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Traitorous translators ?

"TRADDUTTORE TRADITORE" – THE GREAT AGES OF TRANSLATION

I take my text from Ezra Pound, a first-rate poet and a first-rate judge of a translation, whose rendering of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer" is a very vivid and compact piece of work. In his "Notes on Elizabethan Classicists"[1] Pound says, "A great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations: or follows it." In his hasty, intuitive manner Pound uttered a truth about literary history which I do not intend to press too far. I shall also try to say as little as I can about the "influences" of translations upon English literature, great as these were upon language, style, syntax, and point of view. First, it is difficult to prove such influences clearly except in isolated and obvious instances. Shakespeare probably used Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, and Holinshed's *Chronicle* more than any other books in his library; the translated Italian novelle of Cinthio, Bandello, Boccaccio, and Luigi da Porto also rate high among his material of inspiration. Everyone knows too the illuminating effect that Chapman's Homer had upon John Keats. Apart from these examples among the great (and less learned) English writers one can theorize only.

Translation is a form of literature by itself, worthy of study for its own sake and not as mere influence. "The translator is a traitor" runs the forthright Italian proverb; but it might be more just to call him simply a man without a country. He lingers upon national boundaries, seeking what he may bring home to that strange limbo that lies between one tongue and another. His task is hard and his reward small; Arthur Golding was the only Elizabethan translator who received even the modest return offered by the right of sale of his works. The esteem in which translation is held may be shown by the scanty number of first-rate men of letters who have devoted some part of their energies to the task. Some great

[1] *Make It New* (Yale Un. Pr., 1935) p. 101. See T. S. Eliot, ed., *Selectd Poems of Ezra Pound* (London, Faber and Faber, 1933) 151-153 for Pound's translation of "The Seafarer".

writers have done translations. Goethe, Schiller, and Herder; Chaucer, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Fielding, Smollett; Coleridge, Carlyle, Browning, and Tennyson among them. In our day it is usually the academic scholar who has taken over the burden; occasionally writers like Dudley Fitts, Allen Tate, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound have turned their hands to translation, but they too are semi-academic in their pursuits or teachers for a living. I have myself translated more than thirty poems from seven languages, a book of short stories from the Italian, and a scientific treatise from Renaissance Latin and I have not made a dime from any of them.

Regretfully I limit my survey to English translations and begin by setting down some possibly significant initial statements, chronologically in ascending order.

1) In 1626 George Sandys published a translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the first book on a classical subject and the first literary work to be produced in America.

2) The first printed English book was a translation of a collection of stories about Troy (*Recueil des Histoires de Troye*) published by William Caxton at Bruges in 1474[2].

3) The father of English prose is King Alfred, who before his death in 901 A. D. translated, among other works attributed to him, Orosius' *History*, *Gregory's Pastoral Rule*, and the *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius.

I. The Medieval Period. Alfred, like Appius Claudius the blind old Roman censor of 312 B. C., began a literature by translating. Claudius translated a few sententiae from Greek sources, including the famous "Every man is the blacksmith of his own fortune." Alfred established English prose largely by way of translations from the Latin. Both men were far ahead of their times in originality and versability.

Alfred to Chaucer

[2] By Raoul Le Fèvre: his French version was done from the Latin prose chronicle of Guido delle Colonne.

The Medieval period from Alfred to Chaucer is not productive of important translations of single authors. The *Ormulum* (1200), a paraphrase of about forty of the Gospels read in the Mass, Layamon's *Brut* (1175-1200), or John of Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* (1387), even Chaucer's *Boethius* (1381; printed 1479), are not especially prepossessing. Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1484) is an oasis of romance in the Medieval desert. Yet from the Norman Conquest to the middle of the fourteenth century the religious literature of the English people was largely transcribed from Latin and French, Latin hymns deeply affect English prosody, and the Anglo-Latin chronicles show how closely the development of English literature is bound to the Roman language. A recent bibliography lists 3,839 items translated at present from Medieval sources of all kinds, from all languages, chiefly Latin, Greek, and Arabic; of these the chronicles provide a considerable part[3].

