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Freudian Structure of Personality and Poundian Translation: A Case Study of *Cathay*[*]

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***Abstract*—Freud's tripartite structure of personality—id, ego, and superego—together with his topographical structure of the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious, provides a productive framework for translation studies. This paper argues that the interaction between a translator's personality structure and levels of consciousness can be traced in distinctive translational choices. Ezra Pound' s *Cathay* offers a compelling case: elements of the id and the unconscious contribute to his errors and misinterpretations; the superego and the preconscious inform his poetic ideals; and the ego and the conscious mind are manifested in the multiplicity of innovative strategies employed in the target text.**

Index Terms*—personality, Pound, translation, psychoanalysis, *Cathay

I. Introduction

Ezra Pound was one of the most influential modernist poets and translators in 20th-century Anglo-American poetry. His 1915 translated collection of classical Chinese poetry, *Cathay*, as the starting point of his epic poem *The Cantos* (Guo, 2020, p. 2), ignited a powerful Imagist movement in the Anglo-American literary world, reshaping the lyric style, meter, thematic concerns, diction, and form of twentieth-century poetry (Zhu, 2005). Drawing on Freud's theory of the psychic structure of personality to the case study of *Cathay*, this paper examines the dynamic interplay among Pound's id, ego, and superego and the ways in which these forces shaped his translations.

II. Freud's Personality Structure and Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalysis stands as a seminal achievement in the intellectual history of the 20th century and maintains a close connection with literary criticism. As Selden (2004) notes, "the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary criticism spans much of the twentieth century (p. 161)." Sigmund Freud, an indispensable figure in this field, founded the school of psychoanalysis, which has exerted a profound influence on modern Western academic thought.

At the core of Freudian psychoanalytic theory is his conception of the personality's structure and its psychological anatomy. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), Freud sets out in detail his tripartite structure of the psyche: the id, the ego, and the superego. He posits the id as the innate, unconscious component, composed primarily of sexual drives, or libido. Unconstrained by logic, reason, social conventions, or external factors, the id operates solely under biological imperatives in accordance with the pleasure principle. The ego, which belongs to the conscious sphere, mediates between the id and the superego. It engages rationally with reality, adhering to the "reality principle," and functions to regulate and restrain the id in line with the demands of the external world, thereby averting self-destructive outcomes. At the apex of Freud's personality structure stands the superego, associated with the preconscious and representing a moralized dimension of the ego. It comprises two aspects—conscience and the ego ideal—whose primary function is to guide the ego in curbing the impulses of the id, typically by invoking feelings of guilt or remorse to correct behaviors that deviate from moral norms and ideals (Freud, 1996, p. 47).

From the perspective of the structure of consciousness, Freud's tripartite personality structure—id, ego, and superego—corresponds respectively to the unconscious, the conscious, and the preconscious in psychological anatomy. Within this framework, the most powerful force is the id/unconscious undercurrent, governed by libido, followed by the superego/preconscious, which embodies moral principles. Both exert a fundamental influence on the ego/consciousness that mediates between them. Freud famously illustrated the relationship among these three components with the metaphor of an iceberg. In this analogy, the portion above the water represents the ego/conscious—the reality directly perceived by the individual. The section just below the waterline, visible only at low tide, corresponds to the superego/preconscious: past experiences not presently in conscious awareness but retrievable through focused attention or in the absence of interference. Its primary function is to stand guard between consciousness and the unconscious, preventing instinctual desires from surfacing. The deepest part of the iceberg, forever hidden beneath the water, symbolizes the id/unconscious. Entirely instinctual and irrational, this domain of the psyche lies beyond personal awareness yet exerts a powerful influence on human behavior (Zhu, 2002, p. 61).

