

REVOLUTIONARY SHOCKS IN TRANSLATION: POLITICAL AND LINGUISTIC CHANGE IN THE DISCOURSE OF RADICAL TRANSLATORS (1789-1815)

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Abstract: As far as “shocks” go, none was greater to late eighteenth-century minds than the events of 1789. Whether they took part in it, observed it from a distance or opposed it, the Revolution was experienced as a world-historical event whose ideological roots were transnational and whose impact extended far beyond national and linguistic borders. Its meaning and exportability as a political model were the object of fierce debate across Europe. These political issues were frequently seen and addressed as problems of language, as testified by a plethora of initiatives around language planning, dictionaries and instruction manuals explaining the meaning of the new revolutionary lexicon. But how did the shockwave of 1789 translate into other parts of Europe? And how translatable was the new language of the Revolution, which enlisted the cosmopolitan ideals of the Enlightenment but also redefined the political nation, seizing on the rhetoric of patriotism and love of country? This article looks for concrete answers to these large speculative questions by considering some examples of language policies, political lexicography and discourses on translation from the 1790s in France, Britain, and the Italian states.

Keywords: French Revolution, political language, translation, radicalism, Italy

The French Revolution has been described as an explosion of words. Since the convocation of the Estates General, France had been inundated with pamphlets, newspapers, prints, songs and other ephemera. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press were formally incorporated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, followed by “freedom of the theatres” in 1791.¹ In

¹ On the circumstances of this decree see Philippe Bourdin, “Liberté pour le théâtre, citoyenneté pour les comédiens (1789-1792),” *La Révolution française* 21 (2021), accessed 25 July 2025, <https://journals.openedition.org/lrf/5809>.

Britain, the debate on the French Revolution fuelled the so-called “pamphlet war” that dominated the press for much of the 1790s, and inaugurated what has been defined as the “Golden Age” of political caricature.² In Italy too, the arrival of the revolutionary armies in the peninsula in 1796 was accompanied by an unprecedented flourishing of journalism and print culture, which the French struggled to control.³ Words were printed but also spoken in the new arenas of political sociability, from the national assemblies to political clubs to the streets. This collective *prise de parole* marked the advent of an open sphere of communication which transformed language with neologisms and new modes of expression, but also raised the problem of how to control and stabilize their meaning. Cultural historians of the French Revolution such as Keith Baker have brought the importance of revolutionary language to the fore, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of the Revolution requires historians “to identify a field of political discourse, a set of linguistic patterns and relationships that defined possible actions and utterances and gave them meaning.”⁴ The “linguistic turn” stimulated productive efforts to consider the Revolution as a semiotic transformation that shaped language but was also engineered through language and signs.⁵

² Pamela Clemit, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) is the best distillation of work on this topic. On the rise of political caricature see Ian Haywood, *Romanticism and Caricature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and the images and objects in David Bindman, ed., *The Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution*, exhibition catalogue (London: The British Museum, 1989).

³ The classic account is Renzo De Felice, *I giornali giacobini italiani* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962).

⁴ Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4. Other studies of the politics of linguistic change include Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); for Britain, Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1798-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); for Italy, Luca Manori, Alberto Mario Banti, Marco Meriggi, Antonio Chiavistelli, *Atlante culturale del Risorgimento: Lessico del linguaggio politico dal Settecento all’Unità* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2015). See also Reinhardt Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” *Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989): 649-66.

⁵ On revolutionary discourse and rhetoric see for example Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). On the use and effect of key terms and concepts, see Alain Rey, “Révolution.” *Histoire d’un mot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989) and Marisa Linton and Michel Biard, *Terror: The French Revolution and Its Demons* (London:

No one was more keenly aware of this than the revolutionaries themselves: the question of revolutionary language was one of the most pressing issues that occupied revolutionary leaders, journalists and writers, and was debated incessantly in both the radical and counterrevolutionary press. “We have revolutionized government, laws, usages, mores, customs, commerce and thought itself; let us therefore revolutionize language, which is their daily instrument,” wrote Bertrand Barère, a leading member of the Committee of Public Safety, in January 1794.⁶ The new sphere of democratic sociability that was to sustain the exercise of popular sovereignty depended on education and the circulation of information and public opinion. So, in 1794, Barère and the Abbé Grégoire outlined a sweeping programme of language reform aimed at suppressing local dialects and minority languages, which were considered regressive, to establish French as the only language of the revolutionary nation. Although they have been interpreted as harbingers of a totalitarian “ideological state apparatus,” the language policies attempted during the radical phase of the Revolution were integral to the ambition, which the Jacobins of the Year II shared with eighteenth-century *philosophes* and reformers, of creating a new participatory polity and fostering a new political subjectivity.⁷

