

TRANSLATION NATION: LITERARY TRANSLATION AS CULTURAL MEDIATION IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the conceptual foundation of our new collaborative project, which uncovers the overlooked role of French literary translation in shaping Australian national identity – from colonization to today. Moving away from a more typical focus on Australia’s British cultural heritage, our project explores the way in which the translation industry has contributed to the social, cultural and political life of the nation, playing a key role in cultural exchange – bringing the non-Anglophone world to Australia and promoting Australian culture around the globe. Combining archival and digital research with close textual analysis and interviews with contemporary Australian translators, the project sets out to map the importation, distribution and cultural influence of French literary texts in the development of the nation. The idea is thus to map networks of circulation, consumption and production of French literary texts in translation over time from the colonial period, when translations were imported from Britain, through to today’s local industry, which exports Australian translations to the world.

Keywords: Literary translation; digital humanities; network analysis; French literature; Australian literature; colonialism; postcolonialism; Charles Baudelaire; Victor Hugo; Christopher Brennan

IN AN INCREASINGLY INTERCONNECTED WORLD, translation plays an essential role at almost every level of human interaction.¹ Behind the mass of translated texts circulating every second in our globalized societies, from IKEA instruction booklets to warning signs on public transport, hides the translator. However invisible they are, these cultural mediators play a vital part in successful cross-cultural communication.² Generative AI is now emerging as an inevitable tool in such exchange, but, for the moment at least, even the most close-knit human-machine interactions still require a human translator.³ In fact, the cultural mediation performed by literary translators is arguably more important than ever, challenging the monolingual status quo and, importantly, providing visibility to peripheral cultures.⁴ Putting the matter of the Internet aside, it is clear that translation goes naturally with the network (both in the figurative and actual senses). This is our starting point as we aim to assess the role of translation, and the networks of people and texts it generates, in the development of a more composite and multicultural idea of what may constitute a

more-or-less distinctive ‘Australian national identity’. The role of translation here is one that we are calling cultural mediation, for, following a number of recent research projects by Australian-based literary scholars focusing on multilingualism, we propose to examine translated literature in Australia in order to shed light on the multiculturalism that has been a part of our society since the very early days of Federation, and indeed before.⁵ Largely because of our area of expertise, our particular focus is the influence of French-language literature and culture in the construction of a discrete Australian national identity, one that did not develop purely out of or in a dialectical relation to Britain. The idea in itself is not new and builds on excellent work in this area, such as Alexis Bergantz’s prize-winning book *French Connection: Australia’s Cosmopolitan Ambitions* and John West-Sooby’s recent edited volume *What Have the French Ever Done for Us? French Contributions to Australia’s Cultural Life*,⁶ which show how Frenchness has served as an alternative, and more cosmopolitan, ideal, one that freed Australianness, to some extent, from the cultural shackles of hegemonic Britishness, its customs, its culture and, especially, its puritanism....

And yet, there are still surprisingly significant gaps to fill in our knowledge of what we might call ‘Australian Frenchness’. At the core of our approach is the role of networks of literary translation from French – its circulation, consumption and production – in Australia. The idea of the network also informs our project methodologically, as we aim to chase down and trace patterns of circulation of translated texts, from the colonial period, when translations were largely imported from Britain and disseminated, adapted and edited to suit local conditions, through to the present day with its flourishing local industry exporting to the world translations featuring distinctively Australian characteristics. Importantly, a ‘network analysis’ will enable us to tease out, visualize and analyse the relationship between authors, translators, publishers and editors, and the editions involved in these translation endeavours from colonization to the present day, with the creation of the first network of current Australian-based translators of French literature and their publishers.⁷

We are conscious that this is an ambitious task and, furthermore, that we are not the first scholars to approach translation from the perspective of the network; indeed, the intersection of the two fields – translation studies and network studies – has been extensively mapped in a special edition of *Meta*, notably in Deborah Folaron and H el ene Buzelin’s introduction. As they describe, however, this is an intersection fraught with complexity, not all aspects of which are necessarily positive. The considerable difficulty that the two fields meet, independently, certainly, but especially when brought together, is the (ever-evolving, perhaps overly malleable) definition of their respective key words. As Folaron and Buzelin put it,

