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# TRANSLATION

TRANSLATION, trăns-lā'shən, the art of rendering a work of one language into another. This art is as old as written literature. Fragmentary versions of the Sumerian *Gilgamesh Epic* (q.v.) have been found in four or five Asiatic languages of the 2d millennium B.C. Indeed, it may have been read in their own tongues by early Biblical authors and by the poet of the *Iliad*. The Greeks did not translate, for they viewed their neighbors as barbarians and were too busy exploiting their own genius; and the Romans translated little from the Greek, since they were so impressed by the literature of Greece that every cultivated Roman learned to read the language.

The first important translation in the classical world was that of the Septuagint (q.v.), for the dispersed Jews had forgotten their ancestral language and required Greek versions of their Scriptures. They had, however, little sense of literature; therefore they accepted a poor and archaic Greek, full of Semitic constructions. The "olde-worlde" flavor of the first Bible translation has, in fact, continued through the years to bedevil all of the rest, not excluding the Authorized (or King James) Version. For the religious, unlike the literary, have never given priority to standards of verbal excellence, preferring the bare meaning; and the religious were the translator's first patrons.

The Romans followed Greek models, but did not translate; soon they imposed their language on the whole learned world. Until the Renaissance, no man was called educated unless he could read and write Latin, and no learned work could hope to be widely read unless it were written in Latin. King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon versions of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* show a premature development of national self-consciousness. No other king supposed that the vernacular of his subjects was a fit vehicle for serious writing; and the church frowned on even partial adaptations of the standard Latin Bible, St. Jerome's Vulgate (dating from about 384).

The first serious task of translation was undertaken by the Arabs, who, having conquered the Greek world, made Arabic versions of its great scientific and philosophical works. Since manuscripts of these scarcely existed in the West, some translations were made from Arabic into Latin during the Middle Ages, chiefly at Córdoba, one of the few gaps in the iron curtain that had fallen between the Christian and Muslim worlds.

**Chaucer and Early English Prose. –** Medieval translation into the vernacular begins with the emergence of a middle class rich enough to buy manuscripts and sufficiently self-confident to do without an education in Latin grammar. The first English purveyor of fine translations was the first great English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. By his time, both Italian and French had acquired status as languages fit for a literature of entertainment, if not for learned works. The 14th century Englishman, whose language was still regarded as bar-barous in Western Europe, therefore required three foreign tongues, not one, if he were to read the fashionable writers of his day: Boethius in Latin, Giovanni

Boccaccio in Italian, and the *Roman de la rose* in French. Chaucer freely adapted Boccaccio in his *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, began a translation of the *Roman*, and did the whole of Boethius. Called "grant translateur" by the French poet Eustache Deschamps, he founded an English poetic tradition on adaptations and translations. Most medieval literature was based on free adaptation, and since originality was not rated highly before the 19th cen-tury, the classical sources were habitually preferred to the vernacular. Indeed, the vulgar tongues contributed little but folk songs and ballads until the Arthurian and cognate le-gends became widely popular and some plot infiltrations from *The Arabian Nights* had enriched the thematic material inherited from Ovid, Aesop, the Bible and its Apocrypha, and the tales of the saints.

The first great English translation was the Wyclif (Wycliffe) Bible (c. 1382), which, however, displayed all the weaknesses of English prose, for a poetic style is generally formed before a prose one. It was not until the end of the next century that the great age of English prose translation began with Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, a free adaptation of Arthurian romances. Malory's style is rich, and his prose rhythms vary. He uses his sources too boldly, however, to be a true translator. The first great monuments of Tudor translation, therefore, are the Tyndale New Testament (1525; rev. 1534), which profoundly influenced the more famous Authorized Version of 1611, and, Lord Berners' magnificent rendering of Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* (2 vols., 1523-25), with prose as picturesque and delicately modulated as Malory's.

**Renaissance and Elizabethan Translations. –** Meanwhile, in Italy, particularly at Florence, a work of translation was proceeding that was to enrich the whole of Western culture. A beginning had been made with the revival of Greek in Sicily, Petrarch and others had collected Greek manuscripts. But with the arrival of the Byzantine scholar Georgius Gemistus Pletho at the court of Cosimo de' Medici shortly before the fall of Constantinople to the Turks (1453), a Latin translation of Plato's works was undertaken by Marsilio Ficino. This and Erasmus' Latin edition of the New Testament, which he compared with the original Greek, were two great achievements of Renaissance scholarship and led to an entirely new attitude toward translation. Now, for the first time, readers demanded exactness of rendering, for religious and philosophical beliefs depended on the exact words that Jesus or Plato or Aristotle had used.

