

Translation

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THE German polymath Novalis once claimed in a letter to August Schlegel, “only for us [Germans] have translations become expansions.”¹ Referring to a multilingual contribution to *Bildung*, Novalis imagined cultural enrichment through a spatial metaphor of enlargement and territorial extension. Perhaps because of a publishing “culture where ‘concealed’ translation (primarily adaptation) flourished,”² nineteenth-century Britons were apparently less given to expansion. Concealed or otherwise, however, translation worked upon and beneath the surface of Victorian literary culture, and recent studies demonstrate how writers like Harriet Martineau and Vernon Lee, among others, envisioned translation as a route by which to open new territories of thought.³ Works like the commanding *Oxford Literary History of Translation in English’s* fourth volume (1790–1900) illustrate, too, that attention to translation has been consistent if specialized, but I suspect that, despite recent scholarly work, the translative culture of the Victorian period remains mostly concealed for critics who do not deal directly with the subject. Continuing to apply critical pressure to this ubiquitous Victorian activity might disclose something akin to Sukanya Banerjee’s 2018 claim that “A transimperial framework. . . affords the possibility of bringing together nineteenth-century English and, say, Urdu literature not only in terms of parallels or similarities, but also as operating along the same interrelated plane of modernity.”⁴ Indeed, attention to nineteenth-century translations casts into sharp relief a literary culture involved in a global network, but it also shows how that deeply “interrelated plane of modernity,” the place of expansions, consisted of temporal layers across which translation operated to revise and bring immediacy to history. Focusing critical energy on translation reveals not only intellectual “expansions” into globality but richly layered visions of verticality and temporal depth.

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Take as an instructive case study that of banknote engraver turned Assyriologist George Smith. In December 1872, after over ten years of painstaking translation by the natural light in the reading rooms of the British Museum, Smith presented to the Society of Biblical Archaeology his first renditions of the ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh* (though it was not yet known by that title). An account of a flood like that in Genesis 6–9 that either confirmed the biblical tale or exposed it as only a revised chapter from another culture’s mythical anthology, the translation was set to add fuel to the ongoing public debate around biblical historicity. After the audience had listened to Smith’s recitation of Akkadian poetry, Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone stood to offer his assessment of the translation’s potential cultural impact. A well-known student of Homeric epic, Gladstone remarked that the result of Smith’s findings “will be a disinterring and building up of what was conceived to be buried for ever, and not merely the recollections of that world, but its actual history is about to undergo a great process of great retrospective enlargement.”⁵ Gladstone’s comments indicate a change in the way some thinkers saw categories of scripture, culture, and history: as “enlarg[ing]” and expanding alongside the growth of empire and its excavational and philological projects. They also signal a sudden collapse of temporal distance made possible by the extractive machinery of empire: a change not only in “that world” but this one.

The response to Smith’s translation demonstrates the hermeneutic issues that reemerged in tandem with the decipherment of ancient languages, but the recovery of the cuneiform tablets themselves speaks more literally to the concept of expansion. In the 1840s and 1850s, British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard and his Iraqi assistant Hormuzd Rassam participated in the discovery of Nineveh’s ruins, including the site that contained the *Gilgamesh* tablets. Their findings generated excited speculation in the British press, including a piece in the *Illustrated London News* that described Layard and Rassam’s findings with disregard for the latter’s personhood: “It must not be a little gratifying to that pioneer of Assyrian research to find, through his example, an Oriental—generally indifferent to all works of art—so thoroughly interested in the undertaking and impregnated with the English energy to carry his individual labours to a successful conclusion.”⁶ The marriage of Orientalist feminization (“impregnated”), nationalist chauvinism (“English energy”), and sweeping generalization (“indifferent to all works of art”) in the *ILN* piece exemplifies the pairing of earnest inquiry with imperialist prejudice that animated many of the translative

endeavors of the period. Tracing the material history of the translation of the cuneiform tablets, we glimpse how Gladstone and his understanding of antiquity derived from the actions of Rassam, through Smith, and how the seizure of Chaldean history was as associated with territorial expansion as it was with philological profundity. If the result of the translation of *Gilgamesh* was a wholesale reconsideration of scriptural and religious history, investigation into its transmission reveals also the literal expansions that licensed cultural ones, the loaded rhetoric that underwrote them, and the ways that translations renovate not only understandings of source texts but of historical figures and events at varying temporal depths.

Studies of Victorian literary culture might benefit from recognizing that translation—often metaphorized as enlarging, building, extending, and bridging—indicates an active relation to the past that involves readers in placing themselves not only on an amorphous transimperial plane but within a nebulous vertical history. If we consider, as George Eliot did, that translators participated not as passive machinery in the culture industry but as active agents in the business of intellectual history, we can incisively describe the tenuous connections between reinventions of the past and projects for the present and future. “[Translators] are ‘brokers in the great intellectual traffic of the world,’” Eliot wrote, “a function not so high as that of the producers, but one which it is of manifest importance to have carefully and honestly fulfilled.”⁷ That grand Shelleyan phrase carries connotations of trade and exchange as well as mediation and representation; if it indicates a revision of the history of ideas, it does so in the idiom of commerce and vested interest, of brokerage rather than unacknowledged legislation. In these analogies of proxy, the expansions of *Bildung* carry with them the half-seen motivations of a myriad of players who subsidize the bonding of past to present, but whose involvement has been recorded only in paratexts, footnotes, and wedge-shaped inscriptions: the obscured addenda of a changing global corpus.

NOTES

1. Novalis, *Werke Briefe Dokumente*, vol. 4, edited by Ewald Wasmuth (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1954), quoted in Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, translated by S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 12.

2. Terry Hale, "Readers and Publishers of Translations," in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, edited by Peter France and Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4:36.
3. See Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Lesa Scholl, *Translation, Authorship and the Victorian Professional Woman: Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Martineau and George Eliot* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013). See also recent work in both *Victorian Literature and Culture* and *Victorian Studies* from Jessie Reeder, Stefano Evangelista, Colton Valentine, and more.
4. Sukanya Banerjee, "Transimperial," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, nos. 3/4 (2018): 927.
5. "Chaldean History of the Deluge," *Times*, December 4, 1872, 7.
6. "The British Museum," *Illustrated London News*, May 24, 1856, 553.
7. George Eliot, "Translations and Translators," *Leader* 6 (Oct. 20, 1855): 1015.

