BRECHT DE GROOTE

Thomas De Quincey, Translation, and the “Philosophy of Reconstruction”

Mrs. Dangle Mr. Dangle, here are two very civil gentlemen trying to make themselves understood, and I don't know which is the interpreter.

Mr. Dangle Egad, I think the interpreter is the hardest to be understood of the two.¹

Mr. De Quincey The unit itself that should facilitate . . . becomes itself elusive of the mental grasp: it comes in as an interpreter; and (as in some other cases) the interpreter is hardest to be understood of the two.²

THOMAS DE QUINCEY'S TRANSLATIONS HAVE OFTEN BEEN REGARDED AS little more than supporting acts to his far more compelling original work. The strongest expression of this view may be traced back to the very beginnings of comparative Romanticist scholarship.³ When René Wellek briefly considers De Quincey's translations of German idealist authors in his seminal *Immanuel Kant in England*, he faintly praises De Quincey for his “comparative exactness of reproduction,” but castigates him for his “preposterous conclusions” and “gross misunderstanding of the purpose of

1. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Critic: Or, a Tragedy Rehearsed: A Farce*, ed. G. A. Aitken (London: J. M. Dent, 1897), 31–32.

2. De Quincey, “System of the Heavens, as Revealed by Lord Rosse's Telescopes,” in vol. 14 of *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999–2003), 401. References to De Quincey's collected works will hereafter be cited as *Works*, along with an indication of the corresponding volume.

3. Albert Goldman goes even further, dismissing De Quincey's penchant for translation as evidence of his hackishness: “what De Quincey has done,” he wrote, “must be regarded as plagiarism of the most flagrant sort.” See Goldman, *The Mine and the Mint: Sources for the Writings of Thomas De Quincey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 9.

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Kantian philosophy.”⁴ All in all, he concludes, De Quincey’s “hopelessly erratic and eccentric” essays on the intersecting topics of translation, literature, and language are “rightly forgotten”: no one could possibly “extract a coherent scheme of ideas from the multifarious and confessedly casual utterances of De Quincey.”⁵ The best defense of a contrary view, and the best illustration of its continuing rarity, is still to be found in Frederick Burwick’s work. As early as 1968, Burwick expressed his surprise at the critical neglect of De Quincey’s direct and indirect translations, urging “a careful comparative study.”⁶ It is almost solely in French and German criticism that his exhortation has hitherto found a receptive audience, spurred on by Baudelaire’s influential translation of De Quincey in *Les Paradis Artificiels* and De Quincey’s close engagement with the German idealists.⁷ While English-language criticism has long expanded its compass from De Quincey’s biographic essays to include his philosophical, political, and rhetorical writings, his translations generally continue to be either ignored or mentioned only in passing. On those rare occasions that De Quincey’s translations come in for analysis, they are barely acknowledged as translations: Josephine McDonagh, for instance, prefaces her analysis of De Quincey’s version of Herder’s *Laokoon* with a declaration that her “interest is not in comparing the two texts, but rather in the point that De Quincey’s version presents a theoretical outline for [his] aesthetic of force.”⁸

Yet De Quincey did translate plentifully, and he did so to a purpose that exceeds the straightforward transfer of information: he translated in search of his identity as an author. He announces as much in his 1821 “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater,” his deeply self-conscious entry onto the literary scene. This text presents its author not as a creative visionary in the Wordsworthian vein, but as a commentator, explicator, and translator.

4. Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England, 1793–1838* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931), 175, 181.

5. Wellek, “De Quincey’s Status in the History of Ideas,” *Philological Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1944): 270, 268, 248.

6. Burwick, “The Dream-Visions of Jean Paul and Thomas De Quincey,” *Comparative Literature* 20, no. 1 (1968): 3.

7. See Éric Dayre, *L’absolu comparé: Littérature et traduction: Une séquence moderne: Coleridge, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Rimbaud* (Paris: Hermann, 2009). In German studies, see Patrick Bridgwater, *De Quincey’s Gothic Masquerade* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), esp. 46–59 and 105–56.

8. McDonagh, *De Quincey’s Disciplines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 139. Hereafter cited as *Disciplines*. For another good example of a critical analysis of De Quincey’s translations, see Joel Black, “Confession, Digression, Gravitation: Thomas De Quincey’s German Connection,” in *Thomas De Quincey: Bicentenary Studies* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), ed. Lance Robert Snyder, 308–37.

De Quincey highlights his “classical attainments . . . owing to the practice of daily reading off the newspaper into the best Greek I could furnish *extempore*,” and further emphasizes his credentials by packing two specific pieces of luggage when he departs on a walking tour of Wales, a journey designed to confirm him in his literary ambitions: “a favorite English poet in one pocket; and a small 12 mo. volume, containing about nine plays of Euripides, in the other.”⁹ The “Confessions,” that is, imagine their authorial voice to be one that quite literally issues from a space in between two languages, genres, and cultures. De Quincey accordingly sets out to translate voraciously, choosing as his specialization German (pre-)Romanticism: Kant, Schiller, Lessing, and Jean Paul, for instance, as well as lesser-known writers like Niebuhr, Wasianski, and Laun. However, after a five-year flurry of activity, which culminates in 1824, in an intricately self-conscious rendition of Willibald Alexis’s *Walladmor*, De Quincey suspends most of his direct translations: he continues larding his texts with quotations from foreign texts, and he continues holding forth on the certain benefits of translation, but his output slows to a trickle.¹⁰ This does not mean that translation releases its hold on De Quincey; it just passes into a compositional principle that comes to determine all his writing.

