

Literature as Translation/
Translation as Literature

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Edited by

Christopher Conti and James Gourley

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

CHRISTOPHER CONTI AND JAMES GOURLEY

The diversity of approaches to the subject of literature and translation in these pages challenged us as editors to find the right title for this volume. While theories of translation are touched on here and there, what unites this volume is the theme or motif of translation, the expressive, ethical and intercultural potential of translation in and across a range of intellectual, historical and cultural contexts. Our working title “literature and translation”, however, suggested little more than proper names, casting the very illusion of separate and distinct species we were at pains to avoid. We soon dropped the identity thinking behind such a suggestion as itself an inferior mode of translation that stamps “bare” phenomena with the insignia of the concept. The impossibility of translation in the sense of a copy or replica seemed to us the condition not just of literature but of culture too. The densely cultured zones of meaning traversed by translation cannot be circumvented with the lexical ratios of the dictionary. The medium of translation is not abstract equivalence but the creative understanding of another culture that preserves the foreignness produced by temporal and cultural distances. As the etymological and semantic roots of *translatio* (“transferral”, “transportation”) are entwined with those of metaphor, our next attempt at a title, “translation and metaphorical play”, tried to capture the elephant in the room—metaphor—with a butterfly net, leaving untouched the initial problem of the separate identities implied by “literature and translation”. What interested us was the “play” that occurred at the border of literature and translation that enabled the one to be thought in terms of the other, even as we failed to locate the junction between the literary element of translation and the translational element of literature. If definition can do no more than spot family resemblances amongst phenomena, as Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested, then literature and translation might yet be regarded as twins. “Literature as translation/translation as literature” thus refers to this double or twinned identity that resists the *ratio* of the abstract concept.

The diverse attempts in this volume to trace the features of translation in literature and of literature in translation occur in an expanded field of

translation studies ringed by the horizon of the corporate university. Deciding what is translatable and what is untranslatable (and why) has political and cultural ramifications in the increasingly globalised context of the twenty-first century. The claim that nothing is translatable is usually made in defence of the fragile ecology of local cultures after the damage visited upon them by the “translatability” of global economic exchange. The emergence of world literature as the new research paradigm in literary studies is viewed darkly in some quarters as the ideological mask of globalisation. Emily Apter has argued in response that translation can “contest the imperium of global English” even as it performs the “traumatic loss of native language”.¹ The concept of world literature began in the cosmopolitan effort to transcend the drive to ethnic nationalism in the nineteenth century and its central claim that the ethnic uniqueness of culture is untranslatable. The original interdisciplinary research programme of Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach, those great polymaths and exiles from Nazi Germany at Istanbul University in the 1930s, grew out of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s notion of *Weltliteratur*, the modern classic “that circulates around the world outside of its initial home, usually in translation”.² David Damrosch has extended Goethe’s original idea with Jürgen Habermas’ concept of the bourgeois transformation of the public sphere in the eighteenth century, when poetry was as much a medium of social exchange as it was a source of private pleasure. The newly globalised, multimedia environment that literature finds itself in today is where literature always belonged: “That is why in the age of globalisation, although literary studies are often reported to be ‘dead’ and comparative literature is also reported to be ‘dead’, a new comparative literature has been reborn”.³

With the dissemination of literature in translation more global than ever, world literature is rapidly displacing the incumbent paradigm of national literature. National literature is far from dead, but we are learning to see it afresh in light of a new appreciation of the complexity of relations any national tradition maintains with others, which comes into view from the comparative standpoint of world literature. Damrosch reminds us that the various obstacles to translating literature from foreign traditions are already present when we read the literature of our own tradition; for as anyone who has spent any time there will know, the past is a foreign country. The modes of reading based on the idea of literature as translation, such as reading across time and reading across culture,

¹ Apter, *The Translation Zone*, xi.

² Damrosch, “What is World Literature?”, 176

³ *Ibid.*, 181.

promise to expand our literary and cultural horizons. In his keynote address to the Australasian Association for Literature's 2011 conference in Melbourne, where the bulk of these papers originated, Damrosch premised the idea of a national literature on the presence of the work in a literary culture rather than on the author's passport. The shell game between "nation" and "language" in the circular definition of national literature can only be stopped by disclosing the rich international content of the national canon, when, for example, we realise the import of Laurence Sterne's tribute in *Tristram Shandy* to "my dear *Rabelais*, and dearer *Cervantes*" rather than to my dear *Chaucer*.⁴ The displacement of the national paradigm of literature has freed scholarship to pursue more international lines of inquiry, restoring the cosmopolitanism of literary study bleached away by the old debates over national literature. "World literature has always been created through a dynamic interplay among national and regional literatures", observes Damrosch, and "can be said to have preceded the birth of the modern nation-state by many centuries".⁵

The role translation plays in the formation of a post-national canon is discussed in the first two chapters. Nicholas Jose reflects on the diverse contributions to the 2009 *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*—which he edited—in terms that challenge fixed notions of national literature. Noting how much Australian writing in English contains translation, Jose suggests Australian literature can be read more generally as forms of translation, specifically as "writing that transports forms and expressions from other languages and cultures into an Australian literary field". Like the society around it, Australian literature is the product of historical rupture and cultural and geographical dislocation, and Jose observes the impulses to recovery that dispossession implies. From an indigenous perspective, English language and culture in Australia is merely the biggest wave of migration to these shores, and might itself be viewed as a form of translation in the generative sense that implies cultural renewal. Taking his cue from Les Murray's collection of poems *Translations from the Natural World*, Jose redefines the Australian as the cosmopolite and Australian culture as an ongoing translational process of imitation and adaptation. Murray's poet mimes the natural language of things in a human language that overwrites nature with the damaged world of history. Responding to Australian Literature through translational practices of reading and writing yields a richer understanding of culture than can be wrung from the nationalist paradigm. The argument for

⁴ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 151.

