

Translation as Cultural Technique

Constructing a Translation History of Media

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Abstract

Even though studies at the intersection of translation and media are a burgeoning subfield within translation studies, the integration of media theory into the scholarship on translation remains underdeveloped. Joining a recent surge of interest in adapting media theory to facilitate a broad analysis of the impacts of the technologies that organise and support translation, this article takes up the concept of cultural technique to argue that, just as technological revolutions have reshaped translation practices, translations have structured media systems. Following its exploration of a medial methodology in translation studies which assumes a historicist perspective, the article turns to a set of case studies, all sourced from the Romantic period, which was characterised by a complex attitude to mediality and translation prefigurative of the current digital turn. The cases demonstrate the benefits of a medial view in the study of translation.

1. Introduction: Translation, Technology, Media

Even as professional practices of translation have been decisively reshaped by technological advances, research and teaching in translation studies has been slow to act on this “technological turn.” (O’Hagan 2013) Automation may have been one of the translation industry’s founding ambitions (Weaver 1949; see O’Hagan 2020, 2–4), but recent successes in accomplishing this goal are yet to be “mirrored within translation studies.” (Christensen et al. 2017, 7) By the same token, even academic studies on translation technology have been slow to impact debates on the interplay between technology and translation within the broader academic discipline of translation studies. (Doherty 2016) This is due, in part, to a sense that tools must be implemented if a practitioner’s offerings are to remain commercially viable, even if this does not enhance the quality of their translations. (Chandler 2012) More fundamentally, translators and scholars express doubts regarding the benefits of a projected “posthuman” world (O’Thomas 2017), in that this future would entail not just a disciplinary displacement of “the human factor” (Kaindl 2021, 3), but might well trigger the withering of the profession. (Cronin 2013, 115) Still, even as such misgivings continue to circulate, the pressures of the technosphere are increasingly proving such that scholars of translation feel compelled to study its nature and its influence, slowly working towards a perspective that

seeks to expand what Cronin characterises as the presently “instrumental fashion” of work on “translation technology.” (2003, 10) A key aspect of this work is the development of a conceptual framework which might trace the role of technologies and their interaction with human agents so that pragmatic or specialistic studies can be elaborated into an integrated vision of the technologies that support processes of production and reception.

Acting particularly on studies by Cronin (2017a, 2013, 2003) and Littau (2017, 2016, 2011), the following pages contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on the entanglement of translation and technology by staging a double intervention. I will argue that a vital complement to extant work may be found in a perspective that is (1) *historicist* and (2) *media-theoretical*. To situate these two angles further:

1. While current work on translation and technology examines recent processes of digitisation and automation, this article advocates for a *historicising* perspective which reads the present and future of translation through its past. This view should go well beyond extant accounts of machine translation which locate their historical horizon in the 1940s or 1950s (Rozmysłowicz 2020); beyond even the brief gesture at the seventeenth century which Hutchins includes in his seminal overview. (1995) Throughout the history of translation, translators comment on their reliance on tools and instruments, expressing delight or anxiety

regarding the melding of man and machine. Even the most iconic image in translation studies enshrines the irrepressibility of technological aids: in its classic Renaissance-era depiction, the Tower of Babel is framed by a range of mechanical instruments. “Ladders, levers, pulleys, scaffolding, and implements for cutting and shaping stone litter the construction site. Arguably, the true common language here is technology itself.” (Cronin 2013, 21) Seemingly parergic, and accordingly ignored in translation history even when it ponders the question “how are translations made?” (D’hulst 2010, 402), these appliances grow particularly visible when their innovativeness sparks upheaval. As this article will note, a particularly disorienting effect was triggered by the adaptation of the printing press to mass production in the early nineteenth century: in recognising instances where the accepted models of creation and production are profoundly disarticulated, we may begin to construct a *longue durée* of translation technologies, and grow to understand that the digital revolution, for all its epochal force, is also but the most recent instalment in a longer history.

2. As scholars have sought to reconstruct the determinative potential of technologies, a broadly sociological perspective has typically prevailed. (Olohan 2017) The present article proposes to supplement this approach by developing a *materialist* approach, derived from the media-theoretical work of Friedrich Kittler (1990 and 1994) and its pragmatic rearticulation

by Bernhard Siegert (2015). Kittler in turn develops his theories by applying the provocative but abstruse insights of Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1994/1964) to historical translation, seizing on a small hint in McLuhan regarding the translation-like nature of recording the spoken word through the alphabet. Notwithstanding Kittler's investment in translation, however, his interest for translation studies has been entirely ignored, even among media theorists; more surprisingly still, those scholars like Littau (2016) who *do* note his potential for translation studies fail to note that his work *itself* features recurrent comments on the centrality of translation. The same applies to McLuhan, whose value for translation studies has been fleetingly noted, only to be left hanging. (see Basnett 2014, xvii; Cronin 2013, 22)