The question of what mode of reading might be appropriate to De Quincey’s reconfiguration of translatorship as authorship last attracted significant attention in 2000, in a brief yet vigorous exchange between Paul Youngquist and Charles Rzepka in the letters section of the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*. Their discussion centers on the status of “The Last Days of Immanuel Kant,” a long essay detailing the German philosopher’s final moments, first published in 1827. While this piece has long been a mainstay of De Quincey scholarship, few commentators have devoted attention to its curious position as an essay that is not an original composition, and indeed quite explicitly warns against being read as such. De Quincey repeatedly and accurately notes that his text is a translated summary, “gathered from the German” of “Wasianski’s account . . . checked and supported by the collateral testimonies of Jachmann, Rink, Borowski, and other biographers.”¹¹ He accordingly flags most of his inter-

9. De Quincey, “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater: Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar,” in vol. 2 of *Works*, 17–18. Hereafter cited as “Confessions.”

10. See Brecht de Groote and Tom Toremans, “From Alexis to Scott and De Quincey: *Walladmor* and the Irony of Pseudotranslation,” *Essays in Romanticism* 21, no. 2: 107–23.

11. De Quincey, “Gallery of the German Prose Classics by the English Opium-Eater: No. III—Kant,” in vol. 6 of *Works*, 75. Hereafter cited as “Last Days.” De Quincey’s main source is Ehregott Andreas Christoph Wasianski, *Immanuel Kant in seinen letzten Lebensjahren: Ein Beytrag zur Kenntniß seines Charakters und häuslichen Lebens aus dem täglichen Umgange mit ihm*, vol. 3 of *Über Immanuel Kant* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1804). References to this text are included in the citations for De Quincey’s translation, preceded by a comma.

ventions as such: he separates his own preface from the main body and restricts his corrections to footnotes which emphasize the non-coincidence of translator and author in naming the latter as “the author” or “Mr. Wasianski.” And yet some critical examinations persist in disregarding these signals, at most indicating that De Quincey tells his story from the perspective of one Andreas Wasianski, who is thereby demoted to a narrative device.¹²

Youngquist, too, creatively misreads “The Last Days of Immanuel Kant” as a pseudo-translation. He downgrades Wasianski to “De Quincey’s primary source,” and goes on to ascribe to De Quincey several pregnant passages that are virtual copies of the German original. Having thus situated the text in De Quincey’s oeuvre, which he accurately notes is permeated by an “antipathy for things Kantian,” Youngquist contends that “The Last Days” serves as an elaborate satire of Kant’s failure to account for embodied experience.¹³ So pronounced is Youngquist’s reliance on De Quincey’s authorship that Rzepka, when he points out the misattribution, immediately adds that De Quincey’s “faithful adherence to Wasianski” essentially “invalidates much of Youngquist’s argument.” In his response, Youngquist flatly rejects the notion that misidentification amounts to falsification, arguing that Rzepka’s denial of De Quincey’s authorship reflects “a larger institutional issue,” whereby some critics employ “bibliographic criticism” in order to “protect . . . traditional beliefs and practices against unmannerly encroachments.” Aligning his own, self-avowedly counter-bibliographic reading with De Quincey’s counter-Kantian thought, he argues that the bibliographical set exhibit “exactly the attitude Kant’s philosophy takes to the unruly life of the body.”¹⁴ The inverse might also be argued: after all, Youngquist’s argument that De Quincey aims to critique a lacking conception of materiality itself proceeds from a Kantian erasure of the material history of the text.

Borowski and Jachmann respectively wrote the first and the second volumes for the three-volume series in which Wasianski published his account. Rink is the author of *Ansichten aus Kants Leben* (Königsberg: Göbbels & Unzer, 1805).

12. Bruno Clément, “Kant est-il mort comme il a vécu? A-t-il vécu comme il a écrit?,” *Vie philosophique et vies de philosophes*, ed. Bruno Clément and Christian Trottmann (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2010), 79–94.

13. Youngquist, “De Quincey’s Crazy Body,” *PMLA* 114, no. 3 (1999): 347, 350. In a later book, Youngquist corrects the misattribution, but does not otherwise revise his analysis. See “Crazy Body,” *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 109–26. On the connections between Kant and De Quincey with regard to materiality and embodiment, see David L. Clark, “We ‘Other Prussians’: Bodies and Pleasures in De Quincey and Kant,” *European Romantic Review* 14, no. 2 (2003): 261–87.

