Introduction

Conventional wisdom presumes that translation would rank low in poetic intention among the Romantic poets, concerned with the seer’s ‘unmediated vision’ of the cosmos and nature, the feeling-ful exploration of the terrains of past experience, dream-states, and shifts and quickenings of mood, and the passions evoked in indignation at the ‘wrongs’ meted out on the unfortunate and dispossessed members of society. All of these occasions for poetry indicate for Romanticism signs of poetic and human authenticity and of the resurgence of social and spiritual possibility originating in the individuated consciousness. Translation, fundamentally derivative and secondary, an act of mediation doomed to fail, and at the core inauthentic, at best would serve as an apprentice activity for the neophyte poet, a five-finger exercise the effects of which the true poet might absorb as a strengthening of the fabric of original work.

Indeed, little in the way of Romantic translations has the massive presence of the neoclassical monuments of translation such as Dryden’s Aeneid or Pope’s Homer. At the same time, a poem like Keats’s ‘Chapman’s Homer’ sonnet acknowledges famously that a great translation can profoundly illuminate an otherwise inaccessible work, and not any translation can enact such a transformation: the success of a translation in this regard can be as authentic as any success in poetry. After surveying the landscape of Romantic translations in poetry, this chapter will turn to Shelley’s substantial output of translations, situating them in the framework of Shelley’s poetics and Romantic poetic intentions.

Aside from Shelley’s, Romanticism produced a number of locally influential literary translations, such as (to name a few) Helen Maria Williams’s translation of Bernardin de St Pierre’s immensely popular and influential sentimental novel Paul et Virginie, Coleridge’s translations of Friedrich Schiller’s plays which are quoted in literature throughout the Romantic
period from Austen to Hemans, and H. F. Cary’s highly influential translation of *The Divine Comedy* which became important for Keats’s engagement with Dante. Helen Maria Williams also studded her translation of *Paul et Virginie* with sonnets of her own yet spoken by the novel’s characters; these lyric outbursts or improvisations could be said to ‘translate’ the thoughts of the protagonists that, as we say, ‘get lost in translation’, becoming a kind of supplement or postponement of the inevitable vanishing of the high pitch of the passion-love that defines much of the novel’s energy. The same could be said of Charlotte Smith’s *Werther* sonnets which ‘translate’ the unspoken lyric turmoil of Goethe’s hero.

Not influential but nonetheless monumental was Wordsworth’s translation, in heroic couplets, of the first three books of Virgil’s *Aeneid* in the early 1820s. Those scholars who find that among the several unpublished versions of *The Prelude* Wordsworth made substantial revisions during the same years as his work on the *Aeneid* note the presence of a greater than usual ornamentalism and baroque imagery and language attributable to his translation of the Roman poet. Wordsworth’s Virgil is to a degree a throwback to Dryden’s neoclassicism.

By contrast, Shelley’s generation of poets considered translation as part of an effort to contact the poetries of other ages and other nations and cultures, countering the English tendencies towards parochial nationalism and localism. Two of the most prolific as well as the most popular poets in this vein were Tom Moore and Felicia Hemans who each attempted to recover, in translation and imitation, the poetry and poetic temperament of Ireland. Hemans, furthermore, popularized in English the lyric poetry of Germany, as did the somewhat younger Irish nationalist poet James Clarence Mangan (who also translated the Middle Eastern poets Saadi and Hafiz).

Also relevant to the ambiance that produced Shelley’s translations are instances of Englishing work from mythologies and foreign literatures, instances of imitations and recoveries or revisionings such as Mary Tighe’s recovery of the Psyche myth (*Psyche*), Leigh Hunt’s *The Story of Rimini*, his recovery of the Paolo and Francesca episode in Dante’s *Inferno*, Keats’s ‘Isabella’ drawn from Boccaccio, and early Wordsworth’s recovery of Burger’s ballad ‘Lenore’ in his poem ‘Strange Fits of Passion’, Burger having been actually translated in a popular poetic version by William Taylor (1796). The range of translation to recovery emerges graphically in the case of the Paolo and Francesca story which, in addition to Hunt’s poem, includes actual translations by Hunt and Byron and Keats’s sonnet ‘As Hermes once . . .’. This sonnet and Keats’s own dream from which the poem emerged (see the letter to George and Georgiana Keats, March 1819)
suggests how present the episode must have been among Keats and his friends.