Translation studies and network studies, both in theory and practice, seem to encounter certain [...] challenges. At the fore we find the ever-present need to balance and reconcile the broad breadth and scope of basic general concepts in the field with the many diverse details and variables of local circumstances and case studies. Both domains, especially in light of current technologies, have needed to synchronize the general/global/universal with the local/particular, leading some to wonder if the abstraction of details to such a degree in a field’s quest for theory can ultimately be useful as a theory in practice. This balancing act

links to the need to succinctly yet adequately define the object of disciplinary inquiry: concretely, what is a 'network'? what are the features of networks? what is 'translation'? what are the features of translation?⁸

Ultimately, rather than bowing down before the very real danger 'of losing [themselves] within metaphorical language', Folaron and Buzelin adopt the more pragmatic path of accepting the equally real sense in which people do in fact understand what is meant by both of these terms.⁹ This is the path that we wish to pursue here. Further, and again like Folaron and Buzelin, we consider translation to be a networked activity. It is precisely by focusing on its networks, thereby making visible the people and activities that have typically been rendered invisible in order for source texts to become assimilated into the target culture, that we propose to study the role of the objects of translation in the construction, and transformation, of Australian national identity. To quote again from Folaron and Buzelin,

understanding the process of translation, in the strictest sense, also implies [...] recording and analyzing the relationship between translators and their work environment, in as much as these relations do not fall 'outside' the process but instead contribute to its very shaping.¹⁰

This formulation seems to us particularly apposite here, for while the work of the translator is shaped by the external environment – the mediation between a source and target culture, of course, but also the very *skopos*, or goal, of a particular translation – it is our aim to reveal the place of translation in the shaping of the environment. The mediation that we have in mind here, however, is of a very particular, very purposeful kind. But another, perhaps more hidden aspect of our network (and indeed networked) approach is to consider the translated texts themselves (with the networks of people they represent) as nodes in the web of networks.

Reinterpreting history via translation

To facilitate our network (and networked) analysis, this project considers the history of literary translation from French in Australia in three broadly distinct phases, namely:

- i. Phase one: Pre-Federation, during which translation was very much a product that was imported, adapted, edited and circulated within the different colonies.
- ii. Phase two: Federation to the late Twentieth Century, during which Australian translators began translating for publication in Australia.
- iii. Phase three: Contemporary Australia in the World, during which Australian translations from French become a world export.

These three phases are better elucidated via some specific examples, which give a glimpse into some of the corpus we are aiming to analyse and why we deem it important for this discussion.

i) Phase one

During the colonial period (1788–1900), French literary works influenced and shaped Australian culture in a wide range of ways. The colonists were reading imported English translations of French literary works from the earliest years, as booksellers' advertisements and sales lists attest. Adaptations of French novels and plays were produced in significant numbers on the colonial stage. Newspapers extracted French literary works in their pages and reported on the activities of French writers popular with colonial readers. French literary works were set for study on school and university syllabuses, and the students themselves performed translation exercises based on classic works by writers such as Racine and Corneille. While to a certain extent these forms of engagement with French literature were an importation of existing British practices into the Antipodes, a closer examination of the uses made of French literature shows that very soon the colonists were applying the ideas they found there to specifically Australian situations. A representative example of this can be found in an early classic of Australian literature, Watkin Tench's *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson, in New South Wales* (1793), based on the time he spent as a British army officer in the nascent colony between 1788 and 1791. To support his view that the practical survival skills of soldiers and officers were more important here than the military hierarchies of the parade ground, Tench cites a similarly subversive point made by Voltaire in his *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731) about Swedish troops transported to Siberia after their capture by the Russians at the Battle of Poltava in 1709.¹¹ During the nineteenth century, many prominent French writers found that their works were adapted in unusual local ways and their ideas and personal examples cited in local Australian debates – for example, Victor Hugo, in relation to questions of asylum and immigration, and Émile Zola, in relation to concerns about obscurity.

The works of Hugo circulated widely through the colonies during his lifetime and he was such a well-known figure by the time of his death in 1885 that his demise made front-page news in the colonial papers, in some cases accompanied by a portrait image. Reports on his works had begun to appear in the Australian colonial press during the 1820s, in an era when most colonial papers reproduced articles directly from the British press. As newspapers became more sophisticated, employing their own European correspondents, reports on his latest works and tidbits of gossip about his personal life featured more and more frequently, indicating a particular level of interest among his colonial readership. In the wake of the publication of *Notre-Dame de Paris* in 1831, a number of theatrical adaptations were produced in the colonies. In 1838 a three-act drama entitled *Quasimodo; or, The Deformed Bell-Ringer of Notre Dame* was performed in Sydney, accompanied by dances and singing, the bill concluding with a short version of *King Lear*. Six years later a different adaptation of Hugo's novel was produced in Hobart, entitled *Esmeralda, or the Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, followed by a Spanish castanet dance.¹² But it was not just Hugo's blockbuster works that interested the Australian population. Extracts from his more minor writings were published in the colonial papers, as for example when the *South Australian* featured sections of the English translation of his travelogue *Le Rhin* (1842) over the

