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Matthew Reynolds (ed.), Prismatic Translation. Oxford: Legenda Books, 2019.

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Matthew Reynolds (ed.), *Prismatic Translation*. Oxford: Legenda Books, 2019. Pp. viii + 381. ISBN 978-1-78188-725-7.

Weighing in at just over 380 pages, this is not a slender volume. Fortunately, the Greek aphorism, *Mega biblion, mega kakon* (a big book is a big evil), cannot be rightfully applied to it. A product warning might, however, read, 'Not every chapter will appeal to every reader'. This reader found certain chapters bewitching, others beguiling, and one or two just plain bewildering.

'Prismatic Translation' is a multi-authored work in nineteen chapters and an introduction. Each contribution represents state-of-the-art research in translation studies, theoretical and/or more practical approaches to translation issues, or artistic responses, verbal, visual and even computational. From good old-fashioned literary-historical scholarship to reports of experiments in 'extreme translation', the range of topics and approaches is extensive. Arranging such diverse material in five coherent sections must have been quite a challenge for the editor. Matthew Reynolds has risen to this challenge elegantly.

Reynolds, as both editor and a leading proponent of 'prismatic translation', is the author of the introduction and the opening chapter (in Part 1, 'Frames'): 'Prismatic Agon and Prismatic Harmony: Translation, Literature, Language.' In his earlier monograph, *The Poetry of Translation*, Reynolds explored a range of metaphors for translation through literary history. Here, he defines and defends the territory of the prismatic.

So what exactly is 'prismatic translation'? Reynolds proposes changing our understanding of translation to admit plurality, and changing the dominant metaphor to match. He

writes: "Translation's dominant metaphor [...] would no longer be a 'channel' between one language and another but rather a 'prism'. It would be seen as opening up the plural signifying potential of the source text and spreading it into multiple versions, each continuous with the source though different from it, and related to the other versions though different from all of them too" (p. 3). Reynolds goes on to argue that this novel way of seeing translation has implications for how we view language itself, disrupting our ideas of individual languages as entirely separate from each other, and calling into question received ideas about what we think of as 'translations' and their (so-called) 'sources'. Citing Karen Emmerich's study of this very issue (*Literary Translation and the Making of Originals*), he suggests that her argument could be extended from the translator's role in defining 'originals' in cases where the source text is unstable (fragmented or multiple) to "all acts of translation and all source texts" (p. 7).

Concluding with some comments on the paradox of translation and how a prism could be said to 'meet' a channel (p. 9), Reynolds closes his opening remarks with a very brief summary of the nineteen disparate contributions to come (pp. 9-13).

Part I: Frames. In the opening chapter, Reynolds explores classical translations by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*) and Dryden (Virgil, *Aeneid*). He points out that Barrett Browning's world was 'plurilingual' and that Dryden's work on Virgil was informed by earlier translations and commentaries. Thus both translators

were surrounded by a clamour of words not theirs (as indeed we all are). More recently, Reynolds notes, the Belfast poet (and Irish language scholar) Ciaran Carson commented of his own translation of Dante that he was as much translating other English-language translations as the 'original' (p. 37). Showing that all these poet-translators belong within a multi-language, multi-textual context is a salutary exercise. Reynolds contrasts Carson's free-wheeling with the 'correctly, closely, exactly' prescription, which Linda Davis stipulated and attempted to follow for her translations of French prose (Proust and Flaubert). Reynolds notes that her translations met with mixed reviews. I would add that this highlights two central problems in translation and translation studies: prose is not the same as poetry (the same rules do not apply), and translators who follow their own prescriptions to the letter may fail, at their peril, to consider readers' tastes.

In his conclusion, Reynolds returns to the paradox of all translation, acknowledging "the untranslatability within translation and the translatability within the untranslatable" (p. 42).

The remaining four parts are headed: Languages, Cultures, Practices and Readings, respectively. Part II begins with a chapter by Francesca Orsini on multi-lingualism in North Indian literary culture. Orsini unpicks claims about the mutual comprehensibility of Indian languages and the 'lack of originality' in the texts under discussion. She elucidates the historical interplay between Persian and local languages (p. 54) and explains how translators might depart from 'originals' to meet local expectations (55). She refers to 'poetic equivalence' as an instance

of 'language stretching' and also notes that 13th century poetry recitations would use both Persian and Hinduvani in the same sessions. Inadvertently coining a macaronic word of her own (presumably - ironically - from her mother tongue, Italian, which is the source of the 'English' word), she talks about 'macheronic' verse (p. 59), which briefly puzzled this reader. Finally, Orsini considers the impacts of colonialism and orientalism on translations into Hindi.

