

ESSAY

On a Universal Tendency to Debase Retranslations; or, The Instrumentalism of a Translation Fixation

LAWRENCE VENUTI

[A] phenomenon is analyzable only if it represents something other than itself.

—Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father*

The Problem

A paradigmatic case is offered by John Updike in a 2004 review published in *The New Yorker*:

The old standbys who nurtured our youth—Constance Garnett rendering the Russians, C. K. Scott Moncrieff putting his spin on Proust, the Muirs translating Kafka, H. T. Lowe-Porter doing Thomas Mann—are all being retired, with condescending remarks about their slips and elisions, by successors whose more modern versions infallibly miss, it seems to this possibly crotchety scanner, the tone, the voice, the *presence* of the text that we first read. In general—if it's generalizations you want—the closer the translator is in time to the translated, the more closely shared their vision and style will be. (100)

LAWRENCE VENUTI is professor emeritus of English at Temple University. His most recent publications include *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (U of Nebraska P, 2019), *The Translation Studies Reader* (4th ed.; Routledge, 2021), and the retranslation of Dino Buzzati's novel *The Stronghold* (New York Review Books, 2023).

Updike exemplifies the tendency of some readers to prefer an earlier translation in which they encounter a source text, particularly a canonized work, over later versions of the same text. The decisive encounter usually occurs at a young age or at the start of a career—it is likely to be the first time that the reader experienced the source text in translation—and the experience is so compelling as to establish a deep, enduring attachment that entails denigration or outright rejection of later versions. The retranslations may even display a

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demonstrable improvement according to some standard, such as a more reliable edition of the source text, greater linguistic precision, or increased readability through updated language. But these standards are not applied by the reader who is attached to an earlier translation. On the contrary, the reader discloses the attachment, as well as its intensity, through a rather harsh criticism of a particular retranslation. Insofar as the features by which the attachment is manifested suggest obsessiveness, I will call it a fixation.

As Updike's remarks show, the fixation can involve a subtle elision of various ontological differences among texts, an elision that is symptomatic since it carries significant implications for the concept of translation assumed in the reader's comments. Updike's reference to "the text that we first read" does not precisely distinguish between the translation and the source text, especially since his use of "miss" can be taken as the banal disparagement that translation entails loss of source-text features (which, however, he imputes only to the "more modern versions"). In emphasizing "presence," he may be referring to how strongly the earlier translation affected him or to how strongly it produced an illusionism of transparency through which the translated status of the translation vanished and he felt that he was reading the source text itself (see Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility* 1). Or he may simply be assuming that the earlier translation gives back the source text intact, with all the force of the literary effects that this text produced in the source language, so that it is *present* in his reading experience, directly accessible, as if without the mediation of the translating language.

In suppressing these distinctions, Updike's sentences move seamlessly from an experience of one text to an assertion of equivalence between two texts. Thus, he concludes that because the earlier translator was temporally "closer" to "the translated," the translation "more closely shared" its "vision and style." At this point, we can see that Updike's fixation rests on a fundamental assumption about the nature of translation. I will call it the instrumental model: he implicitly understands translation to be the reproduction or transfer of an

invariant contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant form, meaning, or effect (see Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism* 1). Accordingly, he cites two invariants, one semantic, the other formal: "vision and style."

This instrumentalism informs how Updike responds not only to certain earlier translations but also to retranslations of their source texts. It prevents him from accepting new and different versions of those texts. The object of his review is Robert Alter's 2004 translation of the Pentateuch, which Updike argues "should not" replace the King James Bible (100). He gives three "reasons": "the sheer amount of accompanying commentary and philological footnotes" (100), "rather odd English" (101), and the lack of a clear readership, since the apparatus will discourage "fanciers of sheer literature," and "millions of believers, Christian and Jewish, already have their versions, with cherished, trusted phrasings" (102). Updike's instrumentalism leads him to reject any translation that inscribes an interpretation so innovative as to challenge previous versions, including the Jacobean text that he himself cherishes and trusts.

In the end, Updike's instrumentalist fixation on the King James Bible prevents him from adopting what I will call a hermeneutic model of translation (see Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism* 1–4). Here translation is understood as an interpretive act that inevitably varies the form, meaning, and effect of the source text according to changing intelligibilities and interests in the translating language and culture. This variation occurs even when the translator, like most translators today, aims to maintain a semantic correspondence and stylistic approximation to the source text. For any text, whether original composition or derivative work made therefrom, initiates a potentially endless semiosis that is limited only by the various contexts that enable and constrain it, contexts that are textual and institutional, cultural and ideological, social and historical. A hermeneutic understanding would force Updike to admit that a text is never available without mediation, that it is always already interpreted, and that since any source text can support multiple and conflicting interpretations that change with each interpretive occasion or

context, it can give rise to a corresponding succession of translations that can be evaluated according to multiple and conflicting standards. Yet because Updike understands translation as reproducing a source-text invariant, he would assess a translator's work merely as a matter of getting that invariant right or wrong. Hence, he sees Alter not as presenting another possible interpretation but as detecting verbal errors in existing versions. "A host of familiar images," laments Updike, "turn out to be mistranslations" (102).

The instrumentalism that underpins Updike's fixation would in effect deny or stop cultural change, innovative interpretation, the very practice of translation. Any translation, moreover, is itself subject to continuous interpretation, capable of supporting a broad range of responses that are not only diverse but disparate. Updike's reading of the King James Bible, we can be certain, would differ markedly from the readings of an academic specialist in early modern literature or in the history of the Bible or in the various discourses that currently define the field known as translation studies, among many other perspectives—disciplinary and sectarian, cultural and political.

Cases

Most readers seem not to become attached to a particular translation, whether they read professionally, for pleasure, or both, whether they perform the detached application of specialized knowledge typical of cultural elites or the vicarious participation favored by popular taste or whether they shift between both kinds of appreciation. Most readers who are familiar with more than one translation of a source text tend to regard a retranslation as an improvement over a previous version, especially when that version predates the retranslation by a substantial length of time (see, e.g., Navrozov; Bruckner). As a result, the readers who become so fixated on a translation that they reject subsequent versions of the source text constitute a relatively small segment of the possible audiences for any retranslation, making their responses eccentric. Indeed, some of the rejected retranslations became best sellers (see, e.g., Remnick).

All the same, these responses should not be dismissed as utterly idiosyncratic and therefore inconsequential since they can actually produce a considerable public impact. The readers that I have so far identified as manifesting a fixation appear in many linguistic communities around the world. To date, the translating languages in which I have gathered sufficient data to present case studies include English, Estonian, French, German, and Japanese. The cases consist mostly of scholars, novelists, and translators. They are, in other words, professional readers in the sense that reading is essential to their work, and their expertise makes them opinion makers insofar as their commentary on their reading is endowed with literary capital. Nonetheless, the documents that exhibit their fixation show them responding less as specialists in a particular cultural practice or academic discipline than as readers who expect a certain kind of readerly pleasure—even when they bring specialized knowledge to bear in articulating their judgments. Most importantly, their responses share features that transcend their memberships in specific linguistic communities and cultural institutions.