course of several months in 1844. Hugo's political activities, such as his participation in the International Peace Congress in Paris in 1849, were commented on in the colonial press according to the political leanings of the papers in question. And when the British government expelled Hugo from his place of asylum in Jersey in 1855, the incident served as a lightning-rod for colonial commentators who were re-evaluating their relation to the mother country in the aftermath of events such as the Eureka Stockade revolt. The Melbourne *Argus* condemned Hugo's treatment, stating that the paper 'did not belong to that ardent race of John Bulls who regard "British" as a synonym for "admirable"', while the *Adelaide Observer* used the incident to contrast the local, gracious treatment of Lutheran asylum seekers with increasing British restrictions on the 'freedom of aliens'.¹³ Hugo is just one of a number of French writers who had a significant impact on the popular, literary and political culture of the colonies, their works and ideas disseminating in complex and subtle ways through the fabric of Australian society.

ii) Phase two

Within this phase, we aim to include a thorough investigation of such cultural phenomena as the peculiar influence of French Symbolism within Australian poetic circles as part of the broader (poetic, literary, socio-cultural) emancipation from Britain. The huge impact of Symbolism – especially of the work of Mallarmé – in the making of Australian poetic modernity (or even modern Australian poetry *tout court*) is often overlooked outside Australia. Within this country, such influence has been deemed a *fait accompli*; in fact, it has been argued that, in the late nineteenth century, 'there was a stronger interest in Mallarmé's poetic philosophy in Australia than virtually anywhere else in the English-speaking world'.¹⁴ Such views are echoed in more recent work by Australian poets and experts of Australian poetry, to the point that it has even been posited that Paris is indeed the *real* capital of Australian poetic modernism rather than Sydney, Melbourne or London; for Paris represented 'the fugitive capital of an avant-garde tradition that has struggled to find within its cultural context a suitable zone to claim as its "home"'.¹⁵ Groups gravitating around the nationalist paper *The Bulletin*, in particular the Australian poet and critic Christopher Brennan (1870–1932), who boldly sent his own poems to Mallarmé himself and entertained a correspondence with him, have been an echo chamber for the importing of French-inflected poetic modernism in the country.¹⁶ If the influence of French Symbolism is well-established within Australian Studies, what is less studied is the particular role that translations and adaptations played in this process of finding an independent and distinctive voice for Australian poetry. Exploring translations and adaptations from French at that time will permit us to move beyond the famous example of Brennan's humorous and tongue-in-cheek adaptation of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, which Brennan had read in an 1897 issue of *Cosmopolis* that had reached Australia. Brennan's experimental – albeit humorous – imitation titled *Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopomatogra-phoscope* was initially

shared privately with a close friend and then published only in the 1980s. This experiment is still mentioned in poetic circles as a landmark event. Delving deeper into personal correspondence or the local press, however, we may find more examples of the circulation of French poems in translation and their textual and cultural impact on a local literary scene, within the context of a poetic world that was seeking to emancipate itself from Britain while establishing its own and unique national spirit (albeit oftentimes in questionable terms, considering the misogyny and blatant racism of many of the members of the *Bulletin* group). The particular lens of a quest for a 'national poetry' will permit us to strengthen our discussion and analysis of the unexplored role of literary translation from French in the crafting of a distinctive Australian national identity – although within the project, we shall obviously acknowledge the fact that there is no such thing as a monolithic and singular Australian national identity, a perilous concept in itself if taken at face value. In fact, the project will show the inner plurality and multiculturalism embedded in this very myth, from the outset.

