

REVIEWS

Translation and Its Affects

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VANITY Fair (1848) famously opens with a departure. As Becky Sharpe flounces off from Miss Pinkerton's academy, she takes leave of her patron by telling her "in a very unconcerned manner . . . and with a perfect accent, 'Mademoiselle, je viens vous faire mes adieux.'"¹ Miss Pinkerton, we learn, "did not understand French, she only directed those who did: but biting her lips and throwing up her venerable and Roman-nosed head . . . said, 'Miss Sharp, I wish you a good morning'" (7). This performance of befuddlement on the part of a respectable schoolmistress bespeaks a whole collection of Victorian cultural norms about language competence in general and about the French language in particular. Even though the action is set in a period when Becky's speaking "French with purity and a Parisian accent . . . [was] rather a rare accomplishment" (11), the novel was written for a mid-nineteenth-century audience that could mainly count on middle-class young ladies to have acquired this degree of refinement—or at least to aspire to do so.

Rather than showing deference to authority, Becky demonstrates her *savoir faire* in a characteristic power reversal that provokes her antagonist's anxiety. The cultural prestige of the French language among British elites—and its corresponding capacity to intimidate English speakers who have not mastered it—extends in *Vanity Fair* well beyond Miss Pinkerton. William Makepeace Thackeray, who lived in Paris for years and worked as a foreign correspondent for English journals there, makes few concessions to readers who are less than fluent in French. His ease with the language is evident in the flair with which his narrators and characters throw off French *aperçus* and *bons mots*. English readers whose knowledge of French is limited might experience

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a deflating identification with Miss Pinkerton in the face of untranslated words and phrases. Such a scene thus contributes to the generalized mockery that is Thackeray's *métier*. Yet readers with even a scant knowledge of the language can enjoy Becky's sardonic sophistication—a feeling reinforced when she reflects on the scene to her prim companion:

“But that talking French to Miss Pinkerton was capital fun, wasn't it? She doesn't know a word of French, and was too proud to confess it. I believe it was that which made her part with me, and so thank Heaven for French. *Vive la France, Vive l'Empereur, Vive Bonaparte!*”

“O Rebecca, Rebecca, for shame,” cried Miss Sedley—for this was the greatest blasphemy Rebecca had as yet uttered—and in those days, in England to say “Long live Bonaparte,” was as much as to say “Long live Lucifer.” (10, emphasis original)

Wrapped up in Becky's diabolical taunts are conventional gibes at French political radicalism and tyranny, as well as an ironic mockery of such received opinions, which are put in the mouth of the demure Miss Sedley. Thackeray criticizes French ideas from within a zone of familiarity with that culture; this location affords him the leverage to ridicule the French and, at the same time, to deride the British for their own prejudices. Peppering his prose with French words contributes to the worldliness of Thackeray's narrator, which seems to enable him to rise above provincial nationalisms.

The reader, who is buffeted between Miss Pinkerton's linguistic incompetence and Becky's too-knowing sophistication, experiences the vertigo of an uneasy relation to a foreign tongue. This uneasiness is especially acute for Anglophones who would seek to master French, which demands perfection and humiliates those whose command of it is lacking. Both the shame of inadequacy and the aggression of mastery point to the affective dimensions of language acquisition, the emotions that hover around words as they move between languages and cultures. Every foreign language has its particular associations, its own special affective nimbus, in its relations with English at a given time and place. As I have argued elsewhere, the affective stakes for non-native speakers of French concern in part the educational and cultural cachet associated with acquisition of that language, as well as its ethical dubiousness.² The combination of longing and inadequacy, of striving and confusion, of discomfort and creativity that arises in the movement between languages may, as some new scholarship suggests, inhere in the enterprise of translation and language acquisition itself during the nineteenth century.

Generations of debate about the definition and purview of comparative literature and global literature as academic fields about some of these questions about language. The world of translation theory itself is a rich one, which has raised vital questions for the practice and organization of Victorian studies. How was foreign writing translated into English and published, circulated, or imported into Anglophone countries? How was English writing translated into foreign languages and received abroad? Who were these readers, writers, translators, and publishers, and to what extent were their identities—their nationality, gender, race, and class—connected to their literary practice? The number of potential research topics is vast. Some of these questions have been posed and addressed in volume 4 (1790–1900) of the five-volume *Oxford History of Literary Translation in English* (2005–). Others have been approached in the Bloomsbury series on the Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe and elsewhere.