Chapter 3 opens a window onto Ancient Egyptian writing and its 'visual inimitability'. Hany Rashwan points out that scholars have tended to focus on 'verbal layers' (p. 72) rather than visual aspects of the script itself. He explains that hieroglyphs, whilst corresponding to sounds, frequently have a visual meaning as well. Thus, most Ancient Egyptian words have a sequence of phonograms combined with 'soundless sense signs'. The meaning of a word is confirmed or modified by a sense sign that has no phonemic value. Some pictograms (or 'sense signs') can be used to denote concrete entities and some phonograms ('sound signs') can be written without an additional 'sense sign'. This system, with its complex interplay between sounds and symbols, simply cannot be represented by means of any other alphabet.

Rashwan introduces an Ancient Egyptian text to illustrate his argument. In the story, a suicidal man argues with his soul about ending his own life because the life to come may be preferable. His soul attempts to show that the man's lot in life is not so terrible, by recounting the tale of 'The Father and the Crocodiles', in which a despairing father watches crocodiles consume his wife and children. Translations of the source text

are compared, and Rashwan offers a critique of modern dictionaries and readings of Ancient Egyptian. He stresses the importance of grounding critical reading practices in the stylistic context of the source texts (p. 90).

The present reader, grounded as much in formalist, and structuralist as in post-structuralist stylistic analysis, struggled with Chapter 4, in which John Cayley talks about 'translation over time', relying heavily on Derrida. Binary pairs like Good and Evil or Colonialism and Post-Colonialism, though not immune from shades of grey interpretations, are easier to convey - and indeed understand - in plus-minus terms than Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. Derrida's 'grammatology' does not, at least to my mind, somehow invalidate Propp's morphology of the folktale, in the way in which cultural inclusivity and the rejection of colonialism might lead one to wish Edward Colston at the bottom of Bristol Harbour. There is also an extent to which deconstruction is starting to look rather last century. On the other hand, John Cayley makes cutting-edge custom software, and produces decorative 'stills' from it. Having confessed to relying on Derrida's 'philosophy of language' (p. 114), Cayley concludes: "Language is only ever here or there" (p. 115). Some readers may prefer the illustrations in this chapter to the text. I am one of them.

Part 3 begins with a chapter (5) on 'translated culture and change in Russia'. This chapter is a mine of information, meticulously researched, well structured and clearly written. Beginning with a consideration of the untranslatable word 'otsebyatina' (roughly, 'inserting something of oneself into a translation'; p. 121), Yvonne Howell proceeds to show how and why generations of Russian

translators did precisely this. The time-span covered in this impressive, concise study is roughly two hundred and fifty years, from the reign of Tsar Nicholas I to the Cold War and Vladimir Nabokov. This is the kind of chapter where the reader learns something new from every paragraph, not just every page. It is thought-provoking, and refreshingly free from the kind of theoretical jargon that reaches its sell-by date well before most translations.

In the following chapter (6), 'Literary Metatranslation', Kasia Szymanska discusses anthologies that present multiple translations of the same work(s) and reminds us that scholars, for (ostensibly) non-artistic purposes, have often provided more than one translation or paraphrase of the same word or line, to help the reader understand it. Citing Kate Briggs on the overlap between scholarly and literary translation, Szymanska persuasively argues in favour of 'the creative potential in the textual practice of translation criticism' (p. 142), going on to explore a variety of 'translation multiples', including *One Hundred Frogs* (Hiroaki Sato, 1983), where critical and creative responses to a famous haiku are presented. Szymanska goes on to consider homophonic translations and pseudo-translations. Her concluding remarks further reduce the distance between translation theory and creative practice.

In Chapter 7, 'Extreme Translation', Adriana Jacobs performs an invaluable service to the reader (at any rate this reader) by sparing her the need to read all the results of the experiments under discussion. Jacobs selects the highlights of a variety of extreme approaches to translation, some of which seem heavily indebted to conceptual art. Jacobs, like Howell

(in chapter 5), is the kind of writer I exhort my academic writing students to emulate: clear and engaging, and anything but content-lite. Her presentation here of 'border-pushing, transgressive translation strategies' packs a welcome anti-xenophobic punch (p. 158).