⁵ Damrosch, "Toward a History of World Literature", 485.

reading Australian literature as translation rests not on how well the local converts into universal currency, but rather on how well it resists the damage exerted by the homogenising pressures of the global literary marketplace. Elizabet Titik Murtisari then considers the decisive role of translation in the development of national and world literatures with regard to the formation of a new literature in post-war Indonesia and the work of its foremost writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Murtisari tracks the influence of John Steinbeck on the evolution of Pramoedya's style, which Pramoedya cultivated when translating Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in a Dutch prison in 1943. The intimate instruction provided by translation enabled Pramoedya to grasp the detail and subtlety of Steinbeck's simplicity and to incorporate the lessons of economy in novels like *The Fugitive*, a novel smuggled out of prison and received to acclaim that recreates Steinbeck's cinematic style.

Christopher Conti contends in Chapter Three that the intercultural potential of Patrick White's epic *Voss* is borne by the motif of translation; specifically, the idea of spirituality as the mystical translation of gross materiality. Conti defends *Voss* from the indictment drawn up by post-colonial criticism—which regards White's mythic modernism as the mask of imperialism—by suggesting it translates the foreignness of Aboriginal culture for a white Australian audience. Whether White's representation of Aboriginals and Aboriginal culture represents an act of cultural effacement or cultural preservation might depend on one's theoretical point of view. "Translation studies", notes Emily Apter, "has always had to confront the problem of whether it best serves the ends of perpetuating cultural memory or advancing its effacement".⁶ But translation becomes impossible when the lines of cultural difference are drawn too sharply, whether by academic culturalist or ethnic nationalist. Apter suggests the sudden prominence of translation studies since 2001 owes something to 9/11, when the threat posed by US monolingualism seemed to materialise. War and terrorism represent conditions of nontranslatability, a "translation failure at its most violent peak".⁷ Reflecting on her work as the translator of Giovanni Capucci's *Twin Towers*, a collection of poems penned in response to the 9/11 disaster and the ubiquitous media images of the collapse of the twin towers, Gillian Ania is aware that translation is not just a linguistic project but a cultural one. Her over-the-shoulder insight in Chapter Four into the "impossible" task of translating poetry lays out for future scholarship the method behind her choices as a translator of Capucci's significant collection.

⁶ Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

The role literature as translation plays as an agent of social transformation and political emancipation is addressed in Chapters Five to Ten. In Joy Wallace's account of Hazel Smith's City poems, the *flâneur*, the quintessential figure of modernist writing, is playfully translated in a series of experimental poems into the female *flâneuse*. Traditionally, the promenading of the *flâneur* about the real and imagined cities of modernist poetic discourse enables the reassertion of an imperilled male subjectivity. The *locus classicus* of the *flâneur* is Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* and *Les Fleurs du mal*, in which Baudelaire refashions the disorder and detritus of the modern city into an allegorical form that reduces women to material for male sign-making. Consequently, the specifically female subjectivity of Smith's *flâneuse* is imperilled not just by the insidious streets of the metropolitan labyrinth but by the insolent male gazers that occupy them. Smith's translation of the terms of modernist discourse playfully subverts this implicit gender stereotyping, thereby imagining new possibilities in urban space for the recovery of an imperilled female subjectivity. As Wallace points out, Smith's poetic project is a form of translation as metaphorical play.

Chapters Six and Seven form a pair of eighteenth century case studies that begin from the historical fact that translation provided women with the opportunity for social and political advancement, despite its gendering as female labour that ranked it beneath the masculinised original text. Alessandra Calvani shows how the derivative reputation of translation allowed women to enter the literary world under cover, as it were, while the content of the source text drew the point of attack. The close relationship between gender and translation meant women could use translation to speak to other women about topics like emancipation, creating a circuit that linked women across Europe. Giustina Renier's translation of three Shakespeare plays exhibiting strong and literate women, for example, subtly promoted the cause of female education. The choice to introduce Lady Wortley Montagu's *Letters* (1763) to an Italian public devoid of female writers is therefore significant, and Calvani compares the different methodologies of two Italian translators, Maria Petretini's more traditional or mimetic translation in 1838 and Cecilia Stazzone's creative departure from mimetic translation in 1880. Barbara Pauk reflects on a feminist translator's role in the success of the eighteenth century English translation of a French bestseller. Pauk argues that the success in English of the French pastoral novel, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), is indebted to its unconventional translation by Helena Maria Williams, a radical Dissenter who amplified the novel with feminist concerns of her own. Pauk places Williams in a

history of literary women seeking their own voice in translation, but notes that Williams' translation practice openly challenges the hierarchical and gendered distinction between creative author and passive translator. Williams' translation remains problematic, as it merely reverses the hierarchy of author and translator when it appropriates Saint-Pierre's work. Her literary and political activities nonetheless made her a significant champion of the republic of letters and a feminised public sphere.

