Translation and Repetition
Rewriting (Un)original Literature

Mª Carmen África Vidal Claramonte
Translation and Repetition: Rewriting (Un)original Literature offers a new and original perspective in translation studies by considering creative repetition from the perspective of the translator. This is done by analyzing so-called “unoriginal literature” and thus expanding the definition of translation.

In Western thought, repetition has long been regarded as something negative, as a kind of cliché, stereotype, or automatism that is the opposite of creation. On the other hand, in the eyes of many contemporary philosophers from Wittgenstein and Derrida to Deleuze and Guattari, repetition is more about difference. It involves rewriting stories initially told in other contexts so that they acquire a different perspective. In this sense, repeating is often a political act. Repetition is a creative impulse for the making of what is new. Repetition as iteration is understood in this book as an action that recognizes the creative and critical potential of copying.

The author analyzes how our time understands originality and authorship differently from past eras, and how the new philosophical ways of approaching repetition imply a new way of understanding the concept of originality and authorship. Deconstruction of these notions also implies subverting the traditional ways of approaching translation. This is vital reading for all courses on literary translation, comparative literature, and literature in translation within translation studies and literature.

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TRANSLATION AND REPETITION

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A book is a resonance box, an interweaving, a textile. It is a space without limits in which the reader (and the author) listens to multiple voices. A book is a deterritorialized, palimpsestic territory, with multiple layers of meanings. Therefore, a book always owes much to all those who have sung melodies in the author's ear from different perspectives. This book is indebted to many voices. To Susan Bassnett, whose ideas have been crucial to me and whose generosity I cannot describe in words. To Tong King Lee, for being a constant source of inspiration to think of translation in groundbreaking ways, for having read the very first manuscript, and for his true and selfless support. I am also extremely grateful to the AHRC Experiential Translation Network, whose members, under the leadership of Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal, are opening translation to infinite and incredibly enriching avenues. I would like to express my profound thanks to Christopher Mellinger for writing the preface and for all of his suggestions and comments. His voice is heard here before mine but is also a constant echo. My deepest thanks too to Louisa Semlyen for guiding me throughout this journey. Her professionalism, patience, and kindness have resulted in a trouble-free publication process.
History, adventure, erudition, romance, and tragedy echo through the streets and resonate off the warm, blonde sandstone facades of Salamanca. Cervantes ascribed to that city an enchanting allure that leaves every visitor—myself among them—longing to return. Perhaps it is living and working among these reverberating memories that partially inspired África Vidal to reflect on repetition and rewriting.

Fittingly, the opening chapter of this volume starts with Calvino’s query of where a text begins. This question invites any number of starting points for reflection on repetition, from textual and metaphorical allusion to the embeddedness of a work in a broader literary landscape. One such starting point might even be reminiscent of a Proustian memory; a text may simply begin from an involuntary memory of a time and place, in which corporeality and materiality blend with memory and reflection in medias res. But rather than a madeleine, a corporeal memory provoked by the taste of jamón ibérico might instead transport readers back to the memory-laden streets of Salamanca amidst the bustle of outdoor restaurants in the main square. One need only a single visit to remember the delight of the spontaneous illumination of the Plaza Mayor, a moment that is simultaneously wondrous in the crisp evening air and wholly expected by virtue of its clockwork, and thus unoriginal, arrival.

In certain circles, translation has been pejoratively and incorrectly viewed as derivative and uncreative. The idea of translations being “lesser than” or “derivative” as a repetition of a text in a new language is often the first stone cast in arguments regarding why translation ought to be subservient to what constitutes an “original” piece of writing. Vidal challenges these trodden paths by articulating how translation can instead be viewed as a generative act, particularly in the artistic and literary realm, adding layers of meaning in an inventive palimpsest as well as being a joyful and playful task in ludic translation. As she notes, hierarchical positions have been challenged in the field in order to nuance the relative situatedness of author and text,
translator and translation, to describe translations as works worthy of inquiry unto themselves. Meanwhile, there is certainly plenty of support to position translation as being on par with whatever constitutes “original production”.