There are a number of places to which this article might have turned to facilitate the historicist study of translation and technology-as-media that is envisaged above. Before detailing further its proposal for a media-theoretical approach, and demonstrating its concrete implementation in a set of case studies, it is important to weigh up three alternatives. The first such contender is polysystem theory, which identifies technologies as one amongst several sources of norms that govern the acceptability of translations. (Chang 2001, 319–320) Polysystem theory, however, lacks a rich theorisation of what might be specific to technologically determined

alterations in the standards of taste and judgment. Translation studies has accordingly sought out models that examine distinctively non-human forms of agency: the two most important such paradigms are Actor-Network Theory (see Latour 2015) and Science and Technology Studies (see Hackett et al. 2008). Both are sociological models: they approach technologies as actants in a social network, reciprocally constitutive of and constituted by numerous inter-communicating actants. Crucially, as they retrace these networks, both Actor-Network Theory and Science and Technology Studies hold that non-human or technological actants possess agency: tools are recognised to be instinct with a capacity for action that cannot be dismissed as simple anthropomorphism. While Actor-Network Theory has attracted significant attention amongst translation scholars, especially in the 2000s (Folaron & Buzelin 2007), it has also sparked criticism for its tendency to instrumentalise human subjectivity. The recent compensatory interest for Science and Technology Studies (Olohan 2017 and 2011; Ruokonen & Koskinen 2017) is due to its greater methodological flexibility and more tractable terminology; most of all, it does not presuppose a symmetry of human and non-human agency, and accordingly allows for a greater play of subjectivity. (Jones & Karsten 2008) Science and Technology Studies attends to the interaction of humans and technologies, particularly focusing on their mutual resistance to each other. (Pickering 1995) This enhanced

understanding of agency notwithstanding, however, Science and Technology Studies is still hampered by its pursuit of sociological reconstruction, which entails documenting social debates on new or proposed tools rather than registering the transformative effect of these tools on users and products considered in themselves, or vice versa. As a result, Olohan observes, “we have few insights into how technology shapes and is shaped by translation practices.” (2017, 273) It is such interactions that the present article places front and centre. To do so, a perspective will be proposed that approaches technologies through their mediality—the basic fact, that is, that the implements on which translators rely for the creation, correction and dissemination of their translations are all medial; are all engaged in the business of transformation, transferral and/or communication. As media, tools are endowed with a materiality with which the translator must contend in order to deliver successful translations. Moreover, in approaching translation through its mediality, and in defining the latter through media theory, this article will embark on a course that also deviates from extant work which operates at the intersection of media studies and translation studies. This paper, that is, departs from work on audiovisual translation as it is described by Díaz-Cintas (2009) or Abend-David (2014), even as it acts on the latter’s suggestion that there is now a need for conceptual work in which “observations about Media and Translation are used to theorise about

Translation Studies as a whole, and the changing ‘task’ of the translator (and interpreter).” (2014, x) This much-needed conceptual move can be delivered by reflecting on mediality; that is, by considering “the particular characteristics [...] that define each media form” and how these impact on the creation, transmission and reception of information. (Jones 2019, 176) To do so is to reverse a traditional view in translation studies and the humanities at large, which “looked through and/or past the physical, material means by which translation exchanges occur, failing to see these means as agentic objects, communicative vectors and expressive forms in their own right.” (Armstrong 2020, 310)

The following sections offer concepts and methods through which the interaction of translators, translations and technologies may be charted in theoretically cogent fashion. The next section narrows down the article’s proposal by surveying and critiquing extant work in translation studies on media theory and vice versa. (section 2) Having thus outlined on a theoretical level the advantages and challenges of a better integration of media theory into translation studies, the next section details one methodological channel for such efforts, which is the concept of cultural technique. (section 3) Armed with this focus, two sections examine through historical case studies the ways in which translations confront their imbrication in mediality. (sections 5 and 6) A brief section sets up this

analysis by noting the connections between the current digital turn and the Romantic-period transition to mass communication. (section 4)

2. Translation Studies and Media Theory

The two most decisive recent attempts to theorise a cross-over of translation studies and media theory may be found in Cronin (2007, 2013, 2017a) and Littau (2011, 2016). Noting the profusion of work in translation studies on, first, “translation and texts” and, second, “translation and translators”, Cronin broaches a new direction for research by highlighting the neglect of a materialist leg to this analytical triad; that is, “translation and things.”

