“Violence bridling speech”: Browning’s Translation of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*

YOPIE PRINS

In 1877 Browning dedicated his translation of the *Agamemnon* to Carlyle, who accepted the compliment with some embarrassment: “Oh yes, (Browning) called down some months ago to ask if he might dedicate it to me. I told him I should feel highly honoured. But— O bless me! *Can you understand it at all?*” Carlyle considered Browning’s *Agamemnon* an outright failure and so was quick to disavow responsibility for the project:

Yes, Browning says I ordered him to do this translation . . . but O dear! he’s a very foolish fellow. He picks you out the English for the Greek word by word, and now and again sticks two or three words together with hyphens; then again he snips up the sense and jingles it into rhyme! I could have told him he could do no good whatever under such conditions.

Most nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers agree with Carlyle that Browning’s translation is unreadable. Swinburne, for example, who had previously defended Browning against charges of obscurity, pronounced the *Agamemnon* “beyond belief—or caricature,” and Ezra Pound, who learned more from this translation than he was willing to admit, described it as “a stilted unsayable jargon.” Even Sir Frederic Kenyon, Browning’s loyal correspondent, considered it a “perverse tour de force,” and William DeVane, Browning’s loyal critic, similarly found that “a number of commentators have suggested that the rendering is useful for nothing save a ‘crib’” and characteristic of Browning’s “strange perversity.” In their recent edition of Browning’s plays, Thomas Collins and Richard Shroyer also find the translation “perverse.”

But perhaps this perversity is worth exploring in detail. No doubt Browning’s *Agamemnon* places the reader in a peculiar position: by announcing in his Preface that he has translated Aeschylus “in as Greek a fashion as the English will bear,” Browning seems to reverse source language and target language. Indeed, one young Oxford B.A. was reported to have said, “At almost every page I had to turn to the Greek to see what the English meant.” (*Critical Heritage*, p. 443). Ironic as it may be, this response is
nevertheless very much to the point, since the translation presents English as a foreign language that must be translated back into Greek in order to be understood. Ultimately, Browning’s Agamemnon undoes the opposition between the two languages altogether, as it moves into an interlingual realm that John Addington Symonds criticized for being “neither English nor Greek” (Critical Heritage, p. 440). However, rather than criticizing this radical linguistic estrangement, we might ponder how Browning’s translation serves as metaphor for the act of reading itself. George Steiner suggestively places Browning’s “interlingua” of “Greek English” in the theoretical context of Walter Benjamin’s 1923 essay Die Aufgabe des Uebersetzers. For Benjamin, translation demonstrates an alienation within our own language and therefore dramatizes a failure inherent in reading; the pun in the title of his essay already suggests that the translator’s Aufgabe is to fail (aufgeben). The task of the translator, then, is not to make a foreign language one’s own but rather to make one’s own language foreign.

Benjamin’s emphasis on the translator’s inevitable and necessary failure gives us another perspective on Browning’s approach to Aeschylus. Like Benjamin, Browning is interested in translation as a process of alienation that is also enacted in the process of reading. Indeed, throughout his work Browning tends to cite or translate Greek at crucial moments when reading is in question, and although he invokes any number of poets from antiquity to demonstrate the problem of reading, Aeschylus is particularly associated with this difficulty. My consideration of Browning’s Agamemnon will therefore begin with a general look at Browning’s conception of Aeschylus, followed by a closer look at how Browning conceives of translating Aeschylus, and will conclude with a few passages from the translation itself. I would suggest that Browning initially aligns himself with Aeschylus in order to dramatize a vexed relationship with his reading public: the nineteenth-century reception of Aeschylus as sublimely obscure serves as analogy to the popular perception of Browning as obscure poet. His decision to translate Aeschylus may therefore be understood as an implicit response to his critics, but the translation itself also reveals the general problem of audience to be a specific problem of reading. This problem may be theorized in terms of the opposition between voice and text. Eric Griffiths has recently described how Browning’s poetry thrives on the contradictions of the dramatized voice; Browning “tasks us to speak the poems aloud, and to see when and why we cannot quite do that.” The same may be said of Browning’s Agamemnon: although placed within a purely textual tradition, it depends on our pronunciation for its best effect. And yet Browning’s translation also represses speech, as spoken English must give way to written Greek. Thus Browning’s Agamemnon
demonstrates a violent disjunction of text and voice that is present to some degree in all Browning’s poetry, but it articulates this juncture to such an extreme that it finally disarticulates itself.

I

Critics have variously suggested that Browning turned to translating Aeschylus in order to bide the time; to give an example of Aeschylus’ superiority to Euripides (DeVane, p. 415); to defend Euripides by negative example; or to expose the absurdity of Arnold’s claim that Greek should be a model of expression for English poets (DeVane, pp. 415–416). Browning’s “crib” of the Agamemnon could be the consequence of frustrated attempts to tutor Pen in Greek; or, when Pen failed at Balliol, a displaced desire to earn respect from Balliol’s Master. Clyde Ryals speculates that Browning was eager to prove himself “capable of such an undertaking without help from Jowett or anyone else” (p. 144). At a time of increasing archaeological emphasis in classical studies, Browning may also have developed an antiquarian’s interest in the Greek text as a kind of artifact to be uncovered by linguistic excavation. He had in fact read Schliemann, and in a letter dated December 22, 1876, proposed “bringing out an edition of . . . the ‘Agamemnon’ of Aeschylus—which, in default of a better translator, I would try my hand and heart at—and illustrate it by photographs of all the ‘find’ at Mycenae.” Or perhaps Browning translated the Agamemnon simply in response to Carlyle who told him, “Ye ought to translate the whole of the Greek tragedians—that’s your vocation” (DeVane, p. 415).

