Squeezing the Jellyfish:

Early Western Attempts to Characterize Translation from the Japanese

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The opening sentences of an 1896 anthology of Japanese literature read as follows:

What is best in the literature of Japan does not bear translation. It is a literature of form without much substance, and, when pressed into the mould of a foreign language, its peculiar beauties are apt to disappear like the opal tints from a squeezed jellyfish. (Riordan and Takayanagi 1896: v)

Sunrise Stories: A Glance at the Literature of Japan, produced jointly by Tozo Takayanagi, a native Japanese, and Roger Riordan, includes prose and poetry ranging from the earliest to contemporary times. This volume is the first attempt at an English-language survey of Japan’s literary tradition, anticipating W.G. Aston’s renowned A History of Japanese Literature by three years. As the quotation above indicates, in the decades after Japan opened to the West, translators were employing eccentric images to describe their experience of rendering this newly discovered canon into a foreign tongue. This article will consider some of those images, exploring how translation and the work of translators are conceptualized via figurative language, and thus how metaphor may constitute a particular view—if not a theory—of cross-cultural transposition. After all, it has been suggested that much of what has over the centuries “been said and written theoretically about translation has been directed less towards defining or explicating what happens than towards characterising it. And a great part of that characterization … has been pursued by way of metaphor” (Round 2005: 50).

In the seminal Metaphors We Live By, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that metaphors function not only to add vividness to our modes of expression, but also and more significantly to shape how we perceive the world around us (or even effectively to shape the world itself through our perception). If the human conceptual system is
indeed influenced by the terms used to explain the environment and our interaction with it, then the various metaphors that have been applied in attempts to define and describe the translation process are certainly worthy of greater attention than they have hitherto been given. Translation has typically been conceptualized as a bridge, a mirror, a window through which we gaze at the original, a fountain from which we obtain water when we cannot go directly to the stream, the action of carrying across, and so on. Most of these images have lost their power to make us take seriously how they filter or even distort what we see as being involved in the process. Setting aside such dead metaphors and instead trying to think of translation as the squeezing of a jellyfish cannot help but force us to come at the problem from a fresh perspective. Steven Pinker states that Lakoff and Johnson’s is in fact a “messianic theory” (Pinker 2007: 238), one that takes the grasping of metaphors as essentially the very act of thinking. This “metaphor metaphor” has led logically to the notion that “since people think in metaphors, the key to understanding human thought is to deconstruct those metaphors” (Pinker 2007: 238). Whether or not this grand claim is true, by closely examining the metaphors of translation we can at least start to investigate our past and present assumptions about translatability and untranslatability, and potentially develop new theoretical insights.

Japanese prose and poetry were not “discovered” by the West until the mid-1800s. Even when they recognized the real sophistication of this previously unknown literature, Europeans often found themselves at a complete loss as to how best to read and then render its “peculiar beauties”, or whether matters of divergent morality as well as aesthetics meant that it should not be translated at all. The history of its initial Western reception is fundamentally bound up with claims that the features particular to this
foreign canon, if not necessarily toxic to the receptor community, simply cannot successfully be made to fit a non-domestic mould. Various intriguing figures reveal how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars, seeking to explain their new discoveries to an audience lacking any appropriate point of reference, repeatedly framed their perceptions in terms that serve to highlight a profound sense of disorientation.¹ The metaphorical language employed helps us understand not only how the West has sought to define Japan’s literary tradition per se and its relationship to more familiar national literatures, but also the problematics of linguistic and cultural transfer as a whole. This article thus looks at some rather idiosyncratic ways in which the challenging process of transcultural appropriation was conceptualized in the early years of Western exposure to Japanese literature, with a view to exploring its implications for translation studies, as well as for the circulation of World Literature in general.