Although Freudian psychoanalysis has exerted a profound influence in the West, it may at first appear entirely unrelated

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to the field of translation. Yet scholars abroad have begun to probe the connections between the two and have devoted sustained efforts to this line of inquiry. In his 1982 article "Towards the Understanding of Translation in Psychoanalysis," P. Mahony argued that psychoanalysis, like translation, entails the transposition and negotiation of signs and thus falls within the domain of intersemiotic translation. He proposed that translation should be examined from a psychoanalytic perspective, treating psychoanalysis itself as a process of semiotic translation and analyzing the interactions within, between, and across signs and psychological levels during psychoanalytic practice. Building on this impetus, scholars such as Ingram (2001), Venuti (2002), and Quinney (2004) have approached translation from psychoanalytic angles in diverse ways. By contrast, research in this area in China remains at an early stage. The following section therefore takes Pound's *Cathay,* whose writing coincided with his Imagist and Vorticist campaigns (de Rachewiltz, 2015, p. 14), as a case study, employing a psychoanalytic lens to explore the dynamic interplay of the translator's tripartite psyche and its manifestations in the stylistic and qualitative features of Pound's translations.

III. The Dynamic Interplay of Personality and the Multiplicity of Translational Manifestations

Pound's translations of Chinese poetry reveal his distinctive understanding of the Chinese language and culture and exemplify an act of creative "treason." The id, ego, and superego within Pound's personality structure each exerted a distinct influence on his work, giving rise to the diverse stylistic and interpretive features evident in his renderings.

A. Pound Under the Dominion of the Unconscious/Id: Inevitable Errors and Misreadings

Although Pound's translations have exerted a far-reaching influence, their inaccuracies have also attracted considerable criticism. Many of these errors stem from his limited proficiency in foreign languages. As is investigated by Qian (2023, p. 68), Pound's translation of Li Po's poems into *Cathay*, as he knew little about the Chinese language, is largely attributed to Ernest Fenollosa's English crib of the ancient Chinese poems. Pound scholar Kennedy (1958) devoted an article to illustrating Pound's insufficient knowledge of Chinese, while Chinese-American scholar Fang (1957), in his essay "Fenollosa and Pound," documented numerous mistakes in *Cathay*. For example, in his translation of the poem "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," Pound rendered "五月" (May) as "five months." He also conflated Li Bai's two poems— "江上吟" (Song on the River) and "侍从宜春苑奉诏龙池柳色初青听新莺百转歌" (Song of the Phoenix Flute)—into a single piece titled "The River Song." Additionally, Pound's errors include misreadings arising from cultural differences between China and the West. A notable example is his translation of the lines "李牧今不在，边人饲豺虎" from Li Bai's "Ancient Wind, No. 14." Here, 李牧 refers to a cultural archetype of a heroic frontier general, yet Pound rendered it simply as "Rihoku" based on Japanese pronunciation, thereby effacing the rich cultural significance embedded in the original figure.

These errors have attracted considerable criticism, though most assessments approach them from a purely linguistic perspective. Given that Pound lacked a good command of the Chinese language when translating *Cathay*, analyzing these mistranslations solely through a linguistic lens risks overlooking their deeper scholarly significance. Meanwhile, as is recalled by Pound's daughter de Rachewiltz (2022, p. 350), his father Pound often shows deep concern about the economic and social problems in the West. Approached from a psychoanalytic perspective, however, these mistranslations may reveal more profound and particular insights into Pound's psyche and creative process.