14. Rzepka and Youngquist, “De Quincey and Kant,” *PMLA* 115, no. 1 (2000): 93–94

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The debate on the exact status of “The Last Days of Immanuel Kant” outlined above neatly retraces the tense space of paradox in which De Quincey seeks to position his translatorial authorship. Translation divides against itself, uncomfortably straddling the critically irreconcilable categories of imitation and invention. While it is true that translation achieves no more than a reproduction, and is generally composed and read as strictly ancillary, as a more or less transparent window into a superior original, it is manifestly *also* true that translation produces an entirely new text, both in that one idiom is substituted for another, and in that the text is relocated to a new context, in which previously unavailable readings are unlocked. On the former—reproductive reading—the translator absolutely signs away any claim to authorship and ownership. In keeping with this demand for self-erasure, De Quincey submits to the precedence of Wasianski, limiting his appropriation to a select few emendations. This strategy is manifest even to readers with little ear for German echoes: Youngquist observes that the “antipathy for things Kantian rings less clear in ‘Last Days’ than elsewhere.”¹⁵ By contrast, on the latter—creative reading—the translation absolutely displaces the original, since it “belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original.”¹⁶ By virtue of its association with De Quincey, Wasianski’s thanatography discovers a hidden capacity for criticism: while Wasianski, Kant’s onetime amanuensis and eventual executor, adopts a tone of earnest pathos, De Quincey’s previous and future essays mark him out as a fierce critic of the transcendental circumscription of the noumenal. “For two or three years before I had mastered the language of Kant,” De Quincey recalls in a typical passage, the three *Critiques* “had been a pole-star to my hopes, and . . . the luminous guide to my future life—as a life dedicated and set apart to philosophy.” However,

at least ten long years after I came into a condition of valuing its true pretensions and measuring its capacities, this same philosophy shed the gloom of something like misanthropy upon my views . . . for man was an abject animal, if the limitations which Kant assigned to his speculative reason were as absolute and hopeless as, under his scheme . . . too evidently they were. I belonged to a reptile race if the wings by which we seemed to mount . . . were indeed the fantastic delusions which he represented them.¹⁷

15. Youngquist, “De Quincey’s Crazy Body,” 350.

16. Paul de Man, “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 85.

17. De Quincey, “Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater,” in vol. 10 of *Works*, 164–65. Hereafter cited as “Autobiography.”

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When Wasianski describes Kant in piteous decrepitude of mind and body, “push[ing] away the bedclothes and expos[ing] his person,” and “seldom [knowing] any of us who were about him,” he fully appears to do so out of a documentary and sympathetic interest (“Last Days,” 104, 107). When De Quincey transposes these words to English, however, occasionally adding in asides that heighten the potential for humiliation, like when he pictures Kant as “silent or babbling childishly, self-involved and torpidly abstracted, or else busy with self-created phantoms and delusions,” Wasianski’s text receives a new lease of life as a highly charged parody that consciously reverses the trope of the dignified Socratic death (“Last Days,” 103).

Read as an original creation, “The Last Days” viciously satirizes Kant for his purblindness to the material aspects of experience; read as an imitative reproduction, the essay rushes to defend Kantian thought by emphasizing its originator’s humanity. While these readings cannot logically both hold simultaneously, they can be pursued sequentially. De Quincey certainly recommends the latter approach to his readers. When he addresses those who would seek to grasp the logic behind his writings, he urges them to revel in dissonance: he readily allows that his interpreters must experience considerable mental discomfort due to the “scandal of an irreconcilable schism.” He even furnishes a term for the critical quandary at hand: “the *antinomy* it is—the frightful co-existence of the to be and the not to be—*this* it is that agitates and distresses you.” Faced with an antinomic text, readers may be tempted to perform a strategic reduction of the avenues of interpretation—to do so, however, would ultimately amount to little more than a deferral of the issue. “How,” after all, “is that antinomy, which we represent for the moment using the figure of two syllables [*to be* and *not to be*], lessened or reconciled by repeating [only] one of these syllables . . . leaving the secret consciousness to repeat the other?”¹⁸ The antinomic principle of composition that De Quincey here espouses revels in the frightful co-existence of contradictory perspectives, encouraging an interpretation of his translations in acknowledgment of their double filiation.

Read in the dual fashion appropriate to an antinomic conception of authorship, “The Last Days” emerges as a powerful point of entry into the philosophy that undergirds De Quincey’s poetics of translation. While De Quincey acknowledges that Kant, in laying bare the antinomic separation of the noumenal and the phenomenal, has revealed to the modern mind the fundamental structures of its experience, he equally heaps scorn on the sage of Königsberg for his tendency to insulate his thought from the

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18. De Quincey, “Sir William Hamilton: With a Glance at His Logical Reforms,” in vol. 17 of *Works*, 168, my emphases.

full impact of his philosophical revolution. In those essays in which he seems to specify exactly what it is that troubles him in Kant's handling of antinomy, he particularly takes to task the philosopher's application of the antinomic principle to linguistic expression. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant divides language into two entirely incompatible spheres—meaning and form, or eloquence and rhetoric—and subsequently claims that the only way to rescue communication from ceaseless conflict and confusion is to bracket the latter as a “a treacherous art” that is “worthy of no *respect*.”¹⁹ The unforeseen consequence of this restriction, De Quincey laments, is that Kant emerges as a spectacularly inept writer, who “wrote his own language most uncouthly, some would even say *barbarously* . . . without composition or digestion”; “a great man, but . . . obtuse and deaf as an antediluvian boulder with regard to language and its capacities.”²⁰ In a winding passage that parodies the Kantian tendency for circumlocution, he asks of his reader

