Literary and Cultural Translata bility: The European Romantic Example

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Abstract

This essay presents an overview of Western and Central European thinking about translation in the Romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In it, I seek to delineate a convergence of aesthetic and cultural theory in the Romantic preoccupation with translation. Among other things, my discussion is interested in how translation in this period engages debate about what it means to be a 'national' writer creating a 'national' literature. I offer this essay in the hope that its meditation on literary and cultural translatability and untranslatability will resonate with readers in their own quite different contexts.

One of the central statements on translation by a British Romantic writer occurs in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Reflecting on the achievements of Wordsworth's verse, Coleridge proposes that the "*infallible test of a blameless style*" in poetry is "*its untranslatableness in words of the same language without injury to the meaning*". This is at once a prescription for fault-finding and an index of immaculacy. A utopian strain sounds through Coleridge's "*infallible*" and "*blameless*", suggesting that an unfallen integrity may be remade, or critically rediscovered, in the uniqueness of poetic utterance.

Where Wordsworth's "*meditative pathos*" and "*imaginative power*" are expressed in verse which cannot be other than it is Coleridge asserts a vital congruence between the particular and the universal. Yet his formula does not preclude the translational recovery of that expressive pathos and power in words of another language. The utopian moment of "*untranslatableness*" shares a kinship with Walter Benjamin's later suggestion, in "*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*" (1923), that access to the "*pure language*" to which every fallen language aspires is "*the tremendous and only capacity of translation*". The test of "*untranslatableness*" is, after all, translation, and in Kantian terms familiar to Coleridge, its recognition appears to translate into an intuition of experience "*in itself*". "*Untranslatableness*" may in turn prove more at home in the German of *Unübersetzbarkeit* or *Unübertragbarkeit*. Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1854-; *Dictionary of the German Language*) locates both words in a distinct late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century world, citing Georg Forster and Friedrich Schleiermacher respectively. In his posthumous *Sittenlehre* (1835), the latter discovers moral community in experiential uniqueness by arguing that reason is revealed as a totality in the very "*untranslatableness*" of one individual's reason into that of any other.

Schleiermacher's lecture *"Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens" (1813)* makes explicit what might be called the "*hermeneutic*" turn in Romantic accounts of translation. Raised above mere "*interpreting*", which services commercial transaction, and aligned rather with the ideals of science and art, translation (the "*art of understanding*") is installed as a high cultural project in its own right. For Schleiermacher, authentic translation brings the reader to the author, "*representing the foreign in one's native language*" as indeed foreign but without threatening "*the native well-being*" of that language. The value of this endeavor inheres, as with the *Sittenlehre*, in a totalizing vision which aims to "*transplant entire literatures*" and nurture readers who are able to produce their

own ideal composite of different versions of the same text. Where people grant flexibility to its language, this kind of translation becomes a "natural" influence on the formation and development of the nation.

In its organicist and evolutionary view of language and languages, Schleiermacher's translational programme is consistent with contemporary German scholarship in comparative grammar and philology. Their common moment is one of confident inquiry into and assertion of the German tongue as a mature cultural entity; the constitution of German national identity is here enshrined in a language (and literature) which is not yet that of a modern nation state. Hence Jacob Grimm concludes his 1854 preface to the *Wörterbuch* by urging his compatriots, regardless of the faith or empire under which they live, to "*study, hallow and maintain*" the language in which their "*strength as a people*" ("*Volkskraft*") resides. At the same time, this book of words furnishes its definitions in "*exoteric*" Latin, a lingua franca intended to open it to a circle of peoples otherwise not conversant with German. Attention to family resemblance and difference by extension opens up a new translational space in which relations of linguistic domination and subordination are potentially replaced by dialogue and respect for otherness. For Schleiermacher, non-ethnocentric translation requires both that the mother tongue has become the language of high culture (and thus of the culture as a whole) and that it continues to develop through "*many-sided contact with the foreign*". In this prospect, the German language itself becomes a translational utopia, preserving "*in the centre and heart of Europe*" the treasures of its own and of foreign art and science in a great "*historical totality*".

