Thomas Parnell

PREFACE

HAVING SOME TIME AGO heard, that the translation of Homer's *Iliad* would be attempted, I resolved to confer with the gentleman who undertook it. I found him of a tall presence and thoughtful countenance, with his hands folded, his eyes fixed, and his beard untrimmed. This I took to be a good omen, because he thus resembled the Constan-tinopolitan statue of Homer, which Cedrenus describes; and surely nothing could have been liker, had he but arrived at the character of age and blindness. As my business was to be my introduction, I told him how much I was acquainted with the secret history of Homer; that no one better knows his own horse, than I do the camel of Bactria, in which his soul resided at the time of the Trojan wars; that my acquaintance continued with him, as he appeared in the person of the Grecian poet; that I knew him in his next trans-migration into a peacock; was pleased with his return to manhood, under the name of Ennius at Rome; and more pleased to hear he would soon revive under another name, with all his full lustre, in England. This particular knowledge, added I, which sprung from the love I bear him, has made me fond of a conversation with you in order to the success of your translation.

The civil manner in which he received my proposal encouraging me to proceed, I told him, there were arts of success, as well as merits to obtain it; and that he, who now dealt in Greek, should not only satisfy himself with being a good Grecian, but also contrive to hasten into the repute of it. He might therefore write in the title-page, translated from the original Greek, and select a motto for his purpose out of the same language. He might obtain a copy of verses written in it to prefix to the work; and not call the titles of each book, the first and second, but *Iliad Alpha*, and *Beta*. He might retain some names which the world is least acquainted with, as his old translator Chapman uses Ephaistus instead of Vulcan, Baratrum for Hell; and if the notes were filled with Greek verses, it would more increase the wonder of many readers. Thus I went on; when he told me smiling, I had shown him indeed a set of arts very different from merit, for which reason, he thought, he ought not to depend upon them. A success, says he, founded on the ignorance of others, may bring a temporary advantage, but neither a conscious satisfaction, nor future fame to the author. Men of sense despise the affectation which they easily see through, and even they who were dazzled with it at first, are no sooner informed of its being an affectation, but they imagine it also a veil to cover imperfection.

The next point I ventured to speak on, was the sort of poetry he intended to use; how some may fancy, a poet of the greatest fire would be imitated better in the freedom of blank verse, and the description of war sounds more pompous out of rhyme. But, will the translation, said he, be thus removed enough from prose, without greater inconveniences? What transpositions is Milton forced to, as an equivalent for want of rhyme, in the poetry of a language which depends upon a natural order of words? And even this would not have done his business, had he not given the fullest scope to his genius, by choosing a

subject upon which there could be no hyperboles. We see (however he be deservedly successful) that the ridicule of his manner succeeds better than the imitation of it; because transpositions, which are unnatural to a language, are to be fairly derided, if they ruin it by being frequently introduced; and because hyperboles, which outrage every lesser subject where they are seriously used, are often beautiful in ridicule. Let the French, whose language is not copious, translate in prose; but ours, which exceeds it in copiousness of words, may have a more frequent likeness of sounds, to make the unison or rhyme easier; a grace of music, that atones for the harshness our consonants and monosyllables occasion.

After this, I demanded what air he would appear with? whether antiquated, like Chapman's version, or modern, like La Motte's contraction. To which he answered, by desiring me to observe what a painter does who would always have his pieces in fashion. He neither chooses to draw a beauty in a ruff, or a French head; but with its neck uncovered, and in its natural ornament of hair curled up, or spread becomingly: so may a writer choose a natural manner of expressing himself, which will always be in fashion, without affecting to borrow an odd solemnity and unintelligible pomp from the past times, or humouring the present by falling into its affectations, and those phrases which are born to die with it.

I asked him, lastly, whether he would be strictly literal, or expatiate with further licenses? I would not be literal, replies he, or tied up to line for line in such a manner wherein it is impossible to express in one language what has been delivered in another. Neither would I so expatiate, as to alter my author's sentiments, or add others of my own. These errors are to be avoided on either hand, by adhering not only to the word, but the spirit and genius of an author; by considering what he means, with what beautiful manner he has expressed his meaning in his own tongue, and how he would have expressed himself, had it been in ours. Thus we ought to seek for Homer in a version of Homer. Other attempts are but transformations of him; such as Ovid tells us, where the name is retained, and the thing altered. This will be really what you mentioned in the compliment you began with, a transmigration of the poet from one country to another.

Here ended the serious part of our conference. All I remember further was, that having asked him, what he designed with all those editions and comments I observed in his room? he made answer, that if any one, who had a mind to find fault with his performance, would but stay until it was entirely finished, he should have a very cheap bargain of them.