[h]ow . . . could [Kant] have had any sense for the graces of style, in the largest meaning of that word, that is, for the mode of presenting a subject, of effecting the transitions and connexions, for the artifices by which parts are brought forward into prominent relief, or withdrawn from too conspicuous a situation; for the arts of preparation, of recapitulation, of peroration, together with the whole world of refinements which belong to a beautiful and impressive diction?—how, I ask, could *he* have had any organ for the perception of all this, who in his own case, and in those works which he most of all designed as the classical monuments of his own power, shews uniformly that, in a question of *manner*, he knows of no higher purpose that a man can, or ought to have, than in any way whatsoever, no matter how clumsily, disordinately, ungracefully—no matter with what perplexity or confusion, tautology or circumlocution, to deliver himself of a meaning?²¹

De Quincey's complaint is not simply that transcendental writing, in its reduction of expression to a poorly regulated outpouring of concentrated meaning, makes for supremely laborious reading. Kant's “tendency to undervalue style” amounts to a flagrant underestimation of the “enormous services that are or might be rendered by style to the interests of truth and human thinking.” If Kant “labored, but vainly . . . labored, to render intelligible the scholastic idea of the transcendental,” it is chiefly because

19. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 172.

20. De Quincey, “On the Present State of the English Language,” in vol. 17 of *Works*,

210. Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to De Quincey are from this essay.

21. De Quincey, “Kant in his Miscellaneous Essays,” in vol. 7 of *Works*, 51. Hereafter cited as “Kant.”

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he failed to attend to the “artifice of style and action.” “It is certain,” De Quincey declares, “that, by throwing the stress and emphasis of the perplexity upon the exact verbal nodus of the problem, a better structure of his sentences would have guided [him] to a readier apprehension of the real shape [of] the difficulty” (“Kant,” 68). Moreover, in regarding form as parergic to sense, and in consequently spurning rhetoric as an inferior “logic of illusion” (171), Kant has cut off his philosophy from a full expression and understanding of the antinomic divisions which it first served to name: Kant has effectively inaugurated a new mode of thinking and being, and thence decided to “go near to abolish” that very same “mode of existence.” (67) The tragic upshot of Kant’s failure of nerve is that those who have fully grasped his discoveries are first shocked out of a unified and coherent experience, and subsequently consigned to dejection when they find themselves forbidden from giving voice to the full structure of their experiences. Following the pattern set out by Wordsworth and Coleridge, the two writers he most sought to emulate in his early career, De Quincey’s “Confessions” therefore explicitly frame the discovery of his authorial identity as the solution to a suspension of the imagination precipitated, in part, by a close study of the “German metaphysics” (“Confessions,” 60).

Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* itself obliquely acknowledges the dire implications of its stylistic preferences in its analysis of hypotyposis, itself not coincidentally “a notion whose origin is most evidently the rhetorical tradition.” The figure of hypotyposis, as Rodolphe Gasché observes, ordinarily designates “a mode of presentation that pictures things so vividly that they appear to present themselves,” and particularly refers to dynamic tableaux in which a complex assembly of individual acts coalesce into a larger, overarching scene. In Kant’s elaboration of the term, hypotyposis specifically indicates a material presentation by means of which the mind presents to itself its own categories and ideas. Since in its apperception of this self-presentation the subject reveals its own concepts, as described by the *Critiques*, the hypotyposis effectively serves as the keystone of Kantian philosophy: “the mind experiences, and feels itself as, a unity, and hence either beautiful and consequently capable of cognition, or as sublime and consequently capable of moral action.”²² This, at least, is the theory: having affirmed the pivotal importance of hypotyposis, Kant is loath to consider the mechanisms for its concrete manifestation in much detail, for fear, as Paul de Man argues, that this might invite a rather closer engagement with

22. Gasché, “Hypotyposis,” *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 207–9.

materiality than his privileging of pure meaning will countenance. To Kant, the hypotypotic presentation names both an absolute necessity and an embarrassing impossibility, then: at once the solution to Kant's woes and "a very difficult problem that . . . threatens philosophical discourse," it comes to name the insurmountable "difficulty of rendering, by means of sensory elements, purely intellectual concepts."²³

In insisting that form and meaning are equally important in linguistic expression, and should therefore both be pursued in the composition and analysis of texts, De Quincey seeks to reanimate the figure of hypotyposis. His aim in doing so is the poetical enactment of a "philosophy of reconstruction," designed to undo the pernicious consequences of Kant's theory of language, which has reduced Kantian thought to a "philosophy of destruction [in that it] destroys by wholesale, and substitutes nothing" ("Autobiography," 163). The hypotypotic text achieves a reconstructive presentation of frightful co-existence not so much because it pursues the idle dream of reconciliation, but because it fully develops its capacity for form as well as meaning, and thence organizes a constant traffic between these two poles. De Quincey attracts particular attention to the latter aspect of the antinomic text, since "it is in the *relation* of sentences . . . that the true life of composition resides. The mode of their *nexus*, the way in which one sentence is made to arise out of another, and to prepare the opening for a third: this is the great loom in which the textile process of the moving intellect reveals itself" (65). More concretely, the primary instance of a text that through its style realizes a circular self-presentation of the antinomic mind is the translation. Provided that it is read duplicitously, translation generates a dynamic series of creative or interpretative acts, which, when taken together, demonstrate to the composing or analyzing mind its essential structure, as well as its ability to deftly handle its constitutive divisions.

