

Translational Decadence: Versions of Flaubert, Pater, and Lafcadio Hearn

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In his essay “The Task of the Translator” (“Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” 1923), Walter Benjamin posited that translation should be understood as an autonomous literary form. Benjamin wanted to shift the focus from notions of fidelity and freedom that dominated the critical debate on translations, which had long been primarily concerned with assessing the accurate transmission of content from one language to another. Instead of privileging the idea of accuracy, he spoke of a “natural” and “vital connection” between the original and translated text, which made translations an essential component of the survival or reception of literary works, guaranteeing their development and renewal in the course of time: “For, in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change.”¹ The ability identified by Benjamin to transform the source text gives translations great hermeneutic power. At the same time, the revised approach to criticism that he proposes decenters the cultural significance of literary works from the point of creation, and instead looks at how their meaning takes place in the course of history, and primarily outside the boundaries of the culture within which they first came to light. According to Benjamin, therefore, translation claimed cultural difference as a privileged location of meaning. More than that, Benjamin believed in the existence of a quality he called translatability (“Übersetzbarkeit”) that was “essential” to certain literary works, “which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability” (71). Translation thus understood is a posthumous revelation of something that is hidden in the original: a potential that awaits actualization until the moment comes when the historical and cultural conditions for its legibility are right. Crucially, this hidden meaning is conveyed to

foreign readers, who are often far away from the geographical and temporal site of the original's first publication and who may be unable to understand it in the conventional sense.

Benjamin's essay is often associated with the onset of a modernist understanding of translation exemplified in English by the work of Ezra Pound. In fact, though, its genesis is rooted in an encounter with decadence. "The Task of the Translator" was first published as the introduction to Benjamin's translation of Charles Baudelaire's "Tableaux parisiens," the series of poems about urban modernity that Baudelaire added to the second edition of *Fleurs du mal* (1857) in 1861. Decadence inhabits Benjamin's essay at a fundamental level, not only in the author's close reading of Baudelaire that led to its composition, but also in its evident debt to Stéphane Mallarmé's essay "Crisis in Poetry" ("Crise de vers," 1886-95), which Benjamin cites in a passage that is at the core of the philosophical thrust of the essay: "*Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité*" (77-78).² Benjamin's Mallarmé is, like Arthur Symons's, "a seeker after something in the world, that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all."³ In this complex sentence, which, significantly, Benjamin quotes untranslated, Mallarmé argues that, despite their rich diversity, all human languages involve a form of loss in the passage from thought to the written word, which hints towards the existence of an impossible "supreme" language somewhere beyond the realm of the literary. Mallarmé's "supreme" language led Benjamin to the idea of a "pure language" (*reine Sprache*) that is revealed by the process of translation, the attainment of which is far more important to him than the translator's success or failure in communicating content from a source to a target text: "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of

that work” (80). Translation therefore has the power to reveal truths hidden not only within the literary text, but within language itself.

As the line of influence that goes from Baudelaire to Mallarmé to Benjamin testifies, decadence and its reception marked an intensified engagement with questions of linguistic diversity and translation, which was to have a lasting if mostly concealed influence on the twentieth century. Modern decadence developed in the midst of the active culture of translation of the later nineteenth century, which brought to Britain Russian novels (mostly via France) and Scandinavian literature, as well as the edgy naturalism associated with Zola.⁴ This influx of modern European literatures in translation was accompanied by the effort to explore classics from Asian cultures, reflected in Edward FitzGerald’s celebrated version of Omar Khayyám (1859) translated from the Persian, much admired by late-Victorian poets, and the monumental series of *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910) overseen by Max Müller. British readers’ new appetite for translations was reflected in the creation of specialized publishing venues such as the Heinemann International Library, launched in the 1890s under the general editorship of Edmund Gosse,⁵ while the symbolic importance of translation in the tense public negotiation of freedom of literary expression can be seen in the events surrounding the prosecution of Henry Vizetelly, the publisher of Zola’s translations into English, and the subsequent constitution of the Lutetian Society, which commissioned progressive late-Victorian intellectuals to produce new unexpurgated versions of Zola after the Vizetelly crisis.⁶

This increase in circulation, geographical reach, and legal scrutiny, however, did not mean that translations—especially translations of modern works—were generally viewed with the kind of theoretical sophistication demanded by Benjamin. In a 1900 review in *Macmillan’s Magazine* addressing French translations of Walter Pater and other English authors, the writer and translator George H. Ely tersely recorded a widespread cultural

prejudice: “Translation has a bad name; whether well or ill done, critics seldom take it seriously, with the natural consequence that translators themselves are apt to esteem their work lightly.”⁷ Fighting against this prejudice, several authors associated with decadence strove to integrate translation into their creative and critical practices. Decadent landmarks such as A. C. Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866), Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Michael Field’s bilingual *Long Ago* (1889), Arthur Symons’s *Days and Nights* (1889), and John Gray’s *Silverpoints* (1893), all accommodated translation within prestigious literary genres, such as poetry and the historical novel, in order deliberately to confuse dominant hierarchies of values, paving the way for the idea of translation as autonomous literary form later theorized by Benjamin.