While “the tools or elements of the object world which translators use or have been affected by” may be noted in passing, and are notably addressed by research in language technology, a systematic understanding of “the relationship between translation and the technosphere has been in the main underdeveloped.” (2003, 9–10) In Cronin’s proposal, this new branch of scholarship should recognise that “the very definition of translation relies on a particular understanding of how the translating activity relates to tools, namely, the writing instrument (stylus, quill, pen) and its material support (wood, parchment, paper).” (2003, 23–4) Such historically oriented work on translation and things will particularly benefit from integrating insights from media theory:

To develop a keener sense of how translation and technology are coterminous in contemporary human culture, it is necessary to turn to the founding credo of media theory, as articulated by Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan famously argued that what mattered most about new media was not the content they carried but the medium itself. (2013, 22)

While Cronin's observations invite an ambitiously interdisciplinary research agenda, he notes the centrality of media theory mostly by way of an introductory note, apparently hesitating to perform a full integration. This points to a broader impulse in Cronin's work to control the impact of media so as to avoid the "political fatalism" inherent in analyses that veer towards a technodeterminist "fetishiz[ing] the tools per se." (2017b, 96; 2003, 29)

Tellingly, Cronin reminds readers that it is translators, not technologies, who are the "agents of change in a culture," and that technology "need not become the model for our thinking." (2003, 66, 102) He also circumscribes translation's "things" to instrumental "tools" rather than "media", pushing back against considering technologies as actants that might exceed human control. While provocative, then, Cronin's suggestions leave unresolved the question how translation studies might effectively model technology through media theory.

Littau expands on Cronin's suggestions by re-reading the technosphere as a media-sphere. Arguing that scant attention has been paid to "the role that

media forms have played in the history and constitution of translation,” she is concerned with the interaction of translation and technology-as-media, rather than technology-as-tools. (2011, 261) Claiming that “forms ‘effect’ meaning” (2016, 89) and noting that tools are *not* tools, in that they “do more than simply *serve* [...] they are constitutive” (2011, 262), Littau repurposes a foundational tenet of media theory: “media condition our situation.” (Kittler 1999, xxxix) Thus to recentre translation studies onto the media that (dis)organise processes of creation entails decentring the created text, the creative subject and co-creating agent and contexts, since, as Kittler notes, “[m]eaning as the fundamental concept of hermeneutics and labour as the fundamental concept of the sociology of literature both bypass writing as a channel of information.” (1990, 370) Hence, too, Littau’s substitution of the “overly anthropocentric emphasis on mind, consciousness, language, meaning, discourse, critique, etc.” and the “discursivization of culture” by “the material technologies and techniques that underpin cultural practices such as reading, writing, translating, painting, counting, etc.” (2016, 84) In short, what Littau proposes via Kittler is an overhaul of translation studies.

If this article separates from Cronin in contending that tools exert a constitutive force on translation, it also separates from Littau in redirecting the overhaul of translation studies she proposes, thus acting on the

constructively critical responses to her 2016 proposal.¹ In recommending that translation studies be grafted upon the founding axioms of media theory, Littau establishes a disciplinary hierarchy: the object of her programme, which is the construction of a “media history of translation,” subsumes translation studies under media studies. (2011, 278) Rather than argue that translation “needs to be considered as part of the larger circuit of media history” (Littau 2017, 277), the following pages argue for a coordination of the two fields, in which each is recognised for its specific remit: it is the interplay, as Olohan suggests, of technologies and translators that create historical agency. As such, even as a “media theory of translation” (Littau 2011, 277) is constructed, such research should also reverse into a translation theory of media. Whereas Littau offers a medial view of translation in which the specificity of translation almost disappears, this article develops a set of case studies that demonstrate how translation studies may take crucial concepts from media theory to angle analyses of translation towards otherwise unobserved facts.

On a theoretical level, the reversal of perspectives urged in the previous paragraphs—from a media history of translation into a translation history of media—acknowledges a long-standing tacit presence of translation in media theory, which has long looked to translation to clarify its basic ideas. This is

¹ See *Translation Studies* 2016, 9.1, 96–113; 9.2, 314–326.

clearest in Kittler, who founds his media history on a scene of imagined translation featured in Goethe's *Faust*. (1990, 3–25) Following this introductory exegesis, translation recurs time and again, each time clarifying the disposition of the two media ecologies which Kittler has in view, the advent of which he respectively dates to 1800 and 1900. It is thus through its advocacy for radical translatability that he adumbrates post-1800 society to be characterised by a medial monoculture of print/ And it is through its presumption of translation's impossibility that post-1900 society is demonstrated to be arrested by a sudden explosion of audiovisual media forms which appear incommensurable with the traditions of print. In investigating translation, then, Kittler is enabled to go to the heart of what it means to inhabit a mediated world, in that the successes and failures of translation help to outline the structures that subtend the production, dissemination and reception of information. If "media are (at) the end of theory because in practice they were always already there to begin with", translation is (at) the end of media theory because it was always already there to begin with. (Winthrop-Young & Wutz 1999, xx)