In further support of the hypotypotic qualities of translation, De Quincey retools the Kantian antinomy of form and meaning into a pseudo-philological apparatus. In this scheme, the glorification of uninhibited expression is not an error exclusive to Kant, nor even to his disciples: all German writers fall prey to the same "capital blunder" (66). "Style, diction, the construction of sentences, are ideas perfectly without meaning to a German writer. If a whole book were made up of a single sentence . . . the true German would see in all *that* no want of art" (64–65). As a result, "a chapter upon German Rhetoric would be in the same ludicrous predicament as [a] chapter on the snakes of Iceland, which delivers its business in

23. de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 153.

one summary sentence announcing that—snakes in Iceland there are none.”²⁴ By contrast, the French, in obeisance to their own “national disposition,” enthusiastically cultivate a highly flowery style, and in so doing “earnestly and sincerely escape” the dead weight of a flabby form:

it is remarkable that grammatical inaccuracies . . . are almost unknown amongst the educated French. . . . the respect which the French show to their language expresses itself chiefly in their way of managing it,—that is, in their attention to style and diction. It is the rarest thing possible to find a French writer erring by sentences too long, too intricate and loaded with clauses, or too clumsy in their structure. . . . French prose composition usually reveals an air of finish, of self-restraint under any possible temptation to *des longueurs*, and of graceful adroitness in the transitions. (63–64)

The French fondness for ornate rhetoric aligns with linguistic materiality; the German love for turgid eloquence privileges sense. In pursuit of his aim to craft a dual style that will dialogue between both these predilections, De Quincey applauds the French for their worldliness and persuasiveness and praises German authors for their intellectualism and spirituality, even as he chides the former for excelling in mainly dull vacuities fit only for “the necessities (for to the French they *are* necessities) of social intercourse,”²⁵ and he repudiates the latter for cobbling together a prose that is altogether “the greatest nuisance, in what concerns the treatment of language, that the mind of man is capable of conceiving” (66). Even worse, in exclusively committing to only one sphere of expression, both nations pursue methods of writing and reading that tautologously confirm only their own preferences: their literary creations may be circularly presentative of the structures of thought, but in copying Kant’s strategic reduction, they entirely fail to achieve a true hypotyposis. “One inevitably thinks of Bardolph’s attempt to analyze and justify the word *accommodation*,” De Quincey muses when he considers such impoverished presentations of co-existence; “‘accommodation, that is, when a man is (as they say) accommodated; or when a man is being whereby he may be thought to be accommodated; which is an excellent thing’” (68).

The only conceivable way, De Quincey muses, to demonstrate to French writers the possibility of a different, Germanic style, or vice versa, is through a “*translated model*” (“Style,” 18). In mediating between French and German, the interpreter demonstrates that writing may yet cross the

24. De Quincey, “Elements of Rhetoric,” in vol. 6 of *Works*, 181. Hereafter cited as “Elements.”

25. De Quincey, “Style,” in vol. 10 of *Works*, 20. Hereafter cited as “Style.”

line that divides language against itself, and thereby effect a fully constituted presentation of post-Kantian experience. De Quincey specifically maps this anti-tautological intervention through the figure of chiasmus, which describes a cross-shaped reversal of properties: he repeatedly notes that the stylistic features of German texts are “precisely the reverse” of their franco-phone counterparts, and that more instances of such reversing pairs may be found throughout world literature (64). Surveying the ancient world for suitable analogues, De Quincey hits on the mirroring contrast between Hebrew eloquence and Greek rhetoric:

Greece was, in fact, *too* ebullient with intellectual activity—an activity too palestric and purely human—, so that the opposite pole of the mind, which points to the mysterious and the spiritual, was, in the Greek, too intensely a child of the earth, starved and palsied; whilst in the Hebrew, dull and inert intellectually, but in his spiritual organs awake and sublime, the case was precisely reversed. . . . The very languages of these two races repeat the same expression of their intellectual differences, and of the differences in their missions. (59)

De Quincey names Jean Paul as his chief source of inspiration for this figure of reversal, but Friedrich Hölderlin, another German idealist, offers a much closer parallel, even if he is apparently unknown to De Quincey. In his translations of Greek literature, Hölderlin frames his methods and objectives through the aphoristic formula “*bei uns ist’s umgekehrt*”: “for us it’s the reverse.”²⁶ That is, Grecian and German literature flip their traits in a pattern that may best be summarized through the duality of such operative terms as “foreign” and “domestic”: “there is a (chiasmic) reversal in the relation of . . . that which is proper or one’s own and that which is foreign, *das Eigene* and *das Fremde*, between the Greeks and us: what is *das Eigene* there is *das Fremde* here, and what is *das Fremde* there is *das Eigene* here.”²⁷

The advantage of chiasmus is that it serves to map out the dynamics of difference even as it avoids totalization.²⁸ De Quincey and Hölderlin accordingly activate the trope of chiasmic reflection in order to effect a sustained presentation of alterity rather than a reduction through sublation or synthesis: hence Hölderlin’s enthusiasm for importing Greek syntax into

26. Hölderlin, “Brief Nr. 237: An Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff,” in vol. 3 of *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe in drei Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992–1994), 460.