Multi-hued and fascinating, jellyfish are also amorphous, dangerous, and—insofar as the English term is a misnomer, fish being vertebrates after all—inherently false. Further, these brainless creatures are unable properly speaking to swim, making occasional use of rhythmic pulsations to direct their movement but more often than not simply being propelled passively along by the wind and currents. The novel metaphorical expression in those opening lines, therefore, presents Japanese literature as an insubstantive, drifting entity that nonetheless has the ability to fix the unwary with its tentacles and administer a painful or even fatal sting. It is also very much reliant on external forces for its introduction into new waters. Its translation into a foreign language and culture is described by Riordan and Takayanagi as an act of taking this inert yet

¹ My favorite of these analogies appears in an early book review of the Tale of Genji in English, where the anonymous reviewer, desperately casting around for a point of reference, makes the claim that Classical Japanese names are just like those of the American Indians (Anon. 1882: 41).
potentially deadly creature into one’s hands and crushing all the life and beauty out of it. They go on to explain that “handled as carefully as may be, the results are much more likely to excite curiosity than to gratify it…” (1896: v). If all that gets carried across is a colourless, limp and lifeless blob that must inevitably fail to satisfy our interest in the unknown, then how could transferability possibly move beyond the realm of the ideal and/or impossible?

As Pinker explains in *The Stuff of Thought*, when a striking figure of speech is used, it is not just a matter of

> pressing new words into service to communicate a proposition…. The writer is exploiting the literal meaning of those words to shock listeners into apprehending the topic in a more emotionally intense way than they would in the normal course of events. (2007: 121)

The fact that Riordan and Takayanagi describe their English versions of *waka* [31-syllable poems], *monogatari* [tales], and other typically Japanese genres as so many strangled or otherwise lifeless jellyfish implies a belief that their readers will see what they mean and that the use of this image will help them better comprehend the great challenge and struggle inherent to the translator’s task. Metaphors function implicitly to allow us to talk about one thing in the terms of something else entirely and thus suggest how we “learn to reason about new, abstract concepts” (Pinker 2007: 241). They perform a pedagogical function in helping us grasp something novel, such as Japan’s particular literary tradition that initially posed so many problems to those not yet familiar with its conventions, forms, style, and so on. Confronted with figurative explanations, people “notice, or have pointed out to them, a parallel between a physical realm they already understand and a conceptual realm they don’t yet understand” (Pinker 2007: 241).
Although the squeezed invertebrate metaphor is the most arresting attempt at establishing a suitable analogy that I have to date encountered in my research, it is far from the only claim for inherent Japanese untranslatability made by Europeans in the late 1800s. W.G. Aston was a tireless promoter and mediator of that country’s literature, but even he reluctantly admits that “the chasm which divides us in thought, sentiment, and language from the Far East forms an insuperable obstacle to communicating to a translation the undoubted charm of the original” (1899: 98). Aston is here referencing specifically the Tale of Genji, Murasaki Shikibu’s classical masterpiece, which may certainly be considered quintessentially Japanese. Nevertheless, the terms he uses, “chasm” and “insuperable obstacle,” are almost shockingly extreme in identifying a cultural and linguistic gulf and its implications. A sense of something incommensurable persists well into the first decades of the twentieth century, with many others agreeing that an essential difference is the hallmark of Japan’s artistic treasures. The general consensus is that “the degree of originality in Japanese [prose and] poetry is more marked than in the case of any other nation” (Bryan 1929: 234), and that therefore the European translator’s task is virtually an impossible one. Accordingly, we are told,

no Occidental poet has been able to approach the tanka stanza, nor any artist been able to succeed in copying or imitating Japanese painting. All Occidental efforts in this direction are like trying to make artificial flowers instead of obtaining the shoot or seed. (Bryan 1929: 234-35)

If even copies or imitations are beyond one’s capabilities, then a faithful translation that allows the original to live on in another language becomes a hopelessly utopian fantasy; approximate reconstruction of an elusive, even ephemeral original is all that Western readers can expect.