The literature of entertainment, however, continued to be satisfied with adaptations. The Pléiade (q.v.) in France and the first Tudor poets in England wrote variations on themes by Horace, Ovid, Petrarch, and modern Latin writers, founding a new poetic style on their borrowings. The great Elizabethan translators also made free use of these originals. Their purpose was to supply to the new public, created by the growth of a middle class and the development of printing, the type of work the original author would have written had he been a man of their day, writing in their tongue. The Plutarch *Lives* (1579) of Sir Thomas North, famous because Shakespeare used it as a source book and because it has a pleasingly rambling English, was translated not from the Greek but from a French version by Jacques Amyot. The Montaigne *Essays* (1603) of the Italian refugee

John Florio, which still has a high reputation, is in fact loosely discursive where Montaigne is both subtle and taut. Philemon Holland, who translated the million and more words of Pliny's *Natural History* (1601) in a year, had a far greater respect for his text than either North or Florio. "Our Holland had the true knack of translating," wrote Thomas Fuller, who named him "the translator-general in his age," a title that he earned by translating not only Pliny, but Livy, Xenophon, Suetonius, and Plutarch's *Moralia* (1603). Holland, like all Elizabethans, wrote a slow-moving prose which required more than twice the number of words of the original. Thomas Shelton's version of *Don Quixote*, the first part of which appeared in 1612, before Cervantes had published his second, has a similar exuberance. Shelton's Spanish was imperfect, but where he failed to understand his author he generally invented a phrase which, if not exact, was just as good. The last of these great Elizabethans was Sir Thomas Urquhart, who actually wrote during the Commonwealth. His version of the first three books of Rabelais (1653, 1693) vastly expanded his French original without departing from its spirit. Shelton and Urquhart, in fact, were alive to the problem of their authors' styles, as North, Florio, and Holland were not.

Truth to the original style was admittedly an easier achievement with a modern language than with an ancient one. It was almost ignored by George Chapman, whose *Iliad* (1611) and *Odyssey* (1616) are written in different meters, and by his predecessor Arthur Golding, whose Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 1565-67) was one of Shakespeare's source books; but it is clearly important to Sir John Harrington, who fails to capture it in his *Orlando Furioso* (1591). Though he uses Lodovico Ariosto's meter, he fails to appreciate his elegance and is often raw and provincial. Nevertheless it is possible to read his Ariosto for the story, an impossibility with Chapman. Edward Fairfax's Torquato Tasso (*Godfrey of Bulloigne*, 1600, a translation of *Gerusalemme liberata*) and Sir Richard Fanshawe's Camoëns (the *Lusiads*, 1655) not only convey the matter in the original meter, but are pretty faithful to the manner. Thus, the Elizabethan period of translation, which in fact overran the queen's lifetime by about 50 years, witnessed a considerable progress away from mere paraphrase toward an ideal of stylistic equivalence, but even to the last there was no feeling of a need for verbal accuracy.

**Augustans and Victorians. –** The Restoration and the 18th century, conscious of a kinship with the age of classical Rome, took for granted their power of writing in a classical manner. Certainly John Dryden's Plutarch (*Lives*, 5 vols., 1683-86) is truer to the original than North's, and, in the modern field, Charles Cotton's Montaigne (*Essays*, 1685) is preferable to Florio's. But when Dryden set out to make Virgil speak "in words such as he would probably have written if he were living and an Englishman" – a restatement of the Elizabethan ideal – he entirely forgot that the great Augustan was both subtle and concise. His translation frequently attains nobility, but in the most leisurely and obvious rhymed couplets. Homer, too, suffers at the hands of Alexander Pope, who at best produces a well-polished reflection of the "wild paradise" which he thought it his business to reduce to order. Dryden's *Aeneid* (1697) and Pope's *Iliad* (1715-20) and

*Odyssey* (1725-26) are elegant poems for the library; they have not the force of the national epics they imitate.

Though these translations were signed by Dryden and Pope, they were in fact works of collaboration. The English Augustan style was so uniform that one hand could not be distinguished from another. Moreover, translation was now becoming an industry which, though badly paid, never lacked recruits. Peter Motteux, a Huguenot refugee who completed Urquhart's Rabelais and retranslated *Don Quixote* (1700-03), was the first of the new Grub Street practitioners, whose watchword was ease of reading. Whereas Shelton's *Quixote* is longer than Cervantes', that of Motteux is shorter. Anything that he did not understand, or that he thought might bore his reader, he unscrupulously omitted. This was the rule throughout the 18th century, which assumed that its own workaday style was the best and that writers of a less polite age should be pruned and lopped to their level. For scholarship they cared no more than their predecessors. Tobias Smollett took his *Quixote* (2 vols., 1755) from the French; the poet Thomas Gray published poems from the Welsh and the Norse, which he could have known only imperfectly; and when James Macpherson produced his *Fingal* (1762), and *Temora* (1763), half the world believed that he had translated the legendary poet Ossian. In fact his poems owed something to Gaelic fragments, but were mainly of his own composition.