However, Browning’s interest in Aeschylus both precedes and exceeds any of these explanations. As a boy he read about the Agamemnon in one of the more arcane books from his father’s library: Volume III of Daniello Bartoli’s De simboli trasportati al morale emphasizes the power of Aeschylean language, particularly the Herald’s description of storm and shipwreck in the Agamemnon, which leaves an impression of great verbal violence. Browning learned more about this power under the tutelage of George Long at London University, where he studied Aeschylean texts and scholia in detail and became familiar with the Persians, Prometheus Bound, and the Oresteia. Browning’s first published poem Pauline serves as a curious commentary on these early readings of Aeschylus. The unnamed poet of Pauline remembers passing his “first dawn of life . . . alone with wisest ancient books” and finding in them “a vague sense of power” (ll. 318–341). But this proves to be an ambiguous power, for it is followed by a self-estrangement marked in the poem with a sudden pause. “Then came a pause. . . . I lost myself, . . . I learned to turn / My mind against myself”
(ll. 344–348). Hovering between sequentiality and causality, “then” hints that reading those Greek texts initiates a division of the self; it is an uncanny encounter with textuality, where the poet discovers the estranging power of language. Later in Pauline, the poet returns to the rather sinister “old delights” of reading Greek, identifying himself with figures from Greek tragedy who are destroyed by their own madness, such as Orestes, Ajax, and especially Agamemnon:

—that king
Treading the purple calmly to his death,
While round him, like the clouds of eve, all dusk,
The giant shades of fate, silently fitting,
Pile the dim outline of the coming doom. (ll. 567–571)

In Mill’s review copy Browning inscribed two lines in Greek from the Agamemnon (ll. 956–957) at this point. These lines (which Browning translates as “So,—since I hear thee, I am brought about thus,— / I go into the palace—purple treading”) focus on the moment when a figurative transgression becomes literal: by “treading the purple,” Agamemnon reenacts a tendency to overstep human limits (as in sacrificing Iphigenia and pillaging Troy), and so takes the fateful steps toward his own death. This homecoming proves doubly unheimlich, as the translation from Greek further literalizes Agamemnon’s moral translation as a textual transgression. In translating πορφύρας πατιῶν, the poet finds himself once more “treading the purple”; he too is compelled to listen to a voice that persuades him to traverse the original text, and he too follows in Agamemnon’s footsteps with a sense of “coming doom.” Thus Pauline dramatizes a curious ambivalence toward Aeschylus; the poem is drawn to the power of Aeschylean language, but at the same time undone by it.

Subsequent poems by Browning also represent Aeschylus as a potentially destructive force. Sordello, for example, invokes Aeschylus in order to displace “Shelleyan” lyricism, but what takes the place of lyric voice is poetry that originates in a violent disruption of voice:

The thunder-phrase of the Athenian, grown
Up out of memories of Marathon,
Would echo like his own sword’s grizing speech
Braying a Persian shield. (1.65–68)

Aeschylus’ “thunder-phrase” hyperbolically distorts human speech; he speaks only in unhuman sounds “like his own sword’s grizing speech.” Indeed the echo of this speech “braying a Persian shield” seems to echo Aeschylus’ Persians, thereby suggesting that Aeschylus survives as a peculiarly textualized voice. This becomes more explicit in Aristophanes’ Apology, where Aeschylus is again described in terms of unnatural speech. “Aeschylus’ bronze-throat eagle-bark” (l. 1566), referring back to the
description of Furies in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, serves as a figure of voice that is refigured in terms of the very text from which it derives. This emphasis on Aeschylean textuality recurs in Browning's correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett, which abounds in references to Barrett's translation of Aeschylus. Indeed, in exchanging citations from *Prometheus Bound*, the two poets seem to retranslate the original text into the context of their courtship. But here again Browning's ambivalence toward Aeschylus surfaces, as he tries to dissuade Barrett from translating Aeschylus any further: rather than trying to give voice to a dead language, she should pursue her own voice in "a fearless fresh living work." Barrett apparently shares Browning's ambivalence: in "Aeschylus' Soliloquy" (a poem until recently attributed to Browning), she represents Aeschylus as a solitary genius unable to speak to his audience. The intensity of his vision, which Barrett describes in an oddly textual image as a self-blinding "arrowy rush of black and white," finally disrupts even his own voice: Barrett's poem stops short in mid-air and was never completed. Instead of this uncannily superhuman Aeschylus, Barrett comes to prefer "Our Euripides, the human, / With his droppings of warm tears." Barrett's preference for Euripides might serve as partial explanation for Browning's own turn away from Aeschylean to Euripidean tragedy in some of his later work, such as the Pope's reflections on Euripides in *The Ring and the Book*, and the "transcriptions" of *Alcestis* and *Heracles* in *Balaustion's Adventure* and Aristophanes' *Apology*. In these long poems, Browning seems to repress his early interest in Aeschylus. Why then, after years of translating Euripides, does Browning return to Aeschylus in the mid-seventies? It seems as if Browning, like Dionysos in the *Frogs*, descends to the underworld to recover Euripides, but discovers Aeschylus in his place. The Aristophanic plot proves quite relevant, since Browning's Preface to the *Agamemnon* quotes a line from the *Frogs* in order to describe Aeschylus as a difficult poet: "ξυμβαλλεῖν οὖ ῥαίδος, 'not easy to understand'" (l. 930). Aristophanes' comedy presents Aeschylus as a more substantial poet than Euripides because his words weigh heavier on the scale; in weighing the two poets, Browning also ultimately prefers the density of Aeschylean language. Browning, therefore, makes no apologies for Aeschylus' obscurity; on the contrary, he actively endorses it in his Preface by citing an ancient source that gives the *Agamemnon* as "an example of the truly obscure." Browning, of course, cleverly attributes this view to antiquity, but it pertains more to the nineteenth-century reception of Aeschylus as an obscure and therefore sublime poet. In Germany, for example, Aeschylus becomes one of the prototypes of the sturm-und-drang poet, and in England he is romanticized by critics "stressing the irrational, sublime, vatic elements in his poetry." But what appeals to Browning in Aeschylus is not so much the
creation of a vatic voice but the difficulty of reading any Aeschylean text. Aeschylus’ obscurity poses certain challenges to the reader, who must interact with the text in order to reenact both its meaning and its resistance to meaning. On this model of reading, the obscure is a necessary condition for the sublime.