This article presents decadence as a “translational” culture by focusing on two examples linked by the figure of the French novelist Gustave Flaubert: in “Style” (1888), Walter Pater looked to Flaubert in order to lay down the rules for a decadent practice of translation; while for Lafcadio Hearn, who worked outside the social networks of metropolitan European culture, translating Flaubert’s *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874) provided a schooling in how to become a decadent writer. Anticipating Benjamin’s insight, these works exemplify, in different and complementary ways, a decadent understanding of translation as an autonomous form. I borrow the term “translational” from critics of the contemporary novel who have used it to study works that straddle languages, “foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of translation” and, in doing so, challenging dominant notions of national and cultural identity.⁸ I hope to show that the translational can also provide a useful space to situate the decadents’ productive engagement with foreign languages and translations, and to make sense of the notoriously shifty identity politics of decadent works—including, as we shall see with Pater, in matters of gender. In this respect, the translational opens new avenues of enquiry into the cosmopolitan dimensions of

decadence that have come to light in recent work by Regenia Gagnier and Matthew Potolsky among others, particularly in relation to writers' resistance to the dominant cultural politics of nationalism.⁹ My approach is guided by the insight, crucial to translation theorists, that the linguistic act of translation is embedded in complex social and cultural processes.¹⁰ In particular, it draws on Lawrence Venuti's critiques of the ethical and political implications of erasing translators from literary history and conceiving of successful translations as domesticating foreign voices and ideas. Studying translation should therefore entail paying close attention not only to language and aesthetic concerns, but to the social and cultural circumstances in which translated texts came into being, as well as the material history of their circulation and reception.

Viewing decadence as a highly productive culture of translation can help us redress charges of derivativeness that are still frequently directed at decadent writers, especially at British decadents in relation to their French counterparts. Even sympathetic critics, in order to reject the supposed weakness of British decadence and its propensity to imitate French models, often resort to arguing for what is "distinctly British" about British decadence.¹¹ Such attitudes betray the lingering national bias of much literary criticism, which leads us to isolate the supposedly original or distinctive features of national literatures in order to endow such features with special meaning and value. Decadent authors, who lived in a period of rising nationalism, realized that originality was a politically charged category that could be used to stigmatize their cosmopolitan leanings. A truly transnational approach to decadence therefore ought to look beyond the national in order to reclaim those very borrowings, areas of overlap, and fuzzy boundaries as privileged objects of research. At the same time, a more sensitive understanding of decadent theories and practices of translation can enrich Victorian studies by throwing new light on modes of cultural production and on engagements with foreign literatures that are often obscured by deceptive assumptions of monolingualism.

1. Word after Word

Pater's "Style" (1888) sheds light on the cultural politics of this key decadent author's approach to translation. Here Pater famously argued that the literary artist must be "of necessity a scholar" whose task is to study and observe the rules of language in the most correct way possible.¹² Pater's ideal example of the scholar/writer was Flaubert, whose notorious quest for *le mot just* – "the unique word, phrase, sentence . . . absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within" (29) – made him the "martyr of literary style" (27)—an image that captured the decadent sensibility that gently pervades this essay, in which literature is described as "a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain vulgarity in the actual world" (18). Pater's cosmopolitan orientation, evinced by his choice of a French author as the model for a denationalized idea of what counts as good writing, brings him to conceive of languages as hybrid ecosystems that struggle to be contained within the political borders of nations, being the product of "a myriad various minds and contending tongues" (12), and that welcome foreign influences and contamination. As an example of this, Pater cites the assimilation into English of "the phraseology of the great German metaphysical movement" (15) that had taken place over the last fifty years. In a crucial passage, he uses translation as offering a perhaps surprising illustration of what he understands as the freedom of the writer, arguing that the literary artist

is really vindicating his liberty in the making of a vocabulary, an entire system of composition, for himself, his own true manner: and when we speak of the manner of a true master we mean what is essential in his art. . . . The right vocabulary! Translators have not inevitably seen how all-important that is in the work of translation, driving for the most part at idiom or construction; whereas, if the original be first-rate, one's first care should be with its elementary particles, Plato, for instance, being often

reproducible by an exact following, with no variation in structure, of word after word, as the pencil follows a drawing under tracing-paper, so only each word or syllable be not of false colour, to change my illustration a little. (14-15)

Far from being merely a utilitarian task aimed at conveying meaning across the linguistic divide, a good translation practice for Pater shines light on the art of literary composition. Pater chastises translators who concentrate too much on idiom, advocating instead a word-after-word technique focused on capturing the “elementary particles” of literature. In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin too would maintain that the search for “pure language” through translation is aided by a literal rendering that bypasses the constraints of syntax and focuses instead on the word: “For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literariness [Wörtlichkeit] is the arcade” (79). This is why both Benjamin and Pater defend models of translation that respect the foreignness of the original by interfering with its structure as little as possible. Pater’s claim that Plato can be rendered by following the word structure of his sentences is highly disputable from a practical point of view; but what it reveals is Pater’s belief that translation should let the otherness of the foreign text shine through, imprinting the receiving culture with its distinctive stamp, and therefore revealing cultural differences rather than trying to hide them behind the false screen of the idiomatic. To bring home the point about the close relationship between translation and literary style, Pater describes Flaubert’s finding of the *mot juste* as an act of “inspired translation,” building an implicit parallel with the translator’s preoccupation with the individual word, and adding that “all language involves translation from inward to outward” (34). However painfully achieved (the image of Flaubert’s stylistic martyrdom weighs heavily on the essay), translation for Pater is not an ancillary and imitative mode of writing beset by failure, but rather an act of creative freedom that represents, as Bénédicte Coste has argued, “a defining feature of individuality.”¹³ Or, more provocatively still, translation is a mode of writing that

unmasks the fiction of individuality, which plays such an important role in the determining hierarchies of literary value.

