

## Lives of Henri Albert, Nietzschean Translator

ANTHONY PYM

*Universitat Rovira (Calaceite)*

Henri Albert coordinated the first major translations of Nietzsche into French, working on the project from 1894 and carrying out most of the translations himself. A competent and complex strategist, he was creative to the extent of forming a peculiarly French Nietzsche, a textual product that was successful in both ideological and commercial terms. Yet Henri Albert had personal, even secret motivations behind his textual strategies, hidden beneath his long-standing historical influence. The purpose of this paper is to seek out those creative motivations, to explain why they were important in the context of the 1890s, and to suggest that their effects were ultimately negative. Not all creativity is good.

On one level, Albert's personal creativity was perhaps no more hidden than that of any professional translator, given the anonymous subjectivity that frequently guarantees the value of translational products. Translators are not supposed to have private agendas; they are not commonly allowed to be creative. In Albert's case, though, any norm-governed anonymity was complicated by a very up-front public life: our translator wrote regular reviews of German literature for the *Mercure de France* and came to be regarded as something of an authority on Nietzsche and things German (see Schockenhoff 1986: 34). His prominent public agenda, more than any humble self-effacement, helped guarantee the particular value of his translations, especially since Albert repeatedly claimed to understand Nietzsche better than did the Germans of his age. In fact, Albert's mode of understanding effectively made the German philosopher a resolutely non-Germanic thinker. To tell all, Henri Albert was a strong germanophobe, translating an ostensibly Germanic author. Why should he have bothered? How might we try to find out?

My problem really concerns the way one should go about writing translation history. Anyone can put two texts side-by-side, observe the differences, and call the result creativity. But how should we explain the transformations? How much creativity is due to translators as people? And how far should the historian delve into the minor aspects of what could, after all, be respected as private domains? Before divulging details, let me briefly explain

why these questions should be asked in the case of Henri Albert, and why they could be of some importance to us today.

### The Role of Translations in French-German Cultural Relations

In 1995, I quietly commemorated one of the many possible centenaries of non-Europe. About a hundred years ago, in April 1895, there was a very real chance for *rapprochement* or *Annäherung* between France and Germany, the two main powers of western Europe, precisely the two powers upon whose mutual understanding the European Union now depends.

In April 1895 the French literary and cultural journal *Mercure de France* joined with the German journal *Neue deutsche Rundschau* in organising and publishing a major survey-questionnaire (*enquête, Umfrage*) in which some 52 mainly French and German intellectuals were asked if they favoured closer cultural ties between the two countries. Give or take a few negative or ironic comments, the vast majority of the replies sought mutual understanding. They were also backed up by concrete suggestions on how to improve relations: joint research projects, student exchange programmes, better press coverage, even a United States of Europe and, yes, a greater number of translations in both directions. If adopted, these measures might have brought about some kind of historical understanding, a century before their hypothetical success today. Yet something went wrong.

Let's situate 1895. The Franco-Prussian War was 25 years ago; the Great War is still 19 years down the road. We are in the middle of a long European peace. True, the Armenians are about to be massacred, there is tension in the Balkans (when wasn't there?) and imperial armies are committing atrocities under distant suns. Yet things are generally not too bad in western Europe. Germany is industrialising at an alarming rate, but the French are too busy with their colonies (and with British rivalry) to be overly concerned about their neighbour. Of course, Bismarck has encouraged the French to take colonies precisely in the hope that they won't look too closely at Germany, particularly at Alsace-Lorraine, which had become German *Reichsland* in 1871. Forgetting was the order of the day.

This need to forget was accurately reflected in the 1895 survey-questionnaire. The main question began with the phrase, "All politics aside...", inviting thoughts to flow as if Alsace-Lorraine did not exist. The sore point was momentarily bandaged over. Yet, again, something went wrong. In 1897, just two years later, the *Mercure* published a much more elaborate survey (136 replies) without German participation, focusing squarely on the question of whether Alsace-Lorraine should be French or German. This time the replies were overwhelmingly anti-German. There was debate, to be sure, but the previous consensus had been lost. The French wanted their land back. They did not particularly want any *rapprochement* with Germany. The stage was set for

1898 and the torrid social divisions that borrowed the name of Dreyfus, a Jew from Alsace, accused of spying for the Germans. Whatever went wrong, the French side of the change might well have happened somewhere between the two surveys, between 1895 and 1897, and it might well have had something to do with Alsace-Lorraine.