Aeschylus therefore seems to exemplify how Browning himself would like to be read. Like Aeschylus, Browning is also known as “the very incarnation of discordant obscurity,” and Browning even inscribes a quotation from Aeschylus in his manuscript of Fifine at the Fair as an ironic response to the perceived obscurity of his own work:

\[\text{άσκοτον ὃ ἐποικέω ἐγὼν }\]
\[\text{νυκτὸς πρὸ τού ἐκματων σκότον φέρει, }\]
\[\text{καθ' ἡμέραν ὃ οὔθεν ἐμφανίστερος.}\]

Browning here uses Aeschylus’ text to describe how he appears to most readers: “Speaking an inscrutable word at night he brings darkness over the eyes, and by day he is no clearer.” Implicitly, Browning aligns himself with an Aeschylean tradition of difficult poetry; he implies that he, like Aeschylus, is understood by few readers. The analogy between Browning and Aeschylus was not lost on at least one of these readers, who wrote in the February 5, 1887 issue of the Spectator: “Mr. Browning’s translator, if this work should ever be translated into any foreign language, will come upon difficulties to which even the difficulties of translators of a corrupt chorus of the Agamemnon will be trivial.” The reference to “a corrupt chorus of the Agamemnon” as example of Browning’s own style is more than fortuitous: it typifies the reversal of perspective that is needed to describe Browning’s approach to the English language. His English, with its ambiguous syntax, complex figuration, arcane neologisms, and elaborate compound adjectives, is very much like Aeschylean Greek. A pertinent example is “A Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse” where Browning, like Aeschylus, builds up a line through appositions and participles and manages to sustain it despite the contortions of syntax and mixing of metaphors:

Was it when this—Jove’s feathered fury—slipped
Gore-glutted from the heart’s core whence he ripped—
This eagle-hound—neither reproach nor prayer—
Baffled, in one more fierce attempt to tear
Fate’s secret from thy safeguard,—was it then
That all these thunders rent earth. (VIII.196-200)

Of course this is a deliberate paraphrase of Aeschylus, but it also reflects on Browning himself, who was condemned for writing “in a cipher to which he alone has the key” (Drew, p. 73). Browning cultivates an artificial, riddling style that is reminiscent of the ἀρίθμος or riddle often found in Aeschylus’ poetry, and here Browning assimilates one riddle in particular: the
“feathered fury” proves to be an “eagle-bound,” much as “flying hounds” are presented as a riddle in line 135 of the Agamemnon and not identified as eagles until line 137. Such Aeschylean riddles are often dismissed as “odd excesses of rhetoric” with “strictly local” meaning;21 indeed, what do we make of phrases like κάσις πηλοῦ ψυνουρος διψία κόνις (ll. 494-495) and ἀρβύλας . . . πρόδουλον ἓμβαινον ποδός (ll. 944-945), which Browning translates as “dust, mud’s thirsty brother” and “shoes, foot’s serviceable carriage”? But to a poet like Browning, such idiosyncrasies present the possibility of twisting the language into new meaning: they are a type of catachresis, a rhetorical violence that enables Browning to translate Aeschylus’ figurative language “literally.”

Browning thus finds in Aeschylus a precursor for his style, which is often described in terms of a catachrestic or “grotesque” literalism. This insight is articulated in an interesting way by F. A. Paley, whose edition of Aeschylus probably served as Browning’s primary text for translating the Agamemnon, and who wrote the only favorable review of the translation:

In the sublime and eagle-like passages of this greatest tragedy of the greatest Greek tragedian, Mr. Browning has succeeded—well. In passages where the terrible almost trenches on the grotesque . . . he is almost the only one of our poets who is thoroughly at home in this perplexing borderland of beauty and deformity. (Critical Heritage, p. 439)

Translating Aeschylus, Browning explores the “perplexing borderland” where one language crosses into another; indeed Browning’s Agamemnon is not so much a translation as a transgression, which goes beyond English boundaries and into a realm that is literally unheimlich. And yet, according to Paley, Browning is “thoroughly at home” here, because it is the linguistic gap where all Browning’s poetry seems to originate. The “deformity” of Browning’s Agamemnon is therefore an extreme but not unique example of a process of deformation that happens even in the most familiar Browning poem. In this respect, Browning’s decision to translate Aeschylus is not only a direct response to Carlyle and an indirect response to his critics, but also a logical and perhaps inevitable extension of his own poetics.

II

We have seen how Browning’s Preface to the Agamemnon places Aeschylus in a tradition of poetry that is difficult to read, but the Preface also further implies that Browning’s translation might not be read at all. In a persistent reiteration of conditionals throughout the Preface, he projects himself as the only reader: “If I wished to acquaint myself with [Aeschylus]”; “I would be tolerant for once”; “if I obtained a mere strict bald version”; “I should hardly look for”; “I should expect the result”;

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“Should anybody, without need, honour my translation.” To emphasize the absence of actual readers, Browning further cites a line from the original Agamemnon as a way of describing his own Agamemnon: ἀκέλευτος ὀμισθὸς ἀοιδά, “uncommanded, unrewarded song.” Apparently his translation serves no purpose other than his own, and even the dedication remains hypothetical: “No, neither ‘uncommanded’ nor ‘unrewarded’: since it was commanded of me by my venerated friend Thomas Carlyle; and rewarded will it indeed become, if I am permitted to dignify it by the prefatory insertion of his dear and noble name.” Despite the rhetorical gesture toward Carlyle, Browning seems to anticipate that he would not prove much of a reader. In fact, when Browning translated the Agamemnon, he had long given up writing for the popular stage or the popular reader. The formation of the Browning Society suggests that Browning’s public audience grew during the 1860s and thereafter, but at this same time Browning’s relationship to his implied reader becomes increasingly problematic. Browning’s poetry of the 1870s accordingly creates a fiction of an ever-dwindling audience: where Balaustion’s Adventure addresses four fictive auditors, Aristophanes’ Apology is narrated to only a single scribe, and the Agamemnon translation projects no auditor at all; it is an attempt to write a drama that would not require an audience of any sort.