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2 For an examination of the first English translation of this early eleventh-century text, that by Suematsu Kenchô in 1882, see Henitiuk, forthcoming.
Intriguingly, the difficulty seems to lie not only in finding a way to render the non-native art forms of Japan in a way that keeps them alive for the reader, but in attempting to assimilate something innately hazardous to him/her and the target culture as a whole. There are numerous calls to exercise caution with regard to what is described as not merely rendered dead on arrival, but—more seriously—potentially deadly to a Western audience. For instance, Léon De Rosny wonders aloud in an “Avertissement du traducteur” to his 1871 anthology (N.B. an avertissement inside a book is of course a ‘foreword’, but literally this phrase reads as “translator’s warning”) whether he ought not to have restricted himself to an edition for specialists only, ruefully acknowledging what he calls “the danger of presenting the public with specimens of a literature for which it may as yet be insufficiently prepared” [“le danger d’offrir au public des especimens d’une littérature pour laquelle il n’est peut-être pas encore suffisamment préparé”] (De Rosny 1871: iii), as if highly specific advance precautions were called for. This notion of a perilous incorporation of something that is at worst a potential infection across national boundaries, and at best too potentially unsettling to be properly assimilated, is echoed elsewhere. André Bellesort claims that stories coming out of Japan must be completely rewritten if they are to become acceptable to readers in Europe: “Japanese stories are fully charming only in books by [A.B.] Mitford and Lafcadio [Hearn], that is, decontextualised, purified, and above all reconstituted by European artists “ [“Les histoires japonaises ne nous charment absolument que dans les livres des Mitford et des Lafcadio, c’est-à-dire émondées, purifiées et surtout recomposées par des artistes européens”] (Bellesort 1926 [1904]: 270).
This call to ‘purify’ the Other demands further attention. Looking to other translators and scholars of this time, we find they express similar ideas by describing their encounters with Japanese literature in terms of distillation, namely the process of separating out volatile elements so as to leave behind a pure or more refined substance. Anglo-American culture was felt to be unprepared for the sexually frank works coming out of Japan, and the English language simply inappropriate for such extraordinary literature, unlike receptor cultures based on more liberal traditions: “One reason why French writers succeed in giving a true picture of the real Orient is because French conventions of literary taste and decorum come nearer to the license tolerated in the Far East, so that less expurgation is necessary” (Schwartz 1927: 185, ft. 2). Literary taste is one thing, but the necessity for a refining process is perceived as even more fundamental, going somehow beyond language to the realm of thought itself: “to translate is to travesty, for the French language seems to be the only medium through which can be filtered the nuances of Japanese thought, which elude the ordinary element of language” (Schwartz 1927: 75, ft. 1). Of course, it is widely recognized that the Japanese themselves have long sought to distill a domestic art from foreign sources. Writing of the lengthy and undisputed Chinese influence on all aspects of its neighbour’s culture, Aston states categorically that “[w]hatever was borrowed was passed through the alembic of the native genius, and came out transformed into something genuinely Japanese” (1897/98: 276). Obtaining anything that could be described as a genuinely English rendition, acceptable to the reading public, however, out of the raw and purportedly impure materials to be found in Japan, appears to be more problematic.
Basil Hall Chamberlain, one of the most influential nineteenth-century scholars responsible for introducing this literature to the West, often despaired of the task he had assumed:

it is well-nigh impossible to find anything that would be suitable to an English audience among the mountainous masses of a literature, which, like that of Japan, is swayed by canons of taste in all essentials different to those that rule the prose and poetry of Europe. (1877: 106)

A brief contemporary notice of *Sunrise Stories* in the *New York Times* makes the related argument that “Japanese mental traits are difficult of comprehension and are a puzzle” (Anon. 1896: 32). The unnamed author of that piece nonetheless admires the creative way they apparently have of telling a story and urges readers not to forget the “vast influence Japanese art has had on European work”. Full appreciation of its literary wealth remains problematized, nonetheless, and so a translator faces significant challenges in terms of source text selection. Chamberlain continues as follows:

nine-tenths—perhaps I should rather say ninety-nine hundredths—of the literature of this country [is] a sealed book to such as are debarred from studying it in the original; and he who would attempt to give his country-men some notion of the way in which this people write, of the mental atmosphere in which they live, turns away disheartened from almost every book that had at first sight seemed a promising field for translation. (1877: 107)

Disheartened or not, translators were in fact responsible for significant amounts of Japanese literature being translated and circulated at this time, to a public very much enamored of what it saw as the enigmatic, profound and eternally poetic Orient, or conversely the lewd, licentious, anything-goes Orient.