The centrality of translation to the course of literary and social history is further demonstrated in the case studies of Chapters Eight and Nine. Daniel C. Strack's study of literary influence puts the lie to the old charge that significant matters of style must always be "lost in translation". In 1852, Ivan Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* eluded the Tsarist censors to focus attention on the plight of Russia's serf population. Half a century later, Shimazaki Tosōn's *The Broken Commandment* managed a similar feat in Meiji Japan. Tosōn was the first to champion the cause of the *eta* or *burakumin* (a pariah group forced into ritually stigmatised jobs like sewerage disposal), and, like Turgenev, risked censure in doing so. Tosōn learnt from Turgenev the technique unfamiliar to Japanese writing of concealing metaphors in the landscape as a way of expressing the emotional climate of his characters, referred to here as literary or metaphorical *landscaping*. While evidence of Turgenev's influence is most clearly apparent in certain lexical choices, its social expression via Tosōn poses an intriguing question. How is it that two similar works using similar depiction strategies caused fundamental egalitarian shifts in two separate societies? Wenjing Li investigates a more controversial and contemporary example of the political influence of translation practices by looking into the rewriting strategy of Chinese publishing houses in her case study of an Amy Tan translation by Jun Cai, prominent Chinese writer of genre fiction. Cai's translation initially appears to be an artful way around Chinese censorship laws, but it soon reveals itself as exemplary instance of them, muting the political issues addressed in Tan's novel in a wholesale rewriting or "suspense-izing" of the novel. While the practice of "polishing" raw translations dates back to the late Qing Dynasty, the observance of this tradition today serves current censorship laws. The Chinese Communist Party policy of non-interference in Burma, long at odds with the U.S. and European sanctions on Burma, explains why a story exposing Burmese human rights abuses is assigned to a popular genre writer for rewriting. Li investigates other forms of rewriting, like the insertion of Cai's personality into Tan's novel, and notes another

reason for the success of this translation practice: a jump in book sales that boosts the profile of both writers.

The privileged focus on textuality in literary studies in the last half century has diverted attention from the movement of books, and not just texts, across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Matthew Lorenzon's study of Melbourne's *fin-de-siecle* arts scene avoids the fixation on textuality by relating the conceptual economy of ideas uniting its musicians, artists, scientists and politicians to the real economy of book trading and lending that enabled it. The 1896 English translation of Nietzsche's *Case Against Wagner* struck the Melbourne scene like a lightning bolt, splitting German Romantics from the criminal profilers of the scientific community. Lorenzon focuses on the intellectual exchanges joining Norman and Lionel Lindsay, the circle of criminologists centred on Professor Lyle and Wagnerite Marshall-Hall, and future Prime Minister Alfred Deakin. The division between aesthetic and scientific Nietzsches surfaces in the exchange between Lyle and Marshall-Hall, who continued their social chats about Cesare Lombroso in the heavily annotated margins of Lyle's copy of the book. Lombroso's diagnoses of the supposedly recessive traits of European intellectuals and artists like Nietzsche and Emile Zola, echoed in Lyle's annotations, were influential in the years leading up to Australian Federation when a claim to political sovereignty required the supporting claims of cultural and scientific legitimacy. The credibility of the young nation's claim to statehood rested on a translation into the political sphere of the scientific prestige of the new criminal anthropology and the cultural prestige of late German Romanticism. Lyle pushed the claim on the scientific front, while Marshall-Hall lionized German culture in a way that set the tone for Deakin's mythologising of white migrant populations and politics of racial exclusion.

This notion of some untranslatable essence of nationhood running in the veins or ringing in the vowels of ethnic groups has a checkered history, serving the progressive politics of self-determination in the context of imperialism but also the reactionary politics of ethnic purity that sovereignty can seem to entail. In one of history's dark ironies, the modern chauvinism of race, nation and language can be traced back to the historic father of multiculturalism, Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder's insistence on cultural autonomy grew into an anti-assimilationist idea of the *Volksgeist* at odds with Goethe's translational humanism. The Goethean humanism infused into the discipline of comparative literature by Spitzer and Auerbach is at odds with the puritanical and parochial discourses of ethnic nationalism. A more recent heir of Goethe's humanism is Hans Blumenberg, whose dizzying feats of scholarship have brought to philosophy a rigour

worthy of Spitzer and Auerbach. Philosophically, the notion of untranslatability shares none of the ambiguity that plagues the discourses of nationalism, as it refers to the material resistance to the translational force of concepts that marks the threshold of knowability. Reflecting on the daunting task of translating Hans Blumenberg, Robert Savage comes to grips with the notion of the untranslatable by unravelling the etymological roots of *translatio* and their entwinement with metaphor. Blumenberg's epic works on the history of ideas track the limits of conceptuality back into the subsoil of "absolute metaphors", which bear an expressive function that supports concepts, on the one hand, and defies translation into clear and distinct ideas, on the other hand. Absolute metaphors serve the existential function of keeping at bay the otherwise crushing mass of the unknowable, thereby providing the necessary space for human self-assertion in situations blocked to rational access. They translate the terrifying absoluteness of the real into metaphor, thus enabling rational access to the world in the first place and later extricating reason from impasses of its own making. This functional capacity of absolute metaphor, which cannot be overtaken by—or translated into—the concept, explains the enduring power of myth. The experience of translating Blumenberg's reflections on the untranslatability of absolute metaphors, however, leads Savage to an impasse. Can Blumenberg's metaphorology be applied to itself without contradiction? If an "assault on the universal" requires a ground metaphor, then what is Blumenberg's? Savage takes a leaf out of Blumenberg's exegetical manual when he uncovers the literary, philosophical and autobiographical precursors to Blumenberg's primal scene in Kafka's "Report for an Academy", Paul Alsberg's theory of the developmental leap made by our hominid ancestors, and a Blumenberg memoir on escaping his Nazi persecutors. In each case the impasse is broken by a flight into metaphor and culture that "gives the slip" to one's would-be captor, as Blumenberg put it in a memoir. Here is the indispensable metaphor of Blumenberg's metaphorology. When there is no way out, one requires the courage of one's own conjectures, a useful motto for the translator in the creative quest for the right word.