Two important new books, focused on practices of translation into English, expand our understanding of the languages of nineteenth-century literature. While these studies are not organized explicitly around questions about the affects of Victorian translation, reading them with an attentiveness to affect reveals a common set of concerns that pervade debates over translation—concerns that take the form of anxiety, belatedness, inadequacy, melancholy, joy, and surprise. In *Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy*, Yopie Prins approaches classical texts, while Annmarie Drury, in *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry*, considers mainly modern ones. Prins treats familiar, canonical sources, Drury primarily exotic ones; Prins's interest is principally in women translators, Drury discusses mostly men. Both are centrally interested in the translation of poetic language, especially in the rendering of a source's formal features in English. Both studies are deeply researched, innovative in their use of archives, learned, and theoretically minded; moreover, they both offer extraordinarily nuanced, elegant readings of poetry.

Prins's *Ladies' Greek* explores the meaning for Victorian women of reading, translating, and reciting classical Greek texts. Engaging in this work accorded women access to a world of secret knowledge that had been a male prerogative. While the translation efforts belong to the larger movement for women's higher education, they were also distinct from that movement: for most Victorian women classicists, knowledge of the language was explicitly an amateur undertaking, which freed

them from rigid scholastic constraints and opened a wider range of possibilities for the uses of Greek than might have otherwise been possible.

In Prins's account, the universal struggle inherent in translation is made vivid and experiential—the struggle, that is, between fidelity and poetry, between accuracy and artistry, and, more figuratively, between body and soul. “Nineteenth-century debates about translation,” she writes, “often revolved around the question of ‘faithful’ translation, with different standards of ‘fidelity’ according to a wide range of translational practices: every translator found himself or herself entangled in shifting ideas about translating literally, and the value of literalism in translation.”³ For as long as there have been translations, practitioners have been torn between the goal of transparency to the original and the creation of a new work. For this reason, to be a translator is to a degree always to experience ignorance: no matter how fluent one is in the source language, the work of translation entails leaving something out, distorting it, or adding something in. The platonic ideal of utter equivalence to the source is defeated in practice. The translator's anxiety about fidelity can lead to both immobilizing worry and ambitious creativity. The translation itself gives literary form to inadequacy and partiality to the extent that it fails perfectly to mirror the original. Even the most confident translator is subject to this sense of insufficiency, which is especially dramatic with a dead language, in which no one can be totally fluent; in a language freighted with an institutional academic apparatus; and, for women, in relation to a discipline so exclusively the purview of elite men.

For Prins, the belatedness of translation *per se* corresponds to the situation of literary women in general, who sit at the margins of professional literary culture (even if they have subsequently come to occupy the center of the literary canon in many instances). For these women, translation is an art rather than a science, an embrace of intermediacy and imperfection, which must itself always be an approximation or recreation. They make a virtue of their amateur status even while pushing against the material and creative obstacles this exclusion imposes. Prins ingeniously links the melancholic situation of the woman translator to the marked preference among such practitioners for tragedy as a genre; by her account, translations and performances of classical Greek tragedy are reflexive inscriptions, extensions, and sometimes expiations of the vexed situation of the women who aim to inhabit and revive the works, “dramatizing the encounter with Greek letters as a scene highly charged with eros and pathos” (xiii). The translators have a “tendency

to identify themselves with tragic heroines . . . [and] with the chorus as a collective body that could reflect on the performance of Greek tragedy, thus incorporating a self-consciously performative element into women's translations of Greek tragedy" (30–31).