Kakuzo Okakura, who did much for cultural diplomacy at the turn of the twentieth century, decried the crude exoticism characterizing foreign attitudes toward his country:
When will the West understand, or try to understand, the East? We Asiatics are often appalled by the curious web of facts and fancies which has been woven concerning us. We are pictured as living on the perfume of the lotus, if not on mice and cockroaches. It is either impotent fanaticism or else abject voluptuousness. … Your information is based on the meagre translations of our immense literature, if not on the unreliable anecdotes of passing travellers. (Okakura 1964 [1906]: 32-33)

Granted, in *The Book of Tea* and other works, Okakura exploits many of the same stereotypes to portray his nation as possessing a uniquely aesthetic worldview. He was thus himself far from innocent of the very exoticizing tendency he sets out to criticize. His point above, however, is that many of those nineteenth-century anecdotes concerned prostitutes and a booming trade in pornographic pictures that were vigorously supported by a European market eager to experience the reputedly salacious Orient. All this meant a rather warped notion of the literary culture, whereby even the long-established Classical tradition of female-authored tales and diaries was used to imply that Japanese women circulated much too freely in the public sphere, shamelessly writing about immodest subjects. Even scholars like Chamberlain were disturbed by a perceived cultural gap in terms of sexual mores, claiming that Japanese literature is “stamped by peculiarities that render it unfit for discussion in our more prudish tongue” (1877: 107). The analogies constructed by Riordan and Takayanagi play into this prevailing exoticism and eroticism about anything Eastern as well. Despite ostensibly making a claim for authorial propriety, the fact that they posit a resemblance with those fantastical tales that Richard Burton’s loose translation from the 1870s had established as irrepressibly lewd implies that its plots and characters would likely prove too shocking for a polite audience:

There is a strong family likeness between these early tales[^3] and those of the “Arabian Nights,” and it is possible that some of the plots may have

[^3]: The specific example to which they are referring here is a twelfth-century Japanese text known as *Torikaebaya*, in which a boy is raised as a girl and his sister as a boy, owing to their natural preferences.
made their way to Japan from Persia. But in their present dress they are as thoroughly Japanese as the odes of the “Myriad Leaves.” As a rule, however little we may admire the conduct of the heroes and heroines, their adventures are related with the utmost propriety of expression. (Riordan and Takayanagi 1896: 91)

Ironically enough, although we are told that much of Japanese literature needs to be refined or bowdlerized before it can be considered fit for European consumption, the argument is also made that it is somehow inherently sterile. More than one commentator claims that the Japanese, because of deficiencies in their language and psychological outlook, lack any literature of real vitality. Georges Bousquet, who would later famously dismiss the Tale of Genji as impenetrably dull, is among the more critical, arguing that:

> Literature served by such a language and psychology, necessarily descending into banality, the earth-bound, with a baroque or precious style, is marked by constitutional sterility.

[La littérature servie par une telle langue et une telle psychologie, se traînant nécessairement dans la banalité, le terre à terre, le style baroque ou précieux, est frappée de stérilité constitutionnelle.] (1877: 331)

This derogatory image of the inescapable barrenness of Japanese letters is encountered elsewhere:

> This race, whose art lacks genius just as its politeness lacks initiative, owes its impersonal imagination not only to its philosophical poverty, which precludes expansiveness, and its Buddhist upbringing, which sterilizes the human plant’s spontaneous liveliness, but also to the influence of Chinese characters, so prominent in the Japanese language.

