Ningaabii'an Negamotawag: Translating Shelley into Ojibwe

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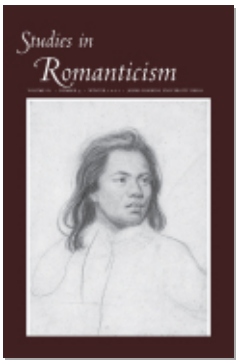

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KAI PYLE (MÉTIS/OJIBWE)

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THE EDITORS OF THIS FORUM HAVE ASKED ME, AS AN INDIGENOUS POET AND Ojibwe speaker, to think about translation and the possibilities afforded by Indigenous-language translations of Romantic poems, with an accompanying translation of a poem of my choosing. Although I must confess I am not a Romanticist, in the past few years I have become increasingly interested in Romantic poetry due to my ongoing fascination with the poetry of the early 19th-century Anglo-Ojibwe writer Jane Johnston Schoolcraft. There are very few people who have created poetry in alphabetically-written Ojibwe: the most famous are Schoolcraft herself and, several centuries later, Margaret Noodin, though a number of my peers like Awanigiizhik Bruce and Zoë Johnson have begun publishing Ojibwe poetry as well.[1] While many of us explicitly frame our poetry within Ojibwe traditions, our knowledge of Anglophone poetry also influences the ways we write in Ojibwe.

The translation of texts in English, French, and other non-Indigenous languages *into* Ojibwe also has a long history. Almost as soon as European missionaries learned enough Ojibwe to stumble through a greeting, they started translating the Bible, hymns, prayers, and other religious texts into Ojibwe. Beginning in the 20th century these translations began to branch out, beginning with the 1900 translation of portions of Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* by Ojibwe speaker George Kabaosa in conjunction with white Canadian marketing strategist Louis Olivier Armstrong.[2] More prosaically, the Canadian government also sponsored (and continues to produce) translations of official documents into Ojibwe. Most relevant to this piece, however, are Margaret Noodin's recent translations of poetry and prose by non-Ojibwe writers into Ojibwe. In an essay about translating Sappho into Ojibwe, she goes into great linguistic detail to show how it is not only the differences between the Greek and Ojibwe versions that are valuable, but also

1. Noodin, *Weweni* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015); Bruce, "Gimaamaaminaan Aki (Mother Earth)," *TCJ Student* (August 17, 2020): https://tcj-student.org/gimaamaaminaan-aki-mother-earth/; Johnson, "Ezhi-Ojibwemoyaan," *The Polyglot* 6 (2020). Note that I say specifically "alphabetically-written" because there is a long tradition of writing Ojibwe song lyrics on birch bark in what most authors call "picture writing."

2. Adam Spry, *Our War Paint is Writers' Ink* (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 2.

the unexpected places where the two unrelated languages come together.[3]

This idea, of unexpected resonances, was what inspired me to translate Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" into Ojibwe. Romantic poems like "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "The Tyger," and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are very firmly rooted in images that felt foreign to Ojibwe culture and history—Grecian urns, tigers, and mariners are all things difficult to speak of in the Ojibwe language! But the west wind is something our language knows very well. There are abundant cultural associations with the west wind in Ojibwe, which I will discuss more below. It triggered my interest, and as soon as I read the first few stanzas, I knew this was the poem I wanted to translate.

I do not mention this connection to suggest that Shelley had any sort of understanding of Indigenous worldviews, or to suggest that there are "universal" underlying messages in the poem. For me, this translation is something of an act of what Scott Andrews calls "red reading." He writes that these readings "explore what happens when a non-native text is read from a native perspective. What disruptions in a text are made possible by reading it with native assumptions? What latent meanings can become apparent? What new meanings can be produced?"[4] While this sort of reading could be done on the original text of "Ode to the West Wind" (or potentially any Romantic poem), translating it into Ojibwe makes these "latent" and "new" meanings unavoidable for the reader.

There are two primary associations with the west wind, Ningaabii'anong, in Ojibwe. First, west is the direction associated with death; it is the direction we walk on the jiibemiikana (often translated as "path of spirits" or alternatively, "ghost road") after we die. This seemed to resonate with Shelley's depiction of the west wind as bringing death, or at least the death that comes with the change of seasons. The second Ojibwe association worth noting is that the west wind is the father of our culture hero and trickster, Wenabozho. While I will not get into details about what the role of the west wind is as Wenabozho's father, I point this out to show that as in Shelley's poem, the west wind is very much an individual and powerful being in Ojibwe culture.

