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THE ART OF TRANSLATION

SURELY TRANSLATION IS AN ART, and a difficult one. How complex and subtle a writer's mind must be, to penetrate the entire meaning of another writer, working in a foreign language, and then to transfer that meaning into his own tongue! The process is hard enough when the two writers are contemporaries, working in neighboring languages, like English and French. But it becomes far harder when the languages are remote from each other in structure and background, like English and Chinese, or modern French and classical Greek. Thought and speech are not two different things which are casually connected, like a motor car and its driver. They are intricately interlinked like cause and effect, like form and substance, so that a thought expressed in two different ways is practically two different thoughts. The translator therefore, when he is working from a remote language, has somehow to *re-think* the thoughts of the original, in order to express them in his own tongue. If I may mention my own experience, I should say that doing such a job of translation is actually more difficult than writing an original work. And a third difficulty, a third barrier may exist: the barrier of time. You and I, if we set out to translate a modern author like Franz Kafka or Jules Remains, would find his mind hard to penetrate and his style hard to reproduce; but we should feel that we at least inhabited the same spiritual climate, used similar rules of logic, felt kindred emotions. But if we attempted to translate someone distant from us in time, like Dante, like St. Paul, like Lady Murasaki, we should discover again and again that the mind of such an author was shaped by a society and an age so vastly different from our own that it would become almost impossible to re-think his thoughts. Almost . . . but never utterly impossible: for the greatest, pleasure of literature is to feel the truth that, in spite of huge distances in time and apparently impenetrable barriers of language, the

thoughts and emotions of all mankind can still be permanently expressed by great writers and understood by diligent and sympathetic readers.

Translation, then, is an art; and a difficult art. But it has long been, and often still is, a sadly neglected one. It has been underpaid, and despised, and misunderstood, and frequently botched and hurried. The worst result of that neglect is that it keeps us from knowing and appreciating really good things, just as a poor black and white photograph of a great painting, or an inexpert student's copy of it, may deform and spoil our understanding of the painter's greatness. Let us take one or two examples.

Suppose we go to the opera. We choose *La Traviata*—the title means nothing to anyone unless he understands Italian, and ought to be translated. We buy a libretto, printed in the original Italian with an English translation. We look through it, and arrive at Act Four, where poor Violetta is dying. She rises and tries to dress. To her maid she says, 'Annina, dammi a vestire.' This is translated as 'Annina, my dress bring hither.' On the same page we find a jolly band of revelers passing beneath her window: they are leading a prize ox to be killed and roasted. The song comes through the window. In Italian it sounds jolly. In translation it begins

> Room for the quadruped
> Fattest and fairest!

Of course, if you read and understand Italian, these phrases are merely silly. But if you don't, they are discouraging, even disgusting. You might very well conclude, as some have done, that La Traviata was a silly piece, and that opera was a silly occupation for a serious person. You would of course be wrong, but your mistake would have been caused by reading a bad translation.

Or think of the Bible. The first sentences of the Gospel according to St. John, as translated into English, are these:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

We read this, and ask ourselves what it means. Does it mean that the Word of God—the Bible itself—has always existed? No, it cannot possibly mean that. Does it mean that speech always existed in the mind of God before human language was created? or that some specific utterance sums up the whole of God's nature? That, too, is very hard to believe. One could think about these puzzling sentences for many months without penetrating to their true meaning, because they have been mistranslated—not only by the English translators but by St. Jerome, who turned them into Latin for the early Church. It is almost impossible to translate them, because the idea intended and its name do not co-exist in Latin or in English. But if I were to make an effort to give their true meaning I think I should say, 'In the beginning was Reason,' or 'In the beginning there was *articulate thought.*' Robert Bridges boldly put forward this translation: 'In the beginning was Mind.'

Now, these two cases are only small examples. But see how they interfere with our knowledge and our appreciation. What are we to say of big mistranslations? What can we think when we see that a mighty and permanent work like a Greek tragedy is lost to us because it has not been adequately translated? How much do we lose? We are surrounded by great and beautiful books and poems in French and Spanish and Hebrew and Greek and Japanese and Arabic and many other languages; and we are deaf and blind to them, because they have never been made to speak in a tongue we can understand and in terms we can enjoy. Recently the most famous Italian novel was newly translated into English: *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, rendered by Alexander Colquhoun. The reviewers nearly all welcomed it, and nearly all said that—although the book is over a century old—it came to them as brand-new and newly delightful because it had now been well translated for the first time. How many other masterpieces have been withheld from us?

