

The Homeric Versions

No problem is as consubstantial to literature and its modest mystery as the one posed by translation. The forgetfulness induced by vanity, the fear of confessing mental processes that may be divined as dangerously commonplace, the endeavor to maintain, central and intact, an incalculable reserve of obscurity: all watch over the various forms of direct writing. Translation, in contrast, seems destined to illustrate aesthetic debate. The model to be imitated is a visible text, not an immeasurable labyrinth of former projects or a submission to the momentary temptation of fluency. Bertrand Russell defines an external object as a circular system radiating possible impressions; the same may be said of a text, given the incalculable repercussions of words. Translations are a partial and precious documentation of the changes the text suffers. Are not the many versions of the *Iliad*—from Chapman to Magnien—merely different perspectives on a mutable fact, a long experimental game of chance played with omissions and emphases? (There is no essential necessity to change languages; this intentional game of attention is possible within a single literature.) To assume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that draft nine is necessarily inferior to draft H—for there can only be drafts. The concept of the “definitive text” corresponds only to religion or exhaustion.

The superstition about the inferiority of translations—coined by the well-known Italian adage—is the result of absentmindedness. There is no good text that does not seem invariable and definitive if we have turned to it a sufficient number of times. Hume identified the habitual idea of causality with that of temporal succession. Thus a good film, seen a second time, seems even better; we tend to take as necessity that which is no more than repetition. With famous books, the first time is actually the second, for we begin them already knowing them. The prudent common phrase

“rereading the classics” is the result of an unwitting truth. I do not know if the statement “In a place in La Mancha, whose name I don’t wish to recall, there lived not long ago a nobleman who kept a lance and shield, a greyhound and a skinny old nag” would be considered good by an impartial divinity; I only know that any modification would be sacrilegious and that I cannot conceive of any other beginning for the *Quixote*. Cervantes, I think, ignored this slight superstition and perhaps never noted that particular paragraph. I, in contrast, can only reject any divergence. The *Quixote*, due to my congenital practice of Spanish, is a uniform monument, with no other variations except those provided by the publisher, the bookbinder, and the typesetter; the *Odyssey*, thanks to my opportune ignorance of Greek, is an international bookstore of works in prose and verse, from Chapman’s couplets to Andrew Lang’s “Authorized Version” or Bérard’s classic French drama or Morris’ vigorous *saga* or Butler’s ironic bourgeois novel. I abound in the mention of English names because English literature has always been amicable toward this epic of the sea, and the series of its versions of the *Odyssey* would be enough to illustrate the course of its centuries. That heterogenous and even contradictory richness is not attributable solely to the evolution of the English language, or to the mere length of the original, or to the deviations or diverse capacities of the translators, but rather to a circumstance that is particular to Homer: the difficult category of knowing what pertains to the poet and what pertains to the language. To that fortunate difficulty we owe the possibility of so many versions, all of them sincere, genuine, and divergent.

I know of no better example than that of the Homeric adjectives. The divine Patroclus, the nourishing earth, the wine-dark sea, the solid-hoofed horses, the damp waves, the black ship, the black blood, the beloved knees, are recurrent expressions, inopportunately moving. In one place, he speaks of the “rich noblemen who drink of the black waters of the Aesopos”; in another, of a tragic king who, “wretched in delightful Thebes, governed the Cadmeans by the gods’ fatal decree.” Alexander Pope (whose lavish translation we shall scrutinize later) believed that these irremovable epithets were liturgical in character. Rémy de Gourmont, in his long essay on style, writes that at one time they must have been incantatory, although they no longer are so. I have preferred to suspect that these faithful epithets were what prepositions still are: modest and obligatory sounds that usage adds to certain words and upon which no originality may be exercised. We know that it is correct to go “on foot” and not “with foot.” The rhapsodist knew that the correct adjective for Patroclus was “divine.” Neither case is an aes-

thetic proposition. I offer these speculations without enthusiasm; the only certainty is the impossibility of separating what pertains to the author from what pertains to the language. When we read, in Agustín Moreto (if we must read Agustín Moreto):

*Pues en casa tan compuestas
¿Qué hacen todo el santo día?*

[At home so elegant/What do they do the whole blessed day?]

we know that the holiness of the day is an instance of the Spanish language, and not of the writer. With Homer, in contrast, we remain infinitely ignorant of the emphases.

For a lyric or elegiac poet, our uncertainty about his intentions could be devastating, but not for a reliable expositor of vast plots. The events of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* amply survive, even though Achilles and Odysseus, what Homer meant by naming them, and what he actually thought of them have all disappeared. The present state of his works is like a complex equation that represents the precise relations of unknown quantities. There is no possible greater richness for the translator. Browning's most famous book consists of ten detailed accounts of a single crime by each of those implicated in it. All of the contrast derives from the characters, not from the events, and it is almost as intense and unfathomable as that of ten legitimate versions of Homer.

The beautiful Newman-Arnold debate (1861–62), more important than either of its participants, extensively argued the two basic methods of translation. Newman defended the literal mode, the retention of all verbal singularities; Arnold, the strict elimination of details that distract or detain the reader, the subordination of the Homer who is irregular in every line to the essential or conventional Homer, one composed of a syntactical simplicity, a simplicity of ideas, a flowing rapidity, and loftiness. The latter method provides the pleasures of uniformity and nobility; the former, of continuous and small surprises.