Any attempt to fit translation into this scenario must pay special attention to the enthusiastic French reception of two Germanic authors. First, the Parisian cult of Wagner had overcome its initial political difficulties (the *Revue Wagnérienne* was a phenomenon of the 1880s) and briefly dominated the French image of German culture on the 1890s (assisted, admittedly, by the Schopenhauer translations of the 1880s). Second, Parisian interest in Nietzsche was riding on the back of Wagner, none the least because the philosopher was initially translated and read as a critic of the musician. The historical point where there were more translations being produced of Nietzsche than of Wagner was 1897 (see Figure 1). As the French Wagner gave way to the French Nietzsche, the Parisian cultural elites were becoming decidedly less interested in good relations with Germany.

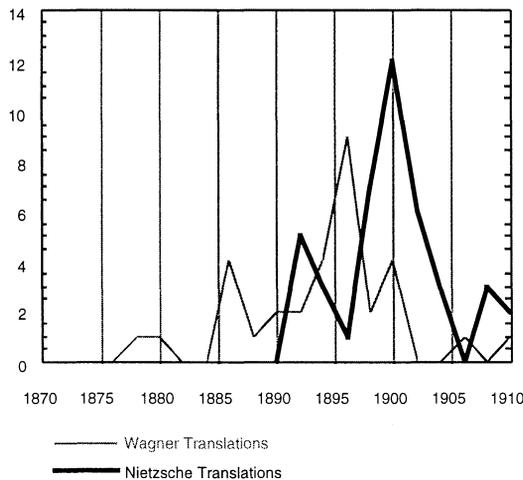


Figure 1: French translations of Wagner and Nietzsche (books and journals)

The shift from the Parisian Wagner (early 1890s) to the Parisian Nietzsche (late 1890s) certainly had its ideological bases. To cut a long story very short, French intellectuals had generally appreciated Wagner as a creator able to attain universality by expressing the most profound Germanic specificity. Nietzsche, on the other hand, was seen as a philosopher who revealed a certain truth by opposing Germanic culture. Further, the peculiar

French vitalism (the cult of "la Vie") that was associated with Nietzsche (among other sources) shifted from left-wing socialist milieux to the right-wing circles that most explicitly opposed German culture and made much of Alsace-Lorraine, exploiting a localist cause for nationalist purposes. That's more or less what happened. To appreciate why it happened, we would have to understand how the Parisians could have read Nietzsche as a non-German. Hence the importance of looking carefully at the man behind the French Nietzsche. We return to Henri Albert.

### A Translator's Public Life

Some information about Henri Albert is very much in the public domain (see Schaeffer 1962, Schockenhoff 1986, Kintz et al. 1989). He was by no means the first to write on or translate Nietzsche in France (the first article to catch public attention was published by Théodore de Wyzewa in November 1891). Yet Albert was the first to produce a comprehensive study of the philosopher (27 pages), published in the *Mercure* in January and February 1893. The following year, 1894, he wrote on the German publication of Nietzsche's collected works and, on behalf of the *Mercure*, negotiated the French translation rights with the philosopher's sister. Albert then organised and worked on the staggered translation of Nietzsche's works, published by the *Mercure* between 1898 and 1914. The translation project was very successful. Individual volumes sold as many as 1200 copies in the two weeks following their release; some were still in print in the 1960s. Although many of his linguistic choices were justly criticised by later translators (cf. Bianquis 1929: 5), Henri Albert was certainly effective in commercial terms.

As we have noted, Albert also acquired authority as a cultural journalist; his articles on Nietzsche were very probably just as influential as his translations. Further, he was a remarkably two-way cultural intermediary. From 1899 to 1904, the years of his most intensive translating into French, he wrote the "Französische Briefe" section of the German periodical *Das literarische Echo* and contributed to *Die Literatur* (Schaeffer 1962: 363). He sold German to the French and French to the Germans, becoming a public figure whose place of work should probably have been an intercultural middle ground.

