# Filologia
## Antica e Moderna

n.s. V, 2
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RUBBETTINO

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# Articoli

*Filologia Antica e Moderna* *N.S. V, 2 (XXXIII, 56), 2023*

Mirko Casagranda

# Victorian Orientalism and Self-Censorship in Max Müller's Translations of the Upaniṣads

Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) lived in that time of British history when it was still possible for a scholar to be both an influential academic and a celebrity to be portrayed in one of *Vanity Fair*'s popular caricatures of the 1870s. The illustration shows his profile sketched in watercolour on paper under the caption «The Science of Language» and ironically embodies what an Oxford professor was supposed to look like in the second half of the nineteenth century. The subtle interplay of praise and mockery embedded in the cartoon stands for his unparalleled position as a famed Victorian *man* of knowledge. When the issue of the magazine was published in February 1875, as a matter of fact, Müller truly was one of the most popular Orientalists in Europe: the previous year he had delivered the opening address to the Second Congress of Orientalists in London, while the following year his prestige and credit allowed him to secure funding for what would become the project of his life, i.e. the Sacred Books of the East series, which was published between 1879 and 1910 by Oxford University Press. Borrowing Norman J. Girardot's words, in his heyday the fifty-two-year-old man that pensively stares in front of himself in the above-mentioned drawing was indeed «an All Souls luminary, influential professor of comparative philology, famous Orientalist, popular public lecturer, controversial mythographer, combative intellectual debater, and well-connected confidant of royalty»[1].

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[1] N.J. Girardot, *Max Müller's* Sacred Books *and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religion*, «History of Religions» XLI (3), 2002, pp. 213-250: p. 221.

Müller was born in Dessau, Germany, to a wealthy and cultured family. He completed his studies in philology at the University of Leipzig and at the University of Berlin, where he further developed his interest in the languages and cultures of India under the supervision of Friedrich Schelling and Franz Bopp. He chose Sanskrit because «it was exotic, and because there was a charm […] in studying something which [his] friends and fellow students did not know»[2]. After working in Paris with Eugène Burnouf, in 1846 he moved to the United Kingdom «to collect materials for an edition of the Vedas»[3] that were in possession of the East India Company and the Bodleian Library. He was soon introduced to the Oxford academic milieu and appointed deputy Taylorian Professor of Modern European Languages in 1850. Although he succeeded to the Full Professorship four years later, in 1860 Müller lost the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit to Monier-Williams, which was his greatest professional regret.

As Gwilym Beckerlegge points out, after the Professorship of European Modern Languages «other University appointments followed, but not positions that gave formal recognition to [his] reputation as a Sanskritist»[4]. This was mainly due to the fact that his first translation of the Ṛgveda was based on a later commentary of the sacred text, a choice other Orientalists deemed inaccurate. Moreover, his views on the role of British missionaries in India had drastically changed over the years:

> Where in his early writings, Müller had been enthusiastic about prospects for the Christianization of India, by the 1870s he was looking forward instead to a reformation of Hinduism and Buddhism which would sweep away "medieval" encrustations and restore them to their original purity[5].

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[2] M. Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915*, Charlottesville (VA), The University of Virginia Press, 2010, p. 39.

[3] L. Delbos, *Professor Max Müller*, «The Modern Language Quarterly (1900-1904)» III (2), 1900, pp. 101-103.

[4] G. Beckerlegge, *Professor Friedrich Max Müller and the Missionary Cause*, in *Religion in Victorian Britain: Culture and Empire*, edited by J. Wolffe, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, pp. 177-219: p. 182.

[5] Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion*… cit., p. 44.

Such views did not fully comply with the imperial strategies of control and domination of the Indian subcontinent and might have hindered his ambitions as a Sanskritist since «acquiring historical and linguistic knowledge of India's classical past was not simply a disciplinary activity, but also an administrative imperative of colonial rulers mapping and securing a new political and cultural terrain»[6]. As a consequence, his decision to resign from his position in 1875 should come as no surprise, and even though he officially stated he wanted to spend more time studying the languages and cultures of India, he confided to his closest friends that «he was tired of Oxford's university and ecclesiastical intrigues»[7]. Despite his disaffection with the academic elites, he remained an influential Orientalist whose work massively contributed to the construction and representation of India in fin-de-siècle Europe, particularly with the Sacred Books of the East series, where Indian spiritual heritage and ancient Vedic lore were translated into English along with the texts of other traditions such as Islam and Confucianism.