First, the psychoanalytic concept of "resistance" offers a novel lens for understanding translational fallacies. In psychoanalysis, "resistance" refers to a patient's opposition to the analyst's interventions during therapy. Freud defined it as the patient's opposition to "bring about an association between the separate psychical group and the rest of the content of her consciousness," resulting in a reluctance to cooperate with investigation and analysis (Freud & Strachey, 1976, p. 151). Specifically, when the analyst presents material consonant with the patient's inclinations, the patient tends to accept it and engage cooperatively. By contrast, if the analyst brings unconscious material that provokes particular distress into conscious awareness, the patient exhibits "resistance," characterized by intense internal doubt (Freud, 2010, pp. 216–217). When this concept of "resistance" is applied to translation practice, it manifests as the translator's emotionally disengaged or passive involvement. Confronted with frustrating linguistic challenges, the translator may experience a form of resistance analogous to that of psychoanalytic patients. In such cases, the translator is predominantly governed by the unconscious and the id, seeking experiences that provide "pleasure" and "comfort." Under the influence of the id/unconscious, the translator often adopts a passive approach to overcoming linguistic obstacles, resorting to assumptions or oversimplified interpretations. In Pound's case, his limited command of Chinese during his work on *Cathay*—and even after he resumed studies in 1935, when his proficiency remained modest—meant that his comprehension of the source text relied heavily on Fenollosa's notes, English-Chinese dictionaries, and existing translations. This objective linguistic limitation made the emergence of "resistance" almost inevitable when confronting language barriers. Unlike successful psychoanalytic encounters, where transference and emotional rapport facilitate accurate understanding, Pound was unable to achieve psychical alignment with the original text, resulting in numerous misreadings and mistranslations at the linguistic level.

Furthermore, translation can be understood as a process in which the translator verbalizes and transforms their comprehension of the source text into the target language. Viewed from this angle, psychoanalysis resembles translation: it too is a process of verbalization—the analyst's discursive articulation of psychoanalytic insights (Cabellero, 2002, p. 6). Freud (1964, p. 60) maintained that the aim of psychoanalysis is to restore the connection between a patient's

mnemonic traces and their linguistic representations. By verbalizing and symbolizing these traces, the analyst seeks to bridge the gap between memory and reality, thereby alleviating or eliminating psychotic symptoms. Like psychoanalysis, translation is fundamentally concerned with language. Yet whereas translation operates between clearly demarcated source and target languages, psychoanalysis negotiates between the patient's memory traces (as potential language) and their verbalized mirror of reality. In both cases, an irreducible difference persists. Venuti (2002, p. 219) designates this intractable residue as "the remainder." Translation, as an act of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication, aspires to bridge the gap between source and target texts, seeking equivalence or identity with the original. But, as Venuti (2002, pp. 219–222) argues, the inevitability of difference entails both gains and losses. "The remainder," internalized in the translator's mind and unconscious as a form of collective ethnic memory, transcends linguistic and discursive structures and manifests in the translated text as mistranslation. In other words, the ideal of full equivalence or identity in translation is illusory; beneath it lie unavoidable deviations produced by the translator's unconscious, itself shaped by internalized cultural and collective forces. Freud's account of verbal slips and misreadings suggests that the psychoanalyst's work is likewise translational: the object of translation is the patient's "dreams." Because an irreducible difference separates the analyst's discourse from the patient's memory traces, the symbols chosen to mediate between memory and reality are inevitably inflected by the analyst's own unconscious, which surfaces at the verbal level.

Thus, whether in translation as cross-linguistic/cross-cultural communication or in psychoanalysis, the "irreducible difference" between codes ensures that the agent's unconscious—translator or analyst—emerges in the outcome of the code conversion, producing mistranslations or interpretive deviations that are inscribed in the text. In this sense, Venuti observes that the translator's unconscious has textuality: mistranslations appear as "the discourse of the other" and assume a "transindividual" form (Venuti, 2002, p. 223). In Pound's case, "the discourse of the other" refers to linguistic errors arising from his limited Chinese proficiency and his unconscious adoption of sinological interpretations as his own, while the "transindividual" dimension reflects his reliance on Fenollosa, English-Chinese dictionaries, and the translations of scholars such as Herbert Giles—evidence of the collective participation embedded in his practice. Consequently, the numerous linguistic errors and cultural misreadings in Pound's translations ultimately reflect the workings of his own unconscious or id as a translator.