This new, revolutionized language would not only be the single language of France but also an effective, modern, rational instrument for moral and social regeneration. It was to be a straightforward language of things, true to the republican principles of plain speaking, honesty and manly virtue, which would expose the tricks of aristocratic and clerical speech. “What is this metaphor called a crown?” Thomas Paine had asked contemptuously, “is it a thing, or is it a name, or is it a fraud?”⁸ The language of liberty and the rights of man was going to sweep

Polity, 2021). On metaphor see Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1700-1800*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001) and Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789-1794* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁶ Bertrand Barère, “Rapport et projet de décret présentés, au nom du Comité de salut public, sur les idiomes étrangers et l’enseignement de la langue française,” reprinted in Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, *Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois: l’enquête de Grégoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), 278. All translations from French and Italian are mine.

⁷ Renée Balibar and Dominique Laporte, *Le français national, politique et pratiques de la langue nationale sous la Révolution française* (Paris: Hachette, 1974), 16.

⁸ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, in *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 175.

away the old, corrupted language of masters and slaves: “It is time for deceitful style and servile formulas to disappear,” declared the Abbé Grégoire in his speech to the Convention, “and for language everywhere to acquire the truthfulness and laconic fierceness that is the prerogative of republicans.”⁹ All relics of false beliefs and markers of social distinctions had to be eliminated, so that the new language of equality could restore the broken relationship between words and things. Yet, the Revolution also gave currency to an avalanche of new terms (e.g., democracy, constitution, reactionary) whose meaning proved to be highly contested and unstable.

Revolutionary Translation

This “revolution in language” also became a “revolution in translation,” as the debate around new words and their meaning extended to issues around the translatability of revolutionary language and of the Revolution itself into other contexts. In France, officially appointed *bureaux de traduction* were tasked with translating decrees and reports initially into the regional languages of France (German, Breton, Flemish, Italian and Occitan), and, after 1792, into other European languages as well, including English, Spanish and Russian. Recent research has clarified the composition and functioning of these translators, highlighting their role in spreading propaganda and in supporting the French occupation of Belgium, the Rhine region and the Italian peninsula.¹⁰ But translation did not serve only to project power: it was also framed within a cosmopolitan enterprise of progress and mutual enrichment between nations.¹¹ In his plan for

⁹ Abbé Grégoire, “Rapport sur la nécessité & les moyens d’anéantir le patois, et d’universaliser l’usage de la langue française,” in de Certeau et al., *Une politique de la langue*, 302.

¹⁰ On the “bureau de traduction” and its staff see Sylvie Kleinman, “Translation, the French Language and the United Irishmen, 1792-1804” (PhD diss., Dublin City University, 2005); and Michael Schreiber, “‘Citoyens – Ciudadanos – Cittadini’: Le travail des traducteurs de la Convention nationale,” in *La Ciencia como diálogo entre teorías, textos y lenguas*, ed. Jenny Brumme and Carmen López Ferrero (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2015), 145-66. On the period of French rule in Belgium see Lieven D’hulst and Michael Schreiber, “Vers une historiographie des politiques des traductions en Belgique durant la période française,” *Target* 26 (2014): 3-32.

¹¹ The *Radical Translations* online resource contains bibliographical and biographical information about ca. 900 activist translators of the revolutionary era: *Radical Translations: The Transfer of Revolutionary Culture between Britain, France and Italy (1789-1815)*, ed. Brecht Deseure, Erica J. Mannucci, Jacob McGuinn, Rosa Mucignat, Sanja Perovic, Nigel

national education, presented to the National Convention in 1791, Talleyrand appealed to Enlightenment ideas about the power of language to shape thoughts, beliefs and actions to argue for the benefits of language learning:

The National Assembly [...] is no doubt aware [...] of the power of language, [and] knows the extent to which signs affect ideas, and through them the habits that need to be established or strengthened [...]. The national language has to be the first means of communication that we need to cultivate. At the same time, education in other languages [...] is a powerful auxiliary means which it would be irresponsible to neglect. In fact, besides the beauties we acquire through translation, we must not forget that by increased contact [*rapprochement*] alone, languages illuminate and enrich each other.¹²

In contrast with conventional (and still enduring) views about the inevitable “betrayals” and “failures” of translation, Talleyrand emphasizes its vital function in intercultural communication as a vehicle for aesthetic innovations. The notion of culture as polite conversation and rational dialogue was ubiquitous in the eighteenth century, but here a conversation is imagined taking place between the European vernaculars themselves.¹³ Their mutual discourse and “*rapprochement*,” in a kind of expanded and democratized Republic of Letters, would not only “illuminate” and “enrich” each language, but also contribute to the progress of world literature. Translation thus becomes an essential part of Talleyrand’s project of education for a free and virtuous polity.