If the foreign is the sign of what lies beyond the reach of assimilation, then this is an argument for—not against—translation, a point Emily Apter makes in regard to the translational task of critical theory as identified by Walter Benjamin.⁸ In Benjamin's memorable metaphor, Adorno noted in "Words from Abroad", the foreign word is "the silver rib" inserted into

⁸ Ibid., 63.

“the body of language”, dislocating its organic wholeness.⁹ Natural language traps consciousness in the illusion of organic wholeness, an illusion broken by the use of the foreign word. The encounter with the foreign word—like aesthetic experience itself, for Adorno—exposes subjectivity to the other and to the truth of its dissonant, fragmented constitution. In Chapter Twelve, Rachel Robertson’s timely investigation of the growing body of memoirs by parents of autistic children inserts “the silver rib” of autism into ordinary language. Robertson refers to recent theoretical work on ethical translation to defend the value of memoir writing that decentres dominant discourses regarding difference and disability. The forms of reflexive writing that flow from conceptions of ethical translation challenge negative views of autism and foreground issues relating to difference and inequality. Viewed as a form of cross-cultural communication, the act of writing a memoir about raising an autistic child can produce progressive cultural change. The nascent autism rights movement promotes autism as a different way of being in the world or as a type of difference in a neuro-diverse world on the analogy of a different culture. While no one mistakes autism for an actual culture, the analogy by which the former can be rethought in terms of the latter lends theoretical and descriptive support to the normative demand for social recognition raised with growing frequency in the autism community. The metaphor extends along a number of points of contact that autism shares with minority culture, which Robertson usefully links to the literature on ethical or cross-cultural translation. Once translation is recognised as a species of interpretation, the forcible assimilation of the foreign to the familiar can be more readily identified and avoided in a new understanding of translation that draws attention to the parent/translator’s role as mediator and documenter. This reflective reconstruction of translation seeks to preserve difference via interpretive strategies that resist the traditional imperatives of fluency, which regularise foreignness and smooth away the bumps in intercultural transmission.

The remaining chapters dilate on the motifs of translation and the untranslatable. Sarah Comyn pursues the notion of money as a translator of value through the pages of Delillo’s *Cosmopolis*. In the new information world ushered in by the Roaring Nineties, information is a spectacle with hypnotic, even mythic powers of enchantment to capture reality in a mythology of the “new economy”, which supposedly transcends the boom and bust cycle of capitalism. The anxiety over personal authenticity that arises in connection with the virtualisation of

⁹ Adorno, “Words from Abroad”, 187.

money in techno-capitalism threatens to expose the fictitious foundations of value in the information economy. The digitalization of money, or its translation into information through virtual financial markets of the late twentieth century, has meant that the sheer speed and volume of digital exchanges on global markets short circuits the interpretive processes of reading that enable meaning. Delillo's emphasis on the role of translation and interpretation in the financial sphere suggests that money and aesthetics are competing exercises of valuation, thus placing the reader in a similar predicament to the translator-brokers of the novel. James Gourley then examines Beckett's *Play*, a late piece which calls for the speech of each character to be "largely unintelligible". Positing Beckett's work as one of the locus points for the investigation of the work of art, Gourley argues that with this play Beckett fundamentally alters the function of theatre, and investigates the work of art as a process of translation that persistently results in failure.

Finally, the fertile ground of misunderstanding in translation is explored by Chris Andrews, the English translator of Roberto Bolaño's works. Andrews' suggestion that creative misunderstanding is the guiding axiom of the translator underscores the theme of this volume. A literary work is often neglected in its own culture because it is understood all too well, covered as it is in layers of over-understanding; but its misunderstanding by a foreign culture can restore the distances required by aesthetic appreciation. The creative misunderstanding of a particular textual element, when it coheres with the integrity of relations accomplished by the translated work, has often gone on to generate fresh truths in foreign linguistic and cultural environments. In translation, incomprehensibility is not an obstacle but an aesthetic ideal that restores the potential of a work to generate new meaning after it has been stripped away by over-understanding. Andrews refers us to the remarks of the Argentine novelist César Aira on the motif or metaphor of translation. The passage of a book across temporal and cultural distances, Aira notes, is shipped by misunderstanding "in an endless voyage towards the incomprehensible". If the crew on this voyage are translators, as Andrews suggests, then as readers we are its passengers.

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CHAPTER ONE

DAMAGE CONTROL: AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE AS TRANSLATION

NICHOLAS JOSE

Australian writing in English contains a fair amount of translation, and more that can be read as translation in a less literal sense: writing that transports forms and expressions from other languages and cultures into an Australian literary field. The *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009), for example, includes many such instances. There's an extract from *My Life and Work* by Taam Sze Pui (c.1853-1926), first published in a bilingual Chinese and English format in Queensland in 1925. The translator is a Chinese scholar, younger than Taam, working in Innisfail, who may also have been the publisher. His name is unknown, as is often the case with translators. Then there are the songs "Ngalalak/White Cockatoo" and "Muralkarra/Crow" by Frank Malkorda (c.1930-1993) that appear both in a transcription of their original Anbarra, a North Central Arnhem Land Australian Aboriginal language, and a translation into English by Margaret Clunies Ross, working from Malkorda's recordings, made in 1982, with Malkorda's approval. There's "7 Last Words of the Emperor Hadrian" by David Malouf, the original Latin and seven different English versions. And there's "After Hölderlin" by John Tranter, subtitled "a version of Hölderlin's 'When I Was a Boy'" that freely interprets the German original. There's Yahia al-Samawy's "Your Voice is My Flute", translated from Arabic by Eva Sallis (Hornung), and there are bilingual English and Aboriginal (Yawuru) poems by Pat Torres.