In a chapter on Virginia Woolf's relation to Greek, Prins focuses especially on Woolf's interest in the nonverbal aspects of the language, the meaning of nonmeaning in the untranslatable cry of Cassandra's "otototoi" in *Agamemnon* (54–55). Here and in many other places, Prins considers the material qualities of the Greek alphabet and its significance for the women who yearned for and acquired it: the sense that these magical letters held secrets that could never quite be revealed. The mystery, eros, and pathos of this experience is dramatized in nineteenth-century women's fantasies of ancient Greek, but it points to the ineffable aspects of all language as exposed through translation, the qualities that a movement between languages cannot capture, and the loss entailed in that failure. Every source language, we might speculate, has an imaginary quality for the translator of any given target language. Prins is an expert guide in this process, interweaving her readings of the Greek texts with those of the translations and their attendant literary histories. Woolf provides one especially vibrant point of origin for this story, thanks to the vivid record she left of her lifelong fascination with Greek letters and translation—and particularly in the aesthetic interest she discovered in her frustration at moving between languages, as described in her 1925 essay "On Not Knowing Greek." (While canonical figures like Woolf, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and H. D. occupy key roles in the argument, many of the other women who interest Prins are much less familiar today.)

Ladies' Greek is acutely attuned to the literariness of both the source texts and the translations. The question of literality, which always haunts translation, is at times the explicit focus. Prins offers readings of the agency of the letter as it connects women of different times and places in their translational labors, such as the I and Ω (as alphabetic letters and as components of the name Io) in the chapter on *Prometheus Bound*. Beyond the close attention to reading and writing, this study is also a cultural history of performance, drawing on a range of archives to document stagings that were especially significant by women of Greek tragedies, often in women's colleges in the United Kingdom and the United States. While a cultural history of translation is in one respect always reception history, the reception takes unexpected turns here, thanks to the focus on tragedy. Both translation and performance

are documented in chapters centered in turn on Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles's *Electra*, and Euripides's *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*. In addition to nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures both prominent and obscure who grappled with literary translation, Prins excavates the extraordinary work of passionate dramaturgs like Eva Palmer (in chapters 2 and 5), who staged productions of Aeschylus at Bryn Mawr College and at Delphi, in performances that conveyed meaning through movement and kinesthetic form. It is surprising to learn that these performances were as much literal renderings of Greek letters as they were interpretations of tragic form: in addition to all the other meanings borne by particular movements and declamatory styles, the performers enacted the shapes and sounds of Greek letters and words, according to the dramatic theories of Palmer and other impresarios. In the third chapter, documenting performances of *Electra* at Girton College, Cambridge, and at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, we see how the meaning of the play resonated for the early generations of women attaining higher education in English.

The reception history that illuminates the affective affordances of Greek tragedy moves back from the stage to the page in a chapter on A. Mary F. Robinson and H. D., but it still traces the lived experience of words circulating among people, rather than assigning a fixed set of meanings to a text. In this case, Prins identifies a queer genealogy, mainly in erotic relationships between women that are mediated by Greek texts, but also in the correspondence between queer women and men through their shared commitment to classical translation. The friendship between Robinson and John Addington Symonds, for example, represents “a period of ‘queer’ tutelage, with his passionate response to Greek literature serving as a model for Robinson to discover the passion of her own literary projections and erotic identifications” (162). Prins reads the metrics of both Robinson's and H. D.'s *Euripides* as attaining a new level of aesthetic achievement, striving beyond the self-professed amateurism of their predecessors practicing ladies' Greek. The material qualities of language (both alphabetic inscriptions and metrical pulsations) compel these poets and translators, as much as the subjects of the plays—particularly in powerful figures like Io, in *Prometheus Bound*, and Sophocles's *Electra*, who are attractive to women translators as figures of loss, tragedy, and mourning, on whom they project and who serve as screens for empathy.

However fluent and immersed in Greek and Latin, translators confront the difficulty of temporal distance from the lived reality of those dead languages. Spatially distant living languages, other than the

dominant Romance and Germanic tongues of Britain's European neighbors, present their own challenges for translators of poetry. Annmarie Drury's concern in *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* is as much about the *fantasy* of Welsh, Arabic, Persian, and Swahili as Prins's is about the imaginary and projective qualities of Greek. Drury's book is also perforce engaged with political questions about imperial subjugation and the global distribution of power, as expressed in linguistic terms. Translation in the nineteenth century into English from another living language—especially one perceived as distant or exotic—always carries an implicit message about cultural politics. The translators in Drury's book are, for the most part, far from fluent in the languages they adapt for their poems, and while this lack of mastery is in one sense an impediment it is also a source for them of creative ferment. Whether a cause of despair or a stimulus, the distance from a contemporary (mainly non-European) language still sponsors feelings predominantly of belatedness and melancholy, which help to lend Victorian poetry its distinctive mood.