[Cette race, dont l’art manque de génie comme sa politesse d’initiative, doit son imagination impersonnelle non seulement à sa pauvreté philosophique, qui lui interdit les grands espaces, et à son éducation bouddhique, qui stérilise la vivacité spontanée de la plante humaine, mais encore à l’influence des caractères chinoises, si considérable dans la langue japonaise.] (Bellesort 1926 [1904]: 241)

and proclivities, with a highly amusing (if predictable) set of consequences as the two reach adulthood. An English translation by Rosette Willig was published in 1983 under the title The Changelings.
Early translators thus had to face the challenge of dealing with a literature all too often perceived as lacking any recognizable literariness. Bryan inadvertently exposes the prevailing Eurocentrism behind this argument, which remained commonplace even as late as the 1920s:

In having no Homer, Plato, Sophocles or Thucydides Japan was no worse off than some contemporary European nations; but then Europe was familiar with Greek and Latin literature. In her passionate and aesthetic temperament Japan was, and is, the equal of the Greeks, but she failed, and still fails, in attaining to their critical and constructive power, through defective conceptions of the universal and the ultimate. (1929: 242–43)

He takes it as self-evident that Japanese literary arts are rarely “of a nature and content that appeals to the occidental mind” (1924: 228). Chamberlain had earlier given voice to this commonly held view:

much of that which the Japanese themselves prize most highly in their literature seems intolerably flat and insipid to the European taste. The romances—most of them—are every bit as dull as the histories, though in another way. The histories are too curt, the romances too long-winded. (1890: 276)

Even Chamberlain’s contemporary F.V. Dickins (who had published great numbers of translations, including the very first book-length rendition of Japanese literature into the English language⁴) eventually became discouraged and, after a fervently Japanophile phase, opted to return to his study of the ancient Greeks: “I shall do nothing more in re japonica … properly speaking, Japan has no history, it has merely annals. Nor is there any literature qua such worth the trouble of working it out” (quoted in Kornicki 2005: 99).

It is important to bear in mind that Riordan and Takayanagi’s anthology appeared in a context where Japan’s other cultural products had already found ready buyers and admirers, with an eager European clientele snapping up woodblock prints, ceramics, 

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lacquerware, and so on. Our co-authors are resigned to the idea that those who approach her literature may well give up in the face of its strangeness and incomprehensibility, and turn their attention back to non-literary forms of Japanese expression—what they call “those ballads in blue porcelain, those sonnets in chased silver, those poems in old gold lacquer” (1896: v). The decorative arts are described as functioning as a “universal language that needs no interpreter” (1896: v)—whose grammar is beauty itself.

Nonetheless, our authors resolutely hold out hope that their ground-breaking anthology will go some way to showing how “the songs of Nara, the romances of old Yedo, [can] add to our knowledge of, and pleasure in, humanity” (1896: vi). They aim to redress a situation where those few brave readers who set out to take such pleasure find themselves stymied at every turn:

Unhappily, there are few translations from which European or American readers can gain even a slight idea of this literature. […] Mr. Chamberlain’s “Classical Poetry of the Japanese,” M. de Rosny’s “Anthologie Japonaise,” Mr. Suyematsu Kenchio’s partial translation of the “Genji Monogatari” (Romance of Genji), Lieutenant Dickins’s of the “Taketori Monogatari,” and Dr. August Pfizmaier’s of the “Isé Monogatari” are the only works worthy the attention of the general reader. (Riordan and Takayanagi 1896: viii)

Although they have thus “endeavoured to bring out the spirit of the originals, to the extent in many cases of making entirely new versions” (1896: ix), Riordan and Takayanagi remain pessimistic, to judge by the words with which they choose to begin their volume, about the likelihood of successful translation.