Foremost among these features is readability, which the readers construe largely as stylistic felicity that invites their imaginative engagement with the earlier translations on which they are fixated. In their view, later versions are unreadable in these terms. Gary Saul Morson, a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Northwestern University, criticizes as "awkward and unsightly muddles" the translations of Russian prose fiction that Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky began to publish in 1990, whereas he finds Constance Garnett's Edwardian versions distinguished by "literary grace" (92, 93). The Estonian novelist Holger Kaints criticizes Klaarika Kladjärvi's 2011 translation of Julio Cortázar's stories as "raskepärased" ("lumbering") because it contains "möödaminekud eesti keele tavalisest sõnajärjest, lauseehitusest, semantikast" ("deviations from the usual Estonian word order, sentence structure, semantics"), whereas Mart Tarmak's 1985 version can be read "mitte mingit tõrget" ("without any obstacle") because his text is "arusaadav, selge" ("understandable, clear"), and "ehkki laused on

sama pikad ja sama liigendatud kui uues tõlkes, aga mõte tuleb kohe selgesti välja” (“although the sentences are as long and complex as in the new translation, the meaning comes through immediately”; trans. Katiliina Gielen). The French novelist Frédéric Beigbeder prefers the earlier translations of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* by Victor Llonca (1926) and Jacques Tournier (1996) because “they are fluid, easy to follow,” while he rejects Julie Wolkenstein’s 2011 version “because she writes complicated sentences” (“Re: The Great Gatsby”). In his review of Wolkenstein’s translation, Beigbeder complains that “toute poésie, toute grâce s’en est évaporée” (“all poetry, all grace has evaporated”; “Touche pas”). A professor emeritus of English at an American university who specializes in the history of the novel prefers Helen Lowe-Porter’s 1927 translation of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* because it “seems more at ease with itself” than John Woods’s 1996 version, which “sometimes seems to combine precision with stiffness” (“Re: Retranslations”). Shunsuke Ozaki, professor of American literature at Aichi University, prefers Takashi Nozaki’s 1964 translation of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* because the language of Haruki Murakami’s 2003 version seems “不自然” (“unnatural”): “野崎訳がどこまでも「普通」に訳しているのに対し、村上訳はどこか色ががついているというか、突出しちやっっているわけね” (“Nozaki’s translation is consistently written in normal language, while Murakami’s translation is somehow tinted or obtrusive”; “Nozaki yaku”; trans. Michael Kuehl).

In the readers’ accounts of their responses, readability is usually linked to equivalence, revealing the instrumentalist assumptions underlying both their fixation and their rejection of retranslations. Although Kaints does not read Spanish, his criticism of Kladjärv’s version implies that Tarmak’s translation establishes a sufficient degree of equivalence to communicate the Argentine writer’s intention: “kahtlen sügavasti, kas Cortázar ennast sihilikult sedavõrd segases keeles väljendas” (“I have serious doubts about whether Cortázar deliberately expressed himself in such confusing language”; trans. Katiliina Gielen). Similarly, when Beigbeder criticizes

Wolkenstein’s retranslation for “evaporat[ing]” the “poetry” and “grace” of Fitzgerald’s novel, he is isolating formal invariants that he believes to be contained in the English text but that the translator fails to reproduce in her French version. Ulrich Faure, a German translator of Dutch literature, faults Nikolaus Stingl’s 2015 version of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* because it “macht die Sätze etwas übersichtlicher” (“makes the sentences a bit clearer”) so that “der Sound von Faulkner war zerstört” (“Faulkner’s sound was destroyed”), whereas in Hermann Stresau’s 1938 translation “hört man die whiskygetränke Stimme Faulknerns” (“you can hear Faulkner’s whisky-soaked voice”). After comparing the Japanese versions of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Ozaki offers a pointed assessment: “野崎訳の方が『ライ麦畑』を日本語で再現していると思います。村上訳はね、あれはサリンジャーの小説じゃなくて、サリンジャーの小説の真似をした村上さんの小説みたいにしかならない” (“I think the Nozaki translation reproduces the English text in Japanese. Murakami’s translation is not Salinger’s novel; it’s nothing but a Murakami imitation of Salinger’s novel”; “Nozaki yaku”; trans. Michael Kuehl).

In some cases, the readers’ instrumentalist assumptions raise questions that point to the interpretive acts at work in their own responses as well as in their preferred translations. In arguing for the superiority of Garnett over Pevear and Volokhonsky, Morson adduces their different renderings of individual words while admitting that “both [meanings] are possible so far as the dictionary is concerned” (94). Why then is he unable to accept the retranslations? What stops him is his investment in a particular interpretation of the Russian texts. After acknowledging that the Russian word (*zloi*) in the opening of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* can mean both “spite” (Garnett) and “wicked” (Pevear and Volokhonsky), Morson asserts that “no one with the faintest idea of what this novella is about, with any knowledge of criticism from Dostoevsky’s day to ours, or with any grasp of Dostoevskian psychology, would imagine that the book’s point is that people are capable of wickedness” (93). Morson is not merely privileging a certain

scholarly reading of Dostoevsky, grounded in research into the history of criticism and “Dostoevskian psychology”; he is also assuming that his privileged reading is identical to the Russian text, effectively turning it into a semantic invariant contained in that text and demanding that any translator inscribe it to the exclusion of other possible interpretations.

When the reader lacks proficiency in the source language, the instrumentalist assumptions that underlie the fixation quickly come to seem arbitrary, exposing the reader’s judgment as questionable. Faure’s view that Stresau’s version, unlike Stingl’s, reproduces the form and meaning of *Absalom*, *Absalom!* is undermined when he compares their different handling of the word “dim” in the opening description of “a dim hot airless room” (Faulkner 5). Unable to take into account the English text, Faure observes that “Bei Stresau ist der Raum düster (das Wort wertet, da ist etwas Bedrohliches, Unheimliches dabei), bei Stingl dämmrig (keine Wertung, es ist einfach nur nicht mehr hell)” (“with Stresau, the room is gloomy (the word counts, there is something threatening, eerie about it); with Stingl it is dim (no valuation, it is just no longer bright)”). Stingl’s choice of “dämmrigen” (dim, dusky, twilight, crepuscular) is actually closer to Faulkner’s English than Stresau’s choice of “düster” (dark, somber, gloomy, ominous)). What Faure prefers here is not Stresau’s greater accuracy but his evocative interpretation.