iii) Phase three

Phase three sees this project move into the twenty-first century and a surprisingly strong culture of Australian translations of French literature. Representative of this phase are translations of French literature commissioned in Australia and exported internationally (such as Stephanie Smee's translation of Joseph Ponthus's *À la ligne*, published as *On the Line* in 2021 by Black Inc.). Other examples include the proliferation of highly Australianized translations of Charles Baudelaire's poems during and since the Covid-19 lockdowns. This phase, which sees Australian writers craft translations from within a target culture that now has an established and recognizable national identity, arguably has the greatest scope for critical responses in the kind of metaphorical language (that threw open questions of the meaning of translation and networks) in which Folaron and Buzelin saw the potential for a loss of self. A self, in the sense of a national identity, that is recognizable as itself also has a greater possibility of losing itself. This contemporary phase of the project offers us the chance to analyse translations written as a response to a breakdown and critique of national identity *in real time*. The Sydney-based poet Toby Fitch published his collection *Sydney Spleen* in July 2021, at a time when the city was still experiencing the Covid-19 lockdowns that had begun in March of the previous year.¹⁷ Thus, Fitch's poems were both written in and about these lockdowns and first made available to readers while these government measures were still confrontingly real. This is a case of poet and reader bound together at a moment when reading literature had taken on a new dimension in the public psyche. The idea of literature as travel, as escape from the reality of lockdown, and thus *as* the reality of lockdown, of urban speed ground to a halt, of the minutiae of everyday life looming large as our space for movement became restricted to our local neighbourhoods, and often our own homes, took on renewed meaning. Books that had lain unread on shelves were picked up and once

again brought to life. Such books, in Fitch's case, included the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and his posthumously published collection of prose poems *Petits Poèmes en prose/Le Spleen de Paris*. *Sydney Spleen* evokes the latter, translating its title directly onto Sydney, while simultaneously translating four of the verse poems of the former collection, Baudelaire's four famous 'Spleen' poems. In this way, the call-and-response between Fitch's Sydney poems and Baudelaire's Paris poems (also) echoes the call-and-response between Baudelaire's two collections – the verse and the prose poems. Fitch thus muddies, even loses, the difference between these two forms while also critiquing it and making it present, even in its absence, in the translation from Paris to Sydney. What he is doing is distinctly Baudelairean, and distinctly Parisian, even as it wallows in (and perhaps also celebrates) 2020s Sydney in all its gory detail. For, of course, Baudelaire's poetry, especially in the prose poems, was precisely a response to a new urban reality, which included massive and rapid change. From 1854 until around 1870 (three years after Baudelaire's death in 1867), Parisian *flâneurs* could walk along one street one day and find themselves on the same street the following day but unable to recognize it as such. (Australians may recall the demolition works of the notorious Deen Brothers in Brisbane in the 1980s, another Baudelairean moment if ever there was one.)¹⁸ The building of Paris's now iconic broad boulevards, and the new *flânerie* that they have enabled, profoundly affected Baudelaire's ability to move around, to live in and, ultimately, to know his city. His poetry is marked by metonymy, including a title – *Le Spleen de Paris* (and its various 'original' avatars) – that marks its poems as Parisian even though they themselves fail, markedly, to represent the city by name.¹⁹ By not evoking Paris, but Sydney instead, Fitch's poems deploy the same basic metonymy, albeit in translation. In Fitch's case, as in Baudelaire's, Paris is metonymically represented, that is, present as absence. The metonymy that Fitch translates here is city-sized in scale: the entire city becomes a metonym for itself, whether it is named as such or not (it mostly is in *Sydney Spleen*; it mostly not in *Le Spleen de Paris*). What we lived through in the Covid-19 lockdowns was a city to which we were simultaneously present (entirely, for we could go nowhere else) and absent (again entirely, for we could not go there).²⁰ This is Sydney and Paris as metonyms, and poetry and translation as metonymy, as well as poetry as translation, in both Baudelaire's and Fitch's originals. It is also poetry and translation as powerful reminders that our present experiences have always been lived before. We are inescapably networked, in other words: we live, at least partly (metonymically), through literature and in translation.²¹

Conclusion

Through the investigation of these phases in the literary translation from French, through the archival work via newspapers and correspondences and, especially, through the tracing of translational networks and the close textual analysis of evocative and significant case-studies, our hope is that this project may reveal the crucial and ongoing role played by literary translations in the

creation of an Australian identity that has progressively separated itself from its British colonial legacy. Our ambition is also to produce the first historical timeline and network analysis of the importing, circulation and exporting of French literature in an Australian context, mapping patterns of translation against key moments in Australian history (including Federation, the Depression, major wars and pandemics). These resources will facilitate further research in this area both in Australia, via the exploration of literary translation from other languages, for instance, and in other multilingual contexts, and help debunk the myth of the largely monolingual, Anglo-centric origin narratives of the past two centuries....

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NOTES

¹ See Loreta Ulvydienė, 'Psychology of Translation in Cross-Cultural Interaction', *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116 (2014), 217–26.

² See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Laetitia Bedeker and Ilse Feinauer, 'The Translator as Cultural Mediator', *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 24 (2006), 133–41.