If the idea of translation is applied more broadly, to include transposition, adaptation and imitation, there are parodies too. John Clarke, for example, renders classic English poems into Australian idiom and context, turning "A Child's Christmas in Wales" by Dylan Thomas into "A Child's Christmas in Warrnambool" by Dylan Thompson:

One Christmas was so like another in those years around
 the sea town corner now, that I can never remember
 whether it was 106 degrees in 1953 or whether it was 103
 degrees in 1956. (1-4)¹

Like so many Australian authors, Clarke was born outside Australia—in his case, in New Zealand. In a biographical sense too, authors can live in translation.

Each of these instances points to a space that lies behind the text, and a process of repositioning. The extract from Taam Sze Pui, for example, is a reminder that many people have spoken, written, read and published in varieties of Chinese over a long period of time in Australia, very little of which has been available in English. For those people to survive and participate in Australian society, a continual translation back and forth was required. Sometimes that produces an articulation in English of Chinese experience and cultural form that is new, as in the work of William Yang, a later relative of Taam Sze Pui, who relates Chinese family history in his documentary performance work *Sadness* (1996). The form of Yang's work, a monologue that recounts oral history accompanied by a double slide show that documents the past and the performer's search for himself within it, is a unique hybrid, as befits the traverse of crosscultural narrative.

Ouyang Yu, who moved from China to Melbourne in 1991, only to return to China later, part-time, as professor of Australian literature, creates a distinctive Chinese Australian voice as persona in "The Ungrateful Immigrant" (2005):

You expect me to speak English and write English
 Which I can do but not so that you think I am English (8-9)

Here Ouyang breaks open the problem of the English language in Australia, as both colonial inheritance that refers back to the fixed authority of an imperial power, distant in time and place, and the changing, changeable medium of daily life here and now, adopted and owned by its users as a means of expression within society at large. Ouyang's work is restlessly experimental and generative in its shifting forms and frames. His handmade chapbooks, such as *Wo Cao* (2003), for

¹ Quotations are from texts as they appear in the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, to which line and page numbers refer. This essay first appeared in *Westerly* vol. 57.1 (July 2012), pp.102-20.

example, collage gum leaves, torn images and pieces of Chinese and English text in order to locate the personal within a layered detritus of nature and culture. Here the necessity of translation is the ground for creative innovation.

If migration to Australia consists of languages and cultures as well as people, Indigenous writing insists that English language and culture itself migrated into Australia by way of invasion and occupation. Though English may be “native” to many of us who use it—we’re born with it—it’s not home-grown. Translation from Aboriginal languages into English can be a form of sharing—cross-cultural communication—but also risks being an appropriation, a forced conversion, as incommensurable difference is managed linguistically, performatively, within structures of unequal power where one side wants something from the other.

Yahia al-Samawy, born in Iraq in 1949, came to Australia in 1997 after fleeing his country. Again the act of translating and publishing his poetry in English makes the claim that Australian literature, like the society around it, is produced from historical rupture, political conflict, cultural and geographical dislocation, and the subsequent impulses of recovery and reiteration, memory and hope, that dispossession demands and mobility allows.

All of this makes for a plural and dialogic literature, which the translations of David Malouf and John Tranter celebrate in their metamorphic remake of classic sources. Malouf’s play with Hadrian’s question about where the soul goes on the death of the body is a many-sided recognition that an idea needs its local habitation to exist, just as that local habitation is unimaginable without its animating imported idea: “without you, my sweet nothing, /I’m dust” (7: 9-10). On a larger scale the same could be said of Australia without its translation into language, where such translation also gives birth to a sense of loss for the unknowable, the unrecoverable: what “Australia” was before that name was affixed.

Some authors in the Macquarie PEN anthology quote literary tags, often the Bible, Shakespeare or the English poets, to add the lustre of lineage to their writing. Sometimes these are foreign references that need translating. A significant example is the line from the Roman poet Horace that occurs in two different contexts. In *Australia Felix* (1917), the first volume of her novel trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, Henry Handel Richardson has Mahony’s interlocutor, who is bitter about how Australia has failed to deliver on its promise, say:

There was a line we used to have drummed into us at school—it’s often come back to me since. *Coelum, non animum, mutant, qui trans mare*

currunt. [This can be translated as: “the sky, not the heart, they change, those who cross the sea”.] In our green days we gabbled that off by rote; then, it seemed just one more o’ the eel-sleek phrases the classics are full of. Now, I take off my hat to the man who wrote it. He knew what he was talkin’ about—by the Lord Harry, he did! (293)

The argument is about whether Australia, rather than change the spirit, the mind, has any use for it at all. For Tangye “the hardest and cruellest country ever created” only has use for an imported European as “dung” for the land, only as matter devoid of spirit. Mahony sees it differently. For him, mind and conscience can survive, but through the exertion of human will, in opposition to the circumstances inflicted by the change of skies. For neither of them does the translation from one environment to another nurture an entirely positive cultural change.

Writing much later, the art critic Robert Hughes quotes the same line of Horace in order to challenge it:

One of the most disagreeable moments of my education [in Australia] was having to stand up and speak *ex tempore* in Latin for four minutes, before other schoolboys and our Jesuit teacher, on Horace’s famous tag, *Coelum non animam mutant qui trans mare currunt*—“Those who cross the sea change the sky above them, but not their souls”. I resented this, not only because my Latin was poor, but because the *idea* struck me as wrong—the utterance of a self-satisfied Roman, impervious to the rest of the world. Hegemonic Horace.