The poets in Leigh Hunt’s circle, including Shelley, were very interested in translation as an element in their progressive poetic and political programme of cultural expansion. Hunt’s book of poems *The Feast of the Poets* (1811, 1814, 1815) ends with a group of his translations from ancient Greek and Roman poets; similarly his next book *Foliage* (1818) concludes with a similar suite of translations. That the ‘original’ poetry in *Foliage* is paginated with prefatory Roman numerals and the translations in arabic numerals suggests that the book’s primary poetic vision resides in a poetry of another time and place. Similarly, the poem ‘Feast of the Poets’ rejects the then current notion of a ‘best’, ‘laureate’ poet, obviously chosen by persons aligned with the ruling national government, proposing instead that all poets be crowned with laurel. In the poem this decision, coming from the master of ceremonies Apollo, who here is more of a drunken Dionysus than a serene and aloof Apollo, announces Hunt’s clear preference for a promiscuous heterogeneous community of poetic voices. It is but a short step to a concluding display of poems in translation, as if the Feast of Poets now includes non-English temperaments and idioms speaking at the dinner table of poetry. Interestingly, Hunt constructs a ‘parallel text’ for his Latin poems: English translations at the top of the page, Latin at the bottom.

This dramatic exfoliation of poetic specimens is further expressed in the choice of poets for translation and poetic subjects. Hunt emphasized Greek (and some Latin) poetry because he saw it as ‘breathing’ the life of poetic authenticity and, by extension, the life of a vital community. Moreover, he selected less the ‘monumental’ poetry of the ancient world (although there are two beautiful passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) and more poetry with a pastoral and lyric bent: the Homeric Hymn to Bacchus, Idylls of Theocritus, Greek lyric (Anacreon), and Latin lyric (Catullus and Horace), all more playful and at times erotic poetry. (Thomas Love Peacock’s erotic *Rhododaphne* (1817) includes a free translation of the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus.) This reinforces the notion promulgated by Marilyn Butler and Jerome McGann that the progressive poetry of the Regency Decade sought to bring poetic playfulness and the erotic myths of classical mythology into the foreground as an anti-repressive gesture.  

Shelley, very simply, seems to have produced his translations in line with the poetic predispositions of Hunt and his contemporaries. Most of his poetic translations were written from 1818 until his death, that is, during the peak of his career. He did not, in other words, associate translation with poetic exercise and apprenticeship. The question then arises: why did he not attempt to publish more of them? Only three pieces (a fragment from
Moschus, a sonnet of Dante, and a scene from *Faust* were published by Shelley. Why, if Leigh Hunt was publishing his own translations, was not Shelley publishing his, which, in fact, Hunt had praised and was to praise again? Although there are no firm answers to these questions, one can observe and speculate: Shelley, first of all, did not get any of his work published easily; it may be that, over time, he would have seen more translations into print. Or it may be that, coming from Eton where translations represented for the students a kind of linguistic callisthenics, Shelley did not immediately associate translation with published performance. It is worth noting that Mary Shelley, just two years after her husband’s death, saw to it that translations appeared in her 1824 edition of his poetry, moreover, at the end of the volume in the manner of Hunt.

One of Shelley’s most ambitious translations was that of Plato’s *Symposium*, which Shelley called *The Banquet*; it will not be discussed here since the focus is on poetic translations with the intention of situating them within Shelley’s poetry and the poetry of Regency Decade Romanticism. Let us enumerate Shelley’s verse translations (the dates given as ascribed by his early twentieth-century editor Thomas Hutchinson; references to this edition are cited as *H*). All except ‘From the Greek of Moschus’ and a sonnet of Dante to Guido Cavalcanti (published in his volume *Alastor* in 1816) appeared after his death in 1822. Mary Shelley in her *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, published by John and Leigh Hunt in 1824, collected for the first time a substantial number of translations: ‘Hymn to Mercury, from Homer’, ‘The Cyclops, from Euripides’ composed in 1819, a ‘translation from Moschus’, ‘Scenes from the “Magico Prodigioso” of Calderon’ composed in 1822, and ‘Scenes from the “Faust” of Goethe’ being Act 1 scenes 1 and 2 with scene 2 having been previously published in Leigh Hunt’s journal the *Liberal* in 1822. Then in her 1839 edition of Shelley’s poems, Mary Shelley included ‘Homer’s Hymn to the Moon’ composed in 1818, ‘Homer’s Hymn to Castor and Pollux’ composed in 1818, ‘Homer’s Hymn to the Sun’ composed in 1818, ‘Homer’s Hymn to Minerva’ composed in 1818, some ‘Greek Epigrams’ including ‘To Stella’, ‘Kissing Helena’, and ‘Spirit of Plato’ all from Plato, and ‘Circumstance’ (1839). Later in the nineteenth century were published Dante’s First Canzone of the *Convito*, from Dante’s *Purgatorio* (28.1–51) ‘Matilda Gathering Flowers’, ‘Homer’s Hymn to Venus’ (composed in 1818); lines 1–26 from Virgil’s Tenth Eclogue; a fragment of Bion’s ‘Elegy on the Death of Adonis’, a sonnet by Cavalcanti to Dante (perhaps written in 1815); and lines 360ff. from Virgil’s Fourth Georgic. Let us now turn to some of the individual translations both to describe them and to speculate on the particular use and intention he had for them.
It is perhaps too easy to take (as has Timothy Webb) Shelley’s famous statement in the *Defence of Poetry* about the near-tragic impossibility of successful poetic translation – like putting a violet in a crucible (Pr 280) – as the poet’s ruling assessment, one that conforms to the standard view: translation is loss – less than, destructive of, the original. Yet his apparent assent to the principles in Hunt and his circle, both about the socioliterary value of poetic translation – it is a gain of other voices, other tales, other visions which enrich the present’s connection to the great stream of world poetry – and about the importance of the erotic in poetry, would suggest the opposite. Moreover, the influence of his translations – in thematic, formal, and linguistic ways – on his own ‘original’ poems indicates that he found a source of vitality in translated works that belies Robert Frost’s infamous remark that poetry is what gets lost in translation. A careful reading of Shelley’s translations in relation to his own poems, in fact, may lead one to posit ‘translation’, for him, as the essential visionary act of poetry itself and perhaps a definition of Shelley’s Romantic poetics.