Browning therefore chooses to translate Aeschylus as part of a purely textual tradition no longer intended for performance. In nineteenth-century England, Greek drama was read in the solitude of the scholar’s study, at least until 1880, when a staging of the Agamemnon in Greek at Oxford sparked a sudden interest in reviving the ancient theater. But when Browning undertook the Agamemnon in 1877, it was accessible only in scholarly editions, such as Richard Potter’s first English translation in 1777, followed by a number of translators in the mid-nineteenth century including John Conington in 1848, John Stuart Blackie in 1850, and F. A. Paley in 1855, all of whom emphasize text over performance. In the case of the Agamemnon the textual question is especially vexed, which is precisely why it appeals to Browning, who stresses the uncompromising materiality of the mutilated manuscript and the physical exertion required of the reader: “The text is sadly corrupt, probably interpolated, and certainly mutilated; and no unlearned person enjoys the scholar’s privilege of trying his fancy upon each obstacle whenever he comes to a stoppage, and effectually clearing the way by suppressing what seems to lie in it.” Browning’s refusal to suppress the ambiguities of such a text (“what seems to lie in it”) is significant. Reading is meant to be hard work: rather than exercising the scholar’s “privilege” of “clearing the way” for meaning, Browning’s task as translator is to preserve “each obstacle” in the original text. As Mary Ellis Gibson has argued in another context, Browning aspires to a “poetry of obstacles”; he actively
seeks out obstructions to meaning, like those moments in the text of the
Agamemnon when the reader comes to "a stoppage." This emphasis on a
literal, plodding translation recurs in a letter to De Vere, in which Browning
prefers "the baldest word-for-word rendering" over "the less important
grases," and presents the contrast in terms of two horses:

I saw a vehicle drawn apparently by two horses; whereof one stout fellow pulled the weight,
while his slim neighbor cantered by his side as if pulling—Grace, παρηγορού—very pleasant to
watch careering, if his companion drew lustily all the while: but for the purpose of making way,
the sober draughthorse was indispensable.24

If literalism is best "for the purpose of making way," then Browning's
Agamemnon, like the sober draught horse, chooses the path of most
resistance.

For this reason Browning thinks of Greek not as mellifluous, but as an
impediment to sound; his Preface explicitly rejects "what Keats called
'vewelled Greek'", in favor of a "consonanted" language that resists
pronunciation. Throughout the Preface there is in fact a tension between
how Greek might but cannot be spoken. For example, Browning defends his
practice of transcribing Greek names and places because it enables the
reader to "relish" speaking Greek, but he also concedes that this practice has
only served to confuse speakers of English:

I supposed I was doing a simple thing enough: but there has been till lately much astonishment
at οι and υς, οι and οι, representing the same letters in Greek. Of a sudden, however, whether in
translation or out of it, everybody seems committing the offence, although the adoption of ο or
υ still presents such difficulty that it is a wonder how we have hitherto escaped "Euripides."

No matter how the Greek is spelled, it remains a strange text that cannot be
fully voiced. Thus Browning simultaneously proclaims the musicality of the
original language and the impossibility of recovering it:

I should hardly look for an impossible transmission of the reputed magniloquence and sonority
of the Greek; and this with the less regret, inasmuch as there is abundant musicality elsewhere,
but nowhere else than in his poem the ideas of the poet. And lastly, when presented with these
ideas, I should expect the result to prove very hard reading indeed if it were meant to resemble
Aeschylus, "ξυμβαλείν ο θανάτοι, 'not easy to understand.'"

Here the sound of Greek is increasingly mediated by text, beginning with
the fact that Aeschylus' "magniloquence and sonority" is known only by
reputation, and progressively displaced by "ideas," "hard reading," and
finally by a quotation from a Greek text.

Later in the Preface Browning again alludes to the problem of
translating Greek by sound, ironically quoting one of his own critics:

"Neither Professor Jebb in his Greek, nor Mr. Browning in his English, could emulate that
matchless music γόνοι ἱδέων κάλλιοτον ἀνθρώπων." Now, undoubtedly, "Seeing her son the
fairest of men" has more sense than sound to boast of: but then, would not an Italian roll us out
"Rimandando il figliuolo bellissimo degli uomini!" whereas Pindar, no less than Professor Jebb
and Mr. Browning, τριακτήροι δίχεται τυχώδε.
In contrast to English translators who make "more sense than sound," Browning introduces a hypothetical Italian translator who seems to make a little too much sound. Although this Italian translator triumphs over Jebb, Browning, and even Pindar himself, a bit of text from Aeschylus still gets the final word: τριακτήροι δίχεται τυχων (Agamemnon, l. 137: "[he who] met the thrice-throwing wrestler—he is also gone to ground"). Thus Browning repeatedly turns from spoken to written Greek and, in fact, his anecdote at the end of the Preface confirms a preference for literal text over hypothetical voice. Here Browning contrasts himself with Old Muytens who restored famous paintings and improved them "by the bestowment of a widened eye and an enlarged mouth." In his own restoration of the Agamemnon, Browning refuses to enlarge the mouth of the original: "I, at least, have left eyes and mouths everywhere as I found them, and this conservatism is all that claims praise for—what is, after all ἀκέλευτος ἡμισθός ἄοιδά." This conversion of song into ἄοιδά suggests the extent to which Browning characteristically converts speech to script, both in his Preface and his translation.