The concluding chapter of *Sunrise Stories* is authored by Takayanagi, who draws on his own experience as a country boy of twelve sent to Nagasaki to be educated by an American missionary. He describes being taught English through the medium of Dutch (no Japanese-English dictionaries or grammars then existed) and being caught up in the
general excitement of the time. The Japanese in the early Meiji period were anxious to absorb what the West had to offer: “to the old dislike of foreign things and foreign ways … had succeeded by this time a great enthusiasm” (1896: 276-7). Takayanagi does add, however, that the rush to emulate Europe had partly bellicose motives: “we desired … to be able to thrash the foreigners, if necessary, in our turn” (1896: 277). This zeal to learn from others is said to be a native characteristic of Japan, along with a tendency to go lightly laden and to throw off and reject whatever is found to be unassimilable. In Japanese literature and art this trait is more marked than any other. There is much in both that has been unquestionably borrowed from the Chinese, but it has been sublimated and spiritualized, has been freed of Chinese sensuousness and of Chinese didacticism. (1896: 280)

Whether or not this intra-Asian cultural borrowing required a similar tussle with jellyfish is left unsaid, but in any case the art and culture that had been so successfully sublimated from China’s models appears in large part stubbornly untranslatable to the West. This fact does not dissuade Takayanagi and Riordan et al. from trying to convey something of Japan’s literary wealth, although the “glancing” subtitle to this book indicates that full perception of the foreign canon is not even to be attempted. Yet is the success or lack thereof of a translator’s efforts an appropriate means by which anyone should be evaluating another’s artistic production? Chamberlain is said to have on at least one occasion quite rightly “objected to the view that a body of literature must be judged by its adaptability to the purposes of translation or presentation to foreign minds” (paraphrased in Chamberlain 1877: 116).

The term sublimation above should bring to mind the pair of chemical metaphors we have already encountered, and so I would like to take a moment to consider that cluster of images in a little more depth. Translation of Japanese literature is likened to a
process of distillation, which involves a change of state from liquid to gas, with the subsequent condensation of a purer substance as the unwanted residue is left behind. As previously mentioned, many early translators argue that works require refinement before they can be deemed fit for European consumption. Further, given its ready association with the production of alcohol, this distilling image is also suggestive of the possibility that those who imbibe the product will become intoxicated, a pleasurable but potentially disruptive condition.

The second term, filtering, by definition removes solid impurities from a liquid by means of a filtration medium of one sort or another. Interestingly, much of Japan’s literary tradition is described as being most successfully passed through French before being presented to the English reader, which cannot help but underscore non-European Otherness. James St André (2003) explains in his discussion of the convoluted path that China’s literature took into Western languages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the intra-European part of what he calls “relay” translation—namely “translation from a translation into a third language (from Chinese to Latin and then to French, for example)” (St. André 2003: 60)—was viewed as comparatively unproblematic. Whereas the initial rendering from such utterly foreign languages as Chinese or Japanese poses challenges on many levels, an already filtered product can be trusted to circulate relatively easily and without danger. The third and final chemical process, sublimation, involves a solid becoming a gas without the necessity of passing through the liquid state, and without anything being added or subtracted from the substance in question. The term seems to arise only when discussing the transfer of literary features within Asia, from China directly to Japan. Where translation occurs entirely within the Eastern space,
between cultures that are similarly Other, it can be apparently understood as a much less complex operation: a simple change in form that requires little intervention. The more radical step, i.e. the crossing over of this enticing but inherently dangerous literature from the “Orient” to Europe, however, necessitates a distillation or filtration stage, with an attendant degree of caution.

One could go so far as to characterize what is being described here overall as not chemistry but alchemy, the process by which lead or other metals are transformed into gold, an elixir of eternal life is created, and ultimate wisdom is achieved. In this respect, when Aston mentions an alembic, or still, we should bear in mind that this is in fact the apparatus typically employed in such transmutations. The word comes from the Arabic \textit{al-kimia}, or the art of transformation, today commonly associated with almost unfathomable mystery couched in an obscure hermetic language. Translators therefore are seen as labouring to convert a base substance into something of value, and thus grant that original a renewed existence (Walter Benjamin’s “afterlife” may usefully be referenced at this point) and the target-language reader access to whatever wisdom was previously unseen. The translator as alchemist would thus be in possession of the philosopher’s stone that confers immortality on the source text and its author.