There is one field where this difficulty is particularly striking, and where valiant efforts are now being made to amend it. This is the field of translation from the Greek and Latin classics. Not many of us know Greek and Latin nowadays: but the demand for good translations of the greatest works of Greece and Rome is constantly increasing. Random House has sold about 100,000 copies of its translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and I understand that E. V. Rieu's version of the *Odyssey* (Penguin) has sold no less than 300,000 in this country. All over the United States, courses in the Humanities, or the Essential Books, or the Literatures of the World, or the Classics in Translation, are being introduced in colleges, and nearly always welcomed. At Columbia the Humanities course, instituted by John Erskine, has exposed nearly twenty generations of students to the minds of Homer and Lucretius and Dante and Montaigne—all in translation: and they have thriven on it. You will know also of the many discussion groups which have grown up outside colleges, and how eagerly they seek out decent renderings of the great books, to read and to analyze. The demand for good translations is actually far greater than the supply.

We have discussed the various difficulties of translation. There is still another, which is permanent. It is that the great books usually have to be translated, not once, but again and again, into modern languages—because the modern languages change and their styles and poetic idioms change. To take an easy example, it is rather repulsive nowadays to read Greek tragedies as translated into the blank verse and the poetic vocabulary of the mid-nineteenth century. Our use of meter, our sentence rhythms, our feeling for words and phrases have all changed in the last thirty years or so; and it is not enough today for the translator of Euripides to know Greek—he must also be steeped in the dramatic verse of T. S. Eliot and Chrisopher Fry and others. If no contemporary idiom exists for the work to be translated, then the translator's task is harder, for he will have to create one.

Difficult, difficult. Yes, but it has been done, and it is being done today. For

one of the qualities of great books is this: they have the power, when you live with them, to make you greater, to deepen your thought, and expand your powers of speech. They take possession of you, and, if you are tasteful and industrious and lucky, they speak through you.

Before we go on to look at some of the most interesting translations of the past few years, let me point out one peculiarity of great books which we must all have noticed. This is that they are so rich, so various, so deep and complex that they mean many different things to different people. Therefore there can be—there *must* be—many different translations of them. No two actors can ever play Hamlet in the same way: think of the vast difference between the characterizations of Barrymore, of Gielgud, of Evans, of Olivier. Similarly, no two men can ever translate Homer or Dante in the same way. It follows that, if we cannot read the original, we ought to use not one translation but several. A few years ago I was reading Dante with my son. He read the prose translation in the Modern Library, and I read Longfellow's verse translation (sometimes also attempting my own rendering direct from the Italian), and in that way we came much closer to the meaning than we could have done by looking through one window alone. If Dorothy Savers' new translation had been available then, we should have used that too.

The biggest challenge to any translator is of course one of the best poems in the world: the *Iliad* of Homer. It is a huge work, many thousands of lines long. It is written in a splendid meter, far stronger and more varied than English blank verse. Its language is both clear and complicated, like a Beethoven symphony or a great cathedral; and it is trenchantly expressive, full of brief phrases which, once heard, can never be forgotten, but which therefore are the despair of the translator. Its range is wide, moving all the way from a crying baby to a god roaring with fury, from a wily diplomatic speech to a savage hand-to-hand battle. It is full of action and passion, myth and history, psychology and rhetoric; it is full of music.

It is a world.

Undaunted by that challenge, four or five translators in the past few years have set out to turn Homer into English. And they have all been successful, working on different levels and for different purposes.

The most ambitious is the verse rendering by Richmond Lattimore, published by the University of Chicago Press. Mr. Lattimore (who is professor of Greek at Bryn Mawr) has prepared himself for his task by years of study and practice. He began about ten years ago with a version of the fearfully difficult lyric poems of Pindar. Then he translated the most difficult of all Greek plays, the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. This was good training, and it rewarded him. He is not merely a translator, but an original poet, with a spare, muscular, energetic style of his own. In order to make a poem worthy of Homer, he had to render this style more subtle and more freely moving, and at the same time to find a regular rhythm to reproduce the majestic regularity of Homer's epic verse. He did this by choosing a spacious meter. Not the usual English verse, which with its five beats is not roomy enough to contain all that Homer got into his lines, but the same six-beat meter which Robert Bridges used in 1929 for *The Testament of Beauty*; and then he made it lighter and swifter. Bridges was writing a didactic poem in the slow, thoughtful style of Lucretius; Lattimore was writing a strongly moving epic. Here, for comparison, are two passages from their work.