B. Pound Under the Influence of the Preconscious/Superego: Seeking New Voices From Foreign Lands

A second category of error in Pound's translations arises from the translator's subjective motivations—deliberate or conscious misrepresentations of the source text. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such intentional alterations may be ascribed to the workings of the translator's superego, governed by the preconscious. In Freud's structure, the superego embodies the moralized self. Within the tripartite structure of "id–ego–superego," its primary function is to guide the ego in restraining the impulses of the id, continually correcting behaviors that deviate from or violate moral norms and ideals. Operating according to the principle of moral perfection, the superego generally comprises two components: conscience and the ego-ideal. What, then, constituted Pound's "conscience" and "ego-ideal" as a poet-translator?

Pound composed *Cathay* at a moment when Europe was still reeling from the trauma of the First World War and English-language poetry was in urgent need of renewal. In the early twentieth century, American verse remained dominated by the "Genteel School" poets, whose work largely imitated Victorian Romantic and pre-war "Georgian" models. This poetry, marked by excessive sentimentality, obsolete metrical conventions, and a striking absence of modern consciousness (Zhu, 2005), severely constrained the development of the American New Poetry movement. Against this backdrop, Pound's poetic ideal—and his personal ambition—was to revolutionize contemporary poetics and participate in the creation of a new cultural order.

In the early twentieth century, Ezra Pound happened upon a lecture by Laurence Binyon on "Oriental and European Art" at the British Museum, an encounter that ignited his deep interest in Chinese poetry and painting. He subsequently acquired—also by chance—Herbert Giles's *A History of Chinese Literature*, which provided him with a more systematic and comprehensive knowledge of Chinese literary history and introduced him to major poets such as Qu Yuan, Liu Che, Li Bai, and Bai Juyi. In 1913, Pound further discovered in the posthumous manuscripts of the Japanese orientalist Ernest Fenollosa what he regarded as a treasure trove of Chinese poetry, famously proclaiming that the twentieth century would "discover a new Greece in China." Guided by his superego, Pound not only sought to transcend linguistic barriers in order to capture the perennial vitality of poetry but also, driven by his own poetic ideals, reshaped the source texts to produce what he called "transcendentally exquisite translations".

Let us first examine Pound's translation of the sixth poem in Li Bai's series "Ancient Winds" (《古风》). The original opening couplet reads: "代马不思越，越禽不恋燕." When annotating this poem, the Japanese scholar Ernest Fenollosa misread "燕" as "swallow" (the bird)—an obvious error. Pound, however, not only avoided this mistake but also introduced new elements into his version: "The Dai horse neighs against the bleak wind of Etsu, The birds of Etsu have no love for En, in the North." This rendering exemplifies Pound's oft-repeated insistence that poets should "present the image precisely" and that "the artist seeks out the brightest details and presents them without commentary." As Zhao (1985, p. 196) observes, "It is precisely because Chinese poets are content to present things directly, without preaching or commentary, that people take great pains to translate them." Yet Pound was not content with mere literal accuracy. Consider lines seven and eight of the same poem: "惊沙乱海日，飞雪迷胡天." Pound renders them as:"Surprised. Desert turmoil. Sea sun. Flying snow bewilders the barbarian heaven." From a conventional reading, "乱" in "惊沙乱海日"

functions as a verb, with "惊沙" and "海日" forming two distinct phrases. Drawing instead on Fenollosa's notes and defying the syntactic conventions of both Chinese and English, Pound decomposes the line into three juxtaposed images—"Surprised" (惊), "Desert turmoil" (沙乱), and "Sea sun" (海日). As is widely acknowledged, Pound consistently championed the superposition and juxtaposition of images, fascinated by how multiple visual layers could produce what he called a "luminous detail," a montage-like beauty. This passage thus illustrates how Pound's Imagist poetics and his translator's ethos led him to intervene actively in the source text.