The mythos of creative works as appearing *ex nihilo* from the mind of a singular genius is both untrue and damaging to the arts and their translation. While there is little doubt that artists innovate and create, Vidal highlights the originality and subversiveness of (un)original literature. In doing so, she draws attention to an extreme form of what Harold Bloom terms the anxiety of influence: the challenge of any writer to offer novelty. Furthermore, the volume makes a strong case for the creative originality of translation by emphasizing the iterative nature of writing and other artistic forms as a series of complex decision-making tasks, echoing Jiří Levý’s characterization of translation. Other scholars have modeled this process from various perspectives, yet repetition remains a common, albeit often unstated, dimension as we reflect on the task of the translator, moving from source to target and back again.

These themes extend beyond literature to other creative art forms; music provides many such examples. Performance of a musical score is an act of translation, interpreting symbols and instructions into sound, mood, and performance. Composers can explicitly instruct performers to repeat a portion of a score at various points: the instruction *D.S. al Coda* is a command to return to a symbol (*dal segno*) for a repetition before skipping to a coda. Western classical structures such as the sonata form will present an opening motif again in a recapitulation near the end of a movement, while modern DJs resample and remix music electronically. Musical theatre will often include a reprise in the second act, and the new setting can dramatically change the meaning and impact of a show tune. All this is to say, repetition finds itself at the core of many a musical rendition that is, in and of itself, a translation.

Vidal has previously written explicitly about music in her volume *Dile que le he escrito un “blues”*. Thus, this preface can revisit David Johnston’s preface to that monograph, in which he invokes a suitably musical reference to harmonics and their ability to add layers and familiarity to a musical score. These sounds and overtones float above the melodic line, adding dimension and texture to a work as musical voices come together in harmony. The melody and harmony do not necessarily coincide, but rather intertwine and modulate as musicians move through the musical score. In transposing the image to Vidal’s volume, he remarks that this effect—one in which readers recognize a familiar emotion while reading a new text—cannot, in fact, be easily referred to in translation. How, then, might we describe these entangled ideas of familiarity and novelty, particularly when thinking of translation?

At hand in the present volume may well yet be Vidal’s answer. The point of departure in translation finds familiar roots in literary studies, specifically those that challenge what constitutes originality to describe (un)original literature. The general premise, that ideas in literature are not necessarily novel but rather draw on intertextual allusion and inspiration from previous writing, is not always expressly stated in scholarship and instead rumbles just beneath the surface. Yet many cling
to the idea of creative genius and inspiration as the source of literary or creative production, when it is only natural for writers, musicians, artists, and other artists to draw inspiration from and repeat ideas with which they resonate. This volume speaks to the question of what it means to resonate and, more specifically, the willingness to invoke and recognize this type of creative repetition, transposition, and iteration as part and parcel of translation.

As such, the challenge and question of repetition, iteration, and creativity are an exciting means by which to view translation—it is a disruptive concept that allows insights to emerge related to affective or experiential engagement with a text. This discussion provides an opportunity to challenge the stability of several concepts (i.e., authenticity, authorship, creativity) that have been central to certain circles of reflection on the topic, further questioning what constitutes the “new” and how texts are created or constructed. These constellations of concepts blur the lines of what constitutes the act of creation and the necessary creative skills of a translator, in addition to the necessary linguistic and cultural facility.

After all, a translator must always understand and navigate nuance in language; the difference between nada and nothing has the power to destroy a silly interlingual pun. One of any number of challenges known to translators, the creative resolution is often unremarked when the new text resonates with readers. Where and how these textual curiosities are addressed is a matter of a translator’s style and approach, yet the individualized process still will revisit the repetitive task of creating a novel rendition.