Aside from the fruitful effects of translation upon religious life and the birth of romance, we must note in this period the glorious tradition of Biblical translation, a cultural current of very great importance in itself, which so enriched English prose and runs from Wyclif (1380) through the work of Tyndale, Coverdale, and Thomas Mathew to the King James translators of 1611.

II. English translation becomes a more impressive branch of literature in the second great age, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After Caxton's day, with its translations of Cato's *Distichs*, Aesop's *Fables*, treatises on the art of warfare and a few other items, the translators produced between 1500 and 1540 not more than a dozen but between 1540 and 1600 at least 56 translations of Greek books. The growth in quality of English humanism can be gauged by these translations even more certainly than by the greatest number of translations from the Latin, French, or Italian, for a knowledge of Greek in England was very rare. Erasmus and the English Humanists Linacre, Grocyn, Colet, Sir Thomas Elyot, and Roger Ascham helped to create the cultural atmosphere which inspired the early sixteenth century translators. They produced translations of Erasmus, Plutarch, Isocrates, Cicero, Seneca, Caesar, Sallust, Terence, Aristotle's *Ethics* and a Thucydides, both three times

[3] A. P. Evans and C. P. Farrar, *Bibliography of English Translations from Medieval Sources* (Columbia Un. Pr., 1946). The list includes the period from Constantine the Great to 1500.

removed from the original by the intervention of French, Latin, and Italian versions.

A Golden Phase

Around the date of Tottel's *Miscellany* (1557), English translation entered a new and golden phase. In addition to the emphasis on moral and historical instruction which characterized the first half of the sixteenth century, a desire for the romance and beauty of poetry and fiction gave rise to translations of Vergil, Ovid, the Greek romances of Heliodorus and Longus, the dramas of Seneca, the *Satires* and *Epistles* of Horace, some Greek epigrams, six idylls of Theocritus, Aplucius, Aelian, Plutarch's *Lives*; Herodotus, Polybius and Livy were forced to wait their turn until a later period.

Among philosophical, rhetorical, and satiric writings Plutarch, Seneca, Lucian, and Isocrates received renewed attention. Aristotle's *Politics*, Plutarch's *Moral Essays, the Manual* of Epictetus, and Seneca's discourses were translated. Cicero's *Offices* were done by Nicholas Grimald (1553) and his other philosophic works followed. The grave and gay, the need for facts, instruction, and entertainment were satisfied. Even Euclid was translated complete–notable as a version direct from the Greek and not by way of French or Latin. Science profited from translations of Hippocrates, Galen, Pliny, to say nothing of Artemidorus on the interpretation of dreams. School books included Terence's *Andria* and Bullokar's curious Aesop.

Over 200 Translations

The early seventeenth century represents a return to more weighty and serious books. The *Characters* of Theophrastus served a timely purpose in directing attention to the original model for the English character writers, Hall, Overbury, Earle, and Butler. The Roman historians including Tacitus at last, Persius, and Chapman's Homer issued from the presses. The latter in leisurely style appeared between 1598 and 1615, trailing clouds of glory even in its own day. Romance and fiction had their due, however, in the translation of Achilles

Tatius, the remaining Greek romancer, in Marlowe's *Amores* of Ovid, First Book of Lucan, and *Hero and Leander*, in Suetonius (Philemon Holland's best work), and in Claudian's *Rape of Proserpine*. All told, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries produced before the passion for translation abated more than 200 separate works, some authors being translated more than once, of course, during that period.

The omissions and postponements of the translators are worth noticing. They did not translate Sappho at all nor any Greek lyric, Lucian (except for small bits), Plato (except the *Axiochus*), nor Lucretius until the late seventeenth century (Thomas Creech, 1682); no Greek drama appeared beyond Gascoigne's *Jocasta* (a paraphrase of Euripide's *Phoenissae*, from the Italian of Dolce, 1572), and little of Plautus or Terence since presumably Seneca was sufficient in drama. Petronius, a character with many affinities for the Elizabethans, had to wait until William Burnaby and another hand did the *Satyricon* in 1694.