In reviewing English translations of Isaac Babel’s stories, the novelist Francine Prose similarly declares her instrumentalism by describing the translator’s work as “inhabiting the mind of the author, communicating those qualities of tone, personality, and voice that distinguish one writer from another,” all invariant features that are assumed to be unaffected by the shift to a different language and culture (77). She writes as if these features were immediately perceptible to the translator upon reading the source text when in fact none of them can be formulated without a fairly aggressive interpretation. She shows no familiarity with the Russian texts, however, when she compares passages from two versions of Babel’s stories, preferring Walter Morison’s 1955 selection over Peter Constantine’s 2001 complete works.

Prose focuses on how the translators treat the final sentences of stories, which she generally finds “clunky and maladroit” in Constantine’s retranslation (78). Yet a sentence she quotes to justify her preference for Morison is actually his revision of Nadia Helstein’s 1929 translation, as a publisher’s note explains (Morison 3). Helstein’s colloquial version of the sentence (“I’d like to know where you’d find in the whole world another father like my father!” [10]) turns out to be rather different from Morison’s polite and somewhat punctilious version (“I should wish to know where in the whole world you could find another father like my father?” [43]), casting doubt on Prose’s remark that Morison’s version should be read as “agonized and searing” (78). Another sentence from Constantine that Prose brands “graceless” (78) is praised by the literary critic John Bayley, who sees it as equivalent to the Russian (“a similar style of English”) and judges that the translator “is surely right to avoid what might seem an elegiac ending.” Prose’s review ultimately reveals less about the translations than about her fixation on Morison’s version, which she first encountered “more than thirty years ago and [has] never forgotten” (78).

Occasionally, a reader will display an awareness of having a fixation, putting into question the underlying instrumentalism. In a mixed review of Pevar and Volokhonsky’s 1990 retranslation of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Caryl Emerson, professor emeritus of Slavic languages and literatures at Princeton University, acknowledges that some readers entertain “‘nostalgia’ for earlier equivalents” before shifting to the first person and including herself in this group:

Most of us, even American Slavists, read Garnett-Dostoevsky in high school, long before we dreamed of majoring in Russian. At some level her solutions persist and are retrofitted back into the original; her musty, well-crafted sentences seem to cry out their nineteenth-century credentials, even though our later absorption in the Russian texts has convinced us that Dostoevsky was portraying his own utterly contemporary, colloquial and feverish age. (315–16)

The phrase “at some level” signals that Emerson’s Garnett attachment is a fixation by suggesting that “her solutions persist” at a “level” that lies beyond the reader’s cognitive control, in an unconscious specific to translation. Emerson is not uncritical of this persistence: to judge Garnett’s sentences as “musty” yet “well-crafted” is oxymoronic, combining denigration with praise. The reference to Garnett’s “nineteenth-century credentials” apparently gestures at a point asserted by Updike—namely, that a translation close in time to the source text necessarily establishes greater equivalence to it and therefore deserves the reader’s credit. But this point is immediately refuted by Emerson’s conviction that Dostoevsky represented a historical moment quite different from Garnett’s. The passage ripples with the tension created by announcing a Garnett fixation while insinuating that her translations have become inadequate.

Most remarkably, Emerson notices how readers with this fixation erase the distinction between the translations and the source texts: Garnett’s “solutions” are said to be “retrofitted back into the original” when readers fixated on her work encounter new versions. Here Emerson abandons, if only for a moment, the instrumental model that governs much of her essay by differentiating between the source text and the interpretations inscribed first by the translator and then by readers of her translation. Elsewhere Emerson’s instrumentalism is evident in her repeated assessments of various translations against her own interpretations of individual words, as if those interpretations were unchanging essences embedded in the Russian text and she were not performing an interpretation that starts with choosing the word as the unit of translation as opposed to other possible units—phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, book (see Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism* 56–57). Emerson ultimately lapses into the rhetoric of translation as reproduction, observing, for instance, that Dostoevsky’s “multifaceted verbal surface, etched with repetitions and traces of echoed speech, is uncommonly difficult to reproduce in translation” (312). This remark treats Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky as a formal invariant, a move that is not unexpected in view of

Emerson’s dedication to the Russian theorist as his anglophone translator and commentator. Still, the assumption that every translation should inscribe only Bakhtin’s interpretation suppresses the many different critical approaches that Dostoevsky’s novels have supported since the nineteenth century. (Miller offers a sampling of criticism; for a critique of Bakhtin’s reading, see Wellek.)

Given the number and diversity of languages in my cases, I am inclined to call the fixation a universal tendency, although here “universal” means that readers worldwide can and do become fixated on a particular translation just as readers worldwide can and do think about translation on the basis of instrumentalist assumptions. What is universal in this instance can be inflected, even redefined substantially, by specific cultural situations in specific historical moments. But the reading experience that establishes the fixation, the subsequent critical commentary to which it gives rise, and the instrumental model of translation that underlies both the fixation and the commentary are shared by every case, regardless of the translating language.

How can the fixation be explained? Attributing it solely to the reader (aesthetic taste) or to the translations (the translators’ strategies), or to both working together, seems unconvincing: these categories would founder on the many linguistic and cultural differences displayed by the cases. The source texts vary so widely in form and theme that they resist any reduction to a coherent set of tastes. And the translations, whether the objects of fixation or the rejected retranslations, establish relations to the source texts that run the gamut from close adherence to significant deviation. Consequently, comparing translators’ strategies among the cases highlights disparity instead of resemblance. To take two preferred translators from the early twentieth century: Garnett’s approach has been described as “stylistic homogenizing,” whereby marked features of the Russian—“Dostoevsky’s constant interruptions of the text or his tendency to put one character’s words in another’s mouth, Tolstoy’s interminable sentences—all were smoothed over” (May 40), whereas Stresau’s approach has been described as re-creating “the Proustian style of

[Faulkner's] original, with its long, involved sentences, parentheses, and extended paragraphs" (Pusey 214). To understand what is at stake when a reader fixates on a translation, then, we must situate the case in a broader context of interpretation: the network of intersubjective relations in which the reader first encounters the preferred translation.

Keats

Earlier cases recorded or represented in literary texts enable a more incisive account of the various conditions that shape the reader's experience. These conditions, usually unacknowledged by the reader who forms the fixation, are at once psychological, cultural, and social, revealing close connections to the formation of individual identity while exposing the transindividual factors that determine it.

Consider John Keats's sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." In October 1816 Keats received "his first introduction" to George Chapman's Homeric translation from Charles Cowden Clarke, an older friend and mentor who was the son of John Clarke, the headmaster of the boarding school that Keats attended because his lower-middle-class family could not afford an elite institution (Cowden Clarke and Cowden Clarke 130). Cowden Clarke and Keats spent an entire night examining a selection of passages from Chapman's text, and at dawn Keats left to write his poem, which he had delivered to his friend by ten o'clock that morning.