Since the late eighteenth century, in fact, the idea of progress had embraced that of language change. In Italian lands, the debate on language centred on which idiom should be the basis for the national language and was tightly connected to aspirations for political unity. The Florence-based *Accademia della Crusca* led efforts to impose the model of fourteenth-century Tuscan, as epitomized by Petrarch and Boccaccio, but was increasingly under pressure from reformers who opposed linguistic conservatism and provincialism. One of the most vocal critics was Melchiorre Cesarotti, professor at Padua and translator of *Ossian*, who advocated for language change in his influential *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue* (Essay on the

Ritchie, Niccolò Valmori, technical eds. Arianna Ciula, Ginestra Ferraro, Tiffany Ong, Miguel Vieira, accessed 25 July 2025, <https://radicaltranslations.org/database/>.

¹² Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, *Rapport sur l’instruction publique* (Paris: Baudouin, 1791), 97-98.

¹³ See David Randall, *Conversational Enlightenment: The Reconception of Rhetoric in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

Philosophy of Language), first published in 1785. There, he asserted that “all languages progressively and inevitably change character,” under the impact of “moral and political causes.” Such changes in the “intellectual system” were like slowly accumulating “fuel” ready to be “set on fire” by new ideas: “the genius of the nation then bursts forth, and triumphs over the despotism of the academy.”¹⁴ Evidently, for Cesarotti, language reform was an essential factor in the struggle against the *Ancien Régime*. He, too, like Talleyrand, presented translation as a major avenue for linguistic and cultural regeneration, arguing that “nothing is more beneficial for granting new orientations and new riches to a language than the influx of intelligent translations.”¹⁵ Cesarotti’s enthusiasm for linguistic change and hybridization stands in stark contrast to anxieties about foreign influence, and especially perceptions of French hegemony, that were voiced in the press and in cultural circles throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁶ The fashion for Gallicisms, generally associated with the influx of cheap novels and plays in translation, was seen as particularly alarming. Cesarotti instead highlighted the intellectual impact of neologisms introduced via French, especially those which add to the “metaphysical phrasebook” of philosophy (*analisi, analizzare*) and Mesmerism (*eletrizzare, magnetismo*).¹⁷

In Britain, too, language contact, translation and comparison between languages became bitterly contested issues. The corrupting influence of foreign languages, and especially the inherent seditiousness of French loanwords, symbols and gestures, was endlessly debated in the conservative press and occupied even parliament and the courts.¹⁸ In an essay of 1797, William Godwin took a stance against those who feared the “infection” of France’s “barbarous style,” reminding them that “the long and close comparison [...] of one language with another will always be found among the most fruitful sources of improvement.” Against linguistic protectionism and paranoia, Godwin invited his readers to “dare to enrich the language in which we write” by welcoming “Gallic

¹⁴ Melchiorre Cesarotti, *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue* (Pisa: Tipografia della Società letteraria, 1800), 136-37.

¹⁵ Cesarotti, *Saggio*, 127.

¹⁶ See the sources collected by Mario Puppo, ed., *Discussioni linguistiche del Settecento* (Turin: UTET, 2013).

¹⁷ Cesarotti, *Saggio*, 207-208.