The translators were rarely scholars like Savile, the translator of Tacitus. They were generally young men from the Inns of Court who translated a book before they took up more serious duties in politics, diplomacy, the law, or the church. What we may call professional translators were few: Philemon Holland, whose labors begun when near fifty covered about ten years, George Chapman, and Sir Thomas Lodge were chief among them.

Their motives were various. First, the sheer interest of the English reading public in the classics of Greece and Rome joined with the fact that few people even among the upper classes could read Latin, much less Greek, accounted for many translations. They were composed to entertain country gentlemen and to instruct courtiers, to present facts of history and precepts of conduct, to offer practice in the adaptation of classical metres, to assist the work of teachers in grammar schools, and sometimes to fill up blank pages at the end of books.

Methods of Translation

The language of the translations at their best was, in the words of Professor Saintsbury

describing William Adlington's *Golden Asse* of Apuleius (1566)[4] "young and vigorous... It is... direct and fresh, and yet possesses that picturesque happiness of phrase which is the crown of a growing language It is dignified, sonorous, but never heavy..." Yet there is an infinite variety in the style of the translations, and some are quite heavy. Many are full of quaint, slangy, highly colloquial speech, full of eccentricity and flourishes. The personal quality of the humanists who made them is seldom absent. The methods followed seem strange to modern views of accuracy; it was not unusual for a translator to cut or expand at will, to use two synonyms where one would do, to paraphrase and garble with allusion and explanation. Alexander Barclay thought nothing of using 38 words to reproduce 5 of Sallust's; this tedious habit of amplification clung to translators even in the eighteenth century, when William Melmoth could employ 42 English words for one 11 word passage of Cicero's *De Senectute*; F. Seymour Smith rashly calls it "a good piece of work." Some of the greatest translators such as North were at great pains to heighten the often severe simplicity of the original and to exaggerate the dramatic element in descriptions of battles and people.

Among the translators Thomas North, Philemon Holland, Thomas Phaer, who translated the *Aeneid* in 1562, George Chapman, Arthur Golding, and Christopher Marlowe were the most famous. Golding and Holland were careful and competent workers who rendered more than one author into English. Golding's *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (1567) was the best known of all the Tudor translations. Holland was with justice called "the Translator Generall in his age" (Fuller). The story of his life as a poor physician and school-master who found fame in turning Pliny, Suetonius, Ammianus Marcellinus, Livy, Plutarch, and Xenophon into English is charmingly told by that connoisseur of Elizabethans, Charles Whibley[5]. The famous pen with which he translated all of Plutarch's *Moralia* was handed down, chased in silver, as an heirloom. The story went that Baskerville, the great printer,

[4] In the preface to the Abbey Clasics reprint.

[5] In the introduction to the Tudor Translation reprint of Holland's Suetonius (Constable, London, 1899).

imitated Holland's Greek script for his beautiful font of Greek type. Whibley thus describes the words in which Holland translated Suetonius: "In such terms as these might Rabelais have composed the lives of the Roman Emperors"[6].

Verse Experiments

Translations of poetry had not the same good fortune as those in prose. Richard Stanyhurst, whose translation of the first four books of the *Aeneid* (1582) supplied the most ridiculous curiosity among the translations, attempted the cumbrous hexameter amid many foolish coinages and whimsies which, like much of the Loeb Theocritus of our day, requires a translation for the English itself. His example in poetic translation, though admired by Spenser and Gabriel Harvey, who also experimented with the English hexameter, has rarely been followed since. Only H. H. Ballard in his very effective *Aeneid* had used it in our time with any success. Smith and Miller in their recent line-for-line *Iliad* in English hexameters hark back occasionally to Stanyhurst with such infelicities as "Buddy, sit thee in silence". Chapman and others used the old fourteener or its variation with the Alexandrine (poulter's measure). The fourteener is used for Chapman's *Iliad*, but the heroic couplet is the medium for his *Odyssey*. A significant contribution of Surrey's translation of Vergil was his invention of blank verse. The translators of Seneca's plays used it only for the choruses, rendering the iambic senarius of the dialogue into galloping fourteeners. Seldom has so incongruous a choice of meters resulted in a translation which is, after all, more adequate than any other we have[7].