This tendency toward manipulation can also be fruitfully interpreted through a psychoanalytic lens. As relevant psychoanalytic theory suggests, patients often wish to reverse roles, attempting to scrutinize their own psychological issues with the analyst's rational detachment and thereby achieve positive therapeutic effects (Ingram, 2001, p. 98). What is at stake here is, in fact, the analyst's act of critical interpretation. Analogously, a translator's critical reading—like that of a psychoanalyst—enables a more comprehensive grasp of the original text's rhetoric, ideas, and style. At such moments, the translator aspires to "become" the author, exceeding the conventional boundaries of their role in the translation process.

American scholar Quinney (2004, p. 125), drawing on his experience of translating French psychoanalyst J. B. Pontalis's Windows and his dialogues with Pontalis, argues that the original author embodies "paternal authority (the father)." Translators, he observes, invariably enter a text bearing their own "resistance," "psychic conflicts," and psychological histories. Under the combined influence of the conscious and the preconscious, they are impelled to transgress this "paternal authority." By "transgression of paternal authority" we refer to the translator's fantasy of becoming the original author, equating translation with creation—a psychological impulse to rival and even supplant the author. In his article "Translation and Difference: The Translator's Unconscious", Venuti (2002) likewise notes that the psychoanalytic concept of the "Name-of-the-Father" embodies Freudian "paternal law," representing cultural and social institutions, values, and ideological beliefs. From a preconscious perspective, the translator harbors a competitive drive vis-à-vis the original author. By adhering to target-language norms while simultaneously challenging the authority of the source text and its author (i.e., the "father"), the translator seeks to break free from the repression exerted by the original and thereby fulfill personal desires. Such transgression, intervention, or challenge manifests the translator's superego, reflecting specific personal aspirations and moral ideals. The consequence is often a breach of the principle of fidelity—deliberate alteration or manipulation of the source text. In other words, from the standpoint of translator subjectivity, a translator governed by the preconscious and superego will interpret the source text critically, maximizing subjective agency and critical distance. In this sense, Pound's superego as translator drove him to transgress the original author: in order to juxtapose images and to "seek new voices from foreign lands," he actively manipulated the source text, producing translations that were both extraordinary and groundbreaking.

C. Pound Under the Dominion of the Consciousness/Ego: Poundian Translation Poetics of "Making It New"

As shown above, Pound's id and superego exerted divergent influences on him as a translator. The id tied him closely to the source text, imposing constraints that could yield chaotic, ambiguous, or even erroneous renderings, whereas the superego impelled him to challenge the original work and its author on the basis of personal aspirations and poetic ideals, seeking to realize his own translational vision. From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, a dynamic equilibrium—mediated by the ego—is crucial between the id and the superego. Representing rationality, the ego responds to external stimuli, seeks to satisfy instinctual impulses, and operates in accordance with the "reality principle." Situated between the id and the superego within the domain of consciousness, it sustains a sober engagement with reality, regulating and repressing the id in line with the "reality principle" and external demands, thereby preventing self-destructive tendencies (Freud, 1996, p. 47). In the act of translation, the translator's ego likewise functions as a mediator, continually negotiating between the id and the superego. It enables the translator to move beyond both the idealizations imposed by the superego and the chaos generated by the id, allowing the work to escape the elusive dream of a "transcendentally perfect rendering" without altogether disregarding prevailing translational norms. By striking a rational balance between these two extremes, the ego facilitates a dynamically equilibrated practice of translation, thereby shaping the distinctive character of the finished text.

For Pound, a translation that approached "the beauty of the thing" was one that, through "words in exact juxtaposition," could infuse language with "energy," preserving the "equations of emotions" and the "indestructible part" or "core" of a poem that would otherwise be lost in translation (Yip, 1969, pp. 75–79). Yet Pound's pursuit of such a translation frequently ran counter to the grammar of the English language and to the dominant translational norms of his time.