In this respect, the argument in “Style” anticipates Pater’s suggestion in *Plato and Platonism* that the thought and “language” of Plato, individual and foundational though they may seem to us looking back on the history of philosophy, are in fact adapted from earlier, anonymous sources: “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in Plato, in spite of his wonderful savour of literary freshness, there is nothing absolutely new: or rather, as in many other very original products of human genius, the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before, or like the animal frame itself, every particle of which has already lived and died many times over.”¹⁴ Rendering Plato word after word into a foreign language, Pater’s imagined translator adds to this palimpsest, in which acts of creating and copying, invention and repetition, blur into each other. By taking care of the transmission of the “particles” of language—an image that is significantly repeated across the two texts—translation becomes a necessary part of the chain through which the polyphonic and collaborative text that crystallizes in Plato in the fourth century BC travels across time and space.

When “Style” came out in the *Fortnightly Review* in December 1888, the essay entered the discursive space of Victorian periodical publishing at the height of the Vizetelly trials. At the instigation of the National Vigilance Association, in the autumn of 1888 the publisher of Zola’s English translations had been charged and fined for obscene libel; the following year—when Pater’s essay was republished in book form in *Appreciations*—Vizetelly was put on trial again and sentenced to three months’ imprisonment.¹⁵ Flaubert was a very different writer from Zola—the latter was often criticized for a slapdash exuberance of style that was almost the opposite of Flaubert’s meticulous linguistic research. However, as a British critic remarked in 1889, “Flaubert is still by many regarded as one of the high priests

of Zolaism”;¹⁶ meanwhile, the suppression of English translations of Zola that followed the Vizetelly trials deepened a sense of confusion about the admittedly fraught relationship between naturalism and decadence as literatures that deliberately set out to offend public morals. At this moment of crisis, therefore, the topic of translation, especially in relation to modern French fiction, was highly politically charged. In this context, Pater’s suggestion that translations should respect the otherness of foreign literature, stretching the aesthetic and moral boundaries of the culture in which they were received, could be seen to nod approvingly towards Vizetelly’s transgressive use of translation, while nodding back disapprovingly, in a characteristically oblique way, to Matthew Arnold’s advocacy of strategies of domestication and standardization in his public controversy with Francis Newman, in the early 1860s, over translations of Homer.¹⁷

To gain a deeper insight into the cultural politics of Pater’s English model of foreignizing translation, we just need to go back to the article on the enduring “bad name” of translation mentioned earlier. In this same article, in which George H. Ely provided an interesting overview of recent French translations of modern English writers (Pater, Carlyle, Ruskin, H.G. Wells), he rejected Pater’s theory of “word after word” translation formulated in “Style,” defining it as a “dubious, almost fatal, doctrine” (258) and as potentially resulting in “a monstrosity” (263). Ely spoke with some authority, as his own translation of *Les Femmes de la Renaissance* (1898) by the French historian René de Maulde la Clavière had just been published that year. In the article, Ely defended the principle of forceful domestication that he adopted in his own work as translator. Building on Dryden, Ely’s definition of a successful translator was one who was able to “produce upon his reader’s mind the same aesthetic effect as the original would produce on the mind of a person reading it in his native tongue” (262). This illusion of transparency described here, by means of which the translated text ought to capture the style and intent of its author while reading

completely fluently in a foreign language, is, as Lawrence Venuti has argued, a recurrent feature in the production, marketing, and reception of translations in English-speaking countries.¹⁸ According to Venuti, transparency and its corollary, the attempt to reduce the translator to an ideal condition of invisibility—both crucial to theories of translation based on principles of domestication—are symptomatic of an attitude of “complacency” in relations with cultural others, which refuses to understand and respect foreignness (13). In extreme cases, this attitude amounts to a form of cultural violence that can be enlisted in the propagation of ethnocentric values, with potentially troubling political consequences (16 and *passim*).¹⁹ In his attack on Pater, Ely exemplifies the conservative ideology described by Venuti, which co-opts ideas of transparency and invisibility in order to uphold what Ely believes to be “the essential differences between the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon races,—differences in blood and genius, in physical environment and dominant occupations, in modes of thought and literary expression” (263). According to the dominant nineteenth-century ideology of cultural nationalism that Ely espouses, literature was at once the natural expression of the “essential differences” between nations and an *a posteriori* proof that those differences were just and needed to be defended. This is why the task of the translator as Ely understood it was to remove the foreign accent of the original as literature migrated across linguistic and national boundaries; while the task of the *critic* of translation, which Ely fulfils extremely diligently, was to point out linguistic mistakes and inaccuracies arising from the ignorance of English customs that demonstrated that those “essential differences” were an actual, ineluctable fact. Ely objected to Pater’s foreignizing theory because, as he rightly intuited, it led to the potential disruption of cultural codes in the translating language, embodied in the image of the alleged “monstrosity” of the cultural hybrid that comes from word-for-word translation.²⁰ His own technique of domestication, on the other hand, kept

borders more tidily in place just as it overtly enabled the flow of ideas from one country to another.