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[6] "Tudor Translators", in *Literary Studies* (Macmillan, London, 1919), 84. F. O. Mathiessen, *Translation: an Elizabethan Art* (Harvard U. P., 1931) 169-227, has a painstaking analysis of Holland's method of work.

[7] Although he devotes only about 4 pages to the translations themselves T. S. Eliot has a most interesting discussion of "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation" (*Selected Essays*, 1917-1932; Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1932, reprinted from the Tudor Translations, Second Series, reprint of Newton's Seneca).

Tudor Vigor and Color

The triumph of the Tudor translators, despite their faults, was in making their works genuine English books in their own right. Most of their translations read as though they had no model in any other language; the characters in them are Elizabethans and human beings. These vigorous volumes do not smell of the lamp or of the scholar's study; few are colorless and indistinctive. Their makers adventured upon the deep of the English language as Drake and Raleigh adventured upon the high seas, and no amount of scholarly accuracy can outweigh the magnificent rhetoric and fellow-feeling with which the Tudors approached the Classics. Indeed, very probably the reason why W. H. D. Rouse's numerous translations in our day find so many carping and unsympathetic critics in the academic world is his insistence on giving his subtle appreciation of the old translators full sway. He is of the breed of Holland and Golding; and modern professors cannot forgive him for it.

The later seventeenth century represents a change and sometimes a falling off in the quality and nature of translations. Most of the great classical Latin and some Greek authors were now available; there remained to be printed the classics of the European vernaculars and the inevitable theory of translation, like grammar and aesthetics, a late growth of language and art. Some of the Spanish and Italian books so important for their influence upon English fiction and drama respectively were already published. Lord Berners had translated *La Celestina* in 1530; Whytehorne had done Machiavelli's *Art of War* in 1560; Castiglione's *Courtier* by Thomas Hoby had appeared in 1561[8]. Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (2 vols., 1566-7), one of the early and best anthologies, had already established itself as a source for many English plots. In 1576 appeared the great Spanish rogue tale, *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The *Fiametta* of Boccaccio was translated in 1587, although the *Decameron* (from which Painter had taken selections) was to wait until 1620, the year of the Pilgrims. Harrington's *Ariosto* (1591) was added to a list of important books.

More were to come. Shelton's *Don Quixote* came into English for the first time in

[8] See Matthiessen, *op. cit.*8-53 for a thorough treatment of this book.

1612; the *Novelas Exemplares* of Cervantes followed in 1640, *Guzman de Alfarache* in 1622, and Gil Blas in 1716 (the first six books only; Smollett did the complete book in 1748). The Spanish *Cid* was first Englished in Southey's prose compilation. Sir Edward Fairfax published his version of Tasso in 1600 and Sir Richard Fanshawe, ambassador to Spain and Portugal, brought out *Os Lusiadas* of Camoens, the epic of Portugal, in 1655. Of these two books C. M. Bowra says in his recent essays on them. "No modern translator can hope to rival their vigour and vitality..."[9]. At last there came Urquhart's Rabelais Books I and II (1653); III (1693) and IV, V by Motteux in 1708. Florio's Montaigne was printed in 1603; the standard modern translation was published by my late friend and teacher, Professor Jacob Zeitlin, of the University of Illinois (Knopf, 1934-36). The ponderous French romances and anti-romance of the middle and late seventeenth century were soon turned into English, rounding out a large library of foreign literature. Grub Street, in the persons of Charles Cotton, John Phillips, Milton's nephew, and Roger L'Estrange, provided the questionable travesties and burlesques of classical and vernacular authors which seem to have so delighted some readers in the late seventeenth century[10].