The closest direct link between the two books lies in discussions of the inadequacies of Robert Browning's and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's translations of Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound*, Prins notes, had been "the first play of Aeschylus to be translated into English in 1773 . . . [and] each translator was 'bound,' with various degrees of freedom and constraint, to the text of *Prometheus Bound*. The translator's bondage could be played out through identification with Prometheus, whose defiant rhetoric inspired an abundance of scholarly translations and poetic imitations in the wake of Romanticism" (59). For Prins, the young Elizabeth Barrett identified with Prometheus through her own bodily pain: "In translating *Prometheus Bound*, E. B. B. intensified the Promethean rhetoric of suffering, binding him again in the lines of her own verse. In the transition from blank verse to lyric meter, he is entangled in longer and shorter lines that seem to recreate his chain of suffering" (60). This effort was cathartic, both in enabling the aspiring poet to conquer her fears about mastering Greek and in helping establish her own poetic voice, but the experiment was regarded as a failure, by herself and many of her readers. She was caught in the snare of fidelity, feeling at once too literal and too faithless to the original. The vexed enterprise was itself productive, in Prins's account, as a spur to later translators of Aeschylus (especially women) and as a source for poetic material that was particularly meaningful for Barrett: "Rather than resolving the translator's bondage, her solution was to perform it even more dramatically

in the body *of* her translation by emphasizing the body *in* her translation” (67). This first translation of *Prometheus Bound*, from 1833, was followed by another, begun in 1845 (and published in 1850), which became a source of connection and erotic banter between her and Robert Browning during their courtship. Yet even the later version was, in many respects, unsuccessful; challenged by a different set of problems of adherence to the original, it raised questions about what it means to be literal. The idea of a productive failure in Barrett Browning’s Aeschylus resonates with Drury’s account, as we will see, of Robert Browning’s own experiment in translating *Agamemnon*, which was equally regarded as a debacle that led to generative meditations on overcoming the dead end of Greek—in his case, through a turn to contemporary languages in a global frame.

One of the valuable aspects of Drury’s book is its attention not just to Victorian translation practice but also to the theories of translation, implicit and explicit, that were developed and enacted in this era, predominantly in the periodical press. As the introduction argues, “Far from being a quiescent time in theorizing translation—that is, in thinking about how translation works and what it means—the second half of the nineteenth century was a time of deep preoccupation with precisely that task, and of continual inability to create answers that transcended . . . the incomplete and the provisional.”⁴ The “need . . . for more theory,” Drury suggests, is particularly acute for translators of poetry, who confront decisions about not only content but meter, rhyme, and other formal features of poems; as a number of other critics have argued, questions about metrics are intimately bound up with those of national identity (26). The “constant and constantly frustrated grappling towards” a theory of translation itself resonates with the inadequacy that, as I have suggested, is inherent in any given translation and the feelings of melancholy or anxiety—as well as the excitement—that haunt the practice (14). Drury’s historical case studies exemplify the hypothesis that the movement between languages seems to ensure that, however innovative or successful, translation fosters a set of negative and minor feelings about incompleteness and shortcoming. In later chapters Drury provides a sidelong answer to the question of what a Victorian theory of translation would look like, not so much in a fully elaborated theory as in the fascinating idea of Victorianness having a sound or a mood that imbues translations in later periods and that itself serves the literary function in Anglophone culture of signifying poetry itself. Some of what is exciting in this book, then, is its demonstration of the cultural effects of the imperfection and queasiness that pervade translation.