But most Australians were on his side. The motto of Sydney University expressed contentment with the colonial bind: *Sidere mens eadem mutato*, another version of Horace’s imperial thought—“The same mind under changed skies”. (928)

Australia has changed, Hughes argues, its mentality changed by its circumstances, to which immigration—the experience of change in many individuals—has itself contributed powerfully, creating, at least from the optimistic perspective of a writer resident in New York in 1993, and by contrast with the United States, an “intelligent multiculturalism [that] works to everyone’s social advantage”. In the translation of culture, a new culture forms through inflection by and of what is already there, forms lastingly, or temporarily coalesces and then drifts apart. Hughes might be pleased to learn that Sydney University has recently removed the Latin motto from its crest.

To see and hear the process of renewal through translation requires a reading that doubles back. In “Ahh . . . Bush-Honey There!” from *Story About Feeling*, Bill Neidjie (c1913-2000) tells his listener how to read an

Aboriginal painting. He compares it to a newspaper, full of story, but story that comes with feeling, with spirit, where it is the feeling, the spirit, that transfers. It can become like a dream, as it came from the dreaming to begin with, creating the country and the beings, “mother, granny, grandpa, grass, fire, bird, tree”, that are present again in the picture. In the translation from one medium to another there is transmission, dynamic circularity, a renewing offer of exchange:

All that painting, small mark . . .
 they put cross, cross and over again.
 White, yellow and little bit charcoal, little bit red clay . . .
 that’s the one all small meaning there.
 They put it meaning.
 They painting fish . . . little mark they make im, you know.
 That’s the one same as this you look newspaper.
 Big mob you read it all that story.
 e telling you all that meaning.
 All that painting now, small,
 e tell im you that story.

That meaning that you look . . . you feel im now.
 You might say . . .
 “Hey! That painting good one!
 I take im more picture”.

That spirit e telling you . . .
 “Go on . . . you look”.
 . . .

No matter who is.
 E can feel it way I feel it in my feeling.
 You’ll be same too.
 You listen my story and you will feel im
 because spirit e’ll be with you. (23-39, 76-80)

Bill Neidjie comes from Arnhem Land. His language here is a version of Northern Australian kriol, a mediation between traditional language and English. He was a member of the Gagadju language group. The Gagadju tongue died with him, remembered today in the name of the park we call Kakadu. It’s also present in Neidjie’s writing, as he translates for us—“You got to put charcoal/because e got ‘business’ there, what we call Dhuwa”—not only language but the world understanding of that language, otherwise lost. Neidjie’s language goes back to what is lost in order to reconstitute it and carry it forward, as a gift of communication. His

language, his idiolect, enacts an open and reciprocal imperative: “No matter who is”.

The authors in the Macquarie PEN anthology are ordered by date of birth which puts Bill Neidjie, published in 1989, next to Donald Friend (1914-1989), writing in his diary in 1952. The two contemporaries could not have more different backgrounds or life paths. Friend writes from Toledo in Spain, after he has seen paintings by El Greco. Something about the country has spoken to him, dry like the country around Hill End that he painted in Australia, and something of the spirit too, in that fabled cosmopolitan centre:

The place is sheer enchantment, magic. I won't speak of the Grecos, which are beyond belief. As much of his art, I imagine, grew out of this environment as was born in his Byzantine origin. The folds of hills and rocks suggest, quite as much as the enclosing womb shapes of ikons, the peculiar swooping and folding-in forms he used. (587)

Friend's language quickly moves from casual to probing, as he folds in the interaction of environment, culture, spirit and artistic expression, with his own situation as subtext, in a way that uncannily parallels Bill Neidjie's and seems distinctively Australian in its translational moves.

The first collection of poems to appear in colonial Australia, in 1819, contained “The Kangaroo” by Barron Field, New South Wales judge and friend and correspondent of London essayist Charles Lamb. The poem entertainingly applies the sophisticated tropes of late 18th century/early Romantic English pastoral poetry to the unique animal: “Kangaroo, Kangaroo!/ Thou Spirit of Australia...” (1-2). A fond paradox of the aesthetic theory of the time was that the best art transcended art to become as if natural. So Barron Field pushes to the limit of precedent in trying to describe the kangaroo—it is not a mythic beast, nor is it like a giraffe. The poet can only credit nature, at play, as the artist of a creation that cannot be improved: “be as thou art; thou best art so” (59). In other words, the uncomfortable translation of contemporary English poetics to the fauna of Australia enables the recognition that Australia can only be understood on its own terms—which the poem then attempts to translate back:

For howsoe'er anomalous
Thou yet art not incongruous . . .
Happiest Work of finest Hand! (51-52, 63)

Many later writers and artists have responded creatively to the ecology of Australia, none more so than Les Murray in his collection *Translations*

from the Natural World (1992) where he declares his abiding concern with giving voice to others, including the spectrum of non-human others, and those that some would denigrate as “sub-human” others too. His poems verbalise the non-verbal, or translate from one side of the limits of ordinary speech to the other, extraordinary side. This is not immodest, not sublimely egotistical in the Romantic sense. On the contrary: “The miming is all of I”. The phrase occurs in a poem called “Lyre Bird” about the bird that patches together its creativity through spirited imitation of the sounds of others. For Murray that becomes a way of speaking of the poet as medium, in communion with the non-verbal or differently verbal world he writes from. Mime here can be taken to represent the replacement of one language by another, a language paradoxically without language, apparently radically diminished, but then richly re-invented through embodiment and gesture. Murray might call it the “natural” world that he mimes, working to find an equivalence in language, but in the poet’s articulation it becomes something else too. His language is a human overwriting, which makes the natural world also non-natural, a damaged world that carries history, culture and loss.