The first thing that became clear to me as I started to translate the poem was that in order to translate effectively, especially from a European language into Ojibwe, it is necessary to really deeply understand what the poem is saying. Initially, I tried to translate very literally, to make sure all of Shelley's images were present and to mimic the roles of verbs and nouns as they appear

3. Noodin, "Miidash miinawaa zaka'iyan sa: And you have set me on fire," *Poetry* (June 1, 2018): https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/146717/miidash-miinawaa-zakaiyan-sa-and-you-have-set-me-on-fire.

4. Andrews, "Red Readings: Decolonization through Native-centric Responses to Non-Native Film and Literature," *Transmotion* 4, no. 1 (2018): i–vii, ii.

in English. When I read over the translation, however, I found it was almost nonsensical in Ojibwe. The trouble was that Ojibwe does not necessarily use nouns and verbs in the same proportions and ways that English does; as is commonly noted by those familiar with the language, verbs hold a much larger percentage of a sentence's meaning in Ojibwe.

So I started again, really closely reading the poem so that I could find the through-line of the narration, even going down to labeling the subject and predicate. When I translated the poem with that in mind, rather than trying to follow the twists and turns of Shelley's language, the poem became lucid. In fact, increasingly I found the Ojibwe version easier to understand than the English—a phenomenon which I have also noticed with government documents translated into Ojibwe. Because the forms of expressing "technical language" are so different between the two languages, in some ways the Ojibwe version requires the translator to be even more explicit about the main point.

One decision I had to make was how to translate the European-specific names present in the poem. I easily translated Maenad as bagwajikwe, literally meaning "wild woman" and for Ojibwe readers, suggesting the mysterious beings who live deep in the bush (Shelley, line 21; translation line 20). With the names of the Mediterranean and Baie, I was originally going to leave them as they were. However, as I read Nikki Hessell's book *Romantic Literature and the Colonised World: Lessons from Indigenous Translations* (2018) and saw how other Indigenous writers sometimes took the liberty of translating European names and touchstones with ones appropriate to their cultural contexts, I decided to try a different method. Baie became Gichi-Wiikwedong, which means "great bay" but also refers specifically to several locations in the Great Lakes, including Grand Traverse Bay (Shelley, line 32; translation, line 32). For the Mediterranean, I took an in-between approach, translating the etymological meaning of Mediterranean "in the middle of the earth" with the Ojibwe term naawakamig. "Sea" in Ojibwe does not differentiate between saltwater and freshwater seas, so "Naawakamig-Gichigami" sounds vaguely familiar in Ojibwe, its name suggesting it may refer to another Great Lake somewhere out there (Shelley, line 30; translation, line 30).

I also took the opportunity to deliberately translate certain pieces of the poem with words and concepts that have connotations in Ojibwe that do not exist in English. One of the first things that caught my attention in the poem was the phrase "angels of rain and lightning" (Shelley, line 18). Although angels are clearly a term laden with meaning in European mythology, the idea of heavenly winged beings associated with storms to me recalled the Ojibwe animikiig, or thunderbirds. So rather than use the loanword *aanzhenii* for angel, I simply said *animikiikaa*: there is an abundance of thunderers, a common word used to say "it's storming outside" (translation, line 18).

Another moment I chose to translate concepts like this was in the line "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe" (Shelley, line 63). This reminded me of a particular song that I have learned, a widely known tobacco song that I learned from Pebaamibines Dennis Jones, where the singer asks that their tobacco (whose smoke brings our prayers to the spirits) travel "midewakiing" and "midegiizhigong." These words might be translated as "around the earth" and "around the sky," but the prefix *mide-* references the Midewiwin, an Ojibwe medicine society. This in turn perhaps brings to mind a portion of the Ojibwe creation story, where Gizhe-Manidoo (the Creator or Kind Spirit) sends their thoughts out into the world that has been created in the form of seeds. After everything had been created, the human was the last being lowered to the earth, and Gizhe-Manidoo breathed all of their thoughts into our bodies, thus allowing us to spread all that creative energy ourselves.