Having completed the above detour into figures from chemistry and alchemy, I would like now to return to the figure of the jellyfish with which this article began. The notion that early translators felt that their efforts on behalf of Japanese literature, seen as unutterably mysterious, necessarily squished any life from it may give us pause, but the image is not without precedent. One of St. Jerome’s key terms was actually \textit{exprimere}, a “squeezing out” of sense from an often recalcitrant source text. And the very terms by
which we routinely discuss the passage of literature from one language and culture (the “source”) to another (the “target”) relate translations obliquely to a type of violence: as Gregory Rabassa has rather mischievously pointed out, targets are after all “something to shoot at and ideally, kill” (1989: 5). Not merely descriptive or entertaining, figures of speech reflect and inform our thinking in ways that have only begun to be understood. By analyzing active metaphorical explanations for how the process and product of translation is perceived, we may well discover promising new avenues for research that shake up our long-standing assumptions and prejudices.

Live jellyfish are elusive and difficult to grasp. Marine biologists inform us that there is little point in trying to catch them in the deep sea, their natural habitat, but that while capturing them on land is easier, it is too often useless, since any that have been swept into shore will normally be dead or dying already. The trick is to go after those that happen to be floating on the surface, scooping them up with a dextrously wielded small net and dropping them into fresh water. In this new, foreign element, their poison drains away within a couple of days. They must, moreover, be caught whole or they remain dangerous and therefore useless to the fisherman. Broken-off tentacles retain all their poisonous properties and, even if deceased, the creature still has the ability to sting. Moreover, the experts advise that properly killed and disarmed jellyfish make an excellent, protein-rich fertilizer. Much of the above—avoiding omissions and dextrously maintaining cultural nuances; ensuring that the target text remains a living thing; allowing the product of literary transposition to enrich domestic culture—offers more or less neat parallels for what successful translations can and should do. And then there are those “opal tints” mentioned earlier. Opalescence means literally non-transparency: when
we look at an opal, the many large particles of which it is comprised scatter the light passing through the stone and make it appear cloudy or opaque. So even in the most felicitous translation, the characteristic aesthetic features of Japanese literature are likely to be lost to the eye. Perhaps Riordan and Takayanagi were more prescient than they may have first appeared.\(^5\)

Pinker writes that the “incongruity in a fresh literary metaphor” (2007: 264) is precisely what makes it work:

> The listener resolves the incongruity soon enough by spotting the underlying similarity, but the initial double take and subsequent brainwork conveys something in addition. It implies that the similarity is not apparent in the humdrum course of everyday life, and that the author is presenting real news in forcing it upon the listener’s attention. (2007: 264)

Literary translations and manhandled jellyfish are clearly not the same thing, but if we find ourselves talking about them as if they are, then this may well provide insights into how intercultural communication is understood and what values those who theorise about translation espouse. The notion that infected beaches have to be closed when Japan’s literary treasures wash ashore or that those in the receptor culture should rush to slaughter, detoxify, and appropriate them for other purposes, underscores a deep mistrust of the “peculiar beauties” (Riordan and Takayanagi 1896: v) of the Other. At the time that Riordan and Takayanagi were writing, Japanese stories and poems were clearly neither “humdrum” nor part and parcel of the “everyday”—to everyone from outside that country, they were so foreign as to seem calculated to cause a “double take” from any readers intrepid enough to explore it. By drawing explicit attention to that fact in the opening

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\(^5\) For readers of this article who may be wondering what “jellyfish” is in Japanese: the term is in fact \textit{kurage}, which is normally written in the katakana syllabics \textit{クラゲ}, although it can also be written with a pair of Chinese characters: \textit{水母}, which respectively mean “water” and “mother”. So far as I have been able to determine, there is no connection with translation either etymologically or culturally.
sentences of their anthology, these translators do succeed in forcing its “newness”—and thus the very real difficulty of successfully carrying it across—upon our attention.