If the true subject of history is not meaning or ideology but the translation as it interfaces with the media that enable its production and circulation, the next question is what method might be apposite to unlocking this interaction. Bachleitner recommends taking inspiration from book

history, singling out those historians of the book who map the workings of print through “all persons and institutions involved in the production and transmission of texts.” (2009, 420) Significantly, in recent years, book-historical scholarship has itself begun to swap sociological models which repose on agents and institutions for medial paradigms which privilege the channels through which actors communicate. Particular interest has been generated by concepts derived from the American branch of media theory, with its German counterpart as yet remaining neglected. (Mole 2017, 15–20) And yet it is by specifically attending to German media theory that otherwise relatively abstract observations might be translated into a practicable methodology, as the latter has made its theorising tractable through the schema of *cultural technique*. The application of this concept to translation is as yet wanting, even if Macho nominates translation as an evident example in an inventory of cultural techniques which encompasses “speaking, translating and understanding, forming and representing, calculating and measuring, writing and reading, singing and making music.” (2013, 31) Within translation studies, a lone and cursory reference is made by Bachmann-Medick and Buden, who describe “translation as a cultural technique for dealing with cultural difference.” (2015, 6) Dizdar alleges that translating and interpreting “pervade our daily social practices to the extent that dealing with translation and interpreting can be considered an essential

cultural technique” (2014, 214), but does not connect the phrase to media theory. Such reticence is remarkable given the evident resonances between translation studies and media theory and between translation and cultural technique: the next section accordingly retools the present, theoretical section into a method by considering cultural techniques.

3. Cultural Technique

Cultural techniques are “operative chains that precede the media concepts they generate.” (Siegert 2015, 11) As a vital part of these operative chains, some sort of tool is required: a technique is a cultural action that employs a technology, and it is the interaction of these two, of a non-human tool and its human use, that gradually sparks a collective understanding that in this technique some form of mediation, with rules and principles all its own, is in play. For instance, it is only as we begin to speak, as we actively use those rudimentary, seemingly non-technological but eminently material tools that permit the articulation of sounds, that we may begin to conceive of language as a medium for the interpersonal communication of meanings, instinct with its own logic, and that this conception may in turn shape our actions or attitudes as we speak. Speaking, then, is a *cultural technique* which corresponds to the *media concept* of language. By the same logic, the cultural technique of translation, the active and individual praxis of

translating, undertaken and subtly steered by tools ranging from verbal devices over pens to computers, relates to a media concept of translation which circulates within the broader culture. If the cultural technique designates an idiosyncratic and contextual practice of creating, transforming, receiving and archiving, the media concept designates a collectivised theory of stable rules and assumptions.

A first difficulty in studying media is that the distinction between cultural technique and media concept is retrospectively regarded as ontological and fixed, but is really “processual.” (Siegert 2015, 13) That is, techniques lead into concepts through a process of increasing abstraction and elaboration. A capacity for self-reflection is vital to this conceptualisation: it is as cultural techniques turn in on themselves to interrogate their own nature that they grow abstract. Some practices resist such recursiveness: one can

write about writing, sing about singing, and read about reading. On the other hand, it is impossible to thematise fire while making a fire [...] We may talk about recipes or hunting practices, [or] represent a fire in pictorial or dramatic terms [...] but in order to do so we need to avail ourselves of the techniques of symbolic work. (Macho 2013, 31)

To assume a media-theoretical perspective is, first, to assess whether a cultural technique has the capacity to redouble on itself and transition into a

concept; second, to study this process as it is taking place in history. If translation is, as Macho assumes, a cultural technique, the mediality of translation may therefore be examined by prioritising those points where translators critically reflect on their translations. Crucially, this close attention to moments of recursion means that translators, as agents who often assume a key role in evaluating the cultural technique of translation, occupy a key position in any translation history of media.

A second hurdle in the study of media is that, given the processual nature of media concepts, research on mediality needs must assume a diachronic perspective. Not only is the conversion of a technique into a concept slow-going, cultural techniques and media concepts are also inherently unstable. New tools and/or new techniques may enforce changes in extant cultural techniques, or lead to the development of entirely new cultural techniques; as techniques adapt to new tools, moreover, they may move to reconfigure extant relationships within the media ecology constituted by the interaction of all media concepts. For instance, people spoke before they wrote, and wrote before they fully began to systematise writing as a medium different from other modi of representation; the gradual introduction of writing, moreover, transformed the concept of language, which had previously been determined by the technique of speech alone. Computers were (and are still being) used before the digital truly began to tell on cultural consciousness,