³ See Mohamad Ahmad Saleem Khasawneh, 'The Potential of AI in Facilitating Cross-Cultural Communication Through Translation', *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*, 37 (2023), 107–30; see also 'Culture/Johnson: The Translator of the Future is a Human-Machine Hybrid', *The Economist*, 30 November 2022, <<https://www.economist.com/culture/1970/01/01/the-translator-of-the-future-is-a-human-machine-hybrid>> [accessed 3 June 2025].

⁴ See *Literary Translation and Cultural Mediators in 'Peripheral' Cultures: Customs Officers or Smugglers?*, ed. by Diana Roig-Sanz and Reine Meylaerts (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁵ Among important recent Australian-based research projects, we would like to draw readers' attention to these recent Australian Research Council Funded Discovery Projects in particular: 'DP210101981: Opening Australia's Multilingual Archive'; 'DP190102863: Transnational Selves: French Narratives of Migration to Australia'; 'DP130103268: New Transnationalisms: Australia's Multilingual Literary Heritage'.

⁶ Alexis Bergantz, *French Connection: Australia's Cosmopolitan Ambitions* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2021); *What Have the French Ever Done for Us? French Contributions to Australia's Cultural Life*, ed. by John West-Sooby (Mile End, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2024).

⁷ The first event, 'Literary Translators and Poets in Conversation', took place at the State Library of New South Wales on 10 May 2025 with the participation of translators Chris Andrews and Stephanie Smee, and poet Toby Fitch.

⁸ Deborah Folaron and H el ene Buzelin, 'Introduction: Connecting Translation and Network Studies', *Meta: Journal des Traducteurs/Translators' Journal*, 52.4 (2007), 605–42 (pp. 631–32).

- ⁹ Ibid., p. 632.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Watkin Tench, *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson, in New South Wales, including an Accurate Description of the Situation of the Colony; of the Natives; and of its Natural Productions* (London: Nicol and Sewell, 1793), p. 2.
- ¹² *The Sydney Herald*, 17 September 1838, p. 2; *The Courier* (Hobart), 10 April 1850, p. 4.
- ¹³ *The Argus*, 4 February 1856, p. 5; *Adelaide Observer*, 23 February 1856, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ John Hawke, *Australian Literature and the Symbolist Movement* (Wollongong: University of Wollongong Press, 2009), p. 6.
- ¹⁵ David Musgrave, ‘Paris, Capital of the Australian Poetic Avant-Garde: Christopher Brennan’s “Musicopomatographoscope”, John Tranter’s “Desmond’s Coupé” and Chris Edwards’ “A Fluke” and “After Naptime”’, in *Remembering Paris in Text and Film*, ed. by Alistair Rolls and Marguerite Johnson (Bristol: Intellect, 2021), pp. 165–86 (p. 173).
- ¹⁶ For more on Brennan and Mallarmé, see Alison Croggon “‘And What an Ear’: on Manson’s Mallarmé”, *Overland*, 11 October 2012, <<https://overland.org.au/2012/10/and-what-an-ear-on-mansons-mallarme/>> [accessed 15 March 2025]; Katherine E. Barnes, ‘With a Smile Barely Wrinkling the Surface: Christopher Brennan’s Large *Musicopomatographoscope* and Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés*’, *Dix-Neuf*, 9 (2007), 44–56.
- ¹⁷ Toby Fitch, *Sydney Spleen* (Sydney: Giramondo, 2021).
- ¹⁸ On the demolition of the famous Cloudland dance hall, see India Dixon, ‘Remembering Cloudland: 40 Years since the Demolition of a Brisbane Performing Arts Icon’, State Library Queensland, 25 October 2022, <<https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/remembering-cloudland-40-years-demolition-brisbane-performing-arts-icon>> [accessed 1 March 2025].
- ¹⁹ The prose poems were published in 1869 and although Baudelaire recorded various potential titles, the collection does not have a single official title.
- ²⁰ Alistair Rolls, ‘Charles Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen*: Re-presenting Paris’, in *Remembering Paris in Text and Film*, pp. 21–38.
- ²¹ This idea of a networked and plural self of the translator is also at the core of the concept of ‘transliteration’: see Valentina Gosetti, ‘Ross Chambers, Beyond Baudelaire: In Defence of (Transliteration) Poetry’, in *Still Loitering: Australian Essays in Honour of Ross Chambers*, ed. by Valentina Gosetti and Alistair Rolls (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), pp. 145–68.