All of this appears affirmed in Shelley’s longest, and perhaps best, translation, that of, as he calls it, ‘Homer’s Hymn to Mercury’, a joyous, playful version of one of the most joyful literary events of Greek literature. It recounts the story of the birth of Mercury, his startlingly precocious maturation, his construction of his lyre out of the shell of a tortoise, the manifold tricks he plays on gods and mortals, including Apollo to whom he eventually gives the lyre out of deference to the god’s great musical and poetic power. Shelley chose to re-fashion the Greek epic metre into what at the end of the Regency Decade had been pegged as a playful stanza, the *ottava rima*. As his contemporary Barry Cornwall (Bryan Procter) wrote:

The octave rhyme (Ital. Ottava rima)
Is a delightful measure made of ease
Turn’d up with epigrams, and tho’ it seems a
Verse that a man may scribble when he please,
Is somewhat difficult. . .

The opening line embodies a connection, in Barry Cornwall’s mind and one might guess in Shelley’s, between translation and this stanza form. It follows that translation is associated not with poetic labour but with ease, scribbling (as Byron often described his own writing), and pleasure, with, in other words, ‘waste’ and ‘excess’, poetic values that pointedly stand outside the realm of the market and exchange and belong to the political and poetic radicalism that characterizes Shelley’s work. Nowhere do these
poetic values reach greater realization than in the masterpiece of Shelley’s
dfriend Byron, Don Juan. Here the ottava rima stanza – six lines of alternat-
ing ab rhymes, followed by a concluding rhymed couplet cc – produces a
poetry of playful, outrageous reversals, deconstructions, and juxtapositions
perfect for comic but also for transformative poetry. For example,

    And Julia sate with Juan, half embraced
    And half retiring from the glowing arm,
    Which trembled like the bosom where ’t was placed;
    Yet still she must have thought there was no harm,
    Or else ’t were easy to withdraw her waist;
    But then the situation had its charm,
    And then—God knows what next—I can’t go on;
    I’m almost sorry that I e’er begun. (Don Juan 1115)

Not surprisingly, then, Shelley uses the ottava rima stanza to expand or
‘dilate’ upon the original Homeric line. Compare, for example, a modern
translation by Thelma Sargent (‘I have taken very few liberties with the
text’) with Shelley’s:

    So Hermes spoke and, picking up the creature [tortoise] with both hands,
    Went back into the house with his lovely new plaything.

And Shelley:

    Thus having spoken, the quaint infant bore,
    Lifting it from the grass on which it fed
    And grasping it in his delighted hold,
    His treasure prize into the cavern old. (45–8; H)

Shelley splits the verb and the object with a two-line shift of attention away
from the main point – taking the tortoise into his house in order to kill it – to
the more peripheral drama of lifting and grasping the tortoise from the
grass; the phrase ‘his delighted hold’ proposes a pleasure in Mercury’s hands
at the prospect of turning the animal into a musical instrument.