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Even before Keats read Chapman's translation, his relationship to Cowden Clarke ensured that the experience would be decisive for his poetic career. Although only eight years older than Keats, Cowden Clarke had been his teacher, bringing a range of literary texts to his attention, reading Spenser's "Epithalamion" aloud to him, and lending him a copy of *The Faerie Queene* (Cowden Clarke and Cowden Clarke 125–26). Cowden Clarke was also writing his own poems and seems to have shown them to Keats, a fact that can help explain Keats's own "diffidence" in sharing his work with his teacher (Altick 20–22). When Keats finally presented one of his first poems, "Written on the Day That Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison" (1815), Cowden Clarke recalled "the conscious look and hesitation with which he offered it" (Cowden Clarke and Cowden Clarke 127). In a verse epistle from September 1816 addressed to Cowden Clarke, Keats referred to the early modern writers they had studied together (Spenser, Tasso, Shakespeare, Milton), and although he expressed his sense of inadequacy as a poet, he cast it in the past tense: "my wine was of too poor a savour / For one whose palate gladdens in the flavour / Of sparkling Helicon" (Keats 69–70). Keats was acutely aware not only that his class position put him at an economic and cultural disadvantage but also that his access to the literary canon was facilitated by Cowden Clarke, whose approval Keats regularly sought with regard to his reading and his poetry.

Thus, a male homosocial triangle, fundamentally oedipal, structured Keats's experience of Chapman's Homer (this approach adapts Sedgwick). On the one hand, Keats assimilated Cowden Clarke's esteem for the translation; on the other, Keats's mimetic desire positioned him in an emulative rivalry with his teacher, resulting in a poem that aggressively expresses his literary ambition. The rivalry is registered from the outset in Keats's elaborately metaphoric account of his education as international travel: the use of "much" and the repetition of "many" exaggerates a knowledge of poetry that was actually far from extensive as well as dependent on translations and reference works in classical mythology. In Marjorie Levinson's reading, "the very act of assertion, as well as its histrionically

commanding and archly literary style, undermine the premise of natural authority and erudition” (12). That Keats should make this assertion to his teacher who knew his limitations indicates the extremity of his aggressiveness. A contemporary like Leigh Hunt, who was favorably disposed toward Keats’s writing, tellingly called the poem “a remarkable instance of a vein prematurely masculine” (248).

Keats uses his reading of Chapman’s translation to proclaim himself a poet by constructing a succession of other homosocial triangles that situate him in relation to figures of poetic authority: a poet-translator whose work gained literary capital in the early nineteenth century (Chapman [see Webb 302–10]), a poet in the classical canon (Homer), and the mythological god of poetry (Apollo). Keats’s sonnet forms his poetic identity along two intersecting yet disjunctive axes, one vertical or hierarchical, the other horizontal or analogical. First, the octave sets up several hierarchies that are arranged on the basis of authorship (a translator as opposed to an original author or “bard”), socioeconomic status (a vassal “in fealty to” his lord), and a metaphysical principle (the human as subordinate to divinity). Second, the sestet establishes an analogical series (“Then felt I like”), linking agents of knowledge in poetic translation, astronomy, and exploration. As a reader of a translation, Keats at first occupies the last rank in the hierarchies, dependent on Chapman, an inferior position that glances at his limited education, his lack of Greek. Yet by inserting himself in the analogical series he occupies the same rank as a poet-translator (Chapman), an astronomer (“some watcher of the skies”), and a conquistador (Cortés). Reading the translation permits Keats to participate in Chapman’s rediscovery of the classical poet, an experience similar to that of the astronomer and conquistador when they themselves first observe phenomena in their respective domains that had already been discovered by others.

Here I am following a recurrent, if not dominant, reading that has emerged in critical commentary on the sonnet: Keats’s analogies turn not on the primacy of a discovery but rather on the belatedness of a subsequent or secondary encounter (Rzepka

36–38; Hasted 262–63). Chapman was certainly not the first reader to appreciate Homer, but he was also not the first English translator of the *Iliad*, a distinction that belongs to Arthur Hall for his 1581 version of ten books made from a French translation (Braden 179–80; Young 99–100). Credited with discovering Uranus in 1781, William Herschel has generally been taken as Keats’s “watcher of the skies” (Hasted 265n1). But the fact that the phrase withholds any specific identification allows it to refer to the “complicated process” of validation that any such discovery must withstand, “the repeated observations, the manipulation of technology, and the collegial consultation” outlined in Keats’s source, the 1807 edition of John Bonnycastle’s *An Introduction to Astronomy* (Hasted 264). Vasco Núñez de Balboa, not Hernán Cortés, was the first conquistador to see the Pacific, in 1513, as Keats would have learned from another of his sources, William Robertson’s *The History of America* (1777). Robertson portrays Cortés not as a discoverer but as the brutal conqueror of Mexico, who had “early entertained an idea” of exploring “the isthmus of Darien” but was “disappointed in his expectations” that “some passage would be discovered between the North and South Seas”—that is, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (2: 143). In choosing the “watcher of the skies” and Cortés, Keats likens his own initial encounter with Chapman’s translation to actions that constitute rediscoveries and thereby reflect the belatedness imposed on his poetic career by his disadvantages.

Keats’s poem uniquely records the sort of fixation I have located in a number of cases from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The retranslation he implicitly rejected happens to have been published earlier, not later, than his experience with Chapman’s Homer. This retranslation was Alexander Pope’s, which Keats had previously read with Cowden Clarke. At the same time, Keats’s fixation typically rests on an instrumental model of translation: he treats Chapman’s version as reproducing or transferring an invariant, the “pure serene” of Homer’s poetry, a metaphysical essence that remains unchanged despite Chapman’s

inscription of an interpretation that is period-specific, distinctly early modern, developed late in the sixteenth century and completed early in the seventeenth. Indeed, neither Chapman nor Keats is represented as performing any sort of interpretive act in the sonnet. Hence, when Keats “heard” Chapman’s version, suggesting that he and Cowden Clarke read aloud passages, he was able to “breathe” Homer’s poetry as if the early modern translation had evaporated to give unmediated access to the Greek. Keats’s instrumentalism assumes an empiricist conception of language as direct reference to reality, which not only turns the translation into unobstructed communication of the source text but also supports the analogies with the astronomer and the conquistador by which he figures his poetic identity. In both instances, translation provides Keats with knowledge of Homer that is likened to firsthand observation, comparable to the sighting of a planet or an ocean.