Even literary forms that are touted as new find familiar traces in repetition. For example, the celebrated Salamanca sage and scholar Miguel de Unamuno advanced literature structurally and thematically with his publication of the tragicomic work Niebla. Despite the first coined usage of its self-referential form as nivola, the story still emerges from a mist (or is it a fog? or a cloud?) of references. A plot built partially on a leading character falling in love with a woman on first sight recalls Dante’s Beatrice, Romeo’s infatuation with Juliet, or Marius glimpsing Cosette. Personal interpretations of literature differ in much the same way as translations do, just as Augusto asks his dog Orfeo the difference between thinking one is in love and being in love. Great stories are told and retold, taking on new shapes and faces with familiar undertones that remind readers of their pasts. Thus, works as disparate in time, place, and theme as Virgil’s Aeneid and Joyce’s Ulysses consciously echo the proto-epic of Homer’s Odyssey, itself beginning in an oral tradition that is still being retranslated and reinterpreted (most recently by Emily Wilson). Vidal’s focus on unoriginal translations, echoes, and repetitions thus draws the reader’s attention to how these same phenomena are ever present in any act of translation.
Continuing to reflect on the translation of artistic forms, one can consider theatre. Aficionados do not always refer to the original script (which served as the source text that is translated to the stage), but rather center their discussions on specific productions, recordings, casts, or artists who have interpreted these works. Attending a recent performance of *The Hours*, a new opera produced by the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, I was struck by the evident intertextuality as the production re-interpreted the story’s previous incarnations in film and literature, which themselves took inspiration from Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf’s novel itself draws its title character from the author’s childhood friend, and the work reflects stylistic influence from Joyce’s innovative stream of consciousness narration. Each repetition and adaptation translate and expand the artistic themes. Not all works lend themselves to such ready identification of their influences, yet the overtones remain nonetheless. Vidal’s erudition to integrate repetition into the act of translation provides an opportunity to reflect on these fragmentary voices that linger in memory.

Repetition, reproduction, and iteration in creative expression also take on new meaning when situated in specific spaces. Consider, for instance, an art installation or a museum exhibit for which creative choices can encompass frames, location and viewing angles, lighting, and progression through the exhibit. In some museums, preparatory sketches that an artist might never have intended to be seen become objects of art in themselves, showing the creative process (much like an author’s handwritten edits in a manuscript can be studied to understand creative intention, meaning, and process). Sometimes artists purposely play with repetition, such as etchings or silkscreen printings. Iterations on a theme can even be seen as the mark of creative development due to sustained engagement with a particular idea. In all cases, art is encountered in a particular time and place, whether chosen by the artist, a curator, a patron, or a customer.

Curated spaces can remind us that movement and travel are also forms of repetition, whether a daily commute, a return to a childhood home, or a trip back to a favorite vacation destination. Travelers always find themselves living in translation; even if no explicit language barrier exists, the local vernacular, jargon, customs, and knowledge will differ. People travel to Salamanca today for myriad reasons, including students from around the world who arrive to immerse themselves in a city steeped in history, artistic expression, and culture. They will surely savor the food, explore the museums, and enjoy the music of the city. As a university town, visitors and international students will be abuzz in classrooms learning the language, conjugating verbs, and translating sentences, perhaps even such a silly question as “¿Qué hace un pez aburrido?”

D.S. al Coda

Thus, authors can use structure and repetition to their advantage, sometimes to great artistic effect and other times for ludic, even silly ends. Vidal’s final chapter, “Echoes, echoes”, highlights the themes of sound and rhythm while evoking
Benjamin’s metaphor of a person at the edge of a forest, calling out into this expansive space and being returned an echo. She ends the volume with the imagery of translation as perpetual movement, for there is no stable, Platonic original underlying the creative act of translation. (Her occasional reference to Platonism throughout the volume is particularly apt in light of Alfred North Whitehead’s characterization of Western philosophy as a series of footnotes to Plato, suggesting the echoes, repetitions, variations, and translations within that discipline.)