¹⁸ Notably during the 1794 treason trials: see James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), esp. 59-82.

modes of speaking” and “new and unauthorized forms of expression.”¹⁹ Cesarotti’s and Godwin’s developmental view of translation can be read side by side with Walter Benjamin’s celebrated dictum that the translator’s task is to “liberate” the target language and “break through the rotten barriers of his own language.”²⁰

Political Lexicography

Just as they articulated the disruptive and emancipatory potential of translation, radical thinkers and translators of the revolutionary era also found themselves embroiled in a struggle over the meaning of words. In the 1790s, a plethora of dictionaries, catechisms and discourses on language reflected the desire to explain and control semantic change for explicitly polemical and partisan reasons. One of the most often quoted examples of political lexicography is Joseph-Antoine Cerutti’s satirical *Dictionnaire d’exagération* (1790). Cerutti was a Turin-born Jesuit priest turned editor of one of the most widely diffused revolutionary newspapers, *La feuille villageoise*, which aimed at giving a civic education to rural audiences.²¹ Cerutti, a moderate, mocked the “idiome exagérateur” he feared had taken over public discourse, theatre and the popular press. The language of exaggeration, Cerutti writes, perpetually inhabits the aerial sphere, dealing in abstract notions such as “nature, liberté, despotisme, fanatisme, enthousiasme, aristocratie, démocratie, fluide universel, équilibre de l’Europe, système du monde.” Undaunted by logic, it freely substitutes one term for its opposite, for instance “évidence au lieu d’in vraisemblance; organisation au lieu de cahos [*sic*] [...] homme vendu [...] au lieu d’un patriote impartial, &c. &c.”²² Today, we might be only too familiar with glittering generalities and alternative facts, but for Cerutti

¹⁹ William Godwin, “Of English Style,” in *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (London: Robinson, 1797), 369, 417.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” trans. Steven Rendall, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 2 (1997): 161. On links with Benjamin in radical discourse see Michael Löwy, “Revolution Against ‘Progress’: Walter Benjamin’s Romantic Anarchism,” *New Left Review* 52 (1985): 42-59.

²¹ See Melvin Edelstein, *La Feuille villageoise: Communication et modernisation dans les régions rurales pendant la Révolution* (Paris: BNF, 1977). On Cerutti as publicist see Antoine de Baecque, “La guerre des éloquences. Joseph-Antoine Cerutti et les brochures révolutionnaires,” *History of European Ideas* 2, no. 3 (1993): 191-214.

²² Micromégas [Joseph-Antoine Cerutti], *Prospectus d’un dictionnaire d’exagération. Destiné à MM. les Rédacteurs du Journal de Paris*, published in *Étrennes au public* (n.p., n.d [1790]), 29-56.

they represented an unwelcome novelty that jeopardized the course of the Revolution and undermined trust in democratic debate and “common sense.”

Similar accusations were moved by radicals against their counterrevolutionary opponents. In Britain, the dictionary format was put to polemical use by Charles Pigott, a notorious “libertine gentleman,” author of scandalous exposés and radical pamphlets in the early 1790s.²³ His posthumous *Political Dictionary*, published by Daniel Isaac Eaton in 1795, satirizes the overcharged, hyperbolic rhetoric of Edmund Burke and the conservative public sphere. Pigott counters them with his own exaggerations, reversals and ironic definitions, through which his riotous dictionary promises to arrive at “the true meaning of words.”²⁴ The entry for “Equality,” for example, distinguishes between “alarmist” definitions invoking “every thing morally and physically impossible; equal wisdom, equal strength, equal wealth, &c. &c.” and what revolutionaries “both in France and England” really mean by equality, namely “equal rights.”²⁵ In this case, exaggeration is exposed as a counterrevolutionary tactic, used for deliberately misrepresenting revolutionary principles and policies to foment anti-French hysteria. Of course, there were many in the revolutionary movement for whom Pigott’s rights-based definition of equality did not go far enough; one year later, in 1796, Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals would demand “real equality,” the abolition of private property and the redistribution of land and wealth.²⁶ At a time when Britain found itself in the grips of Pitt’s repression, Pigott still spoke the language of Paine’s common sense, resolutely presenting revolutionary values and practices as natural and just, sanctioned by ancient models. “Democrat” (another startling word) he defines simply as “one who

²³ The characterization is that of Jon Mee’s “Libertines and Radicals in the 1790s: The Strange Case of Charles Pigott I,” in *Libertine Enlightenment: Sex, Liberty and Licence in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Cryle and Lisa O’Connell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 185-203.

²⁴ Charles Pigott, *A Political Dictionary Explaining the True Meaning of Words* (London: Daniel Isaac Eaton, 1795). On the dictionary, see Sunghyun Jang, “‘The Overturning of an Arbitrary Government’: Pigott’s Radical Challenge to Standard Lexicography,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 3 (2016): 251-77. For a more general account of the English debate on language and projects of linguistic reform, see Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

²⁵ Pigott, *Political Dictionary*, 20. The list of “alarmists” (2) includes some of the most prominent members and supporters of Pitt’s government.