Since this discourse, I have often resolved to try what it was to translate in the spirit of a writer, and at last chose the Battle of the Frogs and Mice, which is ascribed to Homer; and bears a nearer resemblance to his *Iliad*, than the Culex does to the *Æneid* of Virgil. Statius and others think it a work of youth, written as a prelude to his greater poems. Chapman thinks it the work of his age, after he found men ungrateful; to show he could give strength, lineage, and fame, as he pleased, and praise a mouse as well as a man. Thus, says he, the poet professedly flung up the world, and applied himself at last to hymns. Now, though this reason of his may be nothing more than a scheme formed out of

the order in which Homer's works are printed, yet does the conjecture, that this poem was written after the *Iliad*, appear probable, because of its frequent allusions to that poem; and particularly that there is not a frog or a mouse killed, which has not its parallel instance there, in the death of some warrior or other.

The poem itself is of the epic kind; the time of its action the duration of two days; the subject (however in its nature frivolous, or ridiculous) raised, by having the most shining words and deeds of gods and heroes accommodated to it: and while other poems often compare the illustrious exploits of great men to those of brutes, this always heightens the subject by comparisons drawn from things above it. We have a great character given it with respect to the fable in Gaddius de Script. non Eccles. It appears, says he, nearer perfection than the *Iliad*, or *Odysses*, and excels both in judgment, wit, and exquisite texture, since it is a poem perfect in its own kind. Nor does Crusius speak less to its honour, with respect to the moral, when he cries out in an apostrophe to the reader; "Whoever you are, mind not the names of these little animals, but look into the things they mean; call them men, call them kings, or counsellors, or human polity itself, you have here doctrines of every sort." And indeed, when I hear the frog talk concerning the mouse's family, I learn, equality should be observed in making friendships; when I hear the mouse answer the frog, I remember, that a similitude of manners should be regarded in them; when I see their councils assembling, I think of the bustles of human prudence; and when I see the battle grow warm and glorious, our struggles for honour and empire appear before me.

This piece had many imitations of it in antiquity, as the fight of the cats, the cranes, the starlings, the spiders, &c. That of the cats is in the Bodleian Library, but I was not so lucky as to find it. I have taken the liberty to divide my translation into books (though it be otherwise in the original) according as the fable allowed proper resting places, by varying its scene, or nature of action: this I did, after the example of Aristarchus and Zenodotus in the *Iliad*. I then thought of carrying the grammarians' example further, and placing arguments at the head of each, which I framed as follows, in imitation of the short ancient Greek inscriptions to the *Iliad*.

BOOK I.

In Alpha, the ground
Of the quarrel is found.

BOOK II.

In Beta, we
The council see.

BOOK III.

Dire Gamma relates
The work of the fates.

But as I am averse from all information which lessens our surprise, I only mention these for a handle to quarrel with the custom of long arguments before a poem. It may be necessary in books of controversy or abstruse learning, to write an epitome before each part; but it is not kind to forestall us in the work of fancy, and make our attention remiss, by a previous account of the end of it.

The next thing which employed my thoughts was the heroes' names. It might perhaps take off somewhat from the majesty of the poem, had I cast away such noble sounds as, Physignathus, Lychopinax, and Crambophagus, to substitute Bluffcheek, Lick-dish, and Cabbage-eater, in their places. It is for this reason I have retained them untranslated: however, I place them in English before the poem, and sometimes give a short character extracted out of their names; as in Polyphonus, Pternophagus, &c., that the reader may not want some light of their humour in the original.

But what gave me a greater difficulty was, to know how I should follow the poet, when he inserted pieces of lines from his *Iliad*, and struck out a sprightliness by their new application. To supply this in my translation, I have added one or two of Homer's particularities; and used two or three allusions to some of our English poets who most resemble him, to keep up some image of this spirit of the original with an equivalent beauty. To use more, might make my performance seem a cento rather than a translation, to those who know not the necessity I lay under.

I am not ignorant, after all my care, how the world receives the best compositions of this nature. A man need only go to a painter's, and apply what he hears said of a picture to a translation, to find how he shall be used upon his own, or his author's account. There one spectator tells you, a piece is extremely fine, but he sets no value on what is not like the face it was drawn for; while a second informs you, such another is extremely like, but he cares not for a piece of deformity, though its likeness be never so exact.

Yet notwithstanding all which happens to the best, when I translate, I have a desire to be reckoned amongst them; and I shall obtain this if the world will be so good natured as to believe writers that give their own characters: upon which presumption, I answer to all objections beforehand, as follows:

When I am literal, I regard my author's words; when I am not, I translate in his spirit. If I am low, I choose the narrative style; if high, the subject required it. When I am enervate, I give an instance of ancient simplicity; when affected, I show a point of modern delicacy. As for beauties, there never can be one found in me which was not really intended; and for any faults, they proceeded from too unbounded fancy, or too nice judgment, but by no means from any defect in either of those faculties.

Reference: *The Poetical Works of Thomas Parnell*, Freeport, New York, Books for Librairies Press, 1972, p. 131-139.