Shelley’s ottava rima encourages a beautiful paradox in his interpre-
tation of the Hymn: the relationship between poetic construction and a
poetry of chance or spontaneous poetry, what Shelley calls ‘the power of
unpremeditated song’ (590; H). The playfulness residing in the stanza itself
nonetheless allows for its appearance as a highly artificial or constructed
thing. At the same time the repeated dilations of the original increase the
opportunities for play of sound patterns, in particular the rhymes and
consonance. His own poetry mirrors, in this sense, the figure of Mercury
himself, a maker, elaborately constructing the lyre out of a tortoise, and
yet a kind of naif who sings spontaneously about the gods and goddesses.
It is Shelley who twice in the poem introduces the word ‘unpremeditated’ to describe Mercury’s singing, anticipating the song of his Sky-Lark who ‘pours forth profuse strains / Of unpremeditated art’ (5). (Later in the nineteenth century the poet Swinburne, with the same emphasis on spontaneity, referred to the Homeric hymns as ‘miraculous effusions of genius’, a position that Shelley at once accepts and, in his own translations, complicates.) The conjunction of construction (the elaborate, rule-bound stanza) with spontaneous unpredictability has become a poetic ideal in postmodern poetics.

This principle might accord with a challenge for translation as an act of visionary poetry: how do you ‘carry-across’ a poem from another language and yet allow it to breathe life (the unpredictable, the unpremeditated) in a new language? Hermes, or Mercury, seems the perfect god of translations, one who can play tricks of language and yet also is the god of crossroads – in this case, the intersection between one language and another. A commonplace of Romantic poetics is the attempt to call up the locus of unpremeditated song in the midst of the highly mediated or constructed art of the modern world. But Shelley wishes to infuse into his translations some of the unpremeditated, or ‘naive’, elements as a way of countering the assumption of the secondary status typically accorded translation: he would like to be a Mercury of translation. As a footnote to this observation, Shelley calls his hero by both his Greek and Roman names: Hermes and Mercury, as if to emphasize that the best poetic translation enacts a betweenness, a fundamental oscillation of two languages and visions. It is also possible that the oscillation between ‘Greece’ and ‘Rome’ in the naming of the god marks a deliberate refusal to settle either for the language of the empire (Rome) or for the language of the conquered but more ‘authentic’ source (Greece); perhaps Shelley posits a poetic translation as occupying a space between or beyond those of the source or target languages.

But poetically ‘Homer’s Hymn to Mercury’ ends not so much with Mercury triumphant but with Apollo to whom Mercury gives his lyre:

And then Apollo with the plectrum strook
The chords, and from beneath his hands a crash
Of mighty sounds rushed up, whose music shook
The soul with sweetness, and like an adept
His sweeter voice a just accordance kept. (672–6)

Shelley extends the scope of musical effect in volume and speed and intensity. Sweetness, a notion not in the original, comes, for Shelley, from Dante’s final canto of Paradiso, to connote the literally unutterable effect on the pilgrim of divine love. Only Apollo, not the trickster Hermes, can register
such intense transformations. Apollo extends the range of Mercury’s poetic antics, absorbs and transcends them.

Shelley’s Mercury accords with the poetics at work in two other Romantic poems written in ottava rima. The first is Shelley’s The Witch of Atlas, written a year or two after ‘Homer’s Hymn to Mercury’ but featuring a figure not unrelated to Mercury, the Witch – a magical trickster in her own right, capable of playfully performing grotesqueries on unsuspecting humans that alter, usually for the better, their sense either of the tragic nature of their lives or their own self-importance. The second poem is, of course, Byron’s Don Juan (and Beppo and The Vision of Judgement) which, although it has no trickster figure (other than perhaps the poet himself) pulling the poetic strings, exploits the stanza for its capacity for poetic ‘waste’ and ‘excess’ in the service of popping the bubbles of convention both in poetry and social pretension.

Aside from Euripides’ The Cyclops, Shelley’s other specimens of Greek poetry either are or have the feeling of the fragment or lyric. And like the lyric they project voices that seem to come from domains other than that of ordinary consciousness. The fragments of the Homeric Hymns evoke cosmogonies and theogonies, while the fragments from the elegies of Bion and Moschus call up classical pastoral poetic ritual. Together they compose not only a suite of translated poems but also translated voices pitched far from the social sounds of early nineteenth-century England. (One wishes that Shelley’s ‘suite’ of translations would have been heard by his contemporaries more than they were.)