It has been argued that metaphor is fundamentally a matter of thought—how we conceive of the world around us or even construct that world with our mind—not merely of language—how we express things, and certainly thinking of translation in particular ways carries different sets of expectations. Whether or not our minds are the “metaphor mongers” (2007: 245) Pinker would have us believe they are, the images that we use or that others use and we are able to understand, “are not just literary garnishes but aids to reason” (2007: 253). Because it functions to shake us out of the normal complacency of our thought patterns:

metaphor provides us with a way to eff the ineffable. Perhaps the greatest pleasure that language affords is the act of surrendering to the metaphors of a skilled writer and thereby inhabiting the consciousness of another person. (Pinker 2007: 277)

If “inhabiting the consciousness of another” sounds suspiciously familiar, it all comes down to what has been termed “the parallel between the business of doing translations and the business of making metaphors” (Hanne 2006: 208). (Metaphor and translation are of course etymologically similar terms, both meaning to carry across.) Lakoff, Pinker and their fellow cognitive scientists even use the terms “target” and “source” where I.A. Richards writes of “tenor” and “vehicle”, and other scholars of “ground” and “figure”.\(^6\)

Such terminology cannot help but make of metaphor itself an ideal metaphor for what translators do, and indeed Lieven D’hulst has stated categorically that “metaphors have clearly long been a featured part of translation theories” [“il est manifeste que les métaphores sont une caractéristique durable des theoories traductives”] (D’hulst 1992: 35)

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\(^6\) Interestingly, metaphor theory uses these terms in the reversed order of the way they are used in translation theory.
and that they have in fact played a crucial role in the making of such theories from the time of Cicero onwards. Andrew Chesterman in turn argues for “an ever-increasing accumulation of metaphors and images for translation” as a sign of theoretical progress, a greater articulation or “better representation of the object of research” (2000: n.p.). By helping readers understand the topic of their book—Japanese literature, in all its unique and varied forms—by means of something it most demonstrably is not—an invertebrate creature of the sea—Riordan and Takayanagi also remind us that what they will be presenting throughout is demonstrably not the original either.

This article has argued that early translators of Japanese literature tended to view a successful outcome of their task simplistically and imperialistically as a matter of “press[ing the originals] into a foreign mould” (1896: v) for ease of assimilation, or of subjecting them to various intrusive chemical processes for the sake of refining something valuable from an impure and potentially dangerous substance. As novelist Dorothy Richardson once wrote, “by their metaphors shall ye know them” (quoted in Bronfen 1999: 168). In other words, these images of inherently problematized translatability tell us at least as much about the translators and their attitudes as about the artistic tradition that they are ostensibly describing. By taking seriously this early Western theorizing about the myriad difficulties bound up with any attempt to preserve the intriguing “opal tints” (1896: v) belonging to works that are understood as

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7 Bronfen is here citing unpublished correspondence held by Yale’s Bernecke Library: “That Dorothy Richardson did not confine her treatment of the dangers and joys of metaphors to Pilgrimage can be seen in a letter she wrote to Henry Savage: ‘Language is a very partial medium of expression … Oh the helplessness surrounding the helpfulness and manifold uses of speech, the dangers within the delights of metaphor. By their metaphors shall ye know them. Metaphorocracy, that is what really all thought lives under, all the philosophies’” (Bronfen 1999: 168).
irredeemably Other, we cannot help but gain important insights into the complexities of the translation process as a whole.

Works Cited


Henitiuk, Valerie (forthcoming) “‘A Creditable Performance under the Circumstances’? Suematsu Kenchô and the pre-Waley *Tale of Genji*. Forthcoming in *TTR*.


Brislin, R.W. (ed.) (1976) Translation: Applications and Research. The paper investigates how translation is conceptualised through metaphors employed in academic texts in English and Lithuanian focusing on translation problems. As established by previous research, metaphors are tools of rendering abstract thought in terms of more concrete experiences. The methodology of this investigation is based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and further development in metaphor research, the main principles of Metaphor Identification Procedure and metaphorical patterns. 


Drawing on insights from recent developments in metaphor theory, contributors to this volume reveal how central metaphorical language has been to translation studies at all periods of time and in various cultures. Metaphors have played a key role in shaping the way in which we understand translation, determining what facets of the translation process are deemed to be important and therefore merit study, and aiding in the training of successive generations of translators and theorists. 