²⁶ Sylvain Maréchal, “The Manifesto of Equals,” trans. The Radical Translation Workshop, in *An Anarchist Playbook: Fragments from the Conspiracy of Equals*, ed. Sanja Perovic, Rosa Mucignat, Jacob McGuinn and Cristina Viti (London: Tenement Press, 2024).

maintains the rights of the people [...] the advocate of peace, œconomy and reform,” adding that “Aristotle affirms that liberty can never flourish out of a democracy.”²⁷ While entries such as these, associated with revolutionary keywords, tend to defuse the shock value of radical ideas, others are more entertainingly provocative. The London prison of Newgate is “the English Bastille” – a translation that no doubt resonated with the victims of the 1794 treason trials and their aftermath.²⁸

John Thelwall, a radical orator and theorist of oratory who was himself tried for treason, raised the issue of the abuse of words in a public lecture held in London in September 1795, later published in his weekly *Tribune*. “Words of almost every description, are considerably abused in disputes between contending parties,” he observed. “Appellations of the highest virtue and excellence” are constantly perverted by “the enemies of liberty” into “terms of the most contemptuous reproach.” Once more, the case in point is the elusive notion of “Democracy:” “the Aristocrats are very fond of fixing an interpretation to it, which the word never did, – nor can, bear in this or any other language,” Thelwall argues. In contrast to malicious distortions, “an Englishman may naturally be expected to use this word” to signify “a government by the great body of the people.”²⁹ Then Thelwall tries some twisting of his own: since “Aristocracy, in fact, originally meant a government of the *wisest*,” it follows that “representative democracy is the real essence of [...] aristocracy.”³⁰ Of course, “democracy” was not a new word: it had entered English and the other European vernacular via French in the fourteenth century, but until the 1790s it had been confined to historiography and political theory. Now, for the first time since antiquity, the term acquired a real, present-day referent and, together with the new French loanwords “democratic” and “democrat,” entered common usage.³¹ Once an arcane, learned term, “democracy” was embraced to an even greater extent than in France by the Italian patriots, for whom “republic” still designated the oligarchic governments of Genoa and Venice they were seeking to overthrow. In Italy too, vehement discussions raged in the clubs and in the press around the correct definition of “democracy” and how best to communicate it to the people,

²⁷ Pigott, *Political Dictionary*, 14.

²⁸ Pigott, *Political Dictionary*, 87.

²⁹ John Thelwall, “*The Tribune*, no. 25: Report on the State of Popular Opinion (1795),” in *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Gregory Claeys (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 209-10.

³⁰ Thelwall, “*The Tribune*, no. 25,” 210.

³¹ The essential source is Erasmus Leso, *Lingua e rivoluzione. Ricerche sul vocabolario politico Italiano del triennio rivoluzionario 1796-1799* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1991), 43.

hampered in this by the unfortunate assonance, fully exploited by counter-revolutionary propaganda, of “demo-” with “demon.”³² “Democracy” and the other revolutionary keywords were on everyone’s lips, used, abused and dangerously misunderstood by enemies of the revolution, false patriots and the uneducated masses.

Among those who felt the urgency to protect and stabilize the new political vocabulary was Giuseppe Compagnoni, a radical journalist and writer who was involved in the creation of the Cisalpine Republic, and is credited with designing the Italian tricolor.³³ “The meaning of our words is in great upheaval, because our ideas are too,” he warned in 1798 from the pages of his newspaper, the *Monitore cisalpino*.³⁴ This critical self-examination inspired the “Saggio di vocabolario” (Attempt at/Sample of a Dictionary) he compiled for the same newspaper, with eighteen entries featuring some of the terms we have already encountered: “allarmista,” “aristocrazia,” “democrazia,” “eguaglianza,” but also the preposition “ex-” (as in “ex-marquis,” “ex-count”), “emigrato” (to indicate the French émigrés), and the adjective “costituito” (constituted). The entry for the latter turns quickly from a discussion of constitutionalism to a reflection on the translatability of the French model of revolution to Italian lands:

The Cisalpine nation is constituted, meaning that it has a fixed form of government [...] sanctioned by its Constitution. Perhaps it is true that the Cisalpine people, made up of the scraps of various Italian tribes that had long been divided, needed a preliminary cleansing [*lavacro*] before it was constituted as such. If we wanted to turn a mass of spineless, ignorant slaves into a new people [...] we should have stirred them up [...]. Now we would have a real republic. But to achieve that, we should have been the authors of our own transformation.³⁵

With striking lucidity, Compagnoni is aware that the revolution in the peninsula is unfinished business and lacks solid foundations. The word (“constitution”) has arrived in Italy before the fact (“being constituted”) – democratic institutions (the

³² “Instead of Democracy it should be called *Demonocracy* [Demonocrazia], or, the government of Demons,” [Lorenzo Ignazio Thiulen], *Nuovo vocabolario filosofico democratico* (Gelopoli [Venezia]: [Francesco Andreola], 1799), 31.