In the 1890s, his fame inexorably faded, and his theories were soon contested and replaced by other approaches to the study of philology, culture, and religion that mainly built on E.B. Tylor's anthropological school and Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism. More than a century later, especially after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), postcolonial studies has successfully contributed to unveiling the dynamics of colonial control imbued in his oeuvre, which is thus to be considered as a «continuation of ethnocentric presuppositions in the construction of the 'mystic East' as well as the ongoing 'epistemic violence' involved in contemporary appraisals of 'Asian mysticism'»[8].

Even though he is still acknowledged as the founder of the Science of Religion and the first scholar to systematically translate Vedic texts into the West and compare them to other religious traditions, his approach to translation is doubtless the product of British imperialism and the embodiment of Lawrence Venuti's concept of the violence of translation:

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[6] J.G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogue: "Discoveries" of India in the Language of Colonialism*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 60.

[7] Beckerlegge, *Professor Friedrich Max Müller*… cit., p. 183.

[8] R. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 4. See also S. Sugirtharajah, *Max Müller and Textual Management: A Postcolonial Perspective*, in *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion,* edited by P. Bilimoria-A.B. Irvine, Dordrecht, Springer, 2009, pp. 159-170.

> [T]he violence that resides in the very purpose and activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that pre-exist it in the translating language and culture, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts[9].

In the Late Victorian Age, the Orient itself was 'censored' and 'translated' through exotic(ised) and alluring elements that were hierarchically selected among what could or should be represented in order to quench Western desire(s). As Douglas Robinson points out[10], translation was indeed part of such an endeavour and ingrained in the 'domestication' of the colonies to such an extent that Said's famous definition of Orientalism could be easily adapted to that of translation:

> Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institute for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient[11].

As a matter of fact, colonial translation may well be considered as a practice focusing on 'style' and 'stylistic strategies' employed to dominate (i.e. control), restructure (i.e. adapt, domesticate) and have authority (i.e. generate meanings and interpretations) over a selection of texts brought into the colonising culture as a form of academic discipline. If it is true that translating texts equals translating cultures and their representations, here translation is to be considered as a form of Orientalism because it deals not only with the translation of the East into the West[12] but also with a way of creating the Orient as a cultural construct of Western empires. Such translations – Max Müller's Upaniṣads included – are part of «the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period»[13].

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[9] L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 14.

[10] D. Robinson, *Translation and Empire. Postcolonial Theories Explained*, London, Routledge, 2016. See also B. Ashcroft-G. Griffiths-H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London, Routledge, 2002$^2$.

[11] E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 3. For an overview of the influence of Said's seminal work in scholarly research on the Victorian Age, see, among others, E. Sasso (ed.), *Late Victorian Orientalism: Representations of the East in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Art and Culture from the Pre-Raphaelites to John La Farge*, London, Anthem Press, 2020.

This was achieved first and foremost by selecting and censoring what could be translated[14]. Both Victorian Orientalism and translation were regulated by overt and covert instances of censorship and self-censorship. Translation is a form of Orientalism in which self-censorship contributes to the articulation of the discourse of India and religion. At the same time, Orientalism is a kind of ethnocentric translation of colonial 'otherness', a process which ambiguously operates at least at two levels: on the one hand, the spiritual heritage of the East is adapted to the value system of the receiving culture, while on the other it refers to the 'taming' of the 'savage' that need be civilised through education and religious reformation. Moreover, translation can be a form of censorship[15] both in terms of selecting which texts should be translated into a language and a culture, and the translating process proper, i.e. when the translator consciously decides to delete some parts of the source text or to change the meaning of a sentence or of the whole text. Venuti has famously defined such practices as instances of 'domestication', i.e. translations where the meaning and the foreignness of the source text are partly or completely erased or adapted to the target culture.

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[12] On the many ways in which the East has been translated into the West, and vice versa, see O. Palusci-K.E. Russo (eds), *Translating East and West*, Trento, Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, 2016.

[13] Said, *Orientalism*… cit., p. 3.

[14] It should be noted, however, that in the nineteenth century the academic study of the Vedas was at its very beginning and that the attitude towards their translation changed as more texts were discovered and included in the corpus.