On this public level, Albert did little to hide certain features of what might be called his personal platform. When he defended Nietzsche, it was against left-wing Naturalists, French Wagnerism and all kinds of feminism, taking stances that Schockenhoff (1986: 40) considers as clear in his German journalism as in his work in French. Albert's French writings nevertheless retained at least one ideological specificity, since it was there that the translator made a gala of his anti-German sentiments, repeatedly stressing that Nietzsche was resolutely non-German. Here, for example, is a passage from his biographical article of 1893:

Through all the vicissitudes of his thought, Nietzsche remained faithful to the French mind. For him, writers like Montaigne, Fontenelle, Labruyère, La Rochefoucauld and Vauvenargues produced more ideas than the whole of German philosophy put together." (Albert 1893: 57, my translation, here and throughout)

Seven years later, when the bilingual pro-rapprochement *Revue franco-allemande / Deutsch-französische Rundschau* objected to this francocentric appropriation of the philosopher, Albert's position had changed very little: "I look at Germany, I look at Nietzsche, and the more I look, the more I know they weren't made for each other" (1900: 848). Albert's Nietzsche was not to become part of a more pluralist vision of German culture.

With opinions like this, it is not difficult to understand why Albert's translation strategies consistently chose the path of least linguistic and cultural resistance. He initially selected the fragments that were the most specifically French in temperament and reference; he constantly transformed titles so as to cater to Parisian taste (*Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemäßen* became *Flâneries inactuelles*; *Wille zur Macht* was advertised as *Le livre suprême du créateur de valeurs nouvelles* in the commentary, then as *Pour une critique de la modernité* in the translation); he spent little time elaborating or standardising the more complex concepts ("Übermensch" was "surhumain" then "surhomme", "Unwerthung aller Werthe" became "dépréciation" then "revision" then "transmutation de toutes les valeurs"). I leave the textual analyses for another place; here I am more interested in the man behind them. Suffice it to say that Albert's Nietzsche was in some way a French philosopher who had the misfortune to write in German. The least the translator could do was to return his thought to good standard French. This strategy is a common enough defence against foreign excellence (see Pym 1992 on the "forgotten code", the strategy by which the foreigner brings us something we already had in the past). Its success in the hands of Henri Albert might help explain why the rise of the Parisian Nietzsche coincided with a decline of interest in a *rapprochement* with Germany.

This should not suggest that Albert's strategies did not involve struggle. When the *Mercure* translation project was first announced, concretely in the form of a call for translators to work on the project, Hughes Rebell wrote an angry letter to the journal claiming that an "aristocratic" stylist like Nietzsche required similarly cultivated translators, thus implicitly criticising Albert's status as a relative *parvenu*, a mere journalist, in fact a vulgariser: "we must be careful not to mutilate Nietzsche's work by giving it to barbarous hands" (Rebell 1895: 101). The following year Wyzewa ironically described Albert as "the self-appointed interpreter and faithful apostle of *Nietzschéisme*" (1896: 699). The translator had enemies; the norms of his day were rarely depersonalised or beyond debate.

By 1897 Henri Albert was nevertheless sufficiently well known to contribute to the *Mercure's* survey on the question of Alsace-Lorraine. The

translator's comments were peculiarly trenchant, taking a side that one would perhaps not expect: "The movement in defence of Alsace-Lorraine is factitious," says Albert, "supported in France by people from Alsace-Lorraine who have come here to live and by those who manipulate this cause for their own political purposes" (1897: 796-7). A strange statement for a translator born and raised, precisely, in Alsace.

Albert moved to Paris in 1893, at the age of nineteen. He was an outsider, a non-Parisian, a bearer of non-central French, bringing bags of Germanic culture that he hoped would win him a niche in French letters. As an Alsatian, a translator, perhaps a suspect intermediary, he was not easily accepted. To become the Parisian interpreter of a Germanic author, Albert perhaps had some strategic interest in denying the interests of his intercultural Alsace. Only a real Frenchman could give Paris the truly French Nietzsche.