Browning's literalist approach to translating Greek is a radical departure from nineteenth-century ideas about translation in general, and a departure from Matthew Arnold in particular. Browning's Preface to the Agamemnon may be read as an implicit polemic against Arnold's Lectures on Translating Homer. Indeed, Browning ironically turns Arnold's argument against excessive literalism into a defense of literal translation by quoting Arnold's 1853 Preface deliberately out of context. For example, Arnold's admiration of Greek as a language "so simple and so well subordinated" actually serves to emphasize Browning's point about the unique difficulty of Aeschylean language, which is neither simple nor well subordinated. Similarly Arnold's observation about Greek ("not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in, stroke on stroke!") is reinterpreted by Browning as an injunction to translate word by word (or "stroke by stroke").

Turning Arnold's words to his own purposes, Browning concludes triumphantly: "So may all happen!" The Preface thus becomes a defense of literalism in which Browning anticipates the inevitable criticism from his contemporaries, such as Jowett, who responded to Browning's translation with polite reserve: "I do not think that I quite agree in your theory of translation, nor would you in mine. But I can see many rays from the divine original peering through." However, Browning is not entirely alone in his insistence that a translator of Aeschylus must retain Aeschylus' obscurities. Wilhelm von Humboldt, in the introduction to his influential 1816 German translation of the Agamemnon, also argues that translation should not clarify what is difficult (erhaben, riesenhaft und ungewöhnlich) in the original; he further adds that the Erhabenheit of this tragedy in particular depends on its
Dunkelheit. But what distinguishes Browning from Humboldt and other nineteenth-century classical translators is the implication that this is not just a principle of translation, but a method of reading that also pertains to his own poetry.

Indeed, throughout his work, Browning presents Greek translation as a model for reading. For example, he writes to Elizabeth Barrett: “The language with which I talk to myself of these matters is spiritual Attic, and ‘loves contractions,’ as grammarians say; but I read it myself, and well know what it means” (Kintner, pp. 38–39). Browning’s “spiritual Attic” significantly mediates the transition from talking to reading, as observed by Daniel Karlin: “Notice how ‘talk to myself’ becomes ‘read it myself,’ inner speech becomes inner text, the expressive wit of the primary language turns to the difficult grammar of the secondary language; reflexive utterance becomes an object of reflective interpretation.” However, the distinction between “primary” speech and “secondary” text is not sequential but simultaneous; because it “loves contractions,” Attic suggests a language that is already read even as it is spoken. Thus Greek becomes a recurring figure for textuality, as in “By the Fireside”:

Greek puts already on either side
Such a branch-work forth as soon extends
To a vista opening far and wide,
And I pass out where it ends. (ll. 17–20)

Here Browning figures the materiality of the Greek text in terms of a “branch-work” that simultaneously opens a view (“a vista opening far and wide”) and obstructs it (“where it ends”). Greek causes the reader to “pass out” in both senses, and so the stanza enacts both the end and the endlessness of reading. The experience of reading Homer has a similar effect in “Development,” in which the reader gets lost in the endless readings generated by textual scholars like Wolf.

This impasse of reading is further explored in Fifine at the Fair, which represents translation from Greek as increasingly impossible. Don Juan ironically translates a line from Aeschylus:

or it, or he or she—

Theosutos e boteios eper kekramene,—
(For fun’s sake, where the phrase has fastened, leave it fixed!)
So soft it says,—‘God, man, or both together mixed!’
(ll. 905–907)

and later retranslates it:

The individual soul works through the shows of sense

And, through the fleeting, lives to die into the fixed,
And reach at length “God, man, or both together mixed.”
(ll. 2184, 2187–88)
until he wonders whether the original meaning has not been lost altogether:

\[ \text{Theosuton e bromeion eper hekramenon.} \]
Something as true as soul is true, though veils between
Prove false and fleet away. As I mean, did he mean,
The poet whose bird-phrase sits, singing in my ear
A mystery not unlike? (ll. 2209–14)

What follows is a debauched translation of Aeschylus, in which the
description of Oceanids arriving in *Prometheus Bound* acquires a new
meaning, supplied by scurrilous parentheses:

\[ \text{Emerging from the lymph,} \]
\[ \text{‘God, man, or mixture’ proved only to be a nymph:} \]
\[ \text{‘From whom the clink on clink of metal (money, judged} \]
\[ \text{Abundant in my purse) ‘struck’ (bumped at, till it budged)} \]
\[ \text{‘The modesty, her soul’s habitual resident’} \]
\[ \text{(Where late the sisterhood were lively in their tent)} \]
\[ \text{‘As out of winged car’ (that caravan on wheels)} \]
\[ \text{‘Impulsively she rushed, no slippers to her heels,’} \]
\[ \text{And ‘Fear not, friends we flock!’ soft smiled the sea—Fifine—} \]
\[ \text{Primitive of the veils (if he meant what I mean)} \]

The deliberate perversion of the original Greek (including a subtle switch in
gender) demonstrates that Don Juan is as incapable of fidelity in translation
as he is of fidelity in marriage. But it also demonstrates a similarity between
translation and the process of reading, which Browning now conceives of
heuristically rather than hermeneutically; that is to say, the reader no longer
attempts a reconstruction of the original text, but sees reading as an
interaction between text and reader, where each unmakes and remakes the
other. This process is dramatized most succinctly in Don Juan’s reversal of
the question “As I mean, did he mean?” into a parenthetical interjection:
“(if he meant what I mean).”