[15] On the topic of translation and censorship, see, among others, E. Ní Chuilleanáin-C. Ó Cuilleanáin-D. Parris (eds), *Translation and Censorship: Patterns of Communication and Interference*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2008; F. Billiani (ed.), *Modes of Censorship and Translation: National Contexts and Diverse Media*, Manchester, St. Jerome, 2007; G. Thomson-Wohlgemuth, *Translation under State Control: Books for Young People in the German Democratic Republic*, London, Routledge, 2009.

Müller's translations of and commentaries to the holy texts of the East are profoundly influenced by the spirit of the Victorian Age that permeated the whole project, especially in the form of self-censorship, and by a target culture that ambiguously cherished ethnographic and anthropological studies along with colonial systems of control. The metaphor he uses in his preface to the Sacred Books of the East series is revealing as he compares the missionary to whom the publication should appeal to a general, thus reinforcing the ties between the imperial military conquest of the East and the spread of Christianity as a civilising and salvific force: «[T]o [the missionary] an accurate knowledge of [the Sacred Books] is as indispensable as a knowledge of the enemy's country is to a general»[16].

Since the texts of the Vedic tradition are considered as Vāc's revelation[17], their Sanskrit syllables, words, and phrases have a sacred function too – which is still found today in the recitation of mantras – and are thus theoretically and theologically untranslatable[18]. Despite the untranslatability of the sacred component of the Sanskrit word, however, the Vedas have been and still are translated into several languages, especially the Baghavad Gītā, one of the epic poems of the Māhābhārata, and the Upaniṣads. Whereas the Vedas are known as *śruti*, i.e. 'what is heard', hence a revelation, the Upaniṣads are commonly known as Vedānta, i.e. 'the end of the Vedas' or 'complete knowledge on the Vedas', i.e. a series of oral commentaries and teachings on the content of the Vedas delivered by a guru[19]. Even though the Upaniṣads are better preserved in the oral tradition, most of them have been transcribed starting from the seventh century BCE[20]. According to Indian lore, there are 108 main Upaniṣads

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[16] M. Müller, *Preface to the Sacred Books of the East*, in *The Upanisads*, 1, translated by M. Müller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1879, pp. IX-XXXVIII: p. XL.

[17] The goddess Vāc is also called 'the mother of the Vedas'. Through her speech the *ṛṣi*, i.e. the Indian ancient wise men, composed the hymns and verses of the oldest and largest corpus of spiritual literature in the Indian subcontinent.

[18] See C. Shackle, *From Gentlemen's Outfitters to Hyperbazaar: A Personal Approach to Translating the Sacred*, in *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?*, edited by L. Long, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2005, pp. 19-32.

[19] The word *upaniṣad* means both 'secret doctrine' and 'sitting at the feet of a guru listening to his words'.

[20] See J.F.A. Sawyer, *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 76.

(108 being a recurring symbolic number in Indian spirituality), among which either nine or thirteen are considered as the most important[21].

When translating the Upaniṣads, the question is not just about the impossibility of maintaining the sacredness of the source language, but about the fact that the translator may consciously or unconsciously deform and homogenise the text and deviate from the norm in terms of theology rather than language[22]. As stated by Lynne Long in her introduction to *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable* (2005), the translation of sacred texts entails a struggle over the control of interpretation rather than a reflection on the untranslatability of properties embedded in the texts themselves[23]. From a postcolonial point of view, there is a striking parallelism between the need to control interpretation through theological homogenisation and the colonial practices of cultural and political domination. Privileging universality in the translation of holy texts is another way of adopting a Western perspective to the domestication of the East, i.e. embracing 'otherness' by framing it through Eurocentric categories.

When it comes to the Upaniṣads, we are not simply translating from Sanskrit to a European language since «the unit of translation [is] no longer a word or a sentence or a paragraph or a page or even a text, but indeed the whole language and culture in which that text [is] constituted»[24]. This paradigm includes culture-bound terms that are central to the understanding of the spiritual meaning of the text. Translating them with Western words and concepts would be a form of domestication that could be avoided by leaving the terms in Sanskrit. Indeed, «the holy resists translation, since the space it needs in the target language is often already occupied; available vocabulary is already culturally loaded with indigenous referents»[25].

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[21] This is why many of the books published in English are titled *Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads* or *Nine Principal Upaniṣads*.

