurability of the two texts, the alien in the translation, that is the very means of rescuing and strengthening myth. This is what Benjamin calls the afterlife of all translation.

Pound's 1949 version of *Elektra* is and is not a more faithful translation than that of Hofmannsthal. Pound's drama is a line-by-line translation of the original Sophocles, whereas Hofmannsthal's work can be considered an adaptation. But while Pound is committed to

reproducing the oral qualities and characteristics of the Greek, his version achieves an almost complete autonomy from the original Sophoclean tragedy. What Hofmannsthal demonstrates through the inclusion of cultural markers prevalent in the Viennese fin-de-siècle literary milieu, Pound achieves via linguistic means. Pound's notion of translation puts the foreign text in the service of a modernist poetics. Rather than attempt to capture the strangeness in the original text, he stimulates the same degree of alienation within the domestic cultural economy. That is to say, he first appropriates the foreignness of the source and then simulates this in the English language by using passages of transliterated Greek, dialect, colloquialisms, neologisms, archaic or elevated language, ellipsis, alliteration, assonance, and melopoeia to produce the desired autonomy of the new text.³⁵ To put it in Venuti's terms, Pound deterritorializes his language from within, becoming a nomad writer in his own tongue.³⁶

Like Benjamin, Pound views translation as a form of criticism or interpretation, one view of the original rather than a literal rendering in a new language. Here, the specific task of the translator is to write *Electra*'s shadow as she dances to the rhythm of a tragedy he knew all too well. The poet had been imprisoned for his actions during World War II, and was considered by many to be mentally incompetent. In his translation of Sophocles' drama, Pound pens a stubborn and defiant *Electra* to fight the battles he could not. His heroine is not the grief-stricken maiden of antiquity, or the Freudian hysteric of Hofmannsthal's drama, but a capable, strong, and sane woman. Pound wanted to show that, like *Electra*, he could not be silenced or censored by his incarceration.

Pound's technique in his *Elektra* rests on producing an equivalent strangeness in English to suggest the quality of the Greek. He never sacrifices his own poetic voice to the difference of the Greek, but transposes that language's rhythms and melodies into his own infamous "Poundspeak." Pound's translation privileges the sonic over the semantic, using his poetic genius to mimic the sounds of the Greek, all the while communicating a clear message through choice of vocabulary and emphasis. His mythopoetic project involves manipulating the message to paint his own version of *Electra*'s truth. For example, the many references to pain, grief, and sorrow present in Sophocles' version are curiously understated in Pound's rendition. The poet suppresses the Greek *lupein* [to grieve, vex, cause pain], transforming it into anger and hatred. If we compare Pound's translation to Jebb's 1894 literal translation, in several instances we can see a marked difference, for example, during Elec-

tra's long address to her sister, Chrysothemis, when she justifies her steadfast resolve to seek revenge:

Jebb: "For me be it food enough that I do not / wound mine own conscience."³⁷

Pound: "If I don't eat, I don't make myself spew with disgust. / Keep my self-respect somehow."³⁸

Jebb's version shows a mournful heroine with a self-destructive urge, while Pound turns the statement around to make her sound more self-defiant. His *Electra* stifles all weakness and reflects instead a sound clarity of mind. Throughout the action, the poet's modern protagonist stubbornly refuses to take a personal attitude toward suffering and opts to universalize it as a form of pity for mankind's failure and as a call to action. Pound's translation is in many cases less faithful to Sophocles' original than either Jebb or David Grene, but he reserves the right to make a strong mythopoetic statement and in the process challenges the supremacy and privilege of origin.³⁹

Pound's translation poetics are in contrast to many other moderns including T. S. Eliot, whose adaptation of the *Electra* myth in *Family Reunion* is a thorough domestication of the myth, so much so that one might not even know that it is based upon an Attic tragedy. Eliot's version is more of a transposition than a translation as such. The Atrean story is superimposed upon the cultural milieu of upper-class British society in the early twentieth century and only a skeleton of the Sophoclean narrative remains.⁴⁰ Both Pound and Eliot follow a modernist paradigm, seeking autonomy for their literary productions regardless of source, but each achieves this via different means.

Though Venuti is intrigued in particular by Pound's techniques of alienation and autonomy, he ends up labeling this cultural policy both romantic and patriarchal.⁴¹ He accuses the poet of being more concerned with strengthening and influencing the English canon than with the classics themselves. In this respect, Pound's poetics reflect the translation politics of Schleiermacher and his contemporaries. Like the German Romantics, his choice of mythological source is of high universal order and thus deemed worthy of influencing the English canon, yet it was plainly highjacked and distorted to suit the modernist cultural agenda. Pound never borrowed, he simply stole outright.