It is significant that, of the various works under review, the French translation of Pater was precisely the one that Ely found most unsatisfactory—indeed it is impossible not to suspect that his irritation with this particular work was the original trigger for the article. Ely saw Georges Khnopff's recent, allegedly faulty translation (1899) of the *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) as illustrating the dangers of the word-after-word method advocated in "Style" and, in order to demonstrate his argument, he cited multiple examples of incorrect translation: "Sebastian von Storck, Mr. Pater tells us, 'made light of his distress,' and M. Khnopff forthwith writes, 'turned his distress into flame.' The somnolent old Duke of Rosenmold used to 'nod early' at his council-board, and the translator is himself caught napping when he renders, '*se contentait d'un signe de tête, bien vite*'" (258), etc. The Belgian Khnopff was not only a prolific author of translations (including Oscar Wilde's *La Maison des grenades*, 1902), but a key mediator of foreign literatures in French-speaking Symbolist circles and promoter of literary cosmopolitanism. His *Portraits imaginaires* (1899) was the first translation of Pater into French.²¹ Therefore, as Clément Dessy has argued, the excessive fidelity of which Ely accuses Khnopff here should in fact be seen as a deliberate refusal to "gallicize" Pater's text and as reflecting Khnopff's Symbolist-inspired linguistic experimentalism and his ambiguous position as a French-speaking Belgian in the French literary field.²² Or, in Venuti's terms, Khnopff resisted being cast in the role of the invisible translator by placing his translation outside and across the allegedly essential national differences that literature, according to cultural nationalists like Ely, was supposed to uphold. Practiced in this way, translation reinforced the cosmopolitan and culturally transgressive mission of Symbolism, in whose circles Khnopff moved (his translation of the *Imaginary Portraits* came out with the publishing house of the *Mercure de France*, which had close ties

with the Symbolist movement). Back in Britain, it may seem logical that Ely should try to defend and, as it were, patriotically reclaim Pater from this misappropriation of his work, especially as Ely's article was published in the pages of *Macmillan's Magazine*—the very same venue where Pater's short stories had first appeared in periodical form. In actual fact, however, Ely claimed that "Mr. Pater must share the blame with M. Khnopff" for the latter's translation mistakes, and, in support of this claim, cited Arthur Symons's dictum that Pater's prose in the *Imaginary Portraits* "smacked of the French soil" (258). In other words, Ely insinuated that Khnopff might have failed as a translator because Pater's original was itself somehow corrupted—a cultural and even linguistic hybrid, only partially at home in a normative version of literary English: the foreignizing French translation thus perversely mirrored a translational quality that was already present in the source text, distorting it further.

The conservative cultural politics behind Ely's attack on foreignizing practices becomes even clearer if we read his article in *Macmillan's Magazine* in relation to his near-contemporaneous translation of La Clavière's *Women of the Renaissance* (1900). La Clavière's book investigated the social life and biographies of notable women in sixteenth-century France and Italy, suggesting that the flowering of Renaissance art and culture could be seen as the product of an intensification of the feminine influence. While La Clavière overtly approached his topic with the objective gaze of the historian, he in fact presented the intertwined narrative of female emancipation and development of a cult of beauty as inevitably doomed to failure in the Renaissance and, one must infer, in the present: silently leaning on the contemporary idiom of degeneration, he described the feminine influence on Renaissance culture as "soft and enervating" and a "disease of sensibility,"²³ in short, as causing a period of decadence that was later quashed by a masculine, skeptical, and anti-cosmopolitan reaction in seventeenth-century France. La Clavière established an open

dialogue with nineteenth-century British culture by making multiple references to Ruskin and to the New Woman movement, whose radical handling of the woman question prompted, as he admitted in the introduction, his own historical investigation.²⁴ In rendering the book into English, Ely brought out the Englishness and topicality of the source text by making a series of micro-interventions that boosted his strategy of domestication. For example, he substituted the original subtitle of the book, *vers le bonheur!* (literally “towards happiness”) with his own subtitle *A Study of Feminism*, which, by the anachronistic use of the word “feminism,” emphasized its relevance to the modern age. Most pointedly, he dedicated his translation to the outspokenly anti-decadent William Ernest Henley. Translated into English, *Les Femmes de la Renaissance* thus became an intervention into the domestic debate on decadence, which took sides against the progressive twinning of decadent aestheticism and the female emancipation cause. In the context of 1900 Britain, where the scar of the Wilde trials was still fresh, La Clavière’s story of the rise and fall of a decadent, feminized Renaissance read like a warning against the effeminate culture of aestheticism, the more so since his theories were founded on an essential binarism between the supposed “masculinism of Anglo-Saxon countries” and “feminism of Latin countries,” which Ely helpfully glossed in synthetic form in his summary of contents, another domesticating intervention of the translator absent from the source text.²⁵ Cultural effeminacy therefore appeared particularly perverse in Britain, rooted as that country supposedly was in an alleged natural dominance of the masculine spirit. Pater, the writer who had first established the strong connection between Renaissance art and aestheticism and decadence, was an unnamed but obvious target of this critique.