What if the idea that “the miming is all of I” were applied more pervasively to Australian literature? Can we recognise a translational process of imitation and adaptation, decomposition and re-composition, going on all the time, allowing us to experience the new creation as also measuring a distance, a space of travel? In moving forward, the new turns and invites dialogue with where it has come from, and does so from a position without precedent. Here the new, created in translation, also creates the untranslatability that Naoki Sakai recognises in his fertile aphorism: “It is translation that gives birth to the untranslatable”.²

In this way translation is an index of incommensurability, and, in its contingency, an invitation to further attempts at translation, in the knowledge that such translation is also invention in the Derridean sense: “a new way of translating in which translation doesn’t go one way but both ways”.³ Commenting on that passage, the philosopher Saranindranath Tagore adds, “for the cosmopolitan, neither the self nor alterity are transcendently anchored. . . . The welcome [from self to other, same to different, known to unknown] is founded on a translation, an invention, precisely because the stranger cannot remain a stranger but must become a friend”.⁴ To this I would add that in this context, the cosmopolitan can be understood as the Australian, for whom neither belonging nor not-

² Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 14.

³ Derrida, “Politics and Friendship”.

⁴ Tagore, “Bengal and Cosmopolitanism”.

belonging is stable, not “transcendentally anchored”. The Australian is always self and other, in endless oscillation.

So we arrive at a richer understanding of the provisionality, the mobility, the reflexivity, the infinite speculation that is culture, by responding to Australian literature through translational practices of reading and writing, as it invites us to do.

The Macquarie PEN anthology concludes with *Vietnam: A psychic guide* by Chi Vu. It is the text of a performance piece that consists of letters back to Melbourne in English from a Vietnamese Australian woman who is alert to the textures of language crossing around her. In what the speaker calls the “café of Babel”, English, Hebrew and different kinds of Vietnamese mingle. It is like the place in the river where fresh water and salt meet: “In this zone a special type of fish thrives. This is the meeting of east and west. It is the mixing of two mediums. It is where the other fish die” (1402). Chi Vu presents a performative, gendered interplay of modes: writing, speaking, dancing, seeing, hearing. She finds expression for herself, as other women have done in Australia before her, particularly but not exclusively migrant women, through projecting a new artistic language in an act of transformative translation.

Tom Cho, in *Look Who’s Morphing* (2009), makes a different kind of play with that delta zone, where some thrive while others die. “AIYO!!! An evil group of ninjas is entering and destroying a call centre!!!” begins one short fiction that ends when a girl in the call centre remakes herself with computer parts into a deadly cyborg and destroys the ninjas in turn, a hybrid contemporary heroine with language to match:

Aiyah! She even eating the remains of all the ninja warriors! Wah, and now she is offering to buy cappuccino for everybody!!! So polite-ah-she!⁵

These are the zones where literary innovation articulates new personal and cultural possibilities.

But it has always happened in Australian literature, requiring only a certain kind of attuned reading to see it, which might be called translational in registering where elements have come from and how they are changed in the process of creation. John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942), for example, a poet close to the country and the hardships of itinerant rural life, drew on folk ballad, the Bible and high lyricism to communicate his oneness with nature as a new fusion. His poem “The Poor, Poor Country”, written in 1934, concludes:

⁵ Cho, *Look Who’s Morphing*, 95.

The New Year came with heat and thirst and the little lakes were low.
 The blue cranes were my nearest friends and I mourned to see them go;
 I watched their wings so long until I only saw the sky;
 Down in that poor country no pauper was I. (21-24)

In this idiom Neilson is synthesiser and conduit for different traditions and perspectives, a translator of the natural world, an interpreter of himself as “no pauper was I”.

Neilson was born in the same year as David Unaipon, the Ngarrindjeri man whose *Native Legends* (1929) is credited as the first book authored by an Aboriginal person. Unaipon’s work can also be understood as cultural transmission, continuing an Indigenous tradition while translating it into literary English form. “From a very early age”, he writes in “The Voice of the Great Spirit”, “the mothers and the old men of the tribe instruct the children by means of tales and stories. This is one of the many stories that is handed down from generation to generation by my people” (320). That requires, in part, a process of finding language for what is untranslatable, a spirit beyond words: “Thalung is everywhere, and manifests through the colour of the bush, the birds, the flowers, the fish, the streams; in fact, everything that the Aboriginal sees, hears, tastes, and feels—there is Thalung”. And through this language non-Aboriginal readers become aware of what they might apprehend by substituting their own understanding of a supreme deity. As in Neilson’s work, we are given an intimation of what might be understood through translation back. In this way Unaipon can be read simultaneously within the history of the English literary forms he adapts and within the modes of Aboriginal culture.

Bill Neidjie is Unaipon’s successor, as is Alexis Wright in her novel *Carpentaria* (2006) which opens with a magnificent rendering of a “tidal river snake” that is both the environment and its living spirit: “it permeates everything”. But to understand it that way requires an inside kind of reading which the author invites us to make in a voice that transfers knowledge, at once local and immemorial, to the listener, “you”:

Can someone who did not grow up in a place that is sometimes under water, sometimes bone-dry, know when the trade winds blowing off the southern and northern hemispheres will merge in summer? . . . It takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with the river, whatever its mood. It is about there being no difference between you and the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its own mood. (1221)

Carpentaria imaginatively translates Aboriginal law to the extent of the permissible, the limit of the possible, in its bounty of politically

charged stories and characters from particular country.