Jacobs begins with David Cameron (no relation to the former UK Prime Minister) and his 'false translations'. We learn that extreme translation does not require knowledge of the source language. Thus, *Les Fleurs du Mal* becomes 'Flurries of Mail' in one of Cameron's publications. Cameron details ways of doing violence to texts (p. 158), and he is not alone in this deliberate form of translation-assault. Other radical translators cited in this chapter shoot holes in text and then translate around them or steep pages in rainwater for a year and then translate what's left. Reading about these experiments was very interesting; reading the results might be another matter.

Chapter 8 by Cosima Bruni considers the effects of a technological environment and its associated sounds on literature, focusing on Hsia Yü's *Pink Noise*. She presents translation as 'the viral mutation of language' (p. 180). Yü proposes a kind of poetry that is not merely translated poetry but 'translation poetry'; her poems have been read by one Chinese-speaking critic as 'luminous mistakes'. In the English versions cited here, I found them unappealing, though the poet's own comments on her work (and the influence of translations read when young) are fascinating (p. 183).

Jernej Habjan's chapter (9) on cultural translation provides a welcome debunking of Judith Butler's 'performative contradictions'. Butler reading Derrida's reading of J. L. Austin is not something I would turn to for

pleasure (or for any other purpose really); Habjan ruthlessly dissects the contradictions in Butler's own arguments, concluding that Butler's answer to her own question is tautological (p. 199). Habjan's conclusions are instructive, so I will quote the chapter's closing sentences in full: "Before modernity, it seems, translations were valued despite their style, original music and syntax. After modernity, they will hopefully be valued for precisely these qualities. That certainly seems to be the idea of prismatic translation". (p. 200)

Part 4: Chapter 10 considers the literary translator as a 'dispersive prism, refracting and recomposing cultures'. (I wonder if a prism can be non-dispersive). The author of this chapter, Jean Anderson, reflects on "the well-established (and well-founded) practice of translators working into their first language" and raises the question of 'market expectations' (p. 207). She looks at cultural ellipsis in a short story by the Tahitian-born French-language writer, Rai Chaze, as an instance of the need for prismatic translation. Anderson offers a close reading of the cultural allusions in the text that would be impenetrable to outsiders, exploring food as an index of Polynesian cultural values. Identity politics and colonial tensions are convincingly shown to be lurking beneath the surface of the seemingly almost-eventless tale, and the possibility of a 'disconnected' reading, uninformed by all these details, 'letting the text speak for itself' is put forward in the conclusion as a justification for not supplying translator's footnotes. (p. 218).

In Chapter 11, Pari Azarm Motamedi presents a case study of 'lingo-visual translations' through his own responses to the poetry of Shafii

Kadkani. This chapter has colour illustrations of the paintings conceived as part of that resonance. The artist explains the personal and cultural symbolism of these visual artefacts, and suggests that they function as a 'third language', alongside the Farsi source texts and English translations, in creating a 'prismatic experience' for the reader (p. 241). The paintings are very decorative and certainly increased this reader's enjoyment of the verbal translations they accompanied.

The subject of Chapter 12 is nonsense alphabets and the challenges of translating these from English into French ('A' is for 'apple' but not, of course, 'pomme'). In an ingenious solution to both the problem of different initial letters (apple/pomme) and the rule of French (but not English) style that repetition is a form of solecism ('A' said... 'B' said ...), Audrey Coussy contrives to find a different verb of speaking for every letter of the French alphabet. This is an entertaining, thought-provoking chapter by a virtuoso translator.

In Chapter 13, the Hebrew poet and computer programmer/translator of computer programmes, Eran Hadas, discusses Machine Translation, which he calls 'a sub-field of Computational Linguistics' (p. 262). A major achievement of this chapter is its clear presentation of technical material to non-experts. From the 'Eliza effect' (named after Bernard Shaw's flower-seller who mimics a duchess), whereby humans tend to humanize (and greet and thank) chatbots, to an Artificial Intelligence 'therapist' that counsels patients by echoing their statements in a questioning intonation, Hadas had this reader riveted. His translation pyrotechnics include getting around the male/female pronouns embedded in

Hebrew second-person verbs to produce a system where the participant in a 'conversation' with AI can select either option or a third, non-binary one; and reading the first verse of the 'Shema' (Deuteronomy 6, iv-ix: 'Hear o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One) as a haiku. Amazing.