In this respect Browning’s approach to translation reflects a larger shift
from constative to performative reading in the nineteenth century, as
described by Tilottama Rajan: she traces the gradual emergence of heuristic
reading “which performs the significance of the text.”28 Browning’s
*Agamemnon* presents reading as an action to be performed somewhere in the
gap between Greek and English; instead of performance on an actual stage, it
stages an act of reading that Browning significantly calls “the present
performance” in his Preface. But what Browning performs is a failure of
translation in the traditional sense, as indicated by the very first line of the
Preface: “May I be permitted to chat a little, by way of recreation, at the end
of a somewhat toilsome and perhaps fruitless adventure?” Here Browning
announces the failure of the translator that is also announced in *Die Aufgabe
des Uebersetzers*. Benjamin’s essay presents translation as a *Verpflichtung*
that creates a radical discontinuity; it uproots the original and transplants it
in foreign soil. Benjamin therefore reworks the natural metaphors usually
associated with translation, in order to redefine it as an unnatural Nachreife that "withers the fruit of meaning." So also Browning is aware that the Agamemnon will never come to organic fruition in his "fruitless" attempt to reproduce Aeschylus. Indeed, Blackwood's (October 1879) called Browning's translation "an ugly dried flower" because it is too literal: it eradicates the voice of the original. But in Benjaminiian terms, the Nachleben or afterlife of Aeschylus' Agamemnon depends on such radical literalism. In translating the Agamemnon, Browning must paradoxically kill off the life of the original in order to ensure its survival. Thus, although Browning's Preface claims to be "literal at every cost save that of absolute violence," the translation itself cannot be anything save an absolutely violent act.

III

A closer look at Browning's Agamemnon suggests that the violence of his translation is both thematic and rhetorical; his poetic power is especially manifested in violent passages. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Reuben Brower, in one of the few close readings of Browning's Agamemnon, uses the Herald's speech, the turbulent description of storm and shipwreck so admired by Bartoli, as a typical example of the translation. Browning readily assimilates the violence of Aeschylean language into his own poetry, or as Brower puts it: "Browning was never more Browning than when as here he was being intensely 'Greek.'" Another example is the description of Troy captured by Greeks, in which Agamemnon's aggression is intensified by the aggressiveness of Browning's translation:

It did the city to dust—the Argeian monster,
The horse's nestling, the shield-bearing people
That made a leap, at setting of the Pleiads,
And, vaulting o'er the tower, the raw-flesh-feeding
Lion licked up his fill of blood tyrannic. (ll. 830–834)

A pounding alliteration ("It did the city to dust") introduces a rhythmical and metonymic progression that identifies the destructive force of "It" first as monster, then as horse, then as Greeks inside the horse, and finally as "raw-flesh-feeding lion." Here Browning retains the etymology of the adjective ὄμηςτής (l. 827) from ὄμη (raw) and ἐσθίω (feed) not only for meaning but also for a rhetorical climax. The shockingly literal locution in the next line ("blood tyrannic" for αἰματος τυνανικοῦ [l. 828]) seems to stop us short in our tracks, as if Browning himself has usurped the tyrannical power of Aeschylus' poetry.

Thematic and rhetorical violence also merge in Clytemnestra's vaunt after killing Agamemnon:
I stand where I have struck, things once accomplished:
And so have done,—and this deny I shall not,—
As that his fate was nor to fly nor to ward off.
A wrap-around with no outlet, as for fishes,
I fence about him—the rich woe of the garment:
I strike him twice, and in a double “Ah-me!”
He let his limbs go—there! And to him, fallen,
The third blow add I, giving—of Below-ground
Zeus, guardian of the dead—the votive favour.
Thus in the mind of him he rages, falling,
And blowing forth a brisk blood-spatter, strikes me
With the dark drop of slaughterous dew—rejoicing
No less than, at the god-given dewy-comfort,
The sown-stuff in its birth-throes from the calyx. (ll. 1406–19)

Clytemnestra’s terrible act is reenacted in her language, which remains vividly in the present tense and is emphasized by Browning’s translation of the Greek into an exclamatory style: the phrase δούλην οἰμώγμασιν (l. 1384) becomes “a double ‘Ah-me!’” and αὐτοῦ (l. 1385) becomes “there!” But what is especially striking is how Browning sustains the metaphorical complexity of the passage, by attending to significant etymologies. When he translates ἄπειρων ἀμφίβλητρον (l. 1382) as “a wrap-around with no outlet,” for instance, he makes explicit a recurring motif of nets, hunting, and ensnarement in Aeschylus’ trilogy; similarly, when he translates Agamemnon “blowing forth a brisk blood-spatter” (κάκφυσιῶν ἄξιαν ἀιματος σφαγήν [l. 1389]), he makes a conscious allusion to the moment of Agamemnon’s original transgression, “from soul blowing unhallowed change unclean, abominable” (πνεύων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν ἄναγμον, ἀνίερον [ll. 219–220]). Although the verbs ἐκφυσάω and πνεύω are different in the Greek, Browning takes advantage of the translator’s opportunity to make explicit what is implicit in the original. And finally “the sown-stuff in its birth-throes from the calyx” demonstrates how the English language may be tortured into new expressiveness; the line forces the reader through the obstacles of curiously mixed diction (“sown-stuff” versus “calyx”), repetition of double beats, and densely clustered consonants.

The deliberately distorted diction of these passages creates a text that asks to be spoken yet also resists speaking, since Browning’s Anglo-Greek is too loud, too dense, and too strange for spoken English. The violence of Browning’s Agamemnon is therefore not only directed at the original Greek but also at the English language. Commenting on Browning’s disingenuous refusal of “absolute violence” in his Preface, a critic in The London Quarterly Review points out:

It is, of course, a question how much wrestling of the ordinary forms and introduction of inversions, and archaisms, and strange juxta-positions may be indulged in, short of actual violence. If you twist a lad’s arm round till the muscles crack, you may say you are using no actual violence, but the sufferer will think differently. We wonder what this poor English tongue of ours thinks of the way in which Mr. Browning has tortured it of old, and now tortures it even more fiercely. (Critical Heritage, p. 444)
This extreme literalization of violence as figure for Browning’s literalism is curious, but charges of torturing the language are certainly not new to Browning. In “The Chaotic School,” Swinburne also writes: “Never surely did any wretched inoffensive dialect of human speech endure such unnatural tortures as those time after time inflicted with diabolical versatility of violence on our patient mother-tongue by the inventive and unsparing author of Sordello” (Critical Heritage, p. 215). Even more than the “unnatural tortures” perpetrated in Sordello, Browning’s translation tortures the English by violating “her” voice. This violation is suggestively (and characteristically) figured by Swinburne in terms of violence against the mother-tongue, so that the opposition between speech and text becomes gendered. Browning’s translation can therefore be seen as repeating the violent plot of the Orestesia both dramatically and rhetoric: it kills the father (Agamemnon, Aeschylus, the paternal text), but in doing so also takes revenge by killing the mother (Clytemnestra, the maternal voice). Browning makes an interesting comment to this effect next to line 1605 in his personal copy of the Agamemnon: “The silence of KL[t]nt[mnstr] is a striking point” (Paley, p. 459).