Coming back to the article in *Macmillan’s Magazine*, therefore, it is now easier to see that here Ely pursued the attack on Pater’s decadent legacy that he had undertaken by translating La Clavière. Pater’s theory of word-for-word translation was inextricably bound with decadence in Ely’s eyes. Indeed, analyzing a specific passage of Pater’s critical prose in

“Style,” Ely rhetorically asked: “Does not this repetition, this ‘damnable iteration’ of assonant syllables and cadences, suggest that the writer was too greatly preoccupied with single words to attend to the general construction and rhythm” (258-59)? Intentionally or not, this critique echoed Paul Bourget’s famous definition of the decadent style in *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883), translated into English by Havelock Ellis in 1898, as one in which “the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word.”²⁶ Ely found that Pater’s privileging of the word above syntax, whether in his theory of translation or in his critical prose, disrupted the organic integrity of language that made it the foundational element of a national literature and a national identity. Especially perverse in this sense was the way in which writing in the native language followed the same principles as a foreignizing style of translation. This is why there was more than just linguistic accuracy at stake in correcting the mistakes of Pater’s word-after-word method in “Style:” Pater’s translational style was a decadent style that needed to be exposed as such.

2. Born in Translation

We have seen that, in presenting a successful literary style as a form of “inspired translation,” Pater radically repositioned translation as a source of individuality in writing, within a broader theory of literary style that rejected ideas of cultural nationalism. Ever receptive to Pater’s ideas, Wilde wrote to Henley, within days of the first publication of “Style,” that “to learn how to write English prose I have studied the prose of France. . . . Yes! Flaubert is my master, and when I get on with my translation of the *Tentation* I shall be Flaubert II, *Roi par grâce de Dieu*, and I hope something else beyond.”²⁷ Wilde’s preference for the *Tentation de Saint Antoine* displays a more openly—perhaps more affectedly—decadent taste than Pater’s,

for, in this highly wrought tale set in late antiquity, Flaubert described the psychological struggle of a tortured soul in the ornate style and static plot structure that would come to be seen as typical of decadent literature. In *A Rebours* (1884), a work that Wilde knew well, J.-K. Huysmans had canonized the *Tentation* as a classic of modern decadence: reviewing modern French literature through the prism of his perverse taste, the novel's hero Des Esseintes claimed that the *Tentation* showed Flaubert in "a state of mind analogous to his own";²⁸ and he associated the style of Flaubert's novel with the decomposition of the French language and "the decadence of French literature" that he triumphantly witnessed around him in the *fin de siècle*.²⁹

In the event, however, it was not Wilde who produced the first English version of Flaubert's *Tentation* but the barrister D.F. Hannigan who, in the year of Wilde's trial, framed the *Tentation* as a naturalistic exploration of human psychology "from the standpoint of modern science."³⁰ Years later, the *Tentation* started to acquire a more distinctly decadent voice in English, first in a version by G.F. Monkshood (1910) published without paratextual guidance as part of the decadent-leaning Lotus Library, and then in a translation by René Francis based on an earlier manuscript, which openly domesticated Flaubert by deliberately suppressing the "baffling modernism of language" of the French text, opting instead for a "semi-Biblical phraseology" familiar to English readers.³¹ It is perhaps because of this stylistic choice that W.B. Yeats, on reading Francis's translation, was immediately struck by its resemblance to Wilde's *Salomé* and commented on the shaping influence of Flaubert's decadence on "what is most typical in our generation."³² He added: "Flaubert has made enough fabulous beasts to make the wilderness of romance terrible for another hundred years."³³

The *Tentation* certainly cast its decadent spell on Lafcadio Hearn, another Irish writer whose sustained dialogue with aestheticism and decadence is starting to receive attention

from literary critics.³⁴ Hearn is best known today for his Japanese writings, but he was also a prolific translator of modern French literature,³⁵ including the first English version (1882) of Théophile Gautier's fantastic stories. In the early 1880s Hearn also composed a complete translation of the *Tentation de Saint Antoine* which he, however, failed to get published, and which only saw the light of day after his death in 1910. The translation was edited by Hearn's former friend Elizabeth Bisland, who also curated Hearn's posthumous reputation by publishing a biography and selected correspondence. In bringing out Hearn's translation, Bisland did more than add an alternative to the existing English versions: she reclaimed the visibility and agency of the decadent translator and, in this process, she co-opted both Hearn and Flaubert as part of what Kristin Mahoney has called post-Victorian decadence.³⁶ The delayed publication of Flaubert's novel, in other words, activated a decadent network in which Bisland also participated with her own work as essayist and novelist, for instance the collection *At the Sign of the Hobby Horse* (1910), which was also published that same year.