Albert's 1897 refusal of the Alsatian cause is all the more telling when we consider his later public career. From 1902 he was the Strasbourg correspondent for the *Journal des Débats*; from 1904 to 1913 he was in charge of sections of the *Messenger d'Alsace-Lorraine*; his later publications included *La force française en Alsace* (Paris, 1902), *La langue et la littérature françaises en Alsace* (Paris, 1906), *L'Alsace-Lorraine contre la force allemande* (Paris, 1912) and even, according to the records, *Le problème de la navigation en amont de Strasbourg* (Strasbourg, 1914). Albert died in Strasbourg in 1921, no doubt with a sense of having navigated home to a French-ruled Alsace, precisely the political aim he had spurned in 1897. Whatever else he might have been, Albert was scarcely balanced with respect to this particular question. It was an affair of considerable personal importance. Some explanation is needed.

## A Translator's Personal Life

Henri Albert was born in Niederbronn, Alsace, in 1868. His full name was Henri Albert Haug. As the family name might suggest, his ancestors were hardly of French stock: 'Haug' is actually of Nordic origin and is quite common in Norway. Yet Henri's grandfather had come from Württemberg as a Prussian army sergeant with the occupying forces in 1815. To all intents and purposes Henri himself was non-French and passably Germanic. In adopting his Parisian pseudonym he deleted no more than the essential, his family name, his family's past, a side of himself that he wanted to forget.

Given that Henri Albert Haug was three years old when Alsace became part of Germany, his early schooling must have been dominated by German, as was certainly the case when he attended the Protestant *Gymnasium* in Strasbourg. The social context of Alsace nevertheless certainly made Henri Albert a competent bilingual. Indeed, this simple social logic would explain why so many German-French translators of the period came from border regions like Alsace, Lorraine or Belgium (Pym 1996). Yet this does not explain

why a translator with Germanic family origins should become strongly anti-German. More details are required.

Henri Albert's father was a lawyer who became mayor of Niederbronn from 1870 to 1874 - the years following the German occupation - and was a member of the governing council for Lower Alsace from 1873 to 1886. He died in 1888. We might surmise he was fairly well integrated into the initial power structures of the Alsatian *Reichsland*. Yet his sons - Henri Albert's brothers - seem not to have been so well integrated. The eldest, Gustave Émile (born 1861), was a member of the anti-occupation student association Sundgovia. When this association was outlawed in 1887 following the *élections protestataires*, Gustave Émile left for Paris and took French nationality, going on to become president of the French Geological Society in 1902. The second son, Hugo (born 1865), was a member of the same student association, undertaking activities that earned him expulsion from university in 1887 (perhaps he should have moved to Paris). He went on to become General Secretary of the Strasbourg Chamber of Commerce, helping Henri Albert with his journalistic activities in the region after 1903. The third son, our translator Henri Albert, appears also to have been involved in the student association, which would explain why he too left for Paris in 1887. Just for the record, the translator's younger brother, Ernest (born 1871), although no doubt too young to leave in 1887, became a missionary in Gabon from 1895.

We thus have a family dispersed by the events of 1887. Their father died the following year. The centred family unit had been taken away by German repression of the independence movement. Of the four brothers, the only one to marry was Hugo, the one who was expelled from university but stayed in Alsace. Those who left, including Henri Albert, all remained single. They created no new family centre.

## A Translator's Secret Life?

These details could explain something of Henri Albert's aversion to German culture. Then again, they may not. At this point I run into methodological doubts. Just how far should history take us into the inner life of a translator? Is it strictly relevant, for example, that Henri Albert had a stable homosexual relationship with the minor poet and journalist Jean de Tinan? Is it significant that the above details tell us nothing about his mother? How many psychoanalytic schemata would be needed before we could satisfactorily account for Albert's lifelong work on Nietzsche? More important, how many of the translator's strategies should be attributed to his target public, the Parisians who bought and fêted the Nietzsche they wanted to read?