Indeed, Browning’s translation is especially expressive at moments when a feminine voice is being repressed. The exchange between the chorus and Cassandra, for example, achieves a fine lyricism that ironically expresses a loss of voice. Alluding to the Proce Myth, the chorus compares Cassandra to the silenced nightingale:

Thou art some mind-mazed creature, god-possessed:  
And all about thyself dost wall  
A lay—no lay!  
Like some brown nightingale  
Insatiable of noise, who—well away!—  
From her unhappy breast  
Keeps moaning Itus, Itus, and his life  
With evils, flourishing on each side, rife. (ll. 1153–60)

Cassandra responds:

Ah me, ah me,  
The fate o’ the nightingale, the clear resounder!  
For a body wing-borne have the gods cast round her,  
And sweet existence, from misfortunes free:  
But for myself remains a sundering  
With spear, the two-edged thing! (ll. 1161–66)

Browning’s literalism here aptly demonstrates his resolution at the end of the Preface not to “beautify every nymph of the twenty by the bestowment of a widened eye and an enlarged mouth”; he translates Cassandra’s speech as literally as possible, leaving “eyes and mouths everywhere as I found them,” in order to convey the violent self-division of Cassandra’s language. The root meanings of the Greek, for example, are retained in Browning’s compound adjectives, such as “mind-mazed” for φρενομανόν (l. 1140),
“god-possessed” for θεοφάρτης (l. 1140), “wing-borne” for πτεροφόρον (l. 1147), and “two-edged” for αμφήκει (l. 1149). Browning also finds the exact English equivalent for νόμον ἄνωρον (l. 1142), a rhetorical doubling which he translates as “A lay—no lay.” (He preserves similar doublings throughout the Agamemnon, such as “graceless grace” for ἀχάριν χάριν [l. 1545].) And finally, Browning ingeniously manages to convey, in rhyme and a well-placed enjambment, the elaborate periphrasis for Cassandra’s murder: “a sundering / With spear, the two-edged thing!” (σχισμός αμφήκει δορί [l. 1149]).

This repression of speech has another interesting analogue in Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigeneia, which Browning translates vigorously as follows:

His ministrants, vows done, the father bade—
Kid-like, above the altar, swathed in pall,
Take her—lift high, and have no fear at all,
Head-downward, and the fair mouth’s guard
And frontage hold,—press hard
From utterance a curse against the House
By dint of bit—violence bridling speech. (ll. 247-253)

Again the violence of Aeschylean language is conflated with the violence of the scene itself, but with the peculiar amplification of Browning’s own rhetorical power. Browning makes the most of rapid dashes (“Take her—lift high”), abrupt enjambments (“press hard / From utterance”), and forceful assonance (“by dint of bit”). In Greek this passage is reported as an indirect command (φρασέν . . . λαβεῖν [ll. 231–234]), but Browning’s translation separates “bade” so far from its completing verbs that they verge on becoming direct imperatives: “take,” “lift,” “have no fear,” “hold,” “press.” Finally, Browning changes a periphrasis in the original Greek (βιαίω ντ’ ἀνάφει αἷμα, “by force and the voiceless power of the bridle” [l. 238]) into an active verb: “violence bridling speech.” Browning seems particularly interested in this line; in his copy of the Agamemnon, he compares it to the Homeric ἔρκος δαύντων used in the formula “what word escapes the fence of your teeth.” Thus he reads Aeschylus’ phrase in terms of a physical barrier to expression, which is exactly the dilemma of Browning’s own translation insofar as it must repress speech in order to function. “Violence bridling speech” therefore reflects not only the violence of Aeschylean language, but also reflects on the rhetorical violence of Browning’s own text as a violent bridling of speech.

The opening prologue of the Agamemnon serves as a final example of the simultaneous thematic and rhetorical repression of speech in Browning’s translation. Keeping watch on the roof of the house of Atreus, the Watchman waits to proclaim news of Agamemnon’s return to the house, but the truth inside the house he leaves unspoken. He speaks only in riddles, obliquities, and enigmas:
The gods I ask deliverance from these labours,
Watch of a year's length whereby, slumbering through it
On the Atreidai's roofs on elbow,—doglike—
I know of nightly star-groups the assemblage,
And those that bring to men winter and summer
Bright dynasts, as they pride them in the aether
—Stars, when they wither, and the uprisings of them.
And now on ward I wait the torch's token,
The glow of fire, shall bring from Troia message
And word of capture: so prevails audacious
The man's-way-planning hoping heart of woman. (ll. 1–11)

Browning retains Aeschylus' word order, so that the English registers the confusion of the Greek: the elaborate periphrasis in lines 4–7 is a kind of γρίφος that makes clear signs (i.e. the stars) unintelligible. Similarly ambiguous is the reference to Clytemnestra, who is named in a synecdoche that blurs the distinction between male and female: γυναικὸς ἄνδροβουλον ἐλπὶζον κέαρ (l. 11), "a woman's man-willed hopeful heart." The ambiguity is retained in Browning's version, where the juxtaposition of male and female in the original Greek (γυναικὸς ἄνδρο-) becomes a chiasmus in English: "The man's-way-planning hoping heart of woman."