Another Greek philosopher who understood this notion of perpetual change was Heraclitus, originator of the koan that stepping into the same river twice is an impossibility. However, despite the inevitable change that surrounds us, we all so often yearn to return to familiar places.

When I someday return to Salamanca, the city and I will be the same but different. Vidal’s volume delights in the power of the creative arts and translation, exploring what it means to repeat and reverberate. And much like any translation, the city’s art and literature, the taste of its gastronomic delights such as jamón ibérico, and its architecture and lights will all resonate with new layers of meaning, echoes, and repetitions of the past.

Christopher D. Mellinger
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Translating has always been an activity linked to the epistemological changes of the contexts in which it is performed. Translators are never oblivious to what is happening around them. That is why, for several decades now, translation studies has been changing the way of understanding basic concepts in our discipline, such as fidelity, equivalence, or origin. These are notions that affect not only translation but also the very way of understanding our reality and existence. In this context, repetition is a key concept, because it is directly related to others, such as authorship and originality.

In Western thought, repetition has long been regarded as a negative concept, one that should be avoided at all costs. However, in line with contemporary philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and others, this book views repetition as difference or, more specifically, as creation. Repetition is a way of situating texts in new contexts and thus bringing to light their plurality. *Translation and Repetition: Rewriting (Un)original Literature* studies repetition from a new perspective: creative repetition.

Our analysis focuses on “unoriginal” literature, which has been examined in depth by literary critics such as Marjorie Perloff, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Craig Dworkin, as well as by other authors outside the field of translation studies. Based on the reflections of these and other poets and literary critics, this book applies creative repetition to translation. From this innovative perspective, (un)original literature is itself a kind of rewriting of previous works. It is a palimpsest. A fabric. A tissue in perpetual motion that is never finished. In fact, it is always being transformed after subsequent readings and translations (both interlinguistically and intralinguistically). This is an unstable literature, constructed on the basis of a proliferation of iterations. The literature we will analyze in these pages is “unfinished works riddled with variants, whose visual and material aspect many consider crucial to their modes of
meaning” (Emmerich 2017: 161). These works consequently offer a new way of understanding the concepts of originality and authorship in the world today. These notions are now perceived much differently than they were in the past. In fact, when they are deconstructed, traditional ways of addressing translation and the translation process are also subverted.

Philosophy is a fertile source of innovative perspectives on repetition, which can shed new light on originality and authorship. Chapter 1 approaches repetition from a contemporary philosophical perspective. As suggested some lines earlier, the concept of repetition is understood here not as reproduction but rather as the production, modification, and creation of something new. When something is repeated or translated, it becomes transfigured in a new context. Starting from the theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gayatri Spivak, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Douglas Hofstadter on beginnings and repetition, this chapter examines contemporary approaches to repetition, which view this concept not as the repetition of the same, that is, as Greek re-production, but rather as a creative production that advances and produces as it repeats.