27. Andrzej Warminski, “Hölderlin in France,” *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 29.

28. For a discussion of the detotalizing totalization effected by chiasmus, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 28–29.

German, or De Quincey's love of untranslated excerpts, long digressions on the precise meaning of foreign concepts, and interruptive references to Latin, Greek, or German terms.²⁹ As the translator performs interlinguistic comparisons across the gaps laid bare by these demonstrations of difference, he affirms the irresolvable non-coincidence of the foreign and the domestic; more importantly, however, he also comes to appreciate that languages have different balances of strengths and weakness, demonstrating the value of offsetting the faults inherent in one's own idiom by switching to a foreign tongue. Translation effectively serves to incorporate an alien element into the native constitution, inoculating languages against their own worst excesses: "German prolixity and involution are inevitably pruned away by intercourse with French models," and German writers emerge rejuvenated from the encounter, full of new ideas ("Kant," 52). By contrast, those who elect to wallow in exaggerated isolation will slowly exhaust their language, condemning it to ossification. Consider once again the Greeks: while their literature so perfected one of the two branches of style that it may be regarded as "the birth-place of Rhetoric" ("Elements," 160), they ultimately consigned themselves to oblivion, "profound and immovable" as they were in their "self-conceit" when they haughtily dismissed all non-Hellenic languages as bereft of interest:

Having no intellectual intercourse with foreign nations . . . each Hellenic author might be compared with others of his compatriot authors in respect to his management of their common language, but not the language itself compared as to structure or capacities with other languages; since these other languages (one and all) were in any practical sense hardly assumed to exist. . . . Having no temptation or facilities for holding any intellectual intercourse with those who could not communicate through the channel of the Greek language, it followed that the Greeks had no means or opportunity for comparing their own language with the languages of other nations . . . Greece was in the absolute insulation of the phoenix, the unique of birds, that dies without having felt a throb of exultation or a pang of jealousy, because it has exposed its gorgeous plumage and the mysterious solemnities of its beauty only to the dusky recesses of Thebaic deserts. (60–61)

Just as the two chief branches of style may be allegorically transposed onto chiasmic pairs of national languages, so, too, may their higher level translational negotiation. The tremendous powers of translation, De Quincey argues, were first gleaned by the Romans: through their ex-

29. This includes such jarring combinations of Greek, Latin, and English as "*το docendum*, the thing to be taught" ("Style," 21).

tensive familiarity with Greek writing, which presented them with an entirely exotic model of secular prose, Latin authors, at that time still in the throes of superstition, had “a foreign literature before their eyes challenging continual comparison,” and a foreign “language which also challenged comparison with their own.” So receptive were the Romans to the non-native that they founded a style that was always in a state of comparison: even on those occasions that Roman writers appear to speak in an undivided, entirely original Latin, they continue to model their language on the superior feats of others, chief among them the Greeks, whom “the Roman pupils never ceased to regard . . . with veneration. . . . Every Roman of distinction understood Greek; often talked it fluently, declaimed it, and wrote books in it.” Rome, then, is a nation in constant translation: as a result, no Latin text will bear being (re)translated into an ethnocentric idiom. “The Romans had some things in their literature which a Greek could neither have rivaled nor even understood . . . strangely enough, they lose [their] whole effect when translated into Greek: so entirely is it Roman by incommunicable privilege of genius” (62).

This is not to say that languages other than Latin cannot achieve their own version of the Roman genius for translation. Continuing the analogy that he constructed to elucidate the diverging natures of German and French, whose predilections and future trajectories he respectively related to Hebrew and Greek, De Quincey claims that it is the inevitable “destiny” of those who write and think in English to emulate the Roman example: English authors are inherently primed for the poetics of translation, “morbidly impatient of tautology” as they are: “progress and motion—everlasting motion—is a mere necessity of [their] intellect” (“Elements,” 183). In a short, apparently unfinished 1853 essay that announces its programmatic message through its title, “How to Write English,” De Quincey alleges that the English language possesses an as yet largely latent capacity for constant comparison, in that it is endowed with “certain peculiar and inappreciable aptitudes for the highest offices of interpretation.”³⁰ These talents for translation, De Quincey noted in his earlier “On the Present State of the English Language,” largely inhere in the fractured origins of English. While English writing can never hope to effect an accord between the vying Germanic and Romance linguistic families at its base, in acknowledging and cultivating this split heritage, it may prove able to exist, however tensely and precariously, in a “middle position between the French and the Germans” (65). In continually rededicating themselves to

30. De Quincey, “How to Write English: Introductory Paper,” in vol. 18 of *Works*, 48–49. Hereafter cited as “English.” Despite the title, no subsequent paper on this topic was ever published.