³³ For a profile see *Giuseppe Compagnoni. Un intellettuale tra giacobinismo e restaurazione*, ed. Sante Medri (Bologna: Analisi, 1993).

³⁴ [Giuseppe] Compagnoni, “Saggio di vocabolario,” *Monitore cisalpino*, 18 May-22 August 1789, now in De Felice, *I giornali giacobini italiani*, 478.

³⁵ Compagnoni, “Saggio di vocabolario,” 481-82.

Cisalpine Republic) have been swiftly erected before those who should shape and participate in them (the sovereign people) could be formed into a nation of active citizens. In a sense, the Italians have been the translators and not the “authors” of their revolution, which had been effectively brought about by Napoleon’s army and guided by the foreign policy of the Directory. The interpretation of the Italian republican *triennio* and of the Risorgimento as a “passive revolution” will gain wide currency through the writings of Vincenzo Cuoco on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799, and later Antonio Gramsci’s reflections on the Italian path to nationhood.³⁶ For Compagnoni, however, the position of Italy as a late adopter and “importer” of revolutionary idioms and practices developed elsewhere had a crucial advantage, namely the possibility of learning from France’s mistakes:

The fervid imagination of the fiery patriot impetuously launches into the great measures [...] which led to the new order in France. He doesn’t reflect on the horrors that they brought. He doesn’t reflect on the many mistakes that France could have avoided, and how, by avoiding them, we can accelerate the new order.³⁷

Reconceptualized in this way, “translating” the Revolution to Italy is no longer a passive exercise of imitation but becomes a precious second chance to recalibrate its course and rhythm, steering it away from violence, and showing the world that a Revolution without the Terror is possible. For Compagnoni, translating the Revolution means rebooting it, giving new impetus and hope to democratic reformers everywhere, at a time when the window for radical change seemed closed both in France under the Directory and in Britain under Tory government.

Paratextual Polemic

This ambition echoes in the words of actual translators of revolutionary texts, who in some cases appear fully cognizant of the political implications of their strategy and positioning vis-à-vis source text and target culture. Translators’ prefaces, dedications and other paratextual materials are often the place where the dynamics of influence and resistance are expressed and come into the open. Just

³⁶ Antonio Di Meo reconstructs the history of this concept in “La ‘rivoluzione passiva’ da Cuoco a Gramsci. Appunti per una interpretazione,” *Filosofia italiana* 9 (2014), accessed 12 August 2025, <https://www.filosofiaitaliana.it/2023/10/07/la-rivoluzione-passiva-da-cuoco-a-gramsci-appunti-per-una-interpretazione/>.

³⁷ Compagnoni, “Saggio di vocabolario,” 482.

as Italian revolutionaries aspired to improve on the French example, translators felt sometimes in a position to correct and even improve on their source text. Francesco Saverio Salfi, a prominent Southern Italian revolutionary intellectual and man of the theatre, prefaces his translation of Marie-Joseph Chénier's play *Fénelon* with an extended essay on "the purpose of theatre."³⁸ In it, he takes a long view of the shifting relations between theatre and politics from antiquity to the present day, which serves to free his translation from any hint of cultural and political deference, and frame it instead within a longer-term revolutionary strategy in which Italian lands might once more take the lead:

France gave us many tragedies and comedies. But they have generally been the product of republican zeal rather than artistic talent [...]. Time has come for Italy's own intellects to furnish the stage with subjects that will serve both morality and taste. It was from Italy that France acquired theatre and all the other arts, but its drama has progressed much further since then. [...] Now it is Italy's turn to come to the aid of the declining French stage. [...] We have free rein. What we need now is for free souls to take the lead with boldness and success.³⁹