The effect of the Homeric Hymns upon Shelley’s poetic vision is patent: they offer what might be called a cosmological (as well as mythic) idiom. To give some examples:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{the wind} \\
&\text{And the huge billow bursting close behind,} \\
&\text{Even then beneath the weltering waters bear} \\
&\text{The staggering ship—[Castor and Pollux] suddenly appear,} \\
&\text{On yellow wings rushing athwart the sky,} \\
&\text{And lull the blasts in mute tranquillity,} \\
&\text{And strew the waves on the white Ocean’s bed[.]}
\end{align*}
\]

(‘Hymn to Castor and Pollux’, 13–19; \(H\))

We recognize the anthropomorphic act of one part of nature (fuelled by mythic figures) upon another – strewing the waves on the Ocean’s bed – as a Shelleyan vision of interanimation in the cosmos. Similarly, in ‘Homer’s Hymn to the Moon’ the scattering of ‘Far light’ in the sky projects this non-human-centred involvement:
Around the earth,
From her immortal head in Heaven shot forth,
Far light is scattered—boundless glory springs;
Where’er she spreads her many-beaming wings
The lampless air glows round her golden crown. (3–7; H)

Enjambments within the heroic couplets contribute to the ‘scattering’ effect, as in:

Then is made full the circle of her light,
And as she grows, her beams more bright and bright
Are poured from Heaven, where she is hovering then,
A wonder and a sign to mortal men. (16–19)

And from ‘Homer’s Hymn to the Sun’ the scattering works as an erotic interpenetration of light rays and elements in a manner that anticipates the ‘Ode to the West Wind’:

[The Sun’s] countenance, with radiant glory bright,
Beneath his graceful locks far shines around,
And the light vest with which his limbs are bound,
Of woof aethereal delicately twined,
Glows in the stream of the uplifting wind. (16–20; H)

(Contrast the Sargent version of the last lines: ‘His splendid fine-woven garment shimmers about him / And flutters in the breath of the winds as he drives his stallions’ (Sargent, Homeric Hymns, 80).)

Ultimately what we are calling Shelley’s cosmological idiom, the interpenetration of elements from the cosmos (including earth), has an erotic manifestation, apparent in Shelley’s relatively long fragment from the ‘Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite’ (Shelley titled this ‘Homer’s Hymn to Venus’). This Hymn recounts at length Aphrodite’s love affair with the mortal Anchises (father of Aeneas), which, however, is described as an infusion of divine love from Zeus to Aphrodite. Contrasting Sargent with Shelley is again revealing:

into the heart of Aphrodite herself
Zeus cast sweet longing to lie in love with a man

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So for Anchises Zeus aroused in her heart sweet desire,
A man godlike in form who was then tending cattle
Among the high-ranging hills of Ida abounding in fountains.
Aphrodite, lover of smiles, looked on him [Anchises] and loved him,
And desire and desperate longing laid hold on her heart.

(Sargent, Homeric Hymns, 47)
The translator

In Venus Jove did soft desire awaken,
That by her own enchantments overtaken,
She might, no more from human union free,
Burn for a nursling of mortality.

Therefore [Jove] poured desire into her breast
Of young Anchises,
Feeding his herds among the mossy fountains
Of the wide Ida’s many-folded mountains,—
Whom Venus saw, and loved, and the love clung
Like wasting fire her senses wild among. (42–59; H)

This moment in the original Hymn sets in motion the long account of the exchange between Aphrodite and Anchises, but Shelley’s fragment ends right here, shaping it as a climax of divine desire for a mortal. In Shelley’s version, moreover, desire turns back onto the goddess in a gesture of auto-eroticism, so that, unlike the narrative of the Homeric Hymn, Shelley’s fragment has no implications of its use value for the course of human history (Aphrodite to Anchises to Aeneas to . . . Rome) but more for eroticism (and by association for the poetry which carries it) as waste and excess (wasting fire).

One might consider as a late Romantic instance of poetry-as-waste the following ‘epigram’ from the Greek, this lovely one ‘from the Greek of Plato’:

Kissing Helena, together
With my kiss, my soul beside it
   Came to my lips, and there I kept it,—
For the poor thing had wandered thither,
   To follow where the kiss should guide it,
Oh, cruel I, to intercept it! (1–6; H)

So slight as to hardly merit notice, this poem in fact is an elegant study of an ‘epipsyche’ – disembodied, yet playfully generating a logic or erotic spirituality, into which, with delicate rhythm and rhyme, weaves a visionary poetry. In a similar vein of expansiveness within the tight epigrammatic form is the more famous dilation from Plato that becomes the epigraph for Adonais:

Thou wert the morning star among the living,
   Ere thy fair light had fled;—
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
   New splendour to the dead. (1–4; H)

The pronounced asymmetry of odd vs. even line lengths, the hypertrophied decasyllabics pitched against the short six-syllable lines, emphasizing respectively extension (living, giving) and truncation (fled, dead), proposes
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