Keats’s instrumentalism prevents him from thinking that any form of mediation might intervene between his reading of Chapman and Homer’s poetry. The very phrase he uses to describe that poetry, “pure serene,” is a dense node of intertextuality that ironically subverts any claim of immediacy: “a Miltonic construction,” it is put to various uses in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1802 “Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni” and Henry Francis Cary’s 1814 translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Levinson 13). Even Keats’s encounter with Chapman cannot precisely be called unmediated since it was overdetermined by his previous experience of Pope. “To work we went,” recalls Charles Cowden Clarke, “turning to some of the ‘famous’ passages, as we had scrapily known them in Pope’s version” (Cowden Clarke and Cowden Clarke 129). He cites a passage in the *Iliad*—“Antenor’s vivid portrait of an orator in Ulysses, beginning at the 237th line of the third book”—which confirms that Pope’s lineation, not Chapman’s, guided their reading (129 [“237” is an error for “273”]). The bare mention of “the ‘famous’ passages” apparently takes for granted which ones were celebrated by their contemporaries, although only one of the four passages listed by

Cowden Clarke appeared in a popular compilation like *The Beauties of Pope* (1796): “the shipwreck of Ulysses, in the fifth book of the ‘Odysseis’” (129; *Beauties* 2: 85). The term “famous” may refer to passages that Pope himself highlighted with lengthy annotation and effusive praise (Hopkins). Thus, Cowden Clarke includes the description of “the shield and helmet of Diomed” that opens the fifth book of the *Iliad* (129), where Pope’s commentary runs to more than 1,300 words (Pope 71–75).

Keats’s sonnet obviously represses the conditions that make it possible, demonstrating how the instrumentalism assumed in his fixation on Chapman’s Homer is central to the construction of his poetic identity. The repression points to a political unconscious that projects the poem as an imaginary resolution for the class divisions limiting Keats’s career (this approach follows Jameson). The uneasy tension created by his desire is condensed in the invocation of Cortés, which I take to be a deliberate move on Keats’s part, not an error, although he shows no awareness of its questionable implications (cf. Rzepka 75; Frosch 149). Given the metaphoric treatment of poetic traditions as “states and kingdoms” and of Homer’s body of work as “his demesne,” Keats’s identification with the conquistador depicts his literary ambition as a colonizing exploitation of the classical poet, undaunted (“stout”) and predatory (“with eagle eyes”). Yet the image of Cortés confronting the Pacific with a silent stare, coupled with Robertson’s reference to the conquistador’s “disappointed” exploration of the isthmus of Darien, simultaneously suggests a feeling of awestruck powerlessness, of being poised to act but presently inactive. Cowden Clarke in effect corroborates this reading by describing Keats’s response to Chapman’s translation as “teeming wonderment” (Cowden Clarke and Cowden Clarke 130).

Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* (1957) also represents a fixation on a particular translation, although it adds a transnational dimension to the identity-forming process I have been considering. In one scene, Pnin, a Russian émigré who teaches Russian

at a college in the northeastern United States, is reading “Kostromskoy’s voluminous work” on Russian myths and discovers a pagan fertility ritual in which “peasant maidens” created “wreaths of buttercups and frog orchises” and “hung these garlands on riverside willows” while “singing snatches of ancient love chants,” whereafter “the wreaths were shaken down into the river” as “the maidens floated and chanted among them” (77). Pnin is suddenly struck by “a curious verbal association” that he is later able to “recall”:

... *plilá i péla, péla i plilá* . . .
 ... she floated and she sang, she sang and she floated . . .

Of course! Ophelia’s death! *Hamlet!* In good old Andrey Kroneberg’s Russian translation, 1844—the joy of Pnin’s youth, and of his father’s and his grandfather’s days! And here, as in the Kostromskoy passage, there is, we recollect, also a willow and also wreaths. But where to check properly? Alas, “*Gamlet*” *Vil’yama Shekspira* had not been acquired by Mr. Todd, was not represented in Waindell College Library, and whenever you were reduced to look up something in the English version, you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line that you remembered all your life from Kroneberg’s text in Vengerov’s splendid edition. Sad! (79)

Pnin’s attachment to Kroneberg’s translation is instrumentalist: he assumes that it reproduces or transfers Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Hence, he recognizes his association by quoting a line from the Russian version (identified in Shvabrin 364n256)—a line, however, that has no counterpart in the English text. In Pnin’s mind, at least initially, the translation is the source text. When he thinks to “check” or verify his association, he reveals his attachment to be a fixation: what really interests him is not Shakespeare’s work but Kroneberg’s translation, including the edition in which he read it. That work is treated not as an original composition but rather as an insipid copy or “version” of the Russian version. For Pnin, the English text disappoints because it is “never” as “beautiful, noble, sonorous” as he “remembered” the translation to

be. His fixation on Kroneberg’s Russian is so deeply entrenched in his psyche as to be triggered by an unconscious association and so overpowering that it not only drains the English text of literary effect but also erases its ontological priority as the source for the translation.

Pnin’s account makes clear that instrumentalism supports a fixation structured by a homosocial triangle that is explicitly oedipal. Not only has he assimilated the “joy” that “his father” and “his grandfather” took in Kroneberg’s translation, but the passage from *Hamlet* that discloses his mimetic desire is a representation of a woman, Ophelia. Yet insofar as the speech he recalls characterizes Ophelia not as an object of male sexuality but as the victim of suicide accidentally caused by her madness (Shakespeare 4.7.164–81), Pnin’s emulation of the patriarchal figures in his family is not marked by phallic rivalry, challenge, or resistance. On the contrary, his identity seems to have been formed through his youthful submission to them, or more precisely his absorption of their pleasurable investment in the Russian language as well as its literature and culture.

When considered in relation to Pnin’s biography, however, the Shakespearean association acquires a different meaning: it enacts a displacement of other representations of women that also position him in homosocial triangles but that implicitly challenge dominant male figures. Ophelia substitutes for Liza Bogolepov, a Russian émigré who writes love poetry inspired by Anna Akhmatova with erotically charged lines: “I have a rose which is even softer than my rosy lips” (181). Liza’s affair with the narrator, a distinguished Russian “littérateur,” drove her to “a pharmacopoeial attempt at suicide,” and “while recovering” she accepted Pnin’s marriage proposal only to leave him for another man over a decade later (45). Pnin himself establishes the connection to Kroneberg’s translation when he affectionately recognizes Liza’s voice as “sonorous” and describes her as “always” feeling “buoyant” (53). Ophelia similarly substitutes for Mira Belochkin, a Russian Jew with whom Pnin had a “youthful love affair” that ended in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, when she settled in Germany, married another transplanted Russian,

and was finally killed in a Nazi concentration camp (134). Pnin remembers their sharing “fads” like “gypsy ballads” and vacationing with their families at a “marshy” summer resort where their fathers played chess on a porch, and he “imagine[s] Mira slipping out of there into the garden and coming toward him among the tall tobacco flowers” (133). Linked to a symbolic chain that stretches through important moments in his life (woman-flower-song-liquid-death), Pnin’s reminiscence of Kroneberg’s Ophelia represses troubling memories of past relationships in which he expressed more aggressive desires that nonetheless met with frustration.