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the logic of persistent duplication, English authors may thus ultimately elevate their language from its unsteady Kantian foundations, and guide it towards a fully formed, truly modern Romanticism. This process, moreover, is already underway: “[t]he English language (and, therefore, the English literature) is traveling fast towards the fulfillment of its destiny.”³¹ De Quincey chiefly points to the accelerating spread and rising stature of the language, “by whatever names of ‘colonial’ or ‘national’ it might be varied or disguised,” which has continued unabated even as the Empire has seen its American colonies secede. As English extends its reach beyond its traditional sphere of influence, it will absorb new languages into its structure, and thereby subsume them to its interpretative mission. English, that is, will grow ever more cosmopolitan, so that, ultimately, if “any occasion should arise for a modern congress of the leading nations that represent civilization . . . it would be a matter of mere necessity . . . that the English language should take the station” of universal mediator (“English,” 50–51).

As De Quincey seeks to specify the type of text that will be engendered by the translational reconfiguration of English, he adds to his stylistic historiography two early-modern essayists, Jeremy Taylor and Thomas Browne. Presciently echoing Antoine Berman’s observation that “all great poets of [this] period” are marked by two stylistic currents—“literary and colloquial language, the abstract and the concrete, the old and the new”—which “flow in parallel . . . without ever mixing . . . in a network of mutual translation,”³² De Quincey asserts that Taylor and Browne are chiefly distinguished by their “myriad-mindedness,” their capacity to navigate effortlessly between styles, intertexts, and topics. In these two authors, “first, and, perhaps, . . . in them only,”

are the two opposite forces of eloquent passion and rhetorical fancy brought into an exquisite equilibrium, approaching, receding— attracting, repelling—blending, separating—chasing and chased, as in a fugue, and again lost in a delightful interfusion, so as to create a middle species of composition, more various and stimulating to the understanding than pure eloquence, more gratifying to the affections than naked rhetoric. (“Elements,” 169)

De Quincey here anchors his pseudo-philological framework in what he constructs as the precursor to the modern hypotyposis: arguing that the first traces of the separation between the noumenal and the phenomenal are to be located in the baroque period, he identifies in early-modern artists and

31. De Quincey, “Autobiographic Sketches,” in vol. 19 of *Works*, 366.

32. Berman, *Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne*, ed. and trans. Françoise Massardier-Kenney (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009), 109–13.

authors a concerted effort to articulate and think through the resulting confusion through experiments in fugal and translational composition.³³ Resolving to restore the certainties of the past by emulating the attainments of Latin literature, baroque-era writers essentially replicated the Roman attitude to the exemplary Greeks, establishing a model for aspiring modern-day Romans. More importantly, as these authors gained the confidence to interrupt long stretches of quotation and imitation by brief bursts of invention, and thence increasingly came to detach their work from straightforward reproduction, they infused the principles of interlinguistic comparison into all forms of writing, designing in the process a form of intralinguistic translation that manifests as an interplay of idioms and values through the stylistic traditions they are chiefly associated with. The early-modern presentative text, in short, bridges the gap between Romanticism and antiquity in that it adapts the principles of Roman composition to the nascent modern antinomy.

Jean Paul, the third author whom De Quincey names as an exemplar of superior composition, albeit only in “occasional passages,” is glorified as the one Romantic writer to have truly gleaned the value of embracing the antique and the baroque. The result of this fortuitous combination, De Quincey claims in the preface to his translations of Jean Paul’s short stories, is the first instance of antinomic writing truly equipped to capture the full shock of Kant’s destructive revelations. In his best paragraphs, Jean Paul approaches to the ideal of the constant translator, “the one-headed Janus with two faces,” who interleaves a multitude of languages and styles, all the while evincing considerable “nimbleness in his transitions.” So masterful is his talent for mobility that he entirely escapes any ready description beyond a series of grasping metaphors, all descriptive of a ceaseless process of reinvention and recombination: he is “the harlequin, the Vestris, the storm-loving raven . . . in short, . . . the Proteus, the Ariel, the Mercury, the monster,” possessed of an “activity of understanding, so restless and indefatigable that all attempts to illustrate, or express it adequately . . . are baffled, confounded, and made ridiculous.”³⁴ Like the practice of translation on which it is premised, the “middle species of composition” that Jean Paul has begun to introduce to Romantic writing names no specific style, language, or genre. It is a literary mode that exists only as a principle of transition that extemporaneously adapts to variable circumstances, its name

33. De Quincey’s own experiments with fugal writing reach their apex in “The Vision of Sudden Death,” especially its final section, the “Dream-Fugue.” See “The Vision of Sudden Death,” in vol. 16 of *Works*, 429–89.

34. De Quincey, “John Paul Richter,” in vol. 2 of *Works*, 21–23. “Vestris” here presumably refers to Auguste Vestris, a French ballet dancer (1760–1842).

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merely designating the mobile diction that appears when incommensurable modes of expression are brought into a frightfully productive co-existence.