Written in the context of increasingly strained relations between Italian patriots and French authorities, Salfi's dissertation seeks to establish Italy's role as both the originator of republican tragedy – via its privileged link to the classical tradition and the example of the eighteenth-century playwright Vittorio Alfieri – and the future revolutionary avant-garde able to improve on the French model. Until that time came, the "regeneration" of the Italian stage would be kickstarted by Salfi's translations of *Fénelon* and other republican plays, capable of providing the "shocks" (*scosse*) that the Revolution needs to "hasten its progress."⁴⁰

While Salfi enlists the power of dramatic shocks to trigger moral and political change, others resort to translation to emancipate language itself. Gaspare Sauli, a Genoese nobleman turned radical journalist, translated Diderot's anticlerical novel *La religieuse* into Italian in 1797. In his translator's preface, Sauli writes of his efforts to preserve the "purity and elegance of style" of the original work, adding that

³⁸ Francesco Saverio Salfi, "Dell'uso del teatro," in *Fenelon, ovvero le Monache di Cambrai. Tragedia in cinque atti del Cittadino Chenier [...] tradotta dal Cittadino Franco Salfi* (Milan: Stamperia Italiana e Francese a S. Zeno, 1800), 5-15.

³⁹ Salfi, "Dell'uso del teatro," 8, 11-12.

⁴⁰ Salfi, "Dell'uso del teatro," 11.

Translators nowadays generally work for their own profit rather than for the common good, hence all the negligence, mistakes and barbarisms that fill works translated into our language. I am not fond of purists who reject anything that does not conform to the rules of the *Accademia della Crusca*. [...] I am a lover of liberty in matters of language, too.⁴¹

To the oft-voiced complaint that translation was a vector of “barbarisms” and linguistic contamination, Sauli responds by distinguishing between mercenary translators working for the market and activist translators such as himself, working “for the common good.” He recognizes translation as vital revolutionary work, not only because it carries over the products of what Sauli considered to be a more advanced revolutionary culture, but also because of its impact on language itself. Sauli is not translating only Diderot’s powerful indictment of forced vocations, but also the dialogic and conversational nature of his style and his playful disregard of norms. Translating Diderot’s modern idiom into Italian, thus, becomes a way to liberate the language from the fetters of archaism and purism. Never was political freedom so clearly associated with freedom in language and in translation.

Italians were not the only nation seeking to write themselves into the history of freedom. English republican works and ideas had been an important source for the articulation of a distinctive republican vision in the early phase of the French Revolution. In Britain, the intellectual legacy and political imagery of the English Republic of the 1650s was reactivated by the radicals of the 1790s.⁴² This enabled James White, a Dublin-born historical novelist and abolitionist, to present his 1792 translation of Mirabeau’s speeches as a token of admiration for this French exemplar of republican eloquence and oratory. While he expressed a cautious enthusiasm for France’s “virtuous revolution,” White also made clear that Britain had nothing to learn from it. In fact, as he states in the preface, “the speeches of *M. de Mirabeau* [...] may be considered as having gained, rather than lost, by translation; since they are now adopted into a language which, for ages, hath been the language of liberty.”⁴³ Mirabeau’s French elocution is literally “domesticated,” in the sense of “brought to its rightful home” in the original language of liberty.

⁴¹ Anon. [Gaspare Sauli], “Il traduttore a chi legge,” in *La religiosa* (Milano: Villetard e Comp., Anno primo della libertà italiana [1797]), 4.

⁴² On the transmission of radical texts from the English Revolution to the Romantic period see *Radicalism in British Literary Culture, 1650-1830: From Revolution to Revolution*, ed. Timothy Morton and Nigel Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴³ James White, “Preface” to *Speeches of M. de Mirabeau the Elder, Pronounced in the National Assembly of France* (London: Debrett, 1792), i.