[22] See W.J. Johnson, *Making Sanskritic or Making Strange? How Should We Translate Classical Hindu Texts?*, in *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?,* edited by L. Long, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2005, pp. 65-74. On the deformation of the source text as a form of silencing and censoring the 'Other', see A. Berman, *La Traduction comme épreuve de l'étranger*, «Texte» IV, 1985, pp. 67-81.

[23] See L. Long, *Introduction. Translating Holy Texts*, in *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?,* edited by L. Long, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2005, pp. 1-15.

[24] H. Trivedi, *Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation*, in *In Translation – Reflections, Refraction, Transformation*, edited by P. St-Pierre-P.C. Kar, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2007, pp. 277-287: p. 280.

Since classical Sanskrit is an artificial language rich in synonyms and synonymic constructions, it is quite common to have several meanings to the same word that can be rendered in several ways with similar effects[26]. Even though meaning in verse does not necessarily depend on word order, which is due to the fact that Sanskrit is a heavily inflected language[27], there is a tendency among Western translators to produce 'Sanskritised' versions of the target language and to adhere to Sanskrit syntax and the typically Sanskrit compounds and passive constructions. As far as English is concerned, such a tendency results in a preference for literal metaphrases, archaisms, and highly hypotactic constructions, which often make the text particularly cumbersome[28].

Rather than analysing the self-censored parts of Müller's Upaniṣads, e.g. omitted passages and culture-bound words and expressions that do not have an equivalent in English, the following paragraphs will briefly focus on his preface to the Sacred Books of the East series as it showcases a personal reflection on what translating the Vedas into English meant in the 1870s and 1880s[29]. As Müller believed that «[i]n order to have a solid foundation for a comparative study of the religions of the East, we must have before all things, complete and thoroughly faithful translations of their sacred books»[30], there is no doubt that he aspired to produce faithful translations of the Upaniṣads based on a sound historical and philological approach rather than on aesthetic assumptions. However, as Wheeler-Barclay points out,

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[25] Long, *Introduction*… cit., p. 1.

[26] See W.J. Johnson, *Making Sanskritic*… cit., pp. 65-74.

[27] *Ibidem*.

[28] Other approaches may include the adoption of the style and register of the holy texts of other religious traditions, e.g. the Christian Bible, or the translation by poets who are able to transfer the linguistic vitality of the source text even if they might not know Sanskrit. On the translation of the Upaniṣads for a Western audience, see M. Casagranda, *Taming the East: Translating the Upaniṣads into the West*, in *Translating East and West*, edited by O. Palusci-K.E. Russo, Trento, Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, 2016, pp. 89-103.

[29] On the analysis of prefaces and other paratextual elements within translation studies, see, among others, C. Elefante, *Traduzione e paratesto*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2012; K. Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts*, London, Routledge, 2018.

[30] Müller, *Preface*… cit., pp. xi-xii.

> the predominant tone of Müller's work owes more to liberal Christian humanitarianism than to any strictly intellectual decision to avoid cultural bias [as] he was by no means free from ethnocentric assumptions. He saw no reason to avoid pronouncing moral judgement on the customs of other peoples, nor did he hesitate to declare Christianity superior to all other existing religions. Müller shared the tendency of many Romantic Orientalists to idealize the wisdom and virtue of the 'primitive' peoples of the ancient East at the expense of their modern descendants[31].

Müller articulates a judgement that was commonly shared among Victorian scholars and that mainly built on racist and Eurocentric cultural categorisations. His words remind the notorious Minute Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay drafted in 1835 in support of the introduction of English as the language of education across the Indian Subcontinent[32]:

> It cannot be too strongly stated that the chief, and, in many cases, the only interest of the Sacred Books of the East is historical; that much in them is extremely childish, tedious, if not repulsive; and that no one but the historian will be able to understand the important lessons which they teach[33].

In his preface, Müller states that he «feel[s] the less hesitation in fulfilling the duty of the true scholar, and placing before historians and philosophers accurate, complete, and unembellished versions of some of the sacred books of the East»[34], and that, unlike his predecessors who omitted what was 'obscure', 'strange' and 'startling', he intends to include everything so that the translated texts «contain so much that is not only unmeaning, artificial, and silly, but even hideous and repellent»[35]. Only apparently does Müller advocate a foreignising approach to translation when he boldly affirms that the «translations are truthful, that we have suppressed nothing, that we have varnished nothing, however hard it seemed sometimes even to write them down»[36]. However, the actual target texts were heavily adapted to a British readership, an attitude that surfaces also in the preface, where he admits that there is at least one exception to what he has stated:

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[31] Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion*… cit., p. 53.