It is true that among the Greek and Latin classics the late seventeenth century did not yet produce translations of Aristophanes, Greek philosophy, Cicero's speeches, and Roman lyric. But enough of the classics were at hand for the theorists to come forward, *ex eventu*, with their sage judgments There are many bits of translations and remarks on the technique of translation, severely modelled after Quintilian and other Romans, in Ben Jonson's *Discoveries*, published in 1641. Lord Roscommon's *Essay on Translated Verse* (1684), on which Dryden wrote some laudatory verses, inspired Dryden to compose his own very important essay on translation, the preface to "Sylvae or the Second Part of Poetical Miscellanies" (1685). I do not know any piece in English more sane and judicious on the subject. It proceeds from one who had done many admirable if now unread translations from the Latin poets and from Homer and Theocritus. There is a precision and a firm reality in the

[9] *From Virgil to Milton* (Macmillan, London, 1945) V.

[10] See Whibley, "An Underworld of Letters" in *Literary Studies*, 298-342.

heroic couplets he used which make them far more attractive than Pope's perversions of Homer. Dryden would never have written such lines as these, typical of Pope.

Apply thine engine to the spongy door
Set Bacchus from his glassy prison free

where what is meant is simply "uncork the bottle"[11].

Dryden develops in this preface his manner of procedure in reproducing what he called the "Genius and distinguishing Character" of four poets–Vergil, Theocritus, Lucretius, and Horace. His keen perception grasped the special quality of each as only a true critic might: "the majesty in the midst of plainness" of Vergil, "the noble pride and positive assertion" of Lucretius, "the briskness, jollity and good humour", "the secret Happiness of choice" in Horace.

III. The third great age of translation, after the Medieval period and the Renaissance, is the modern age. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced at wide intervals some competent and even charming work. Henry Fielding, with his fondness for Lucian, once projected a translation of the Greek satirist, going so far as to advertise it for subscription. It was never printed, if written, and it is true that Lucian had been done more than forty years before by several other hands (1711)[12]. Such translations as Murphy's long-winded Tacitus (1793), Thornton's Plautus (1769-1774), and Melmoth's Pliny (1746) appeared in the eighteenth century. None of these was the equal of the great translations of the Tudor age; I should gladly trade them all, were it necessary, for Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*. With the

[11] W. H. D. Rouse, in his refreshing translation of Homer's *Odyssey* (Modern Age Books, 1937, terminal essay, "Homer's Words", p. 302) comments amusingly on Pope's pomposity. See F. Seymour Smith, *The Classics in Translation* (Scribners, New York, 1930) Part I, Chaps. 1 and 2, for a survey of "The Theory of Translation". An excellent study of the entire subject is H. B. Lathrop's *Translations from the Classics into English*, 1477-1620 (University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature 35, 1933).

[12] Fielding owned 9 complete sets of Lucian in 4 languages and was fairly deeply influenced by him: see my note "Lucian and Fielding" *Classical Weekly 29* (1936) 84-86. Erasmus and St. Thomas More had translated much of Lucian into Latin: see my review of C. R. Thompson, *The Translation of Lucian by Erasmus and St. Thomas More;Classical Weekly 35* (1942) 103-104.

foundation of the Bohn translations, upon which some of our grandfathers were nourished, begins the modern era of literal, scholarly, and often dull translations, augmented since 1912 by the uneven productions of the Loeb Classical Library.

Modern Translations

This is a great age of translation not because of its literary qualities, though they are not absent, but because of the tremendous effect that translations of any sort must exert and continue to exert upon growing numbers of Greekless and almost Latinless readers if the sense of continuity with the past in humanistic education is not to be completely lost.

The translations of the future must be done in the current idiom without departing unduly from the spirit of the original. Mere verbal dexterity or slang are not required, although some authors may allow an occasional lapse; certainly Plautus and Terence could be satisfactorily translated into loose colloquial English, as W. A. Oldfather, my late friend and teacher, has done with two plays of Terence[13]. But good taste needs to be observed and what Dryden called the "Genius and distinguishing Character" of each writer. What is particularly required is a simple speech which can be read *aloud* without monotony or embarassment, which in translating Greek drama, for instance, will contain no gratuitous elaboration or false sweetness such as Gilbert Murray gave to Euripides in his English versions. For the weight of evidence shows that the prevailing method of reading in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and probably the Renaissance was *reading aloud*, as it is in the Orient today[14]. A modern translation ought first then to commend itself to the ear as did the ancient classic.