There are also several points where, like the main figure of the west wind or Ningaabii'anong, British and Ojibwe imagery came together in a surprising way. In the second stanza, Shelley references four colors: yellow, black, white, and red (Shelley, line 4). For him, these were clearly markers of the four humors of European medicine at the time, as suggested by the following phrase "Pestilence-stricken multitudes" (Shelley, line 5). For Ojibwe people, those same colors are often associated with the four directions (though different people have different teachings on which color is associated with which direction). The connotation is very different in the two versions, but in both the colors remain significant on a deeper level. In some ways, because of the reference to directions, the Ojibwe translation actually contextualizes the west wind among its peers in a way that English does not.

One other phrase does this particularly well: near the very end, the poet writes, "Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!" (Shelley, lines 68–69). I have translated this as "Omaa nibewakiing, / Ninga-onwaachige!" (translation, lines 68–69). The first line literally means "here on the sleeping earth," but the second uses a particular Ojibwe term for prophecy, fortune-telling, or perceiving the future: onwaachige. I learned this word from a presentation by Alan Ojiig Corbiere, where he discussed how this term connects to not just ideas of knowing the future, or to an individual "prophet" persona, but instead suggests "reading the signs."[5] He gave examples of how Ojibwe and Odawa people used the landscape, waterscape, and skyscape to foretell the future. This connotation, then, deepens the connection in the poem between the physical metaphors Shelley uses for the west wind's impact and the future he is prophesying.

Because there are relatively few monolingual speakers of Ojibwe and not very many people who read written Ojibwe, the purpose of translating

5. Corbiere, "Nwaachge: Reading the Signs," virtual presentation at the 45th Annual Elders and Traditional People's Gathering, Trent University, March 20, 2021.

this poem is not necessarily to expand its audience to people who might not be able to access it otherwise. Instead I offer the translation as a kind of cross-cultural literary exercise. Translating "Ode to the West Wind" into Ojibwe offers the opportunity to see the unusual places where Ojibwe and English linguistic expression overlap. It also shows how Ojibwe-specific worldviews can be highlighted by the language itself through even a Romantic-era English poem when translated.

The poem that results from this Ojibwe translation is not a work of fully Indigenous Ojibwe worldviews, to be sure. I must note that I am not a first-language speaker of Ojibwe and so, for starters, my translation may have errors apparent to more fluent speakers. Although I have found ways to transform the words into Ojibwe and often the concepts behind the words as well, certain things still remain slightly clunky or simply unfamiliar in the Ojibwe version: ruins of castles, sepulchre roofs, even the idea of being proud as a positive quality. I can point out similarities between Ojibwe song traditions and "Ode to the West Wind"—calling on winds as powerful beings is common in Ojibwe songs, and declaring one's own power as Shelley does is an important part of certain genres. This still does not fully erase the different contexts of the original and the translation. The translation may, though, create something a bit like Jane Johnston Schoolcraft's poem "To the Pine Tree"—a text mediating forms and worldviews.

Yet I choose not to position this text as "hybrid" *per se*. Instead, I would argue that this is a form of Indigenization, specifically "Ojibwefication." To write and read "Ningaabii'an Negamotawag" is not to erase the Britishness or Romanticism of "Ode to the West Wind" or to assert that it expresses some "essentially Indigenous" quality, but instead to offer a reading of the poem through an Ojibwe gaze. It shows the flexibility and creative utility of the Ojibwe language to be able to take on content from across oceans and worldviews and to interpret it in a way that resonates with Ojibwe people while still respecting the original form. To me, that is the most significant aspect of this exercise: the demonstration that the Ojibwe language can take on any topic as aptly as any other language—even a British Romantic poem.

My conceptualization of this ability is influenced by David A. Chang's work on how Native Hawaiian people historically engaged in exploration of the world and envisioned the universe beyond the shores of their islands.[6] While often Indigenous people are perceived as having unique and valuable knowledge about local places and topics, this can sometimes lead to an assumption that Indigenous languages and knowledge is *only* suited for the

6. Chang, *The World and All the Things Upon It* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

local, or even unable to handle "global" topics that other languages can address. If we do move beyond the shores of our islands or our lakes, we are sometimes then perceived as becoming assimilated to non-Indigenous ways. Yet we can point to literary ancestors like Maungwudaus, who wrote about his travels in England and other parts of Europe in the 1840s with a distinctively Ojibwe humor, as examples of how Indigenous people have always been developing our own perspectives on the ever-expanding world.[7] His gentle skewering of American and European habits did double-duty, allowing him to articulate an Ojibwe view of a part of the world unfamiliar to most of his Ojibwe community, as well as to make the familiar strange in a kind of mirror for white American and European audiences.