I would like to consider the various fates of a single passage from Homer. These are the events recounted by Odysseus to the ghost of Achilles in the city of the Cimmerians, on the night without end, and they concern Achilles' son Neoptolemus (*Odyssey* XI). Here is Buckley's literal version:

But when we had sacked the lofty city of Priam, having his share and excellent reward, he embarked unhurt on a ship, neither stricken with the

sharp brass, nor wounded in fighting hand to hand, as oftentimes happens in war; for Mars confusedly raves.

That of the equally literal but archaicizing Butcher and Lang:

But after we had sacked the steep city of Priam, he embarked unscathed with his share of the spoil, and with a noble prize; he was not smitten with the sharp spear, and got no wound in close fight: and many such chances there be in war, for Ares rageth confusedly.

Cowper in 1791:

At length when we had sack'd the lofty town
Of Priam, laden with abundant spoils
He safe embark'd, neither by spear of shaft
Aught hurt, or in close fight by faulchion's edge
As oft in war befalls, where wounds are dealt
Promiscuous, at the will of fiery Mars.

Pope's 1725 version:

And when the Gods our arms with conquest crown'd
When Troy's proud bulwarks smok'd upon the ground,
Greece to reward her soldier's gallant toils
Heap'd high his navy with unnumber'd spoils.
Thus great in glory from the din of war
Safe he return'd, without one hostile scar;
Tho' spears in the iron tempests rain'd around,
Yet innocent they play'd and guiltless of a wound.

George Chapman in 1614:

... In the event,
High Troy depopulate, he made ascent
To his fair ship, with prise and treasure store
Safe; and no touch away with him he bore
Of far-off-hurl'd lance, or of close-fought sword,
Whose wounds for favours and war doth oft afford,
Which he (though sought) miss'd in war's closest wage.
In close fights Mars doth never fight, but rage.

And Butler in 1900:

Yet when we had sacked the city of Priam he got his handsome share of the prize money and went on board (such is the fortune of war) without a wound upon him, neither from a thrown spear nor in close combat, for the rage of Mars is a matter of great chance.

The first two versions—the literal ones—may be moving for a variety of reasons: the reverential mention of the sacking of the city, the ingenuous statement that one is often injured in war, the sudden juncture of the infinite disorders of battle in a single god, the fact of madness in a god. Other, lesser pleasures are also at work: in one of the texts I've copied, the excellent pleonasm of "embarked on a ship"; in another, the use of a copulative conjunction for the causal in "and many such chances there be in war."¹ The

¹Another of Homer's habits is the fine abuse of adversative conjunctions. Here are some examples:

"Die, but I shall receive my own destiny wherever Zeus and the other immortal gods desire" (*Iliad* XXII).

"Astyokhe, daughter of Aktor: a modest virgin when she ascended to the upper rooms of her father's dwelling, but secretly the god Ares lay beside her" (*Iliad* II).

"[The Myrmidons] were like wolves carnivorous and fierce and tireless, who rend a great stag on a mountainside and feed on him, but their jaws are reddened with blood" (*Iliad* XVI).

"Zeus of Dodona, god of Pelasgians, O god whose home lies far! Ruler of wintry harsh Dodona! But your ministers, the Selloi, live with feet unwashed, and sleep on the hard ground" (*Iliad* XVI).

"Be happy, lady, in this love, and when the year passes you will bear glorious children, for the couplings of the immortals are not without issue. But you must look after them, and raise them. Go home now and hold your peace and tell nobody my name, but I tell it to you; I am the Earthshaker Poseidon" (*Odyssey* XI).

"After him I was aware of powerful Herakles; his image, that is, but he himself among the immortal gods enjoys their festivals, married to sweet-stepping Hebe, child of great Zeus and Hera of the golden sandals" (*Odyssey* XI).

I shall add the flamboyant translation that George Chapman did of this last passage:

Down with these was thrust
The idol of the force of Hercules,
But his firm self did no such fate oppress.
He feasting lives amongst th'immortal States
White-ankled Hebe and himself made mates
In heav'nly nuptials. Hebe, Jove's dear race
And Juno's whom the golden sandals grace.

third version, Cowper's, is the most innocuous of all: it is as literal as the requirements of Miltonic stresses permit. Pope's is extraordinary. His luxuriant language (like that of Góngora) may be defined by its unconsidered and mechanical use of superlatives. For example: the hero's single black ship is multiplied into a fleet. Always subject to this law of amplification, all of his lines fall into two large classes: the purely oratorical ("And when the Gods our arms with conquest crown'd") or the visual ("When Troy's proud bulwarks smok'd upon the ground"). Speeches and spectacles: that is Pope. The passionate Chapman is also spectacular, but his mode is the lyric, not oratory. Butler, in contrast, demonstrates his determination to avoid all visual opportunities and to turn Homer's text into a series of sedate news items.

Which of these many translations is faithful? my reader will want to know. I repeat: none or all of them. If fidelity refers to Homer's imaginations and the irrecoverable men and days that he portrayed, none of them are faithful for us, but all of them would be for a tenth-century Greek. If it refers to his intentions, then any one of the many I have transcribed would suffice, except for the literal versions, whose virtue lies entirely in their contrast to contemporary practices. It is not impossible that Butler's unruffled version is the most faithful.

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