Bisland's introduction to Hearn's *Tentation* was simultaneously a subtle critique of Hearn's decadent identity and an eloquent defense of the autonomous form of decadent translation. She achieved this by taking the highly unusual step of drawing a double portrait of Flaubert and Hearn in which translation is understood as a form of kinship between two writers, exploding the fiction of individuality of the literary text. Hearn was painfully aware that translators were penalized by a literary market that did not offer adequate financial rewards for their efforts.³⁷ However, reconstructing his early career, Bisland decided to put aside material concerns in order to present translation as a creative outlet for what she described as Hearn's instinctive indifference for English literature of the Victorian period, with its "large, unacademic freedom of manner" and narrow domestic concerns.³⁸ Bisland depicted the young Hearn working on his versions of Gautier and Flaubert at night, "with the flickering gas jet whistling overhead, and his myopic eyes bent close to the papers which he

covered with beautiful, almost microscopic characters—escaping thus from the crass, raw world about him to delicately and painstakingly turn into English stories of Cleopatra’s cruel, fantastic Egyptian Night’s Entertainment.” Or, alternatively, taking his work into “strange lodgings in gaunt, old half-ruined Creole houses; at the tables of odd little French cafés, or among the queer dishes in obscure Spanish and Chinese restaurants.” Linked to secrecy, transgression, and withdrawal into the self, translation was Hearn’s schooling into a decadent identity: it led the young author, both in mind and body, into a world at the margins of American middle-class propriety, populated by foreign voices, where his intellectual work, far from appearing elitist, mingled naturally with the daily tasks of migrants.

Crucially, Bisland wanted to convey the fact that translation was not a process of loss of self but a productive journey towards the attainment of an individual voice: “in his immersion in the works of these virtuosos of words, in his passionate search for equivalents of the subtle nuances of their phrases, [Hearn] developed his own style. A style full of intricate assonances, of a texture close woven and iridescent.” Hearn’s decadent style—exemplified in the Japanese exotic and supernatural tales with which readers in 1910 would have been familiar—was therefore born in translation: the young Hearn discovered himself by following Flaubert into the “strange” and the “queer” marginal locations of nineteenth-century New Orleans. It is particularly significant in this sense that Hearn’s self-revelation should take place in translating the *Tentation*, which, as Michel Foucault has argued in “Fantasia of the Library” (1967), is itself a book made out of other books. For Foucault, the *Tentation* marked the historical moment in which “[t]he imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books.”³⁹ Foucault did not speak of decadence explicitly but in his analysis we can recognize a number of tropes that are associated with decadent literature, such as the author’s

withdrawal from reality and the emphasis on modes of consumption rather than production: the *Tentation* is the book that consumes books, a decadent archive like Des Esseintes's library in *A Rebours*. In this space of decadent textuality, translation is not conceived of in terms of loss of authenticity or meaning but as a logical extension of the text that already contains within itself modes of reproducibility and transmission. More than that: paraphrasing Benjamin, we could say that, in Bisland's account, "translatability" is the meaning of the text that Hearn found in his close engagement with Flaubert.

Bisland demonstrated the attainment of literary individuality in translation by reducing the distance between Hearn and Flaubert, pointing out natural affinities or what she called spiritual "points of resemblance" that made their textual encounter almost inevitable, until the translator and author appeared as veritable alter egos despite being separated by the gulf of language, space, and time. She noted their shared indifference for useful things and a life of action, their anti-materialism, their curiosity about "poignant sensations, of the sad, the mysterious and the exotic." But what bound Hearn and Flaubert most closely for Bisland was a "nostalgia for the strange, for the unaccustomed, that all born wanderers know":

Fate arranges it for many of them that their lives shall be uneventful, passed in dull, provincial narrowness; but behind these bars the clipped wings of their spirit are always flutteringly spread for light. They know not what they seek, what desire drives them, but a sense of "the great adventure" unachieved keeps them restless until they die. It is such as these, these *voyageurs empationés*, when condemned by fortune to a static existence—who find their outlet in mental wanderings amid the unusual, the grotesque, and the monstrous. Hearn and Flaubert both were at heart nomads, seekers of the unaccustomed; stretching toward immensities of space and time, toward the ghostly, the hidden, the unrealized. Like that wild fantastic *Chimera* of the

“Temptation” each soul declares “*je cherche des parfums nouveaux, des fleurs plus large, des plaisirs inédits.*”