[32] For the texts of the Minutes Macaulay wrote between 1835 and 1837, see *Macaulay's Minutes on Education in India. Written in the Year 1835, 1836, and 1837, and Now First Collected from Records in the Department of Public Instruction, by H. Woodrow Esq. M.A. Inspector of Schools, Calcutta, and Formerly Fellow of Caius College, Cambridge*, Calcutta, Mission Press, 1862.

[33] M. Müller, *Preface*... cit., p. XLIII.

[34] *Ibid*., p. XX.

[35] *Ibid*., p. XII.

> There are in ancient books, and particularly in religious books, frequent allusions to the sexual aspects of nature, which though perfectly harmless and innocent in themselves, cannot be rendered in modern language without the appearance of coarseness. We may regret that it should be so, but tradition is too strong on this point, and I have therefore felt obliged to leave certain passages untranslated, and to give the original, when necessary, in note[37].

Not only are some passages omitted from the text, but others are placed in notes in Sanskrit so that only those who can read it, i.e. other Sanskritists, can understand the meaning. There is no need to refer here to Victorian morality and the sexual taboos of British society at the end of the nineteenth century to see how distorting such a vision was. By concealing the «sexual aspects of nature», as a matter of fact, Müller contributed to the creation of a sensual and sexual, exotic and erotic, repressed and fetishised Orient which is far from the original meaning and purpose in the source culture and in the source texts[38].

Moreover, even though Müller is aware of the untranslatability of certain concepts[39], in his translation of the Upaniṣads there are some inconsistencies as regards key culture-bound words like, for example, *karma*, which conveys the idea of all the actions performed by human beings over the span of their lives. From a Vedic perspective, only by performing such actions without being attached to their result is it possible to interrupt the cycle of death and rebirth produced by human desires and actions. When Müller translates *karma* as 'work', the Victorian reader would probably associate the term with its Western meaning. Even though such an interpretation is quite misleading, especially in capitalist economies and societies like Victorian Britain, Müller does not further explain the Vedic meaning by adding, for instance, a note or another paratextual element.

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. xx.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

[38] The «sexual aspects of nature» censored by Müller are also part of the tantric tradition that is still practiced today devoid of the semi-pornographic allure bestowed by the West.

[39] For example, he writes many pages on the meaning of *ātman*, which can be roughly translated as 'soul' or 'individual Self'.

The omitted passages and mistranslated culture-bound words in Müller's text are mostly due to a gap between the spiritual system of the source culture and the values of the Victorian Age. His version of the Upaniṣads is a form of self-censorship, a product of the age but at the very same time a discursive force shaping and structuring Western conceptualisations and representations of the East as «[c]ensorship itself must be understood as one of the discourses, and often the dominant one, produced by a given society at a given time and expressed either through repressive cultural, aesthetic and linguistic measures or through economic means»[40].

The idea of censorship and self-censorship as discourse in Müller's oeuvre is strengthened by the fact that he intended these translations mainly as an academic endeavour aimed at a scholarly readership – hence the untranslated words with no notes or glossary to explain their meaning. Within the fin-de-siècle British academic milieu, the translation of these texts was considered as a scientific venture devoid of the ideological implications deriving from the cultural values the translated texts were imbued with. By omitting or adapting concepts, Müller ultimately contributed to the creation of the mystery of the Orient and its stereotypically Eurocentric representations that postcolonial studies and the recent interest in Indian spirituality have been trying to readdress.

## Abstract

Max Müller was one of the first European translators of the Vedas and one of the most influential Orientalists of the Victorian Age. He is especially renowned for the publication of the Sacred Books of the East series (1879-1910), where

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[40] F. Billiani, *Assessing Boundaries – Censorship and Translation. An Introduction*, in *Modes of Censorship and Translation: National Contexts and Diverse Media*, edited by F. Billiani, Manchester, St. Jerome, 2007, pp. 1-25: p. 2.

the Indian spiritual heritage and ancient Vedic lore were translated into English along with the texts of other spiritual traditions. This article analyses Müller’s translation of the Upaniṣads as a form of Orientalism, a discourse that contributed to the creation of a colonial and Eurocentric representation of the East based on self-censorship and a domesticating approach to translation.

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