First, Bridges, from *The Testament of Beauty* (3.354-8):

> How was November's melancholy endear'd to me
> in the effigy of plowteams following and recrossing
> patiently the desolat landscape from dawn to dusk,
> as the slow-creeping ripple of their single furrow
> submerged the sodden litter of summer's festival!

And now, Lattimore (4.422f.):

> As when along the thundering beach the surf of the sea strikes
> beat upon beat as the west wind drives it onward; far out
> cresting first on the open water, it drives thereafter

> to smash roaring along the dry land, and against the rock jut
> bending breaks itself into crests spewing back the salt wash;
> so thronged beat upon beat the Danaans' close battalions
> steadily into battle.

You see how rapid and strong it is, and how clearly it reproduces the divine clarity of Homer. If Mr. Lattimore's translation has a weakness, it is perhaps that it lacks something of the gusto and plenitude of Homer. The *Iliad* is full of sunshine and sweat, knotted muscles and brown skins: its words have color and savor. Mr. Lattimore's translation wants something of that richness, partly because the general poetic vocabulary available in English today is much smaller than that of Homer—or, for that matter, of Shakespeare. But it is a clear, courageous, and successful piece of work, for which he deserves much gratitude.

Last year a verse translation of another great poem was issued. This is the version of Vergil's *Aeneid* by Rolfe Humphries, published by Scribner. Like Mr. Lattimore's *Iliad*, this is simpler than its original, and its author freely admits he has cut a little. But the most interesting change is that he has speeded up the poem. Vergil is not like Homer.

The *Aeneid* is a slow, elaborate poem, full of half lights, and obscure double and triple meanings, and haunting sound effects, and peculiar distortions of language (to which one of his most eminent contemporaries bitterly objected as 'affectation'). It does not march on with the tread of an army or gallop like a chariot, as Homer does: it is the record of a pilgrimage, arduous and thoughtful, full of anxious pauses. Now, such effects are almost impossible to reproduce in a modern language, and perhaps they ought not to be attempted. Mr. Humphries has chosen not to echo them; his style is much more brisk and carefree than Vergil's; he likes short, stabbing sentences, and bold unequivocal utterance. Here is a soldier's speech, rendered roughly as Vergil says it (2.387-91):

> Comrades, where fortune first points a way to safety and where she shows herself friendly, let us follow: let us change our shields and fit on ourselves the emblems of the Greeks. Treachery or courage, who would ask which, in an enemy? They themselves will

give us weapons.

And here is Mr. Humphries' version:

Comrades, where fortune
First shows the way and sides with us, we follow.
Let us change our shields, put on the Grecian emblems!
All's fair in war: we lick them or we trick them,
And what's the odds?

As you see, this has one mistake in it ('we follow' for 'let us follow'), one piece of slang ('lick them'), one addition ('what's the odds?'), and one omission ('They themselves will give us weapons'). But the meaning is nearly the same, and the speed and pace of the original have been increased: we can almost hear the desperate youngster shouting. Again and again, comparing Mr. Humphries' version with the original, we see him abbreviating and simplifying, but always so as to make the poem more rapid and more continuously readable. The result is that much of the poetry and music has been sacrificed, but the rhythm, the story, and the imagination are kept alive. Mark Van Doren says it is the most readable English version since Dryden, and I agree with him.

Another translation of the *Aeneid* has been completed more recently, by Mr. Cecil Day Lewis, now Professor of Poetry at Oxford University. Here is his version of the same few lines we have already looked at:

Comrades, let's follow up where fortune has first
shown us
A way to survival, and play our luck while it is good!
Change shields with these dead Greeks, put on their
badges and flashes!
Craft or courage—who cares, when an enemy has to be
beaten?
The Greeks themselves shall equip us.