Like Chi Vu's river where sweet and salt water mingle, like Les Murray's lyre bird language, Wright's river speaks for a way of being in the world that is greater than any fixed or singular perspective can express. And that recognition is liberating, revolutionary and a call to justice. She explains:

This is the condition of contemporary Indigenous storytelling that I believe is a consequence of our racial diaspora in Australia. The helix of divided strands is forever moving, entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several tunes at once. These stories relate to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams. Where the characters are Indigenous people in this novel, they might easily have been any scattered people from any part of the world who share a relationship with their spiritual ancestors and heritage, or for that matter, any Australian—old or new.⁶

It is such territory that the creator inhabits, where disintegration and reconstitution are double sides of a process, where translation from one state or condition or language to another is continuous, unpredictable and generative. So Elizabeth Costello, fictional Australian novelist, discovers (in J.M. Coetzee's work of the same name), when asked what she believes:

But the Australian continent, where I was born into the world, kicking and squalling, is real (if far away), the Dulgannon and its mudflats are real, the frogs are real. They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them. . . . She thinks of the frog beneath the earth, spread out as if flying, as if parachuting through the darkness. . . . Yes, that she can believe in: the dissolution, the return to the elements; and the converse moment she can believe in too, when the first quiver of returning life runs through the body and the limbs contract, the hands flex. She can believe in that, if she concentrates closely enough, word by word . . . (982-4)

That generative zone, the moment of crossing, of formation, through translation into new language, is where Australian literature comes into existence.

A more extreme example is the hoax poet Ern Malley, conjured into being by James McAuley and Harold Stewart in 1944, literally patched together by transposition and remix of language tags out of context into unlikely new creation. In the recent *Cambridge History of Australian*

⁶ Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", 6.

Literature (2009), one writer (Peter Kirkpatrick) claims Ern Malley as “the ultimate triumph of modernism”⁷ while another (John Kinsella) suggests that “a definitively postmodern moment is located” there.⁸ Philip Mead, in his important book, *Networked Language*, draws on the Shakespearean entanglement with the Ern Malley hoax. McAuley and Stewart used fragments of Shakespeare in their concoction, and in the subsequent obscenity trial of Ern Malley’s publisher, Max Harris, Shakespeare was invoked on all sides as yardstick and arbiter of poetic value. Mead concludes, provocatively, that “this is the sense in which Ern Malley is a national poet, or, even, Australia’s Shakespeare”.⁹ The cultural translation of Shakespeare has been an enduring imperial project. Here it comes back to haunt, from beyond the limits of what authorship has conventionally been taken to be. “. . . I have shrunk/ To an interloper, robber of dead men’s dream. . . . I am still/ the black swan of trespass on alien waters” concludes Ern Malley’s poem “Dürer: Innsbruck, 1495” (627), itself a translation of an image of a distant reflection.

In *My Life as a Fake* (2003), Peter Carey’s fictional variation on Ern Malley, where the imaginary poet becomes as flesh and blood as Frankenstein’s monster and runs amok in Malaysia, the maker comments on the creative transformation that has taken place: “What had been clever had now become true, the song of the autodidact, the colonial, the damaged beast of the antipodes”.¹⁰ For Carey, Ern Malley’s poems are a postcolonial comeback, a self-made literary expression from the other side of the line.

Literature comes from somewhere and goes somewhere, which may also mean that it returns as gift or reflection to the place it came from. The circulation of manuscripts, the movement of type, the portability and durability of the book through many hands, the ceaseless back and forth of interpretation and translation, across time and space: this is the life of literature. Australian literature participates in these processes and contexts too. Does that make it part of world literature? Or can it only be part of world literature if it stops being *Australian* literature?

Perhaps Australian literature can be thought of as literature at the limit of world-literature. Here I adapt the title of Ranajit Guha’s *History at the Limit of World-History*, his densely suggestive retort to Hegel’s comment, in 1839, that “India has no history”. World-history—Hegel’s term—could only be the history of nation states and their institutions. Since India was

⁷ Pierce, *Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, 222.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 476.

⁹ Mead, *Networked Language*, 185.

¹⁰ Carey, *My Life as a Fake*, 82-3.

not a state in the Western historiographical sense, it lay beyond the limit of World-history. Australia, for Hegel, would have been outside World-history too, certainly before 1788. World-literature—*Weltliteratur*—is Goethe’s coinage from around the same time (1827), as the German polymath looked to an encyclopaedically inclusive commerce between the literatures of recognised cultures. He might have included Aboriginal songs in World-literature, had he known them—the inconceivability of that speaks for itself—but English writing from Australia would have been compiled as British literature in Goethe’s world-literary world-historical scheme—until a point of differentiation emerged that qualified it as the writing of a recognisably separate language and community. That might have been marked belatedly when Patrick White was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1973 for introducing “a new continent into literature”, or when David Malouf won the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2000, or even when that other Nobel Literature laureate, J.M.Coetzee, relocated to Australia in the same year. But such appearances have not secured Australia’s place in *The World Republic of Letters* (1999, English translation 2004), French critic Pascale Casanova’s influential analysis of how authors from the periphery achieve metropolitan (read: Parisian) success, nor in the various other schemas that seek to move outside or beneath hegemonic Anglophone (or Francophone) literary domination. Third World, postcolonial, anti-orientalist: to include Australia in these frames requires a degree of special pleading. It’s not an easy fit. In practice such globally aspirational paradigms become catch-all categories in which Australian and other “small” literatures figure as merely following suit, the limit term at the end of a sequence of repetitions, a place marker.

Oddly, China is in the same boat, only marginally present in most discussions of world literature: hardly a small literature, but a major, ancient and continuing literary stream from an alternative empire. I am reminded of Derrida’s recognition of the “Chinese prejudice” in Western thought, which prompts an awkward question from his translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: “the East is never seriously studied . . . in the Derridean text. Why then must it remain . . . as the name of the limits of the text’s knowledge?”¹¹

Spivak’s question appears in the later corrected edition of *Of Grammatology* and is investigated by critic Sean Meighoo who suggests that if Western thought since the Enlightenment, including Derrida, reaches a limit point in the way it misreads Chinese as a language (“the

¹¹ In Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, lxxxii.