If Schleiermacher articulates the period's most sophisticated programme for translation, he nonetheless begs characteristic Romantic questions concerning the translatability of theory into practice. His conception of language as the realm of inter-subjective understanding and hermeneutic inquiry sits uneasily with the

translation of that realm into a particular linguistic territory; the protected "*language domain*" ("*Sprachgebiet*") which he reserves for translation into German arguably comes to announce a more imperiously assimilative middle European dominion. It may then follow that his desire to embrace commonality and difference is only sustainable insofar as the utopian end of cultural regeneration remains speculative. Yet this tension describes a dynamic within the wider Romantic practice of translation. For even as Schleiermacher's translational summa recalls Friedrich Schlegel's "*Athenäums-Fragment* 116", "*Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry*" (1798), so Schlegel's "*Universalpoesie*" foregrounds another order of translational wish-fulfilment: the synthesis of "*the poetry of art and of nature*" ("Kunst- und Naturpoesie"). And with the endeavour to translate between the languages of "*art*" and "*nature*" we are returned to the most celebrated "*translation*" of the Romantic period, James Macpherson's *Ossian* (1760-63).

Debate about the authenticity of *Ossian* shaped its further translation either as a work of folk poetry or of more deliberate art. Thus the first Hungarian version, by János Batsányi (1788), sought a continuing role for the "*bardic*" poet while the nation's integrity was under threat, whereas Ferenc Kazinczy considered translation of the whole work (1815) as a test of his invention in his native tongue. The "*Nordic Renaissance*" which served as a model of national literary renewal across Europe was itself enshrined in Herder's two anthologies of *Volkslieder* (1778-79; *Folk-songs*), where *Übersetzung* into German was also, in effect, *Übertragung* into Herder's neologism of the "*folk-song*". The popularity of European translations of Walter Scott and Robert Burns in turn answered to a populist appetite for the romance of national identity. In the contrary direction, the Gothic novel made its English début, with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), by masquerading as a translation from the French, and many early examples of the genre relied on the free adaptation of French, and later German, sources. In

all such instances cultural values and coordinates are also in translation, whether in creating a homogeneous European north (which, with Herder's 1771 essay on Shakespeare, enabled the refashioning of England's national poet as an essentially German dramatist), or in negotiating between Europe's north and south, between Europe and the orient, and so on. Perhaps the most far-reaching of these translations is, however, that between the man or woman of letters and the "*people*", an engagement which inevitably puts the question, in Schiller's terms, of the formers "*sentimental*" idea of the latter as the preserver of a more authentic, "*naive*" ideal.

In the Romantic period, translation variously informs the drive toward and conception of cultural wholeness or unity. Where the foreign is made familiar, translation may be held to overcome dichotomy and difference, yet it can also be seen as constitutive rather than resolving of the division between what is native and what is foreign. As Madame de Stäel wrote in *De l'Allemagne* (1810), "to acquire another language is to acquire another world for one's mind". From a hermeneutic point of view, language is acknowledged both as the term which separates cultures and which mediates between them: all is in translation, just as, for Novalis (à propos August Schlegel's translation of Shakespeare), "*all poetry is translation*". But by the same token, translation is a process without end, its gesture toward universal understanding infinitely deferred within the historical process of which it is part. And here the period bequeaths us two quite different responses to what resists translation. The first elects openness to the unknown, and is voiced in one of Goethe's late *Maximen und Reflexionen* (1826): "*In translating, one must proceed until verging on the untranslatable, whereupon one first perceives the foreign nation and its foreign language*." The second stresses the closure of the unknowable, and its accent falls on Romantic irony. In his novel *Godwi* (1801), Clemens Brentano stages a conversation which begins by defining the "*Romantic*" as the "*perspective*" colouring our view of any object, proceeds through debate about translating Tasso to an analogy between poetry and untranslatable

music, and concludes with the narrator stating that "*The Romantic itself is a translation.*" In the degree to which the Romantic work renders its medium of representation purely musical, it becomes an untranslatable translation. It is on this fine line between apprehension and occlusion of the ineffable that a Romantic poetics of translation continues to engage us. Wordsworth describes it most finely in Book Six of *The Prelude* (1805):

> "And all the answers which the man returned
>   To our inquiries, in their sense and substance
>   Translated by the feelings which we had,
>   Ended in this – that we had crossed the Alps."

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(Quotations from non-English-language texts have been translated by the author. Alternative translations of most of these texts can be found excerpted in Berman or anthologised in Robinson and in Schulte.)