It is significant that the final quotation from the *Tentation* should have travelled to Bisland’s introduction by way of *A Rebours*, where Des Esseintes engages a ventriloquist for a private night-time performance of Flaubert’s dialogue between the Chimera and the Sphinx culminating in this very line. Des Esseintes fancied that, in this grotesque form, the disembodied voice of Flaubert spoke directly to his own “unsatisfied longing for the ideal.”⁴⁰ Now Bisland used the same quotation to subsume Flaubert and Hearn within the decadent affect encapsulated by Symons in his characterization of Mallarmé as “a seeker after something in the world, that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all”—an affect on which Nordau had meanwhile put the indelible stamp of degeneration theory. Bisland reclaims the decadent “longing for the ideal” as an effective category of artistic production and resistance. At the same time, the impossible translational intimacy between Hearn and Flaubert imagined by Bisland also conjured the foundational decadent encounter between Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe of a half century earlier. Speaking of that encounter, Hearn, in an article from his American period, described translation as creating a “reflection” between the two authors, who lived in such different social and cultural circumstances: “the same wild dreams, the same strange despair, the same madness of melancholy, the same idiosyncrasies of style marked the literary character of both writers.”⁴¹ Indeed, Baudelaire remembered that, on first reading Poe, he had had an uncanny experience of seeing, “with horror and delight, not only topics I’d dreamed of, but *sentences* I’d thought of and he had written 20 years before.”⁴² Bisland switched to a similar uncanny register (“the ghostly, the hidden, the unrealized”) in order to situate the productive encounter between translator and author on a special plane where the rules of chronology and traditional patterns of influence do not apply.

As we have seen with Pater, the translational is not only an aesthetic category and a form of radical subjectivity, but a vantage point to probe the limits of a national culture. Therefore, like Baudelaire's Poe, for whom America was "a vast prison in which he ran about with the fevered restlessness of a creature born to breathe the air of a sweeter-scented world,"⁴³ Bisland's Hearn was at once a critic and a victim of America's materialism and its hypocritical puritan morality, which Bisland dubs a "state of provincial propriety." Hearn was aware that his determination to preserve the integrity of the original put him at odds with the tastes and publishing conventions of his host country. He admitted to a correspondent that the work was "audacious in parts," but he did not want anything suppressed: "That serpent-scene, the crucified lions, the breaking of the chair of gold, the hideous battles about Carthage,—these pages contain pictures that ought not to remain entombed in a foreign museum."⁴⁴ Hearn's refusal to domesticate Flaubert placed his translation outside the boundaries of the culturally acceptable, as his failure to find a publisher testifies. In bringing it out, Bisland not only consecrated Hearn's translation of the *Tentation* as a decadent classic: like Pater, she also mounted a defense of the translational as a core feature of the aesthetic and political identity of decadent literature.

3. Conclusion

Within the active culture of translation at the turn of the century, decadence provided a space of creative freedom and critical intervention for authors interested in forms of belatedness and cultural contamination, such as Pater, Hearn, and Bisland. This is why paying attention to how translation was theorized, practiced, and received casts light on a much broader spectrum of issues than the ability to convey literary content efficiently from one language to another. It enables us to understand decadent attitudes towards literary language, aesthetic values, and canon-formation, and to reconstruct textual networks such as the Pater-Ely-

Khnopff-La Clavière and the Flaubert-Hearn-Huysmans-Bisland ones analyzed here, where domestic and foreign voices, canonical and marginalized writers, entered into productive entangled formations.

Nearly one hundred years after Benjamin's plea to treat translation as an autonomous literary form, and despite the growth of translation studies over the last three decades, critics of Victorian literature are still largely reluctant to adopt the change in attitude advocated by Benjamin. There are of course notable exceptions, especially within the sub-field of Victorian poetry.⁴⁵ However, literary histories of the period still rarely integrate the production and circulation of translations within surveys of "original" literature written in English; the study of technical innovations in translation is regarded as a specialist interest, marginal to mainstream approaches to literary form; most translators' names remain all but unknown; and, in the case of authors who were also translators, such as Hearn, their translations hold an inferior status in relation to the other branches of their literary output. The emphasis here has been on unearthing a progressive culture that reclaims the visibility of the decadent translator in order to safeguard an ethics of the otherness of the foreign text, and that assumes a translational stance in order to question dominant models of literary subjectivity and nationalist cultural politics. However, attention should also be paid to the problematic politics of cultural appropriation, especially in the colonial context, and to the ways in which translation could and, indeed, was used to bolster cultural nationalism and reactionary politics. Translation can forward our understanding of Victorian literacy by bringing to light new agents and mediators, decentering our critical focus on a deceptively monolingual British metropolis and revealing transcultural alliances and tensions, as well as unexpected contemporaneities that come into being as works from the past emerged to the consciousness of Victorian readers. As such, translation provides insights into both the openness of Victorian culture and its others – misunderstandings and points of blockage in the

international flow of ideas. It lends itself both to close and distant readings that concentrate respectively on textual detail and microhistories, and on broader trends and patterns of transmission. What would a map of Victorian literature look like if we reinserted translations alongside works that were originally published in English? This is a question that is especially worth asking now, as the hegemonic status of English within literary studies risks to obscure its rich history of engagement with other languages and cultures.

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Notes

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¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 72, 73. All subsequent references to this work are noted parenthetically in the text.

² “The imperfection of languages consists in their plurality, the supreme one is lacking: thinking is writing without accessories or even whispering, the immortal word still remains silent; the diversity of idioms on earth prevents everybody from uttering the words which otherwise, at one single stroke, would materialize as truth.”

³ Arthur Symons, “Decadent Movement,” 175. Symons is quoting Pater’s “A Prince of Court Painters,” 79.

⁴ For a succinct overview, see Kenneth Haynes, “Translation and British literary Culture.”

⁵ In “The Heinemann International Library,” Kathy Rees gives a balanced assessment of this series in the context of the Victorian translation book market.