What, then, were the prevailing translation and poetic norms in Pound's time? In terms of meter, the mainstream remained dominated by Victorian poetry and the "Georgian" poets, whose works adhered to strict metrical rules and predominantly employed rhymed verse. Thematically, Romantic poetry celebrated nature and idealized women, with human emotions—joy, sorrow, death, love, friendship, and the full range of sentiments—occupying a central place. In terms of lyrical expression, Romantic poetry prioritized the outpouring of the poet's subjective emotions over objective description, leading to a mode of expression that often became excessively sentimental for its own sake (Zhu, 2005). Pound himself lamented that this tradition of emotional excess had "a whole country rotted with it" (Paige, 1971, p. 55). Thus, whether in poetic form, thematic choice, or mode of expression, Pound's poetic principles stood in fundamental opposition to the dominant conventions of his era.

Caught between his ideal of "transcendentally perfect renderings" and the prevailing poetic conventions of his time,

Pound came to believe that only through poetic translation could European and American poetry be revitalized. Mediating between the two poles of the "id" and the "superego," his "ego" sought balance and coordination, prompting him to innovate upon traditional poetry through techniques such as the juxtaposition of images. In his translations, Pound broke free from the constraints of the translator's id. Refusing to submit to the original work as a form of "paternal authority," he instead treated the source text as a reservoir of poetic energy. He approached poetic translation as an "experiment"—"an experiment aimed at creating works vitally connected to contemporary life" (Cheadle, 1997, p. 29). At the same time, Pound resisted being drawn by the "superego" toward an ideal of "transcendent moral perfection." Guided by the translator's ego, he pursued his poetic ideals through translation. In *Cathay*, for example, Pound emphasized the precise presentation of poetic imagery, eschewing the imposition of the poet's subjective emotions upon the reader. This principle is clearly illustrated in his rendering of Li Bai's "送友人" ("Farewell to a Friend"):

Taking Leave of a Friend
Blue mountains to the north of the walls,
White river winding about them;
Here we must make separation
And go out through a thousand miles of dead grass.
Mind like a floating wide cloud,
Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances
Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.
Our horses neigh to each other as we are departing.

Pound's translation foregrounds images such as "blue mountains" (青山), "white river" (白水), "dead grass" (孤蓬), "a floating wide cloud" (游子意), "the parting of old acquaintances" (故人情), and "horses neighing to each other" (萧萧斑马鸣). His poetic rendering thus conveys a depth of feeling without overtly articulating it in words. By contrast, as Xie (1999, p. 96) observes of Victorian lyric poets, imagery is "subordinated to the dominant emotional or psychological mood imposed by the poet himself. Thus the poet's attention is almost solely devoted to his own elegiac states of mind, without any effort to ground such feelings in the immediate, circumscribed actualities that surround the poet or the poetic persona in the first place." The result was, inevitably, an excessive and unrestrained display of emotion.

According to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the ego operates as a bridge and mediator between the id and the superego. On the one hand, it strives to satisfy the impulses of the id insofar as possible; on the other, it is constrained by the superego, ensuring that behavior conforms to social morality. Thus the ego is "a servant to three masters, subservient to the id, the superego, and the external world" (Lu, 2001, p. 29). Viewed through the lens of Pound's translation practice, his ego as translator enabled him to transcend the interference of the "id"—avoiding errors stemming from limited linguistic proficiency—while simultaneously serving his poetic ideals. At the same time, it remained responsive to the poetic realities of his era, synthesizing and balancing these competing forces. It is this dynamic mediation that ultimately shaped the distinctive form and character of Pound's translations as they are known today.

IV. Conclusion

Building on a detailed exposition of Freud's theory of personality structure and psychoanalysis, this paper has conducted an in-depth analysis of Pound's translation practices through the lens of the tripartite structure of the "id–ego–superego." The study demonstrates that the psychoanalytic structure of personality offers valuable insight into the relationship between the formal features of Pound's translations and the dynamic interplay of the translator's psyche, thereby enriching our understanding of translational phenomena. As discussed, the psychoanalytic approach remains a relatively novel perspective within translation studies. Nonetheless, as Mahony (1982) and Quinney (2004) have noted, there are significant points of convergence between psychoanalysis and translation, indicating considerable potential for further research in this interdisciplinary direction.

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