just as acts of translation proliferated long before anyone thought to name the practice. (Berman 2009, 10) Cultural techniques may even be predictive, in that they can prepare new cultural techniques and media concepts long before their definitive advent. A direct line may thus be discerned to lead from drawing to writing, or, as Siegert demonstrates, from the multiplication of transmission speeds first encountered in the mail coach to much later advances in telegraphy and radio, so that Romantic and modernist epistolary and literary practices may be fruitfully interpreted to constitute progressive “epoch[s] of the postal system.” (1999) Much of the anxiety felt presently by of scholars and practitioners of translation relates precisely to the status of acts of translation that draw on new tools: do these merely herald a new technique? Do they announce a genuinely new concept which might compete with the concept of translation presently extant? Any answer to this question must turn on a diachronic construction of mediality.

As the analysis below takes to heart the two aspects on which cultural techniques pivot—first, their recursiveness; second, their diachronicity—, it will also need to note that translation occupies a particularly complex position in any media ecology, in ways that exceed the standard definition of cultural techniques. As Kittler’s interest in translation demonstrates, if by implication, in investigating translation, we investigate an entire media system. While Siegert argues that cultural techniques function to articulate

and police the boundaries between nature and culture (2015, 14–15), translations do not: rather than distinguish between nonsense and signification, they serve to separate or reconcile native and foreign. Translation, then, establishes not what language is, but how languages differ; not what any one medium is, but how media differ. As the next sections are poised to demonstrate, this meta-medial position of translation entails that it has extraordinary diagnostic potential: when the material conditions of production alter, translators may be amongst the first to note the implications of such changes.

4. A Case For Romanticism

In turning to Romanticism for its test case, the latter half of this article studies an unusual suspect: the interaction of translation, technology and media in Romantic writing is as yet under-explored in the two disciplinary contexts which might most evidently be invoked. First, in translation studies, scholars have tended to deploy Romanticism as a negative framing device, decrying the Romantics' alleged denigration of translation to heighten the stakes of their own intervention. (Venuti 2008, 83–98) Second, in media theory, researchers argue that the early nineteenth century lacked a media concept, reasoning that a “concept of a medium of communication” cannot emerge from an undifferentiated media ecology ruled by print alone.

(Guillory 2010, 321) However, what ought to give these two disciplines pause as they classify Romanticism as a period during which writing dissociated itself from foreign inspirations and material containers is that this requires taking Romantic texts at their word. From the 1780s forward, Romantic writers began to separate literature out from everyday writing by mystifying the realities of authorship, illocutively presenting their texts as effecting an almost telepathic communication between authors and readers, free from outside influences or technological determinants. In denying that Romantic-era writing interfaced with translation and media, then, scholars repeat the cues given by Romantic texts, rather than critically investigate these texts for how they were actually produced.

Belying the proclamations of spontaneous invention and untrammelled communication in which Romantic texts couch themselves, there is an extraordinary contemporary interest for translated ideas and genres, as well as an increasingly self-consciously material print culture. Fuelled by an expanding reading public, a burgeoning periodical sector which operated to a dynamic and interactive model of writing, and rapidly developing technologies which entailed lower printing costs and hugely faster communication (Klancher 1987, 18–46), what took place was a veritable “revolution in the republic of letters.” (de Groote 2018) Within this fast-moving media space, practices and theories of translation served as an

intermedial clearing ground as new forms of authorship, informed by developing cultural techniques of mass communication, sought to assert themselves. (Bernofsky 2005) Even if the world that takes shape in the early nineteenth century is not yet globalised, it is “a network society,” as Manuel Castells puts it (1996); if it is not yet digitised, it is certainly increasingly industrialised: Romantic media, then, may be argued to predict the patterns that electronic networks have gone on to intensify. If the Romantic-period overhaul of mediation was directly predictive of the modernist audiovisual turn, as Kittler argues, the same precedential force may be hypothesised to obtain for Romanticism with regard to the current digital turn. And if indeed there is, as Esterhammer has suggested, a “late-Romantic information age” (2015, 229) that prefigures the digital turn, it is specifically through translation that it will come into view. In order to demonstrate what it means to write a translation history of media, the following two sections therefore turn to three Romantic-period case studies.