Although such memories show Pnin’s identity to be fragile, it has already been unsettled by his cultural dislocation as a migrant. To cope with his American present, he spontaneously evokes aspects of his Russian past. Because he lacks native proficiency in English, his speech is riddled with translanguing features like code-switching and homophony where the Russian language intervenes, particularly when his confidence is shaken. Discombobulated by taking the wrong train to deliver a lecture, he checks his bag with a station attendant to whom he addresses a baffling calque: “‘Quittance?’ queried Pnin, Englishing the Russian for ‘receipt’ (*kvitant-siya*)” (18). Pnin then suffers a “seizure” (20) in which he finds himself “sliding back into his own childhood” (21), so that at the lecture he imagines the audience to include “one of his Baltic aunts,” “a dead sweetheart,” “many old friends” (27), and his parents, who “looked at their son with the same life-consuming passion and pride” they felt when he recited a poem by Pushkin “at a school festival” (28). Less hallucinatory but equally nostalgic is the research project that occasions Pnin’s Shakespearean association, “the great work on Old Russia, a wonderful dream mixture of folklore, poetry, social history, and *petite histoire*, which for the last ten years or so he had been fondly planning” (39). The prolonged “planning” of this “dream” work points to its compensatory function: it fulfills Pnin’s desire for a Russia that no longer exists, but whose image remains sustaining for a refugee who has been, in the narrator’s words, “battered and

stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness” (144). Pnin’s fixation on Kroneberg’s Shakespeare constitutes yet another defense against his alien surroundings.

Nabokov inadvertently suggested how it might perform this function in his 1941 essay “The Art of Translation,” where he scathingly describes Kroneberg’s version of *Hamlet*. Much to Nabokov’s irritation, Kroneberg “g[a]ve Ophelia richer flowers than the poor weeds she found,” substituting the “splendor” of “violets, carnations, roses, lilies” for the “crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples” in the English text, and he “bowdlerized the Queen’s digressions” by deleting her double entendre (160): “liberal shepherds give a grosser name,” Gertrude remarks, to “long purples” (Shakespeare 4.7.168, 167). For Nabokov, Kroneberg illustrates what happens “when a masterpiece is planished and patted into such a shape, vilely beautified in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public” (“Art” 160). This criticism implies a reading experience that is fundamentally narcissistic: the translation inscribes the values, beliefs, and representations of a specific cultural constituency, so that the readers who comprise it undergo a specular process of identification that entails not only self-recognition but self-congratulation insofar as those values, beliefs, and representations are held in esteem. Even though Pnin belongs to the third generation of Russian readers who enjoyed Kroneberg’s Shakespeare—the Vengerov edition appeared in 1902—his fixation indicates that he shares the “notions and prejudices” of the nineteenth-century “public” for whom the translation was initially produced, an audience that included the family patriarchs who inculcated in him an appreciation of Russian literature. Pnin’s fixation transforms his narcissistic response to the translation into a memory that helps to alleviate his migrant anxiety.

In Nabokov’s view, Kroneberg’s Shakespeare exemplifies “the worst degree of turpitude,” a harsh judgment that not only impugns the translator’s ethics but also makes Pnin’s fixation seem ridiculously misplaced (“Art” 160). All the same, author and character do share the same instrumental model of

translation. Nabokov assumes that a Russian version can reproduce Shakespeare's play simply through close adherence to the English text, thereby avoiding an interpretation that inscribes the intelligibilities and interests of the receiving culture. Yet Nabokov himself casts doubt on this assumption by declaring that the translator "must possess the gift of mimicry and be able to act, as it were, the real author's part by impersonating his tricks of demeanor and speech, his ways and his mind, with the utmost degree of verisimilitude" (161). "Mimicry" and "impersonating" suggest deception, not authenticity, and "verisimilitude" is plausibility, not precision. Here the point seems to be not that a translator can preempt an interpretation that is assimilationist, but rather that the translator's interpretation can be made so true-seeming that the translation is taken for the source text.

In an essay from 1955, the year that Nabokov completed *Pnin*, he restates his instrumentalism by explaining the translator's "duty" as "reproduc[ing] with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text" ("Problems" 504). He defines "exactitude" as "the absolutely literal sense" combined with "copious footnotes" that in the case of Pushkin's *Evgeniy Onegin* comment on its prosody "as well as its associations and other special features" (512). Nabokov clearly privileges his own interpretation as a set of formal and thematic invariants that are contained in the Russian text, and that therefore must be transferred in any translation or noted in any commentary. Yet when he provides an example of an acceptable verbal choice, like "the sylvan shade" (508), the notion of reproduction is put into question: that phrase is a poetical archaism that recurs in English pastoral verse from Sidney to Pope to Wordsworth, varying Pushkin's work by assimilating it to anglophone literary traditions ("Sylvan"). Nabokov's instrumentalism blinds him to such problems by suppressing the transformative impact of translation, its creation of a receiving intertextual network that allows the source text to support meanings, values, and functions that differ from those in the source culture (see Venuti, "Translation"). Unlike *Pnin*, who is fixated on a Russian translation (Kroneberg),

Nabokov is fixated on a Russian source text (Pushkin).

Pnin can be read as Nabokov's struggle to manage his own émigré status through the interaction between his protagonist and his narrator. Symptomatic of this unconscious process is *Pnin*'s "double" characterization: "funny *Pnin* (the eternal Alien)," whom the narrator cruelly satirizes for failing to acculturate to the United States through his speech, manners, mishaps, even driving, and "sad *Pnin* (the eternal Exile)," whom the narrator makes pathetic through his seizures and divorce, the loss of his lodging and the termination of his teaching appointment (Gordon 149). Not only is *Pnin* based on a Russian Jewish colleague of Nabokov's at Cornell University, the historian Marc Szeftel, toward whom Nabokov was "patronizing" and "dismissive" (Diment 4), but the narrator is a stand-in for the author himself, described as "a prominent Anglo-Russian writer" named "Vladimir Vladimirovich" who is a lepidopterist (Nabokov, *Pnin* 140, 128). And not only does the narrator "exorcise" his own "condition of exile" by projecting himself into *Pnin*'s biography, inventing details he could not have known firsthand (Stuart 160), but *Pnin* and the narrator can be considered two representations of Nabokov's "public personality": the "obscure and seemingly eccentric Russian lecturer" who in 1940 arrived in the United States without a passport and the American citizen who established himself as a "polished intellectual" and "successful author" from the mid-1950s onward (Diment 50). The novel stops short of reconciling these representations: it remains suspended between repugnance and pity toward *Pnin*'s failure of acculturation.