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[13] Printed in Guinagh-Dorjahn, *Latin Literature in Translation* (Longmans, Green, New York, 1942), 83-165; they are the *Phormio* and *Adelphi*.

[14] The definitive collection of evidence is Josef Balogh, "Voces Paginarum": Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens; *Philologus 82* (1927) 84-109; 202-240. See also G. L. Hendrickson's much briefer treatment, entitled "Ancient Reading"; The Classical Journal 25 (1929) 182-196.

The translator himself should receive more recognition and reward in order to encourage more and better translations. Reviewers at least could begin his rehabilitation by commending the translator's work, if they can do so, in generous terms instead of ignoring him as they often do. Better pay and prestige are the best stimulation as the world is now constituted toward achieving the form of true art which is a good translation.

It is my fortune to teach from time to time a course in Latin Literature in Translation; each time it is a most curious and instrutive experience. In the first place, no volume suitable for use as a text in this course has any notes at all and the type and amount of selections leave something to be desired. I am under the necessity of supplying all mythological, historical, and biographical information necessary for background as well as the elementary principles of literary criticism and appreciation. But despite the considerable labor of teaching and the abundant reading the student has to do, it is gratifying to see how students who scarcely know Apollo from a handsaw and do not know Epicurus at all can genuinely enjoy the Latin poets or historians and how they can become aroused to questions about the ethical doctrines of Cicero.

The modern age has ceased to limit itself to a few authors or to the Latin and Greek classics; all authors now swim into our ken. The church fathers and other Medieval writers now enter the canon. In the space at my disposal I can mention only a few of the excellent translations which the modern age has produced; representative of the best are Church and Brodribb's Tacitus, Phillimore's Philostratus, T. Rice Homle's Caesar, A. E. Taylor's *Laws* of Plato, Rackham's *Ethics* of Aristotle, Jackson's Marcus Aurelius and Butler's Quintilian. The need is still for more and better translations together with simple interpretations of the civilization and thought which produced the authors. We need specifically more Greek drama done along the lines followed by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald[15], more Latin comedy

[15] See my reviews of Fitzgerald, Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus; *Classical Philology 38* (1943) 155; of Fitts and Fitzgerald, Alcestis of Euripides; *Classical Philology 33* (1938) 347; of Campbell, The Agamemnon of Aeschylus; *ibid*. 417-419; of Thomson, The Oresteia of Aeschylus; The Classical Journal 36 (1941) 366-368; of Lucas, A Greek Garland: a Selection from the Palatine Anthology; *Classical Philology 36* (1941) 109-110; of Fitts (ed.), Greek Plays in Modern Translation; *The Western Review 12* (1948) 244-246.

in a colloquial idiom (preferably by another Benjamin Bickley Rogers, the famous translator of Aristophanes). We need more of the classical thinkers in the style of Jowett's Plato. There are still no complete translations of Livy or Aulus Gellius in effective modern style and no Vergil in modern verse which can be read with complete enjoyment. Above all we need better translations in verse[16] in an age when poetry has receded into metaphysics and erudition, verse as good as that in the various manners of Herrick, Calverley, Headlam, D. G. Rossetti, Housman, Macneice, and Pound. These may come when our age becomes more aware of its vast international debt of culture to Europe and Asia, when poetry becomes once more the heritage of the people, when true humanistic learning and feeling revive in a world truly at peace, when in Shelley's words, which are themselves a paraphrase of Vergil's Messianic Eclogue:

> The world's great age begins anew,
> The golden years return.

Source :

[16] C. Day Lewis' *Eclogues* (Oxford University Press, 1947) is an exception to the statement about Vergil. I have collected a great number of the best verse translations in my forthcoming *New Directions Book of Latin Verse in Translation.*