5. Two Contrasting Cases

In the 1808 *Part One* to his *Faust*, Goethe draws on the intermedial valency of translation to redefine what it means to write. When first the audience meets the titular protagonist, an apocryphal sixteenth-century scholar, they find him engaged in translation. True to the period in which the story is

staged, Faust is seen to read the first verse of the Gospel of John and to doubt its veracity. Against the Renaissance dictum of conducting a detailed philological exegesis to repair a faulty transmission, however, this one translator refuses to channel his efforts through his library of authoritative sources. Foregoing such tools, he favours his own idiosyncratic interpretation, irradiating any notion of external inspiration or material impact beyond what is absolutely necessary. Having paid ritual homage to “the sacred original”, Faust promptly repudiates it. Faust aims for the ultimate freedom in translation; that is, to liberate himself from any concern for material proof:

I feel impelled to open the original text—to translate for once with upright feeling, the sacred original into my darling German. *He opens a volume and disposes himself for the task.* It is written: “In the beginning was the Word.” Here I am already at a stand [...] I cannot possibly value the Word so highly; I must translate it differently. [...] The spirit comes to my aid! At once I see my way, and write confidently “In the beginning was the Deed.” (1838, 38; 1808, 80–81)²

The tools of scholarship are disappeared under the weight of Faust’s personality, his “spirit.” Authorship and translatorship effectively collapse

² Here as in the other German texts excerpted below, the second reference is to the original.

into one another, and the resulting media concept of writing is one that denies any external interference: were he fully to develop his powers, Faust could translate without any material aids, or even any sort of original.

This, at least, is Kittler's reading, if heavily compressed. The question, of course, is whether Goethe's analogisation of writing and translating are as representative of Romantic-era translation as Kittler claims. The tragedy hardly endorses Faust's contraction of translation to pure creation: his daringly personal translation prompts the cautionary invasion of the demonic Mephistopheles, who is poised to make an example of the translator's intrepidity. More importantly, those early-nineteenth-century writers who had extensive experience with translation explicitly advanced a different picture. The scene of translation in *Faust* notably contrasts compellingly with another such vignette imagined by Coleridge: in comparing these two allegories, the stakes of a third and final case will emerge the more clearly.

In 1809 and 1810, a decade before he went on to translate *Faust* and having already embarked upon the translations of German literature and philosophy on which would come to rest much of his reputation, Coleridge devoted a trilogy of essays to the translation of the New Testament undertaken by Luther in 1521 and 1522. Writing in order to examine the perturbed media ecology of his time, Coleridge performs the same

historiographic analogisation as Goethe did: he situates his essay in a previous period, roiled like his own by new modes of writing and reading. In contrast to Faust, however, Luther is observed to be poring over scattered books, contending with a single line for which he can find no satisfactory translation. Luther incarnates the media concept of translation as laid down by Renaissance doctrine, in that he consults external authorities: to his frustration, however, his predecessors prove wanting. As the translator idly muses some demonic influence must have interfered with his sources, his thoughts wander:

Luther [...] had a full view of the room in which he was sitting, of his writing-table and all the implements of study as they really existed, and at the same time [had] a brain-image of the Devil [...] Methinks I see him sitting, the heroic Student, in his Chamber in the Warteburg, with his mid-night Lamp before him [...] Below it lies the Hebrew Bible open, on which he gazes [...] And he himself does not understand it! [...] With sullen and angry hope he reaches for the Vulgate [...] thick darkness continues to cover it! not a ray of meaning dawns through it. [...] Disappointed, despondent, enraged, ceasing to think [...] he sinks, without perceiving it, into a trance of slumber. Repeatedly half-wakening, and his eye-lids as often re-closing, the objects which really surround him form the place and scenery of his dream. All at once he

sees the Arch-fiend coming forth on the wall of the room [...] the Ink-stand [...] he hurls [...] at the intruder. (1867, 85–87)

While much the same elements are in play as in *Faust*, including the apparition of an evil spirit, Coleridge here dramatises the invention of a new praxis of translation, such as is necessitated by the introduction of moveable type, itself the fourteenth-century correlate of the nineteenth-century steam press. The cultural technique towards which Luther is working innovates on both premodern and canonically Romantic media concepts: Luther contends with a text that thwarts the pre-1800 technique of relaying interpretation through external sources even as it equally rebuffs any thought of evading the issue through Faustian appropriation. As he finds these two avenues blocked, Luther considers the tools that support him; those implements of translation “as they really exist” around him. As he recognises as media his scribed scrolls and printed books, his pens and ink, even his desk and oil-lamp, they grow tremendously in materiality, so that Coleridge’s allegory of translation comes to centre on the interplay of text, translator and tools. In thus shifting focus to factors that would otherwise be considered extraneous, Coleridge mounts a revolution in the republic of letters in miniature, gesturing at a media concept of translation in which media are explicitly integrated. This approach, too, however, comes with issues: like Faust, Luther has courted a diabolical presence, born not of idiosyncratic cynicism

but materialist nihilism. Crucially, it is by continuing to trust to the agency of technology, in the form of an inkstand, that this spectre is exorcised. The effect of this gesture, however, is to suspend the vision, and to leave the extraction of its implications to the reader. If Coleridge can only briefly sustain his chimeric vision of an ecology of media hinged in translation, in which tools and carriers are recognised for agentive capacity, it falls to other Romantic writers to continue this project. The next section studies one such set of writers at length.