Despite these doubts, general awareness of the above background certainly changes the way one reads Albert's critical and translational discourses. The relation between the translator and the author was intensely

personal. When Albert denied Nietzsche's Germanness, he was also denying his own Germanic origins. When he emphasised Nietzschean disdain for women and the family, he was quite possibly expressing his own life preferences. When he occasionally recast the philosopher as a frustrated francophile poet (yes, poet more than philosopher), he was perhaps also framing his own thwarted ambitions. More hypothetically, when he stressed Nietzsche's preference for life in a European non-Germany (Basle, northern Italy, Nice), Albert could well have discovered a fellow citizen of what I have elsewhere called Europe's Middle Kingdom, the sequence of intercultures that separate France and Germany and stretch from Denmark down to Naples (Pym 1996). The French Nietzsche belonged to the same middle ground as his translator. Yet the translator never went so far as to efface his author's difference, just as he never completely forgot the specificity of his native Alsace. Author and translator were, in a sense, compatriots from the Europe of intermediaries.

For all these reasons, Henri Albert had every interest in creating a non-Germanic Nietzsche and making him readily accessible to the French. To the extent that these motivations ensued from his personal background, well concealed behind his discourse as a translator and authoritative intermediary, we have every reason to hold him partly responsible for the historical results of his actions. Had there been no Henri Albert, European history might have been a little different. Looking back on a century of wars, we might even hope it would have been a little better.

### Postscript on the Value of Creativity

It is easy enough to say that translators are creative. Yes, of course they are, and in ways that are grossly overlooked by common conceptions of the translator's task. Yet it does not follow that all translative creativity is necessarily a good thing, nor that it is always powerful enough to matter (Albert achieved just as much by selecting and commenting on Nietzsche's texts). More to the point, invocations of creativity should not imply any wiping clean of ethical slates. To the extent that translators are creative, they are also responsible and thus subject to moral judgement. As the case of Henri Albert shows, the work of translators can effectively separate rather than bridge cultures, flattening rather than pluralising the image of the other, edging toward transcultural mistrust rather than cooperative understanding. Henri Albert was human; yet he was no hero. We should create, by all means. But we must also think about where history is headed.

### References

- Albert, Henri. 1893. "Friedrich Nietzsche". *Mercure de France* 7: 46-64, 163-173.  
 Albert, Henri. 1894. "Nietzsche et Georg Brandès". *Mercure de France* 10: 70-76.  
 Albert, Henri. 1900. "Lettres allemandes". *Mercure de France* 36: 843-849.

- Bianquis, Geneviève. 1925. *Nietzsche en France. L'influence de Nietzsche sur la pensée française*. Paris: F. Alcan.
- Kintz, Jean-Pierre et al. (eds.) 1989. *Nouveau dictionnaire de biographie alsacienne*. Vol 15. Strasbourg: Fédération des Sociétés d'Histoire et d'Archéologie d'Alsace.
- Mercure de France / Neue Deutsche Rundschau*. 1895. "Une enquête franco-allemande"/"Die deutsch-französische Annäherung. Eine Umfrage bei Deutschen und Franzosen". *Mercure de France* 14:64 (avril 1895): 1-65, 14:65 (mai 1895): 235-236. *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* 6:1: 286-312, 412-413.
- Mercure de France*. 1897. "L'Alsace-Lorraine et l'état actuel des esprits". *Mercure de France* 24:96: 641-814.
- Pym, Anthony. 1992. "Strategies of the frontier in Spanish-American Modernismo". *Comparative Literature* 44/2: 161-173.
- Pym, Anthony. 1996. "Interculturality in French-German translation history. Logics of the excluded third", *Blickwinkel. Kulturelle Optik und interkulturelle Gegenstandskonstitution*, Ed. Alois Wierlacher and Georg Stötzel. Munich: ludicium, 933-945.
- Rebell, Hughes. 1895. "Sur une traduction collective des œuvres de Nietzsche". *Mercure de France* 13: 98-102.
- Schaeffer, Louis Edouard. 1962. "Écrivains alsaciens médiateurs entre la pensée allemande et la pensée française: Henri Albert et Nietzsche, Schuré et Wagner". *Les Lettres en Alsace* 8. Strasbourg: Istra, 363-368.
- Schockenhoff, Andreas. 1986. *Henri Albert und das Deutschlandbild des Mercure de France 1890-1905*. Frankfurt/Main, Bern, New York: Peter Lang.
- Wyzewa, Théodore de. 1896. "La Jeunesse de Frédéric Nietzsche". *Revue des Deux-Mondes* (4ème période) 133: 688-699.