The 19th century set new standards of style and accuracy in translation. In the matter of accuracy, "the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text," with the exception of any bawdy passages and the addition of many explanatory footnotes, became accepted policy. The Victorians' stylistic practices, however, render most of their translations unreadable today. Their aim was to remind the reader on every page that he was reading "a classic" written in a foreign tongue and generally in another age. Thomas Carlyle's Goethe is English written as German; the vocabulary is Teutonic and the constructions Germanically cumbrous. Sir Richard Francis Burton's *Arabian Nights* (16 vols., 1885-88) is full of pseudo-Arabic convolutions. Even Robert Browning, who claimed to be "literal at every cost," indulged in peculiar archaisms in his version of *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (1877), and William Morris, in *Beowulf* (1895), which he translated with the aid of A. J. Wyatt, wrote English as it might have been if it had developed straight from the Saxon and there had been no Norman Conquest. By contrast, the outstanding Victorian translation, Edward FitzGerald's *Rubaíyát* of Omar Khayyám (1859), attains its Oriental flavor chiefly by the use of Persian names and by discreet Biblical echoes, and it succeeds as a poem in its own right with very little basis in the Persian.

**The 20th Century. –** The cult of archaism was broken in 1871 by the Oxford scholar Benjamin Jowett, who translated Plato into simple decent language, thus setting an example that was not generally followed until well into the 20th century, when the whole question of style was put aside and plain accuracy became the criterion. As in the age of Elizabeth I, translators were now providing for a new educated public, though its training was generally scientific rather than literary. Such works as E. V. Rieu's *Odyssey* (1946)

set out to translate plainly and word for word into prose that could be read without resort to footnotes. The new paperback translators prefer prose to verse, and approximate meters to close imitations, even when rendering the great poems of the past. They do not view their authors with the reverence of the Victorians and let them kick up their heels when they will. Bayard Taylor's otherwise reputable 19th century *Faust* (2 vols., 1870-71) fails where Goethe writes light-heartedly in doggerel; his American translator calls him gently to order, where more modern writers point or even underline the contrast. Light-heartedness indeed sometimes tempts the translator too far, as when Robert Graves makes Lucan faintly absurd in the duller passages of the *Pharsalia* (1957). Criticism by parody is, however, as much a fault as the 18th century's criticism by omission. Our present age demands the whole of the meaning, even when, as in the case of Jackson Knight's *Aeneid* (1956), this involves a considerably expanded text to account for the multiple layers of meaning in every line of the Latin.

Scientific translation is the aim of an age that would reduce all activities to techniques. It is impossible however to imagine a literary-translation machine less complex than the human brain itself, with all its knowledge, reading, and discrimination. Literary translation is never a matter of word-for-word equivalences. The meaning of a paragraph, with all the associations that it had for its author, must be rendered and, if this is done, the sentences will probably bear only a loose resemblance to those of the original. French or Spanish constructions can often be exactly matched in English. German generally needs recasting. Latin, Sanskrit, and Russian require varying degrees of expansion, which are all presently beyond the capacity of anything but a trained human mind.

The plain prose method has not entirely prevailed in the last half century. Outstanding verse translations such as, in the United States, Leonard Bacon's *Lusiads* (1950) and Dudley Fitts' and Robert Fitzgerald's Aristophanes and Sophocles and, in England, Arthur Waley's Chinese poems recreate poetry as poetry, all but Bacon's work employing modern meters and rhythms. First-class work has been done also, on both sides of the Atlantic, in contemporary literature, where the complexities are often greater than in well-annotated work of the past. Here C. K. Scott Moncrieff's Proust and H. T. Lowe-Porter's versions of Thomas Mann stand preeminent. Certain translations of theoretical writers such as Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and Søren A. Kierkegaard, which demand of their translator a profound knowledge of the subject as well as a linguistic skill, have been of a very high order also. General standards of taste and accuracy have in fact greatly risen both in Britain and the United States during the present century, though it seems to be becoming increasingly difficult to suit both English-reading publics with a single ver-sion of the same book.

## Bibliography

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