6. A Case of Recursive Translation

The publication in 1823, continuing into 1824, of a historical novel called *Walladmor* marks a pivotal episode in the translation history of media. The book stands out for its paratextual apparatus, which contains a richly textured conversation between two Romantic translators who draw on their professional experience to read the cultural technique of translation through its mediality. The first such interlocutor is the book's German translator, Willibald Alexis, a pseudonym for Georg Haring. The second is an anonymous English translator, later revealed to be Thomas De Quincey, who in 1825 is commissioned to retranslate the work. On its surface, much of the discussion between Alexis and De Quincey appears animated by the status of *Walladmor*. Initially advertised as a translation of a new book by the

highly marketable Walter Scott, the book soon transpired to have no English original, and even to make a virtue out of its deception, presenting itself as a Romantic translation that has grown so idiosyncratic as to do away with originals entirely. Hence its ambivalent subtitle, *Frei nach dem Englischen des Walter Scotts*—literally, *Freely after the English of Walter Scott*. While ostensibly sharply critical of such radical freedom, the English translator hedges his screed against Alexis’s questionable ethics by noting that such debates are largely perfunctory: as noted before, Romantic-era discourse on originality often serves as a performative foil to pragmatic concerns regarding the nature and mechanisms of publication. De Quincey’s *Walladmor* makes such recursiveness evident by transforming the German subtitle into a chiasmus: the English translation is advertised to be *Freely Translated into German from the English of Sir Walter Scott, and Now Freely Translated from the German into English*.

Alexis and De Quincey design *Walladmor* to be self-reflective: drawing on their extensive professional experience as translators, they use the novel’s prefatory materials to evaluate current practices of translation. Their diagnosis centres on the ongoing transformation of translating as a cultural technique: Alexis and De Quincey portray Romantic print culture as a system whose forms are processually being reshaped by new technologies of mass production. This is Alexis as De Quincey renders him, wrapping his

report on revolutionised practices of translation in an introductory letter to Scott which begs the author's pardon for any pseudo-errors in the pseudo-translation. His excuse for the lamentable quality of many of his recent translations, Alexis writes, is to be found in recent developments in book printing, whose new focus on mechanised efficiency determines how translators must now work:

Ah Sir Walter!—did you but know to what straits the poor German translator of Walter-Scottish novels is reduced, you would pardon greater liberties than this. *Ecoulez*. First of all, comes the bookseller and cheapens a translator in the very cheapest market of translation-jobbers that can be supposed likely to do any justice to the work. [...] in every bookseller's shop throughout Germany [...] the forestalling spirit of competition among the translation-jobbers, bidding over each other's heads as at an auction, where the translation is knocked down to him that will contract for bringing his wares soonest to market [may be seen].
(1825, 1.xxiii–xxvii; 1824, [ii–vi])

Today's translator, Alexis here opines via De Quincey, is little more than a replaceable labourer, recruited by publishers on the same grounds that workmen are hired by the recently ascendant factories; contracted not for the quality of their work, but for the rapidity of their output—fired by steam

and an audience that has grown habituated to extremely quick translations, printing presses more than ever prize speed over slowly achieved beauty of accuracy. As such, the *Freiheit* or freedom asserted by the subtitles takes on a new meaning: rather than mark an ego that has liberated itself from foreign inspirations or material constraints, as it would in *Faust*, the terms serve to flag and excuse errors owing to overly speedy work. *Walladmor*, then, labels itself free out of necessity: it is free precisely because its translators are *not* free. While most literary authors can still hide behind greater wealth, and a dissembling poetics of radical creativity, translators are among the first writers to depend on a newly industrialised market.

Writing from Britain, ahead of the technological curve that Alexis can already discern in Germany, De Quincey adds an account that further confirms the mechanisation of translation. The English translator notes that any aspiration for quality perforce came second, in that he was obliged “to keep up with the printer.” As such, “three sheets, or forty-eight pages,” he notes, in demonstratively careful calculation, “I made sure of producing daily; at which rate, a volume would be finished in week, and three weeks might see the whole work ready for the public.” (1851, 140) Hyperbolising the impact of steam on the technique of translation, De Quincey even alleges that “Alexis” names not a singular writer but a many-headed sweatshop, regulated by a division of labour on the plan of Adam Smith.