This reads fairly well at first. But, as we reread, and continue through the rest of

Mr. Lewis' rendering, we find that he has not solved the chief problem nearly so well as Mr. Humphries and others: he has not managed to blend the colloquial and the poetic. For instance, even in this little piece, 'badges and flashes' is pure British military slang, while 'craft and courage' is graceful rhetoric. Either is good for poetry, but we cannot imagine them both being used in the same speech. And so, again and again, Mr. Lewis shows that his ear is untrue, or at least uncertain: sometimes he gives us the brisk up-to-date slangy note of Auden, and sometimes, within a few lines, the complex lofty language of Tennyson or Morris. Probably that is right for him, since he belongs to the generation which was reared on Victorian and Edwardian poetry and then went tight-lipped and modern; but it is not right for Vergil, who spent much time on creating a single, unique, unified style.

Both Lattimore's *Iliad* and Humphries' *Aeneid* are poetic translations. But some very interesting translations have been made in prose. Random House sells the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in stately, archaic versions by Andrew Lang and three colleagues of his, they sound rather like the Bible and rather like Sir Thomas Malory. Samuel Butler put both poems into brisk matter-of-fact modern prose expressly to show that they were gripping stories with well-observed characters. More recently we have had translations by W. H. D. Rouse (New American Library) and E. V. Rieu (Penguin). These are the best translations to begin on. To begin on, but not to stay with. They show us the poems as wholes, stripped down and simplified. The story becomes clear. The colors become sharp and rather crude. Rouse was a jolly, extroverted English schoolmaster, and his translation is full of slang, which keeps something of the youthful energy and bursting animal spirits of Homer, but loses his dignity and his frequent grandeur. Rieu is less fanciful, and retells the tale as straightforward prose, which is always clear, but now and then a trifle dull. But they are both good to read. Homer—even when he is cruel and tragic—is always enjoyable, he makes you feel more fully alive; and that is the chief merit of Rouse

and Rieu, that their translations move and live.

So much for epic poetry. What about translations of Greek drama? Here the problem seems to be much more serious, and translators have been less lucky. Gilbert Murray's renderings are sometimes very moving, but their Swinburnian cadences seem rather old-fashioned now. W. B. Yeats at tempted the *Oedipus*, but he didn't really know enough Greek, and he was not temperamentally suited to the task. Some young contemporary poets have made valiant efforts to produce translations in the modern idiom, but seldom with complete success. At their best they remind me of the French prose translations of Shakespeare, and at their worst they are disastrous. I think the worst translation I have ever read is the *Agamemnon* as rendered by a normally competent poet and scholar, Louis MacNeice. Rex Warner has published versions of *Prometheus*, *Hippolytus*, and *Medea* in a style which avoids pomp and circumstance by going to the other extreme and becoming chatty and commonplace. In this country Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald have been working the same field for several years with more success. Their verses are nearly always poetically uplifting, although occasionally they stray too far from the Greek original.

Perhaps it is too early for us to expect really satisfying translations of Greek tragedy at this present stage. Perhaps the idiom and rhythms of modern poetic drama need to be more thoroughly explored, its powers and potentialities more closely tested, a new kind of rhetoric developed, before translators will have a suitable style at their disposal. The Athenians saw dozens and dozens of plays; their poets wrote and produced very copiously; they had a wide range of instruments to use. We seldom see a modern poetic play, and most of us feel that Eliot and Fry and others are still experimenting. When modern poetic drama is more firmly established, we can hope for richer translations of ancient drama.

Earlier we said that translation was a difficult art, and that it had been

neglected; but that it had recently been more fully recognized and more skillfully practiced. We have had time to look at only one field; but in other areas there are many skillful translators with many striking successes to their credit. Scott-Moncrieff's equisite version of Proust is a masterpiece. Mrs. Lowe-Porter has grappled successfully with the fearful difficulties of Thomas Mann's thought and style. Justin O'Brien, in his magnificent four-volume translation of *The Journals of André Gide*, has produced not only a skillful rendering of Gide's spare and taut style, but a full critical apparatus without which the Journals would scarcely have been intelligible to the ordinary reader. Jacques Le Clercq has done the apparently impossible by both translating Rabelais and improving on the seventeenth-century translation by Urquhart and Motteux. There are many more among our contemporaries doing translations which do not merely serve as faithful reproductions of the original, but, written with genuine passion, with understanding, and with love, can very nearly claim to be original works. We do well to be grateful to such translators. They know we are blind and deaf, and they make it possible for us to see, and to hear.

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