We as Ojibwe people, as Indigenous peoples, can bring our knowledge to bear on anything in the world without compromising our Ojibweness and our Indigeneity. When we do so, we bring a unique lens that may even cause others to look at what they considered old topics in a new way. We breathe life into old words, bearing something fresh in the air: *giishpin bi-biboong, wiiba sa go naa da-ziigwan!*

Note: Three versions of Shelley's poem are reproduced here, in order to demonstrate the process of translation and for ease of reference for readers. Shelley's original verses are printed first, followed by the Ojibwe text and a re-translation of that text back into English.

Ode to the West Wind

I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O Thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

7. Maungwudaus, *An Account of the Chippewa Indians, who have been travelling among the Whites, in the United States, England, Ireland, Scotland, France and Belgium* (Boston, 1848).

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O hear!

II

Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like Earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Mænad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou Dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain and fire and hail will burst: O hear!

III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his chrystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiæ's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: O hear!

IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O Uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?[8]

8. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, 1st Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 221–223.

Ningaabii'an negamotawag

I.

Ningaabii'an, giin enanaamoyan dagwaaging
Giin wayaabanjigaazosiwan wenji-biiwibagaasing, aniibiishan
Indigo jiibayan genjiba'aawaad mamaandaawichigewinini.

Ozaawaawan, makadewaawan, waabishkaawan, miskwaawan,
Bayaatayiinadoon ayaakoziimagakin: giin
Epizonitooyan iniw miinikaanan

Bibooni-nibaaganing, imaa dakisingin
Bebezhig jiibegamigong, biinish
Gishiime, wezhaawashkozid, ge-ondaanimak

Wii-biibaagi ogidakamig aki gaa-bawaajigemagak,
(Inaasinoon zayaagibagaagin indigo bineshiinying)
Wii-minwaande minomaagwak gaye.

Bagwaji-manidoo, miziwe bebaamaashiyan:
Neshwanaajichigeyan genawenjigeyan gaye: shke, shke!

II.

Giin wendaanimak naawigiizhigong
Aanakwadoon indigo aniibiishan, ezhi-binaakwiid mitig
Wenji-bapawiimagakin giizhigong gichigamiing gaye

Animikiikaa: dazhwaangeniwag
Imaa wezhaawashkoziyan memaangaashkaag
Indigo anooj bagwajikwewag owiinizisiwaan

Naaskindibejig, dabasagoodegin
Ishpiming gaye
Animikiig omiigwaniwaan. Giin negamoyan

Ani-biboong, noongom wayekwaase
Digo jiibaayaatig odapakwaaning
Ezhi-meshkawaag gimashkawiziwin

Gizoongi-giizhigong wii-gimiwan
Biskaneg mikwamiikaag gaye: shke!

III.

Giin emaji'ad niibino-inaabandamowining
Ozhaawashko-Naawakamig Gichigami, dezhishid
Nebaad imaa oziibiinsiming,

Besho asiniiwi-minis Gichi-wiikwedong,
Gaa-inaabandaman gete-ogimaawigamigoon
Mamaajiimagakin digowing giizhigong,

Onzaamiginoon ozhaawashkwaasaakamig waabigwaniin gaye,
Epiichi-wiishkobangin, mii wenji-wanendamaang gaa-inaabandaming!
Giin wenji-daashkaashkaag gichigamiing

Gimiikanaaming, megwaa
Ataagib miinawaa mitigoog waasa anaamayi'ii
Gichigamiing gikendangwaa

Enweyan, mii-sh gezika zegendangwaa
Maajii-baapagishkaawaad: inashke!

IV.