(1825, 2.301) This unlikely scenario is further exaggerated by Scott, the novel's pseudo-author, who recognises that *Walladmor* has succeeded in revealing a revolutionised cultural technique of translation which may be predictive of impending changes in the technique of literary writing. In the introduction to his 1825 novel *The Betrothed*, he alleges that *Walladmor* shows a similarly industrialised process of novelistic production cannot be far off. Much as engines are now built "where they put in raw hemp at one end, and take out ruffled shirts at the other," an experimental jenny may be constructed to save "some part of the labour of composing these novels [...] by the use of steam." (1825, iv) Parodic as these remarks are, Scott recognises the value of translation in assessing the way we mediate now, and in tracing the irrepressible impact of technological revolutions on mediation.

As *Walladmor* inspects the media that subtend its existence, its two translators follow Faust and Luther in summoning yet another apparition. Lamenting his tribulations, Alexis notes that one particular source of translation errors is that he must often work on disjointed sheets, shipped from Britain to Germany immediately upon rolling off the presses, even before they are gathered or proofed. Numerous issues result from translating on this basis, including the inadvertent conjuration of an entirely new character from an unnoticed aporia:

the sheets, dripping wet as they arrive by every post from the Edinburgh press, must be translated just as they stand with or without sense or connexion. Nay it happens not unfrequently that, if a sheet should chance to end with one or two syllables of an unfinished word, we are obliged to translate this first instalment of a future meaning; and, by the time the next sheet arrives with the syllables in arrear, we first learn into what confounded scrapes we have fallen by guessing and translating at hazard. [...] the sheet unfortunately closed thus: —“[...] *he became an agent of Smith-;*” and we all translated—“[...] er wurde Agent bei einem Schmiedemeister;” that is, “*he became foreman to a blacksmith.*” [...] next morning’s post arrived, [and] the next sheet took up the imperfect and embryo catch-word thus—“*field matches, or marriages contracted for the sake of money*” [...] woe is me! it was too late: the translated sheet had been already printed off with the blacksmith in it (lord confound him!) and the blacksmith is there to this day, and cannot be ejected. (1825, xxiv–vi; 1824, [ii–iv])

The English sheet ends in a hyphenated *Smith-*, who might reasonably (if not quite idiomatically) be conjectured to refer to an actual smith, a *Schmiedemeister*. Too pressed for time to ponder the subtleties of English morphology or spelling, Alexis translates accordingly, accidentally inventing a character who promptly grants the protagonist a backstory of

which the original's readers will remain wholly unapprised. Even as Alexis curses his mistake, this one spectre cannot be exorcised: nothing can be done to correct the deviation, except to adapt the sentence and any following so as to ensure the story does not collapse into nonsense. In thus drawing attention to an aporetic blacksmith, and in implying the likely presence of many more such exotic characters, he grows even more visible—and that is the point: the translator's protestations are performative. As in *Faust* and *The Friend*, the adventitious apparition makes a point, if one that takes us well beyond these writers, whose demons respectively betokened Goethe's warning to idiosyncratic translators and Coleridge's admission that there are limits to his understanding of media. In *Walladmor*, the obstinate *Schmiedemeister* functions as a point of recognition; perceptible only to those translators who reflect on their translations, he punctually asserts the cultural technique of translation and its predictive force. Moreover, he also functions to invert the apparent submission of translation to industry: it is precisely in so vocally focusing on the blacksmith and analogous points of technological failure that industrialised translators may register their resistance, and ultimately impact on the broader media concept of translation, by suggesting that the disadvantages of industrialisation may be supplemented by a renewed focus on the importance of the human factor. Alexis's blacksmith, in short, marks a key point in the history of translation and media as the two intersect in the Romantic period and onwards: his

emergence operates as a node whose interpretation demands that translation studies and media theory join forces—not in order to orchestrate a supplantation of translation by media, or of translation studies by media theory, but by encouraging an enriched understanding of the historical workings of translation through its technologies.

7. Conclusion

To read translations through their mediality is to read for the technological conditions of production and circulation as these impinge on translations and translators, impacting both individual, concrete praxes and collective, abstract conceptions. What is at question is how these two interact; how tools spark new techniques, or revise extant ones, and how such innovations redefine what mediation is conceived to be. In proposing a translation history of media, this article has argued that a medial perspective need not entail a technodeterminist integration of translation studies into media theory: in attending to media theory and its unacknowledged investment in translation, an approach may be unlocked that acknowledges the specificity of translation to reside in its uniquely intermedial position.

The horizon against which this paper offered its proposal for a translation history of media is shaped by an effort to understand the digital turn through a historicisation of revolutions in mediation. In operating to a diachronic view that pivots on the Romantic rise of the translation industry, this article

has modelled one way in which translation studies might write a prehistory of digital technologies, offering to those who now contend with digitisation a basis for theorising and describing yet another reconfiguration of the interaction between man and machine.

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