⁶ Between 1893 and 1895, the Lutetian Society issued *L’Assommoir*, translated by Symons; *Nana*, by Victor Plarr; *La Curée*, by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos; *La Terre*, by Ernest Dowson; *Germinal*, by Havelock Ellis; and *Pot-Bouille*, by Percy Pinkerton. They printed 300 copies of each on Arnold’s hand-made paper, as well as ten copies on Japanese vellum, for private distribution amongst the Society’s members.

⁷ George H. Ely, “French and English,” 257. All subsequent references to this work are noted parenthetically in the text.

⁸ Wail S. Hassan, "Agency and Translational Literature," 754. See also Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated*; and Matthew Reynolds, *Translation*, 102-20.

⁹ Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence, Globalization*; Matthew Potolsky, *Decadent Republic*.

¹⁰ See, among others, Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone*; André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*; Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*.

¹¹ Cf. Chris Snodgrass, "The Poetry of the 1890s," 324.

¹² Walter Pater, "Style," 12. All subsequent references to this work are noted parenthetically in the text.

¹³ Bénédicte Coste, "Pater as Translator," 49.

¹⁴ Pater, "Plato and the Doctrine of Motion," 8.

¹⁵ Information about the Vizetelly trials comes from Anthony Cummins, "Émile Zola's cheap English Dress." Cummins persuasively argues that the outcome of the Vizetelly trials was motivated by a class-biased wish to screen an allegedly vulnerable British mass readership, as French versions of Zola's novels were still permitted to circulate freely in Britain after the suppression of their English translations.

¹⁶ W.P.J., "The Nemesis of Sentimentalism," 191.

¹⁷ Matthew Arnold, "On Translating Homer." On the ideological tension between Newman's foreignizing and Arnold's domesticating positions see Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, 99-120.

¹⁸ Lawrence Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, 1 ff. All subsequent references to this work are noted parenthetically in the text.

¹⁹ Venuti analyses the complex involvement of translation in nineteenth-century theories of nationalism in "Local Contingencies: Translation and national Identities."

²⁰ Cf. Venuti, *Translator's Invisibility*, 15.

²¹ Khnopff had already published his translation of “Sebastian van Storck” in periodical form, in the *Mercure de France*, in July 1898. See Emily Eells, ““Influence Occulte,”” 89.

²² Clément Dessy, “Georges Khnopff,” 56.

²³ René de Maulde la Clavière, *Women of the Renaissance*, 476 and 480. Ely would go on to translate more works by la Clavière in the following years.

²⁴ La Clavière, *Women of the Renaissance*, 1. “The woman question – what is more absorbing? . . . They ought to have votes – that, it appears, forms one element of happiness. Many people in England are even dreaming of suppressing marriage; and it must be observed that, as Englishmen largely expatriate themselves, there is no lack of involuntary spinsters, who are by no means the least ardent in prosecuting the campaign.”

²⁵ La Clavière, *Women of the Renaissance*, xi.

²⁶ Havelock Ellis, “Huysmans,” 180.

²⁷ Oscar Wilde to W.E. Henley, [? December 1888], in *Complete Letters*, 372.

²⁸ J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 181.

²⁹ J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 199.

³⁰ D. F. Hannigan, “Introduction” to Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of St Antony*, vii.

³¹ René Francis, “Translator’s Preface” to *The first Temptation of Saint Anthony by Gustave Flaubert*, 54.

³² Yeats to René Francis, *Letters*, 562.

³³ Yeats, *Letters*, 562.

³⁴ See Catherine Maxwell’s chapter “Scent, the Body, and the Cosmopolitan *Flaireur*: John Addington Symonds and Lafcadio Hearn,” in *Scents and Sensibility*, 135-81; and my “Symphonies in Haze and Blue: Lafcadio Hearn and the Colours of Japan.”

³⁵ Bernadette Lemoine, “Lafcadio Hearn as an Ambassador of French Literature.” Lemoine’s focus is mostly on Gautier.

³⁶ Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of post-Victorian Decadence*.

³⁷ See Lafcadio Hearn, “For the Sum of \$ 25.”

³⁸ Elizabeth Bisland, “Introduction” to Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Since Bisland’s text is not paginated, subsequent references in the text appear without page number.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, “Fantasia of the Library,” 91.

⁴⁰ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 114-15.

⁴¹ Lafcadio Hearn, “A French Translation of Edgar Allan Poe,” 64. The article originally appeared in the New Orleans *Item* on 22 October 1879.

⁴² Charles Baudelaire to Théophile Thoré [about 20 June 1864], in *Selected Letters*, 204.

⁴³ Charles Baudelaire, “Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Works,” 70. The essay was first published as “Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et ses ouvrages” in the *Revue de Paris*, March and April 1852; it was then reprinted in revised form as an introduction to Baudelaire’s translation of Poe’s *Histoires extraordinaires* (1856).

⁴⁴ Hearn to Jerome A. Hart, January 1883; in Elizabeth Bisland, *Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, 1:249.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry*; Yopie Prins, *Ladies’ Greek*; Matthew Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation*; and Lesa Scholl, *Translation, Authorship, and the Victorian Professional Woman*.