Nabokov's instrumentalist understanding of translation likewise shows that he never moved beyond the obsessions and compensations that often complicate migration from a native country, especially when the migrant is a refugee. When asked in a 1962 interview whether he would return to Russia, his response was positively *Pninian*: "I will never go back, for the simple reason that all the Russia I need is always with me: language, literature, and my own Russian childhood" (*Strong Opinions* 10).

Psychic Economies

These literary cases illuminate the responses of readers I identified earlier as fixated on specific translations. In this respect too Updike's review of Alter's Pentateuch proves to be paradigmatic. On concluding his extended critique, Updike announces that "reading through this book, or five books, is a wearying, disorienting, and at times revelatory experience" because it "awakened certain sensations from my Sunday-school education, more than sixty years ago" (102). After rapidly summarizing several passages in Genesis, he situates them in a remarkable evocation of his youth in the early 1940s:

[T]hese glimpses into a world ancestral to our own, a robed and directed world of origins and crude conflict and direct discourse with God, came to me via flimsy leaflets illustrating that week's lesson, and were mediated by the mild-mannered commentary of the Sunday-school teacher, a humorless embodiment of small-town respectability passing on conventional Christianity by rote. Nevertheless, I was stirred and disturbed, feeling exposed to the perilous basis underneath the surface of daily routine—of practical schooling and family interchange and peer pressure and popular culture. (102–03)

Updike is describing his early experiences with the King James Bible, but without expressing any awareness that he was simultaneously becoming fixated on that particular translation. Hence, he takes it for granted: this account suppresses any mention of it, although he would certainly have encountered biblical quotations in the "leaflets" as well as in the teacher's "commentary" (the translation seems to have been widely used in Updike's area at the time: see "Conventions" 186, where the "theme" for the 1937 convention of the local Sunday-school association consists of verses from the King James Bible). This absence points to how powerfully Updike's instrumentalism influences his fixation: not only does he treat the Jacobean version as if it were the Hebrew text, but even the Hebrew vanishes, becoming a transparent representation in which the "perilous basis" beneath "daily routine" might apply either to antiquity or to his own youthful moment.

His instrumentalist assumption that the translation reproduces the source text is thus reinforced by his belief in the timeless universality of the biblical narrative.

In recalling that his Sunday-school attendance "stirred and disturbed him," Updike apparently has in mind the intense emotions evoked by the illustrative visual images in the leaflets. He describes them as "polychrome miniatures of abasement and terror, betrayal and reconciliation" (102). Yet these images belong to a broader Sunday-school context that seems to have been unsettling because it made him mindful of the psychological tension that was then forming his identity. Updike identified with the biblical narrative such that he perceived his experience as an ensemble of "origins and crude conflict and direct discourse with God." A conflict is staged in this very memory: as he represents the founding moment of his attachment to the King James Bible, he also presents a satirical portrait of the Sunday-school teacher as uninspired and provincial ("mild-mannered," "humorless," "small-town," "conventional," "rote"). Updike's account partly represses the oedipal nature of the conflict because he does not divulge that his father, a junior high school teacher with whom he studied mathematics, served as a deacon at the family's local Lutheran church and taught Sunday School there (*Self-Consciousness* 23). Updike's father, along with other Sunday-school teachers, occasioned his early encounters with the King James Bible, although his maternal grandfather's habitual quotations from it must have been a factor as well (*De Bellis* 67). Updike's fixation clearly hinged on the sort of identity-forming process represented by Keats and Nabokov.

This process can be formulated with greater depth and precision if we rely on Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject, particularly his concept of the "object *a*," where the "*a*" abbreviates "autre" (the French for "other"). Lacan assigns the object *a* two functions that are at once constitutive and phantasmatic. On the one hand, it is the "cause of desire" (Lacan, *Anxiety* 101) modeled on what the subject imagines as the desire of the Other, the chain of signifiers that constitutes while dividing

the subject between ego and unconscious; the Other consists of figures and institutions invested with social authority and cultural prestige—"from our parents to the academic Other, the law, religion, God, tradition, and so on" (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 86). On the other hand, the object *a* is the "remainder left over from the constitution of the subject in the locus of the Other," a memory of a "primordial mythical subject" that was undivided, its desire satisfied, but that never actually existed (hence "mythical") because the subject was not yet constituted (Lacan, *Anxiety* 284, 314). The object *a*, while powerful in its effects, resists representation or symbolization, often taking the form of the Other's voice or gaze that directs the subject's desire toward an idea, action, or material thing. When, however, the subject encounters a thing that does not support its Other-directed desire, thereby displacing the object *a*, the effect is anxiety. In Lacan's formulation, the "object *a* is what fell away from the subject when anxious" (*On the Names-of-the-Father* 58).

We can now sketch the psychic economy at work in a translation fixation. A reader becomes aware of an attachment only when confronted by a retranslation that fails to support desire dating back to a primal encounter with an earlier version of the source text—a version whose function as a Lacanian object *a* is thus revealed. As Bruce Fink observes, "an object becomes an object *a* at the very moment one is threatened with its loss" (*Clinical Introduction* 191). Reading Alter's translation is "disorienting" and "revelatory" for Updike because it both discloses and threatens the attachment to the King James Bible that he developed in his youth. As a result, his review turns on a question that is implausible if not absurd—namely, whether the Jacobean text will be supplanted: the King James Bible has continued to be "the most widely read" version in the United States (Goff et al. 9–11). Updike recalls how his desire was "stirred and disturbed" by the Other(s) who directed him to that version but who remain generalized (his Sunday-school teacher) and partly repressed (his father and grandfather), noting in particular the sights and sounds of the experience (the "polychrome miniatures" in the leaflets, the "mild-

mannered" and "humorless" instruction). The fixated reader's instrumentalism is ultimately bound up not only with the desire caused by a decisive experience of a particular translation but also with the anxiety caused by the encounter with a retranslation, which must therefore be rejected in instrumentalist terms (i.e., because it does not reproduce or transfer the style and meaning of the source text). This rejection usually means that the reader has repressed any awareness of the fixation as such.