These new modes of understanding repetition as creative are reflected in the (un)creative writings of (un)original authors in Chapter 2, which provides an overview of writers who create unsettling derivative texts through repetition. These (un)original texts, originals born from other originals, are subversive. Because they require a different mode of translating, they give rise to a singular kind of translation. In the first section, special attention is paid to Samuel Beckett’s repetitions, John Cage’s writing through, Simon Morris’ Getting Inside Jack Kerouac’s Head, and Christian Bök’s Eunoia. Also analyzed is erasure, a technique used by Jonathan Safran Foer in Tree of Codes (2010), Nick Thurston in Reading the Remove of Literature (2006), and Derek Beaulieu in a, A Novel (2017), an erasure-based translative response to Warhol’s a: a novel. The second part of this chapter also examines the works of three important contemporary writers/copyists/translators, namely, Bartleby & Co. and Mac & His Problem by Enrique Vila-Matas, The Recognitions by William Gaddis, and Absent City by Ricardo Piglia. The third section approaches other (un)creative writers such as Kenneth Goldsmith, Charles Bernstein, Nicole Brossard, and Susan Daitch or Susan Howe, among others. Thus, this chapter shows how many contemporary writers create through (creative) repetition and through these new philosophical modes of understanding repetition, which are reflected in the (un)creative writings of (un)original authors. These writers construct derivative texts that require a type of translation that is totally opposed to prescriptivist approaches. In these traditional approaches, translation merely signifies reformulating the text in another language so that it is “faithful” and thus equivalent to the original. These texts show the need to deal with the materiality of the sign, with the performative nature of these (un)original writings, and with the way they approach meaning, as “a multifaceted, context-dependent and mutable phenomenon which inevitably dissipates and alters during the translation process” (Bennett 2019: 1).
Chapters 3 and 4 explain how the new theories of translation transcend the essentialist binary oppositions between original and translation, and between primary and secondary. As shall be seen, these are ways of approaching translation that not only can be applied to this (un)original literature but also fit the requirements of the 21st century. Chapter 3 deals with four acclaimed 20th-century writers and translators: Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, Jerome Rothenberg, and Jorge Luis Borges. Rothenberg’s ethnopoetics has been widely analyzed, but his translations have not, and even less so his theory of “total translation”. Although these are well-known authors in translation studies, the approach in this book is new because it focuses on aspects of their translation theories that have not been studied in sufficient depth in connection with repetition, namely, the “transcreation” of Haroldo de Campos, the “porous prose” of Augusto de Campos, and Jerome Rothenberg’s “total translation”, applied here, for instance, to the work of Caroline Bergvall, among others. As for Borges, I focus on his “Pierre Menard”, a story that perfectly defines and embodies creative repetition and that has been reused by such artists as Michel Lafon, Glenn Gould, Pierre Huyghe, or (Elaine) Sturtevant. This chapter shows how these rewriters create a theory of translation that can be applied to ethically approach the texts described in the previous chapter.

Chapter 4 expands the ideas of these 20th-century translators analyzed in the previous chapter with 21st-century views on translation, such as those by Susan Bassnett, Anne Coldiron, Kirsten Malmkjaer, Loredana Polezzi, Theo Hermans, or Lawrence Venuti.

These authors, as well as others with different perspectives, agree that translation is infinitely more complex than the mere substitution of one linguistic system for another. In the 21st century, translating consists of “the weaving together of languages, the searching out of linguistic sympathies, linguistic versatilities, linguistic multiplicity, the self-renewing concertedness of a heterogeneity, which has no telos” (Scott 2018: 30). And in this context, translation becomes a form of creativity. According to Borges, translation completes the original, multiplies its meanings, and brings to light what the text hides in its interstices. This is why translating is not repeating: “Translation is not the repetition of a text in another language, but a complicity between texts to converge on something that lies beyond them” (Scott 2018: 31).

Chapter 4 thus shows that the new ways of understanding translation as something always in motion, as something that must move in order to superimpose new meanings derived from new contexts, are very appropriate for translating the (un)original texts discussed in the previous chapters, for instance, Caroline Bergvall, Jen Bervin, and others: namely, original texts, whose creation is based on appropriations, citations, quotations, and intertexts; texts whose dynamic materiality turns the page into a nonhierarchical territory full of traces that do not move as a linear progression but invite the reader to see new interconnections in new ways; derivative texts that reveal by effacing, by presenting what is absent.
Consequently, in these texts and their translations, fidelity and equivalence “are not, of course, simple terms, and have become increasingly relativized in both translation practice and translation studies” (Scott 2011: 215). During the 20th century, the definitions of fidelity and equivalence have evolved in many disciplines, and this is also true of translation. Because the meaning of these concepts has shifted, the attitude toward translators has also been transformed (Bassnett 2022b: 237–238). In line with authors such as Tong King Lee, Clive Scott, Madeleine Campbell, Ricardav Vidal, and many others, the concept of translation in this book is broad and transformative. It is thus conceived as always on the move, experiential, ludic, and creative. It is a translation that finds meaning not only in words but also in forms, sounds, silences, smells, and textures. It is an interactive and participative translation that is the result of a holistic approach that “recognizes that there are multiple possible versions of both source and target texts and this can help mitigate the biases and preconceptions a static, intralingual translation can sometimes introduce” (Campbell and Vidal 2019: xxvi).