The preparatory stage of De Quincey's reparative philosophy encompasses an exploration of the principles and paradoxes of translation; the second, more deliberate and impactful stage involves the transposition of these principles onto all forms of literary production and linguistic expression. De Quincey's ambitions ultimately extend even further, however. In a move that repeats and reclaims Kant's effort to achieve a fully constituted philosophical system by converting his epistemology and ethics into a political ideology, De Quincey's poetics eventually come to infiltrate and reshape his politics. The "shrill voice of political reaction"³⁵ that characterizes his notoriously fervid defense of High Tory talking points—complete with the requisite touches of "Tory jingoism, crude orientalism, and imperialist apologetics"³⁶—is thus gradually integrated into what McDonagh calls "a language of balance."³⁷ Musing on the irreparable splitting of political opinion into two antagonist tribes, the conservatives and the reformers, De Quincey notes that the two parties should be regarded in the same way as the antagonist forces that compose the full system of antinomic experience and expression. The British constitution "is sustained in its integrity, by their equilibrium—just as the compound power which maintains a planet in its orbit, is made up of the centripetal force balancing the centrifugal."³⁸ As such, the survival of the nation in modern times requires careful management: as De Quincey writes of Coleridge, his self-declared *doppelgänger*,

[i]n this age of fervent partisanship, it will . . . naturally occur as the first question to inquire after his party and political connexions: was he Whig, Tory, or Radical? Or, under a new classification, were his propensities Conservative or Reforming? I answer that . . . he was none of these; because, as a philosopher, he was, according to circumstances, and according to the object concerned, all of these by turns.³⁹

Whenever De Quincey finds that a particular set of ideas, either for the reactionary or the radical, grows dominant, he counteracts them with tactical code-switching. A hyperbolic condemnation of the French Revolution

35. Josephine McDonagh, "De Quincey, Malthus, and the Anachronism-Effect," *SiR* 44, no. 1 (2005): 64.

36. Charles Rzepka, "The Literature of Power and the Imperial Will: De Quincey's Opium War Essays," *South Central Review* 8, no. 1 (1991): 38.

37. McDonagh, *Disciplines*, 36.

38. De Quincey, "A Tory's Account of Toryism, Whiggism, and Radicalism: In a Letter to a Friend in Bengal," in vol. 9 of *Works*, 395.

39. De Quincey, "Samuel Taylor Coleridge," vol. 10 of *Works*, 339–40.

through a poetical register—"Dread watchword of mystery and fear!—Augury of sorrow to come!—Record of an Iliad of woes!"—may thus incongruously sit alongside a wistful declaration that the author had regrettably not "been old enough to participate, at the first outbreak of the French Revolution (as else, undoubtedly, I should have done)."⁴⁰ De Quincey grounds such arresting shifts in politics and stylistics by broadening his philological theories still further, alleging that progressive preferences correspond to a Frenchified outlook, and that conservative views are characteristic of a Germanic mindset. In a secondary gesture, designed to ensure that the politics of translation neatly close upon themselves, he notes that both these ideologies were, and continue to be, communicated to the British citizenry through the "tremendous galvanism" of "translated books"⁴¹ of French or German provenance, and that Britain may exercise a similar influence on other nations by harnessing the powers of translation.

Languages, styles, histories, nations, and ideologies—all are to be gathered into a densely interconnected and hypotypotic system of antinomic opposition, ceaselessly traversed by a mediative force which in thus shuttling back and forth finally keeps to a middle position. Fully embracing the hypotypotic potential of translation, De Quincey places its structure of irresolvable paradox at the heart of all his writing, transforming his entire oeuvre into a sustained performance of his counter-Kantian philosophy of reconstruction. In so doing, he demonstrates how the nation, like the presentative text and translation, may gradually approach to a Romanticism in full cognizance of its antinomies.

While the intersection of translatorship and authorship has long been a mainstay in studies of the French and especially German Romantics, in many of their British counterparts, as Tom Toremans observes, the "relationship between aesthetics, rhetoric, and translation," stands in urgent "need of closer investigation."⁴² In recentring the interpretation of De Quincey around the core concept of translation, the critical formula outlined above lays out one way in which the critical appraisal of authors ranging from Coleridge and Carlyle to Smith and Hemans may be reconfigured. The final objective of bringing this increased attention to the pivotal position of translation is not to rehearse the well-worn argument that translations are crucial to the transfer and elaboration of new ideas and genres; or to engage in close criticism of the various gestures of adaptation that infiltrate all translations; or even to determine the ruleset that Romantic translators typically abide by. Such approaches ultimately fail to produce

40. De Quincey, "Wordsworth and Southey," in vol. 11 of *Works*, 76.

41. De Quincey, "Schiller," vol. 13 of *Works*, 275.

42. Toremans, "Sartor Resartus and the Rhetoric of Translation," *Translation and Literature* 20 (2011): 61–62.

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transferable or overarching insights because, as Walter Benjamin notes in his seminal essay on literary translation, there is no idiom, structure, or genre that is entirely unique to translation, rendering a stable description of its action exceedingly difficult. Yet even though Benjamin claims that there is “no muse of translation,” he also alleges, albeit in characteristically enigmatic terms, that translation may be cultivated into a distinct “literary mode” which exploits structural possibilities unique to the fraught structure of translation, and that the latter may ultimately serve as the aesthetic grounding for a philosophical project: “there is,” he observes, a “philosophical genius that is characterized by a yearning for that language which manifests itself in translation.”⁴³ It is this creative potential, which inheres in translation’s capacity to organize modes of writing in which language redoubles on itself, that Romantic authors seize upon as they pursue the mode of translation, and that a criticism of Romantic translation strives to elucidate.

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