The entire prologue proceeds by thematizing such syntactic ambiguities:

But when I, driven from night-rest, dew-drenched, hold to
This couch of mine—not looked upon by visions,
Since fear instead of sleep still stands beside me,
So as that fast I fix in sleep no eyelids—
And when to sing or chirp a tune I fancy,
For slumber such song-remedy infusing,
I wail then, for this House's fortune groaning,
Not, as of old, after the best ways governed. (ll. 12–19)

Browning translates this as one prolonged sentence, in which the elaborate syntax of the protasis ("But when I . . .") complicates and postpones the declaration of the apodosis ("I wail then . . ."). Repeatedly the Watchman avoids straightforward assertion; the hint that all is not well in the house ("not after the best ways governed," an ironic litotes in Browning's translation) is immediately followed by a shift in tone and a series of euphemisms:

Now, lucky be deliverance from these labours,
At good news—the appearing dusty fire!
O hail, thou lamp of night, a day-long lightness
Revealing, and of dances the adornment!
Halloo, halloo! (ll. 20–24)

Although the Watchman hails a sign ("Halloo, halloo!" for ἱῶ ἱῶ [l. 25]), he does not name it except by elaborate periphrases which Browning keeps intact: the beacons from Troy are "dusty fire," "lamp of night," and "of dances the adornment." As the Watchman refuses to be clear, his prologue also becomes increasingly resistant to clarity:
To Agamemnon’s wife I show, by shouting,
That, from bed starting up at once, i’ the household
Joyous acclaim, good-omened to this torch-blaze,
She send aloft, if haply Ilion’s city
Be taken, as the beacon boasts announcing.
Ay, and, for me, myself will dance a prelude,
For, that my masters’ dice drop right, I’ll reckon:
Since thrice-six has it thrown to me, this signal.
Well, may it hap that, as he comes, the loved hand
O’ the household’s lord I may sustain with this hand!
As for the rest, I’m mute: on tongue a big ox
Has trodden. Yet this House, if voice it take should,
Most plain would speak. So, willing I myself speak
To those who know: to who know not—I’m blankness. (ll. 25–38)

The Watchman’s initial assertion (σημαίνω τορώς, “I show by shouting” [l. 26]) turns into the conditional (εἴπερ Ἰλίου πόλις, “If haply Ilion’s city” [l. 29]), then the optative (γένειτο δ’ οὖν, “Well, may it hap that” [l. 34]), then a refusal to speak (τὰ δ’ ἀλλὰ σιγάσω, “As for the rest I’m mute” [l. 36]), and finally complete silence (κοῦ μοθοῦσι λήθομαι, “to who know not, I’m blankness” [l. 39]).

As Browning translates Aeschylus’ prologue, it sounds increasingly like one of his own dramatic monologues: stylistically, it features a similar combination of elevated and colloquial diction, rapid movement of thought, compression of language, self-interruption, and rhetorical exclamation; thematically, it raises similar questions about the status and function of utterance. The prologue introduces the problem of speaking throughout the _Agamemnon_ with an odd proverb, βοῦς ἔτι γλώσσῃ μέγας / βεβηγεν (ll. 36–37), which Browning translates literally, “On tongue a big ox / Has trodden.” This is a graphic image for the repression of speech not only in the original tragedy, but also in Browning’s translation. One of Browning’s critics even comically quipped, “Browning has trampled upon his mothertongue as with the hoofs of a buffalo” (_Critical Heritage_, p. 441). But Paley’s gloss on the phrase serves as a more sobering commentary on Browning’s translation: “This proverb was used of those on whom compulsory and unwilling silence was imposed” (p. 334). Aeschylus’ _Agamemnon_ imposes a compulsory silence on Browning, who would have his version pronounced in English poetry even though it is written in “Greek” script. Thus the problem of the prologue, which speaks what must remain unspoken and cannot quite speak what must be spoken, is also the problem of Browning’s _Agamemnon_: on the one hand impossible to read, on the other hand asking to be read. In this respect, Browning’s translation presents us with the paradox of reading itself. ὡς...
Notes

1 Boyd Anthony Litzinger and Donald Smalley, eds., Robert Browning: The Critical Heritage (New York, 1970), pp. 432–433. This edition is hereafter cited as Critical Heritage. This paper was first presented at the 1988 MLA Convention in New Orleans, for a panel entitled “Translating Greek Tragedy into English Poetry,” chaired by Professor Fruma Zeitlin. Subsequent versions have benefited tremendously from the insights and suggestions of Virginia Jackson, Michael Lucey, Herbert Tucker, and Daniel Karlin (who generously pointed out to me several unpublished letters in the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University). I am also grateful to the Armstrong Browning Library for their assistance and for granting permission to quote from Browning’s letter to De Vere, Jowett’s letter to Browning, and Browning’s marginalia in his personal copy of the Agamemnon (F. A. Paley, ed. [London, 1870]). All quotations from the Agamemnon in Greek are based on this edition.


15 Philip Kelley and Betty A. Coley, eds., The Browning Collections: A Reconstruction with Other Memorabilia (Waco, 1984), p. 353. (D1159).

16 Barrett writes these lines in “Wine of Cyprus” (1844); Browning quotes them as epigraph to Balaustion’s Adventure.


20 Choephoroi, ll. 816–818; Poems, 2:975.

21 Thomas Rosenmeyer, The Art of Aeschylus (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 92–93. Opinions vary among classical scholars about Aeschylus' riddling technique. For example, Edward Fraenkel defines the γρίφος as a riddle immediately followed by its own explanation (Aeschylus' Agamemnon [Oxford, 1950], 2:9, 135), while Anne Lebeck sees it as part of a larger pattern of enigmatic prolepsis (The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure [Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971], p. 16).


24 February 17, 1887 (No. 87:48, Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University).

25 October 26, 1877 (No. 77:93, Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University).


31 Paley's edition offers three possible explanations of the idiom φυλακάν κατασκευή, which Browning underlines in his own copy of the text, and to which he adds in the margin: "and, fourthly, we might remember ἐρκος ὀδόντων" (p. 350).