In translation, what is important is not so much the result but the process itself (Campbell and Vidal 2019: 2), because, if reading is an active and creative process with many layers, translating is an endless semiosis that is never finished: “No text can be fixed in time, because it will always be open to new interpretations and each translation is a new version in what is a long line of earlier versions” (Bassnett 2022b: 245). To rewrite these texts, we need a translation

which realizes language’s metamorphic impulses, its solicitation towards the allophonic and the allomorphic. Translation begins in equivalence, but is itself the very process of superseding equivalence, of setting language on the move; in translation, we use words precisely in order to reinflect them towards, or away from, the languages they confront or summon up, indeed by means of the languages they confront or summon up.

(Un)original writings bring with them a proliferation of versions of the “original” text. Here, language is always a living organism, a performance in motion that invites the reader to approach multiplicity. Translating these texts is in itself an open experience:

In order not to become itself an unwitting instrument of closure and textual decision, translation will tend to multiply obstructions to a fluent, linear, recapitulative kind of reading and pass on its own constructivist persuasions to its readers, by various processes of linguistic provocation.

Translation is relational becoming, creation; it is thus “necessarily experimental, unable to draw exclusively on the known, begetting knowledge, not meaning” (Scott
In this context, Tong King Lee’s theory of *ludic translation*, which Lee applies to concrete experimental Chinese poetry, is most relevant. Ludic translation is a subversive, rhizomatic translation in which play can serve as a lubricant in negotiating the tensions between original and translation. It proffers a conceptual route out of irreconcilable dualities by opening up to the possibilities of creative and critical intertextualities across languages and cultures. It transcends a zero-sum (all-or-nothing) conception under which the translator is either submissive to or subversive of the original text and its author. Instead, play spotlights the liquidity of the source—target interface, from which translational identity formations are engendered.

(Lee 2022: 6)

It is my assertion that the derivative, quotational texts studied in this book not only subvert our way of understanding authenticity, originality, and authorship but also challenge our ideas of the construction of the real and of previously established cultural values. Consequently, these texts require an ethical translation, which is unique, creative, and ludic. The study of this (un)original literature explains how new theories of translation transcend the essentialist binary oppositions between original and translation, and between primary and secondary. In order to translate these (un)original writings, which are already rewritings of previous texts, it will be essential to start from the latest translation theories that have broadened the scope of translation and that point the way to new research perspectives in the field. Translation will be seen in this book as an encompassing process, as a (original) performance, as a sensual experience that plays not only with language but also with our senses. This translation will be appropriate to rewrite texts that are canvases on which words are transformed into visual events, something that once again expands and enhances the concept of translation. Ludic and creative translation is an adventure because it invites us to experience language, to create new language(s) with all our senses.

Ludic translation is perfectly applicable to texts that defy the notion of origin. These are texts that are characterized by their indeterminacy and that allow “for radial strands of thinking” (Lee 2022: 46). Like these (un)original writings, ludic translations are never the same. In them, repetition implies both creativity and playfulness: “Each time a work is translated, even by the same translator, the outcome will inevitably be different because the extraneous circumstances impinging on each instance of translation can never be exactly the same” (Lee 2022: 46). Like other contemporary theories of translation, ludic translation is political: “Play transforms normativized identities, thereby gaining its politico-ethical force” (Lee 2022: 6). Translation is seen in terms of a heterogeneous, affective phenomenology,

a method to democratize expression and level the ground of linguistic transaction, such that “no one is permanently on top, no one is permanently at the