Drury's book opens conventionally enough with a chapter on Alfred, Lord Tennyson, proving him to be engaged in melancholic self-reflection, followed by one on Robert Browning, which shows him embarked on a project of anxious self-invention. But in both the framing and the approach she takes to these and other poet-translators, Drury offers a fresh perspective. While Tennyson emerges in his familiar role as the poet habitually pondering his own doubts and sadness, he does so, in this case, by means of adapting Charlotte Guest's Welsh translations in *Idylls of the King* (1859–85). Reading Tennyson's adaptations of Welsh sources, Drury shows the aesthetic and political effects of remaking one national linguistic tradition for the purposes of another. Tennyson's insecurity moves around the question of fidelity to a source that, as Prins shows (and as Walter Benjamin's classic essay emphasizes), inheres in the practice of translation. In "the transformation from [Guest's] prose into blank verse" in two of the *Idylls*, "that blank verse *as a form* becomes Tennyson's fundamental means of assigning his distinctive affect to Guest's material. I interpret that affect as melancholy" (76, 77, emphasis original). For Drury, this melancholy coincides with Tennyson's erasure of Welsh sources and their "appropriation through translation" to a myth of British national identity (84). His faithlessness to his sources, she argues, is transformed into the content of the poem, which dwells on questions of fidelity, both martial and marital.

Drury reads Browning's "Caliban upon Setebos" (1864) as a pseudotranslation—that is, as a citation, by virtue of its idiosyncratic syntax, of an invented language. At the same time, she shows the poem, through its displacement and deferral of subject positions (syntactically and narratively) to offer a meditation on the process of poetic composition—which, in this account, is tantamount not only to the subgenre of dramatic monologue but to translation writ large. The anxious inventiveness is characteristic of Browning, who often asks readers to focus on the nature of language itself. In her readings of other poems, the concern with translation is more direct. Drury discusses Browning's awkward translation of *Agamemnon* (1877), framed by an analysis of "Karshish the Arab Physician" (1855) and "Muléykeh" (1880), which both draw imaginatively on Arabic sources. The *Agamemnon* failure (by most accounts) exemplifies Browning's idea that fidelity to a dead, overvalued Greek original is unfruitful, if not impossible, whereas the Arabic poems show how his claims for worldly, modern sources of language help infuse English poetry with vivid life.

A central chapter of *Translation as Transformation* reads Edward FitzGerald's famed translation from Persian of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859) and its subsequent reception. Drury identifies the work's central affect as surprise, both as theme and form, observing that "FitzGerald was attracted by the idea of genuine imitation being achieved by an accidental imitator, a writer who hasn't set imitation as a primary goal. Recognizing his *own* limits as a translator, and convinced of the severe limitations of translation as an enterprise, he nurtured a vision of good translation as imperfect re-creation that was governed largely by fortune" (153). This striving after the mood or feeling of a source as it strikes him, rather than rigidly attempting to reproduce all its features (which is partly what hobbled Browning's Greek), puts FitzGerald on one side of the debates over what fidelity means in translation. In relying on an "aesthetic of accident" as his principle of translation, FitzGerald approaches the *Rubáiyát* in a way that resonates with the poem's own theme of the happy accident and its emphasis on *carpe diem* (155). Drury traces the element of surprise as it informs the translation both formally and thematically, showing how rhymes and stanza forms, as well as plot elements and imagery, reinforce the aesthetic of accident that was so congenial to the translator.

Drury allows that, from a distance, FitzGerald's project might be characterized as Orientalist or imperialist, but she aims to complicate that account by tracing the nuances of his attitude toward his Persian sources and by documenting his "dim view of imperial expansion" (164). In part, the translator's identification with the speaker of the poem conditions a form of empathy, and in tracing the influence of the *Rubáiyát* on others (including Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and especially Michael Field) Drury explicates the opportunities for other poetic voices enabled by the compound subject position that FitzGerald developed. She argues that the Michael Field poets found a resource in the multiplicity of FitzGerald's lyric "I," born of his translational efforts, which they could exploit for their own purposes. More broadly, Drury's research on FitzGerald's influence shows how all investigations of translation are themselves studies of reception, just as the chapter on Browning suggests that all poetry is in some sense translation.