With Pound's mythopoetics, we are confronted once again with the dichotomy of transcendence from mythology and the forging of

a new mythology through the introduction of the foreign into the domestic. Venuti concludes that this poetic policy was in a way a self-defeating mission, for his rhetoric of cultural autonomy ended up "developing translation practices that drew on a broad range of domestic discourses and repeatedly recovered the excluded and the marginal to challenge the dominant."⁴² Venuti may have a point; however we should give Pound credit where credit is due—he was highly influential in putting an end to the primacy of the transparent translation that had ruled since the seventeenth century.

The translation of myth has been a constant struggle between origin and invention, since repetition is always both a return and a difference. But permanence and transformation need not conflict with each other if, as Eva Kushner argues, the permanence of myths "lies not in the fixity of narrative detail, nor in the ontological unity of the human mind . . . but in the very dynamics of myth itself."⁴³ Similarly, myth can be viewed as a collapsing of the border between "truth" and "lies," if we agree that "myth is the force of 'invention': a power that founds itself as its own absolute foundation."⁴⁴ As a founding fiction, then, somewhere between fixity and flux, myth must be a performative and self-perpetuating narrative, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls "auto-poetic mimesis."⁴⁵ What for Benjamin is the afterlife of a work and for Derrida the strangeness of the double makes itself available only through the translation of myth. And yet translation's emancipatory potential rests on the denial of a stable and knowable origin. The symbiotic and oscillatory relationship between fixed and transitory elements, between origin and performance, is the magic in the translation of myth that keeps alive our "fragile moorings to Being."⁴⁶

Notes

1. This essay will deal primarily with the conceptual links between translation and myth. However, I shall address specific aspects of translation practice in my discussion of Ezra Pound's *Elektra*.

2. *Mythopoetics* is the general theory of the production of myth, and *mythopoesis* is the actual creation of new versions of already existing myths. The term is historically contingent in the sense that mythopoesis means something vastly different in the eighteenth century than it does in the twentieth century. For example, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* is a creative translation and interpretation, whereas in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les mouches* the boundaries of myth are much more permeable. Similarly, the poetic *Electra* texts of H.D. and Sylvia Plath extract and shape a single character from the Atrean myth. But even Homer practiced mythopoesis by structuring the oral culture of myth for a written format.

3. Quoted in Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Uni-

versity Press, 1987), 14. Müller's oft-cited phrase is used to illustrate mythology's claims to self-importance. His critique of myth is really a longing for a "healthy" pure language, uncontaminated by metaphor. Myth is for him a corrupting influence. Müller (1823–1900) comes at the tail end of a long line of German Romantic philosophers intent on establishing myth as an absolute quality, capable of reflecting a transcendent human consciousness. It was their intent to keep the purity of myth intact and to fend off any trend toward the interpretation of myth. This presents an obvious conundrum since Romantic philosophers employed their own hermeneutic methods in order to prove the transcendence of myth.

4. Quoted in Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.

5. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), vii.

6. Quoted in Steiner, *After Babel*, 235.

7. Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 9–21. All translations are my own, except where indicated.

8. Benjamin explains that the essence of a text is expressed "in language and not through language." Walter Benjamin, "Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 142. Language is infinitely self-reflexive in that every language expresses its essence first and foremost to itself in a tautological imperative. This essence or magical element of language is further expressed through the relationship of one language to another in the act of translation.

9. George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 304. Steiner brings with him a wealth of knowledge and adds immeasurable insight to the problem of human expression, and yet his privileging of "Greek myth" over other ancient myth systems is somewhat problematic. He himself raises the issue of the "unbroken authority of Greek myths over the imagination of the West," and justifies their exclusivity by suggesting that they encode primary biological and social confrontations and therefore make up part of our collective memory: "We come home to them in our psychic roots" (*ibid.*, 300–301). While it is likely that Western cultures have been more influenced by the myths of ancient Greece than by the stories of other civilizations, Steiner's silence on this issue is nevertheless significant. His preoccupation with Hellenic Greece perpetuates another myth—that of fixed origin of civilization.

10. *Ibid.*, 135.

11. Schelling's pronouncement of myth as a "tautegorical" absolute renders it endlessly and exclusively self-reflexive. More recently, Jean-Luc Nancy has taken a similar approach, stating that "myth is a myth." See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, ed. and trans. Peter O'Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 52. He appropriates the views of the German Romantics in order to argue that myth is an unthinkable limit to presence and being, a suspension or interruption of the subject.

12. Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, 41.

13. Douglas Robinson, *Translation and Taboo* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 198.

14. *Ibid.*, 204.

15. Robinson seems to have misunderstood Benjamin's "pure language," which in fact expresses the fundamental otherness within language and not a transparency or immanence. Benjamin was more interested in a theory of naming than he was in contributing to theories of translation as a cultural practice.

16. See John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993) for a full discussion of Benjamin's concept of "dream-kitsch" and the critique of myth.

17. Strangely, Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that a return

to myth is actually the means to escape the dangers of myth: "In the layers of Homer's material, myth has been suppressed. The account of them, however, the unity forced out of the diffuse legends, is at the same time the description of the subject's escape-route from the mythical powers." See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1969), 61.

18. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Reflektierter Mythos," in *Mythe et création*, ed. Pierre Cazier (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1994), 9.

19. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, 1.

20. Burten Feldman and Robert Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology: 1680–1860* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 227.

21. *Ibid.*, 262.

22. Robert Fagles and W. B. Stanford, "Introduction," *The Oresteia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 93.

23. Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 1,752, 1,756.

24. While tragedy aims to civilize myth through its poetic structures, it cannot ultimately transcend the powers of its ancient, mysterious roots, which seem always to seep forth like a text seen through a palimpsest. Translating myth into new times and spaces makes it available to modern audiences, but its narrative force is not diminished.

25. Sophocles, *Electra. Plays: II*, trans. Kenneth McLeish (London: Methuen, 1990), 1,1508–10.

26. Robinson, *Translation and Taboo*, 189.

27. Quoted in Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 5.

28. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Elektra: Tragödie in einem Aufzuge* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001).

29. Martin Mueller, "Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* and Its Dramatic Models," *Modern Drama* 29, no. 1 (1986):72.

30. Klaus E. Bohnenkamp, "Deutsche Antiken-Übertragungen als Grundlage der Griechendramen Hofmannsthals," *Euphorion* 70, no. 2 (1976):198.

31. The tragic unity is disturbed by the addition of the Dance of Death. According to the principles of Aristotelian tragedy, the unity of the drama pivots on the vengeful murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. When Hofmannsthal's *Electra* performs her triumphant *Totentanz* and falls lifeless to the ground, the tragic unity is broken. Her dead body remains on stage as a physical remainder, a residue or a supplement to the dramatic action. The materiality of her body acts like an open-ended question and not a tidy tragic conclusion.

32. There is evidence that Hofmannsthal knew of Freud's work and of the *Case Studies in Hysteria* (1895) in particular because of a letter he wrote to his friend Hermann Bahr asking to borrow his copy of the work. See Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefe II: 1900–1909* (Vienna: Bermann-Fischer, 1937), 42. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, "Fraulein Anna O.," in *Studies in Hysteria. The Collected Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 2: 21–47. For a full analysis and comparison of Hofmannsthal's *Electra* and Freud's "Anna O.," see Jill Scott, "The Passion According to the Analyst: Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* on the Couch," *Biffores* 1, no. 1 (1997):81–96.

33. Quoted in Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy*, 19.

34. Walter Benjamin, "Der Erzähler," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 445–46.

35. Examples of Pound's careful attention to the reproduction of sounds abound in his *Elektra*, such as the heroine's self-designation as a "ninny," mirroring the Greek *nepios*, meaning childish. While ninny is not a synonym for the Greek, Pound manages to replicate the sonic quality of the original. Sir Richard Jebb's 1894 translation, which Pound used almost exclusively as his study aid for the Greek, uses the word "foolish" for the Greek *nepios*. See

Ezra Pound and Rudd Flemming, *Elektra*, ed. Richard Reid (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989). Sir Richard Jebb, trans., *Electra*, in *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924).

36. Lawrence Venuti, *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 204.

37. Jebb, *Electra*, 1.363–64.

38. Pound, *Elektra*, 1.418–19.

39. David Grene, trans., *Sophocles' Electra. Greek Tragedies*, vol. 2, ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

40. See T. S. Eliot, *The Family Reunion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963).

41. Venuti, *Rethinking Translation*, 191.

42. *Ibid.*, 203.

43. Eva Kushner, "Greek Myths in Modern Drama: Paths of Transformation," in *Literary Criticism and Myth*, ed. Joseph Strelka (University Park Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 201.

44. Christopher Bracken, "Oedipus in Translation: Psychoanalysis and the Language of Anthropology" (paper presented at the Conference on Globalization and Translation, University of Toronto, October 1996), 1.

45. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 56.

46. Steiner, *Antigones*, 133.