Chapter 14 presents a humorous updating-in-translation of what the author-translator, Philip Terry, terms du Bellay's 'sonnets of administrative grief' (p. 287: *Les Regrets*, 1558), to decry the current state of UK universities. Here is Sonnet 98 in Terry's 'translation':

We don't spend our days here writing poetry,
as we did in the 1960s, when Davie was in charge.

If you really want to know how we spend our days,
The next ten lines will bring you right up to date:

There is no time for research, we are too busy making research plans,
There is no time for teaching, we are too busy on curriculum review,
There is no time for real conversation, we are too busy on e-mail,

There is no time for students, we are too busy monitoring student satisfaction,

There is no time for culture, we are too busy on business plans,

There is no time for education, we are too busy on employability,

There is no time for marking, we are too busy reviewing assessment,

There is no time for work, we are too busy on workload models,

There is no time for literature, we are too busy on transferable skills,

There is no time for thought, we think only of outcomes.

Part 5, Readings: Chapter 15 is devoted to translations of the incantatory opening lines of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. The myth of the poem (Coleridge and the man from Porlock) as well as the historical context (Coleridge's personal circumstances at the time of writing, and the excerpt from Marco Polo's 'Book of Marvels' which, in English translation, probably inspired him) are succinctly sketched, and twenty translations (into seven languages) of the opening lines are discussed by Patrick Hersant, whose close reading of the original lines in English is masterly. Fun fact: most of the translators opt to 'translate' Kubla Khan's name!

In Chapter 16, Péter Hajdu examines Hungarian translations of Petronius's *Satyricon*. The strangeness of Latin not quite transposed into Hungarian syntax; accidental 'Christianisation', and domestication through the interpolation of Hungarian proverbs, as well as the changing attitudes over time among translators, readers, and publishers to explicit sexual content, are detailed. Hadju concludes with some comments on the 'tension between source and target cultures' (p. 327).

The focus of Chapter 17 is language and mental illness, explored through Louis Wolfson's 'Le Schizo et les langues'. Alexandra Lukes comments on the 'heavily anglicized French' of the source text (p. 331), which was composed by a patient who experiences 'intense physical and mental pain' whenever he 'hears, speaks or reads any word of the English language'. (p. 332). The editor's preface to this work even expresses concern for the mental health of the reader. Translation therapy and the perils of translating the untranslatable are explored within the claustrophobic 'language games' of the

source text (p. 342), which this excellent chapter did not tempt me to read.

Dennis Duncan opens Chapter 18 with the words, "This is a chapter about *bad* translations". He talks about the jarring effect produced by translators who handle their own language inelegantly, and the gap between reader expectation and the translated object (p. 347). Duncan then defines and discusses pseudo-translation before presenting a case study of Harry Mathews' *Armenian Papers*, a work of pseudo-translation in which " 'lost in translation' becomes a literal loss" (p. 352), as the original (non-existent) manuscript is found to be 'missing'. At the end of his discussion, Duncan reverts to the Freudian theory he had invoked at the beginning of the chapter, describing the 'lost' manuscript as "an absent father who isn't coming back" (p. 356).

And finally: Chapter 19. In a fitting follow-up to the preceding exposé of pseudo-translation, Stefan Willer takes on the topic of back-translation. He presents the curious case of Goethe's translation of a lost text by Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*. By the time the original resurfaced, Goethe's text had taken on the status of an original work and had been back-translated into French at the behest of a French publisher. Thus the back-translation temporarily replaced the original. Willer compares the two French versions with the German in a short sample, and quotes Goethe's response to the ensuing debate. In a final twist, Goethe, commenting after the original has been found, states that the French public has begun to suspect that the eponymous hero, Rameau's supposed nephew, had never really existed as a historical character (p. 365).

Prismatic Translation is a book of delights, despite its occasional *longueurs*. As I suggested at the beginning of this review, different readers will find greater enjoyment in some contributions than in others, depending on their individual tastes and interests. But there is unquestionably something here for everyone with an interest in translation, whether as an art form, an object of study, a field for radical experiments, or indeed all of the above.

Works Cited

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