Begish naa gaaskibagoowiyaambaan ji-bimiwizhiyan;
Begish naa anakwadoowiyaambaan ji-wiiji-bimiseminaan;
Begish naa digowiwiyaambaan ji-baazhijishkawiyan, maa da'ookiiyang

Gimashkawiziwin, gaawiin dash indigo giin
Epiichi-dibendizosiwaan, giin bagwaji-aya'aa!
Giishpin geyaabi gwiiwizensiwiyaambaan, ji-wiijiiwinaan

Imaa babaamiseyan giizhigong, mii
Iw apii gaa-inendamaambaan ji-bakinoonaan
Gagwejikanidiyang; giishpin ge-wiijiiwinaambaan

Gaawiin indaa-gii-anami'aasiin maneziyaan.
Oonh, ombinishin indigo digowing, aniibiishing, aanakwadong!
Nibaazagoshin, nigidimaagiz! Nimiskiiw!

Indani-gitaadiz misawaa go giin enaadiziyaan:
Wayaangawizisiwaan, gezhiikaayaan, gechi-apiitenimoyaan.

V.

Noondaago'ishin mitigwakiing:
Mii ezhi-bangising nindaniibiishiman!
I'iw keyaa gizoongi-inwewin

Wii-baswewe, wii-minotaagwad
Gashkitaagoziyan dash gaye. Giin gidaaw, Manidoo,
Nindoojichaag! Digo giin nindaa-aaw, ayaakwaadiziyan!

Babaamisetoon nindinendamowinan midewakiing,
midegiizhigong
Indigo gaaskibagoon ji-oshki-ondaadiziikeng!
Mii dash wenji-nagamoyaan,

Biiwisidoon bingwii gaye biskanewin, nindikidowinan
Imaa geyaabi ishkodewang!
Omaa nibewakiing

Ninga-onwaachige! Noodin,
Giishpin bi-biboong, wiiba sa go naa da-ziigwan!

Singing to the West Wind

I.

West Wind, you who breathe in autumn
You, unseen, from whom leaves scatter
Like souls fleeing a magician,

They are yellow, black, white, red,
Many are the sick: you
Who drive those seeds

To a winter bed, where they lie cold
Each in their grave, until
Your younger sibling, the bluegreen one, who comes blowing

Will shout over the land that was dreaming,
(Buds blowing like birds)
Will be lovely-colored and sweet-smelling too.

Wild Spirit, you who blow about everywhere:
Destroying and saving alike: hear, hear!

II.

You from whom blows in the midday
Clouds like leaves, as they might fall from a tree
Shaken from the sky and sea

Thunderbirds abound: they stretch their wings
There where you are blue, in surging waves
Like the strands of some wildwomen's

Messy hair, where hanging low
Too in the heavens are
The thunderbird's feathers. You who sing

As it becomes winter, today it ends
Like the roof of a spirit house,
So strong is your power

In your firm-sky it will rain
Spark, and hail: hear!

III.

You who awakened from summer dreams
The Great Blue Middle Sea, who lay
Asleep there in his streams,

Near the stony isle in the Great Bay,
Who had seen in sleep old castles
Moving on waves in the sky,

They are overgrown with green moss and flowers,
So sweet, that we faint imagining them!
You, who waves split in the sea

Your path, while
Algae and trees far below
The ocean know

Your voice, and suddenly become fearful,
Beginning to shake: oh hear!

IV.

Oh if I were a dried leaf to be carried by you;
Oh if I were a cloud to fly beside you;
Oh if I were a wave for you to roll over, sharing

Your power, but not quite
So free as you, oh wild being!
If I were still a boy, to accompany you

There where you sail in the sky, that
Is when I would have dreamed to best you
In a contest; if I could go with you

I would not have prayed when in need.
Oh, lift me like a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall scraped upon, I am pitiful! I bleed!

I become aged though I have been like you:
I untameless, swift, proud.

V.

Play me as an instrument in the forest:
That is how my leaves are falling!
That way your strong sound

Will deeply resound, will sound beautiful
But sad as well. Be you, Spirit,
My soul! I should be like you, fierce one!

Send my thoughts flying around the world, the universe
Like dead leaves for a new birth!
That is why I sing,

66 Scatter ashes and sparks, my words
67 There where fire still burns!
68 Here on the sleeping earth

69 I will prophesy! Wind,
70 If winter comes, soon it will be spring!

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