In Drury's final chapter on little-known twentieth-century Swahili translations of the interwar period, she makes the argument that, for later poets and translators, the sound or feeling of Victorian poetry becomes the very sign of lyric poetry itself—as if making a text's sound signify Victorianness certifies its legitimacy as a poetic undertaking.

The “seemingly reflexive recourse to Victorian language in twentieth-century translation” shows how poetic characteristics serve as an affective emblem that are transportable across time, albeit serving different purposes at different historical moments (193). When translated poetry sounds familiar and assimilable (and slightly antiquated) by virtue of its quaint diction and syntactic idiosyncrasies, Victorianism itself becomes a kind of affect, blending authority, domesticity, nostalgia, and colonial domination. This argument is effective in part because Drury shows how it might have been otherwise with some telling counterexamples. The translator William Hichens was “Victorianizing as a deliberate strategy for domesticating, legitimizing, and idealizing Swahili literature for an English-speaking audience” (201), especially in his rendering of meter, which Drury views as part of a nationalizing project. But she presents comparative efforts by a close collaborator of Hichens’s, Mbarak Ali Hinway, whose English translations are more modern, colloquial, and accessible to a contemporary ear—less Victorian and less fraught with layers of poetic obligation.

Translation must always be the work of affect, bound as it is to questions of fidelity and belatedness, inventiveness and melancholy. The great translation projects that emerged out of the Victorian print explosion set the terms, as these two books suggest, for English translations to follow. A telling example has recently emerged about one of the most monumental translations into English ever undertaken, Charles K. Scott Moncrieff’s English version of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27). Scott Moncrieff would, on the evidence of his achievement, seem to be a sublime master, immune to the worries and cavils of lesser translators. He inhabited his source completely, putting it into an English work of profound originality. But even a writer of such assured prose was still subject to the vexations of any translator wrestling with a recalcitrant source. In this case, the author of the original was still living, and on one occasion corresponded with the translator of his work. Scott Moncrieff had presented Proust with the English translation of *Du côté de chez Swann* and, in writing back, Proust criticized the translation, particularly in its approach to the title of the work as a whole (*Remembrance of Things Past*) and of the volume (*Swann’s Way*). In his 1922 letter, Proust stated, “Je vous demande pardon de vous écrire en français mais mon anglais serait si pitoyable que personne ne le comprendrait.”⁵ Scott Moncrieff wrote back in turn, unable to resist responding to the suggestion that he—who was in the midst of translating hundreds of thousands of Proust’s French words—might feel that an apology was due for having

a letter addressed to him in French. “My dear Sir,” Scott Moncrieff wrote, “I beg that you will allow me to thank you for your very gratifying letter in English as my knowledge of French—as you have shown me, with regard to your titles—is too imperfect, too stunted a growth for me to weave from it the chapelet that I would fain offer you.”⁶ Scott Moncrieff, who was a product of the Victorian age and was enmeshed in the remnants of the aestheticist literary world of the 1890s, evinces a resentment that is hard to gainsay in reacting against Proust’s condescending suggestion that his skills are not up to receiving a letter in French. He betrays the anxiety that always besets translation, perhaps especially of a work whose author can still be reached through the mail. The aggression evident in writing back to Proust in English could hardly be more telling, expressing his exasperation with the characteristically pedantic attitude of a Francophone toward foreigners who would presume to use his language. Each man writes in his own language, complaining (implicitly or explicitly) about the other’s language, while cunningly claiming not to understand, or be understood by, the other. With a little of Becky Sharpe’s French insouciance, Scott Moncrieff’s English *chapelet* distorts the source in reflecting it back to itself. That distortion is a repository for affect, a twisting whose feeling tells us something about both the original and the new work that has been woven out of it.

NOTES

1. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 7. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. See Cohen, “Why Is There So Much French in *Villette*?” and “Wilde’s French.”
3. Prins, *Ladies’ Greek*, 61. All subsequent references are noted parenthetically in the text.
4. Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, 18. All subsequent references are noted parenthetically in the text.
5. Quoted in Findlay, *Chasing Lost Time*, 322n24. Findlay translates this: “I am sorry I have to write to you in French, but my English is so appalling, that no one understands it” (195).
6. Findlay, 297.

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