Both White and Salfi package their translations from the French with paratextual material that contests diffusionist models of revolutionary culture as emanating from the French “epicentre.” For moderate reformers as well as radical democrats, the accusation of being imitators and even lackeys of the French was a particularly damaging one, and a major theme of the anti-Jacobin and conservative reaction everywhere in Europe. The nationalist claims of historical precedence and cultural superiority served in part to deflect such attacks. But they also served to construct a longer and more capacious narrative for the revolution that drew on many sources and embraced a range of historical moments and traditions. As late as 1802, when the Treaty of Amiens brought an interval of peace in the wars between France and the allied monarchies of Europe, the American patriot Joel Barlow published (anonymously) a new translation of Volney’s *Ruines*. Barlow had been one of the foreign “apostles of Liberty” who had been granted honorary French citizenship in August 1792.⁴⁴ Volney’s radical Enlightenment critique of religion and unchecked power had already been translated into English twice and made its author a celebrity in both Britain and America. However, Volney had been dissatisfied with both and entrusted the task of retranslation to Barlow and Thomas Jefferson (whose involvement only transpired in the early twentieth century).⁴⁵ The unsigned preface makes a claim for the place of Volney’s *Ruines* in the new literary and philosophical canon: “As the work has already become a classical one, even in English, and as it must become and continue to be so regarded in all languages in which it shall be faithfully rendered, we wish it to suffer as little as possible from a change of country.” The translator’s preface is a profession of faith not only in the value of the source text, but in the capacity of translation to ensure frictionless circulation and seamless integration. This was made possible by transnational networks of collaboration and co-creation, which ignored accepted distinctions between foreign and local, original and translation, moving even beyond ideas of authorship and the antagonisms it engenders: “we believe we have made a better translation than the former one,” declare Barlow and Jefferson, thanks to the fact that they have “been aided by [the] labours

⁴⁴ Suzanne Desan has analyzed the significance of this much publicized ceremony: see “Foreigners, Cosmopolitanism, and French Revolutionary Universalism,” in *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*, ed. Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt and William Max Nelson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 86-100.

⁴⁵ On the genesis and reception of this translation, see Nathalie Caron, “Friendship, Secrecy, Transatlantic Networks and the Enlightenment: The Jefferson-Barlow Version of Volney’s *Ruines* (Paris, 1802),” *Mémoires du Livre* 11 (2019), accessed 25 July 2025, <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/memoires/2019-v11-n1-memoires05099/1066940ar.pdf>.

[of their predecessor]; and, what is more, [their] work has been done under the inspection of the author."⁴⁶

This vision of a revolutionary republic of letters puts forward an alternative project for world literature, different from the economic models of international trade, free market competition and uneven development underpinning theories of *Weltliteratur* from Goethe to Marx and Engels and beyond.⁴⁷ World literature as a radical utopia would be oriented instead towards the universalism of rights, equality and freedom – a collective founded on rational dialogue and communication, enabled by transparent signs and trustworthy translations. The “spirit of translations” and their role in governing cultural influence continued to be a political issue post-Waterloo, as demonstrated by Mme de Staël’s 1816 essay *De l’esprit des traductions*, which generated much controversy in Austrian-occupied Italy.⁴⁸ Staël patronizingly advised Italian literati to stop “scratching around” (*razzolare*) the “ashes” of classical antiquity and “assiduously translate” from new works in English and German instead. Staël rehearsed by now familiar arguments about the gains obtainable by translation in the international “commerce of thought.”⁴⁹ This, however, was no free trade: Italians must learn to speak the language of Europe’s new masters and, most of all, leave aside “war” and “politics” to cultivate their true “natural faculty,” namely arts and letters.⁵⁰ Staël, although a liberal, in this case leans towards the cultural policy of the Restoration, which strove to archive the classicizing language of liberty in order to achieve a European appeasement. While it is possible to assert that the dream of a transnational radical culture was as evanescent as some of the Revolution’s political institutions had been, its significance is undeniable: endlessly re-translated, rediscovered and reenacted, it proved portable and malleable enough to survive political failures and compromises and endure as an intellectual resource for global revolutionary movements into the twentieth century and beyond.

⁴⁶ [Joel Barlow and Thomas Jefferson], “Preface of the Translators,” in *A New Translation of Volney’s Ruins; or Meditations on the Revolution of Empires: Made under the Inspection of the Author*, 2 vols. (Paris: Levrault, 1802), 1:vii-viii.

⁴⁷ For an overview see Jernej Habjan, “The Global Process of Thinking Global Literature: From Marx’s *Weltliteratur* to Sarkozy’s *littérature-monde*,” *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 3 (2019): 395-412.

⁴⁸ Mme de Staël’s essay was translated as “Sulla maniera e la utilità delle traduzioni” and appeared in the first issue of the government-sponsored magazine *Biblioteca italiana*. Now in Carlo Calcaterra, *Manifesti romantici e altri scritti della polemica classico-romantica* (Turin: UTET, 1979), 83-92.

⁴⁹ De Staël, “Sulla maniera,” 87, 83.

⁵⁰ De Staël, “Sulla maniera,” 92.

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