Fixated readers display key features of this psychic economy. A parent or teacher frequently assumes the role of the Other by exerting literary authority. Faure and Ozaki developed youthful attachments to the only available translations of the Faulkner and Salinger novels, but the ground had already been prepared by their fathers' influence: Faure remarks that "mein Vater war Literaturfreak" ("my father was a literature freak"), while Ozaki's was "a high school English teacher" ("Re: The Catcher in the Rye"). Similarly, Prose refers to the classroom scene when she became attached to Morison's version of Babel's fiction, indicating the crucial impact of voice: "I was eighteen, a college sophomore, when our writing instructor read us the whole of 'My First Goose'" (74). In some cases, the fixated reader is gifted the primal translation, or a gift initiates a metonymic chain of objects *a* that includes it. Beigbeder explains that "I read *Gatsby le magnifique* [Llona's version] when I was sixteen in the old castle of my American grandmother [who] gave me the translation" ("Re: The Great Gatsby"). The professor emeritus of English discovered Lowe-Porter's version of *The Magic Mountain* after reading the entry on the novel in William Rose Benét's *The Reader's Encyclopedia* (1948), a "book that was in the house because of my mother, who was a subscriber to The Book-of-the-Month Club" ("Re: Retranslations").

The reader's desire can also be overdetermined by a sociopolitical situation that assigns the function of the Other to a cultural institution. Thus, Kaint's fixation on Tarmak's version of Cortázar's stories was caused by the literary supplement that published the translation, *Loomingu Raamatukogu* (*The Library of Creation*), an organ of the Estonian

Writers' Union that during the post-Stalin liberalization of the Soviet bloc issued hundreds of translations, challenging the dominance of socialist realism as well as its exclusion of experimental narrative (Lange; Monticelli). Yet although these translations can be considered "ideologically resistant" into the 1980s, the period of Tarmak's Cortázar, they also tended to be "linguistically conservative" (Kaldjäv and Gielen 26), cultivating fluency through "adherence to the orthographic and grammatical rules of Estonian" so that the translated text read like an original composition in the translating language (28–29). Kaldjäv's retranslation distressed Kaints because she refused this norm by adhering to the lexicon and syntax of Cortázar's Spanish as closely as structural differences between the languages would permit (Ojamets and Lotman). Kaints's openness to Tarmak's version evidently reflected an interest in developing the literary resources of Estonian through translation, a cosmopolitanism that often emerges in minor languages (Casanova). But Kaints's subsequent rejection of Kaldjäv's retranslation shows a narrowing of that earlier interest and perhaps a recession into a vernacular nationalism that would exclude the imprinting of foreign languages on Estonian, as well as a new interpretation of the Spanish text.

The harshness with which fixated readers reject a retranslation makes quite clear that they anxiously perceive it as a threat to the object of their desire. Yet for some readers the anxiety would seem to be so great that they feel compelled to express the threat in more extreme terms. In a review that mostly disparages retranslations of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the Slavic translator Richard Lourie makes the Pnin-like admission that his encounter with Garnett's version as a young adult overwhelmed his first experience of the Russian text decades later. "It had all stayed too fresh in memory," he asserts, leading him to conclude that "the original read at the age of 50 could never shake you like a translation read at 20." For the nonfiction writer Janet Malcolm, choosing a translation of *Anna Karenina* means intervening in a "controversy," confronting a stark opposition between Garnett as the champion of "pleasure and

understanding" and recent "masochistic" versions that "impede" both, so she abruptly demands of her reader, "What side are you on?" Morson characterizes Pevear and Volokhonsky's critical and commercial success as sheer "marketing," conspiratorially engineered by "magazine and newspaper editors," publishers (Farrar, Straus and Giroux is cited), and a celebrity book-club host ("none other than Oprah Winfrey"), whereupon he conjures up a fantastic vision of "the P&V version right there at the bookstore by the tens of thousands to welcome the buying throng" (98). The frustration these readers are articulating far exceeds the retranslations they revile.

I want to suggest that they would not have become so fixated on a particular version of a source text if they had not assumed an instrumental model of translation. Readers usually do not choose and cannot change the intersubjective conditions under which their reading is done, conditions of which they cannot be entirely aware and whose consequences they cannot entirely anticipate. But readers can certainly be critical of their ideas about translation. They can be suspicious of Malcolm's assertion that even though Leonard Kent and Nina Berberova's edition of Garnett's *Anna Karenina* "contains thousands of revisions, it essentially remains Garnett's translation," just as they can be suspicious of Kent and Berberova's assertion that Garnett's "language and syntax almost always faithfully reproduce both the letter *and* the tone of her original" (xxxiii). These statements rest on metaphysical assumptions about textual invariance that reduce translation (as well as editing) not just to untroubled communication but to mechanical substitution. Hence Updike opens his review with the outrageous assertion that "in this age of widespread education and flagging creativity, new translations abound" (100). Because instrumentalist thinking suppresses the irreducible linguistic and cultural differences between the source and translated texts, it fails to appreciate the creative and learned dimensions of translating that always make it an interpretive act. Instrumentalism is unwilling to admit that the interpretation inscribed by the translator inevitably transforms the source text, so that a translation

cannot be evaluated merely by comparing it to that text. It must ultimately be judged in relation to cultural forms, practices, and institutions in the receiving situation (see Venuti, *Theses*).

We are still far from conceptualizing translation in a way that can foster a more sophisticated appreciation of it. And so it continues to be misunderstood, marginalized, and exploited even as our urgent need of it persists undiminished, if not intensified, amid the monolingualism that prevails in anglophone (among other) cultures, at once exclusionary and repressive. Yet translations, like the cultural artifacts of the past, remain sites where we can confront our limitations, what we ourselves are not, and imagine new possibilities of being together, what we might become. I hope for a time when translation will be liberated, not only from reader fixations but from instrumentalist thinking in general, so that the central place it occupied in humanistic study for millennia can be recognized, restored, and developed.

NOTE

All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated. The translations attributed to Katiliina Gielen, of the University of Tartu, and Michael Kuehl, of the University of Texas, Austin, were kindly prepared for this essay at my request. They have not been published elsewhere. Kuehl also supplied the transliteration of Japanese titles in the works-cited-list entries.

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Abstract: Some readers prefer an earlier translation in which they encounter a source text, particularly a canonized work, over later versions of the same text. The decisive encounter is so compelling as to establish an enduring attachment that entails denigration or outright rejection of later versions. Insofar as the attachment suggests obsessiveness, it can be

called a fixation. The readers' responses share features that transcend membership in specific linguistic communities and cultural institutions: they value a high degree of readability, which is construed as an indication of greater equivalence to the source text. Here the readers reveal their assumption of an instrumental model—that is, an understanding of translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant form, meaning, or effect. The fixation can be illuminated by considering the intersubjective relations in which the preferred translation is first encountered. Cases recorded or represented in literary texts enable a more incisive account of the conditions that shape the reader's experience: John Keats's poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) and Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (1957). These texts disclose an identity-forming process that can be deepened with Jacques Lacan's concept of the "object *a*." The instrumentalism that underpins the fixation deserves consideration because it would in effect deny or stop cultural change, innovative interpretation, the very practice of translation.