The Abomination of Moab

On Translating Verse — By ROBERT CONQUEST

IT IS A CENTURY since Matthew Arnold introduced into English, in the sense in which we now use it, the word “Philistine,” and defined him for us as “a strong, dogged opponent of the chosen people, of the children of light....” But we need to remember that Israel’s early troubles were not always from this straightforward foe. On the other flank lay a more insidious enemy of their own blood, the Moabites, who, from their capital at Shittim, infiltrated temple and harem and set the children of light whoring after strange doctrine. At the present time, not Alderman Dagon but Professor Chemosh is the bigger menace. Philistia is, at least for the moment, a beaten force. Today’s tocsin, for everyone who cares for the arts, is rather, “The Moabites be upon thee!”

These reflections apply, of course, to current literary attitudes in general. But verse translation is perhaps the field in which the highest abomination rate is achieved. The problems have been frequently discussed, and need no full restating here. The main issue has long been clear—that, as Pope puts it,

There have not been more men misled in former times by a servile dull adherence to the letter, than have been deluded in ours by a chimerical insolent hope of raising and improving their author.

As to which of the two dangers is the more obtrusive at present, there should (one would have thought) be little dispute. Departure from the original far more extreme than anything any earlier age could have imagined has long been a respectable weapon in the Moabite anti-art armoury.

One or two formidable figures have indeed spoken up for greater rigour—for example, Mr.

Anthony Burgess and Mr. Vladimir Nabokov. It is true that Nabokov’s own literal verse translation of Eugen Ionesco’s can unfortunately not be regarded as a success, for two main reasons. First, he has retained of the strict verse-structure of the original only the iambic pentameter, with lines varying from two to six feet, while the single “poetic” device he uses, and much too indiscriminately, is the very tricky one of inversion. Second, his idea of being literal involves the very frequent use of rare or non-existent English words for quite common Russian ones: for example, since we have no adjective from “field” to match the Russian “polevoy,” he has rendered it as “campestral.” This is to interpret the word “literal” in far too restrictive a sense, confining it to the denotive and ignoring the connotative, with highly distorting results.

But these particular faults do not, of course, affect the case as such. And they are, anyhow, as nothing compared with the excesses of the opposite faction. The latest to hand is a new translation of Catullus, for which astonishing claims have been made. A typical passage (which first appeared in the sinisterly named Journal of Creative Thought in Buffalo—others have come out in Poetry Chicago) runs,

Lesbia (my price scent t’her hero) mauls and depleores me, ‘dig if:
he the lug fatuous Maximal Light titillates

a rendering of:

Lesbia mi praesente viro malo plurima dicit
haec ille fatuo maxima laetistiast

The Hun is at play—worse still, at work—among the ruins.

One would think that this sort of thing would be too much for anyone to swallow, even today. But though many critics, especially in Britain, remained unimpressed, not all did. One reviewer (in the Sunday Times) even suggested that though we dull fellows may deplore this sort of thing, Catullus himself would have liked it. This facile and traditional ploy is par-

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2 Catullus. Translated by Louis and Celia Zukofsky. Jonathan Cape, 63s.
particularly inept here, since Catullus’ own effort in the field, his translation of Sappho’s “Ode to Anactoria” is, of course—even though “enflecked” (as Swinburne put it) by occasional padding—wholly in the literalist tradition. “Σαπφος και τον θεό σκοτώνει” becomes, or rather stays, “ille mi par esse deo videtur”—but when it’s Zukofsky’s turn we get “He’ll hie me, par is he? The God divide her.” (To round it all off, one might suggest a Sappho-Zukofsky: “Fine heat! I’m makin’ noses as the God’s in.”)

More formal justifications have been advanced, and it is worth looking at a couple of the most solemn. It is true that the second is made by the translator himself, but the first is by Professor Hugh Kenner, the noted Poundian. Kenner remarks, in good demotic Moabite, The structural eloquence is phatic, the Latin treated not only as a source of “meanings” but as a graph of breathings and intonations; the achieved English is irremediably strange; and the strangeness is accepted and turned into a virtue by the sheer scale of the enterprise, which (difficulty overcome) offers not just a few compliant instances but Catullus whole, subdued after unimaginable trouble. A mad enterprise? Yet it carries Pound’s way with The Seafarer, or Joyce’s with what you like, to its logical term.

Zukofsky himself says in his preface, “This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm and syntax of his Latin—tries, as is said, to breathe the ‘literal’ meaning with him.” Mr. Zukofsky, after all, may be joking. And it might even be argued that to try to do what he claims to be doing is not in itself a harmful way of spending a lazy afternoon. But to be given it seriously, to hear it spoken of as Professor Kenner does, is to feel a chill wind from the abysses of unreason.

What on earth can Kenner and Zukofsky mean? Apart from their other defects is it seriously thought that these lines give anything whatever of the tone of Catullus’ Latin? The “breathing” is nonsense anyway, on the obvious grounds that the Latin scansion by quantity is quite different from the English by stress. Even the syllable count is often wrong, through lack of attention to the Latin rules of elision. But, more basically, an easily moving sentence cannot possibly be said to have the same breathing as a clot of semi-comprehensible and over-consonantalised monosyllables. Do we really need to be told again that “When Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw” runs differently from “Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain”? Is the whole matter of the poet’s “ear” to be forgotten—and not only in this context? The answer seems to be yes, on both counts. Meanwhile we note that even Zukofsky’s sole alleged virtue, for which everything else has been sacrificed, is also illusory. Now, on its merits, Zukofsky’s stuff is obviously not worth bothering about. We might pass on, merely hoping—and it is no more than a hope—that no one will find a way of being sillier still. But it is after all significant, in the mere fact that some allegedly expert voices have been raised in its favour. That this is the case about something so ostentatiously, so uncompromisingly awful, already tells us a good deal about the general standards now prevailing.

*We may discover* a fair, a canonical demonstration of the Moabite position in Dr. George Steiner’s *Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*, lately reprinted.3 In his introduction Steiner argues, or rather asserts, the attractive Whorfean view of the status of language: “Each language cuts out its segment of reality. We live our life as we speak it..." etc. With all its important element of truth, this thesis has on the whole had to be modified fairly considerably, and is nowadays seldom put forward quite so flatly even in “general semantics” circles. Steiner uses it as a basis for the argument that languages are so idiosyncratic that translation—even of prose—is strictly speaking impossible, in the sense that the connotations of apparently identical words are different in different languages. So far, all is true and familiar: Anatole France remarks somewhere that Mlle de Lespinasse alone alters the word “plaisants” to something very unlike its supposed equivalents. But the well-known difficulties of translation and the impossibility of precise translation lead Dr. Steiner to conclude not that divergencies of sense and style should be kept to a minimum, but that any departure may be excused. Because the work is heartbreakingly hard and often fails, it should be abandoned in favour of something else. But all art involves difficulties: “Lutte avec le carrefour.”

Doubious theses, unlike obviously reasonable ones, can only be made palatable by an impressive dialectic. When Steiner speaks of a translation being “explicitly directed towards Homer’s survivance” the effect is of a technical jargon, and the implication is thus of accuracy, rigour, science. For there are nowadays two main attitudes to literature: on the one hand system, finality, revelation; on the other, recog-
nition that there can be no rigorous aesthetic at least until that improbable date in the future at which psychology itself attains rigour, and perhaps not even then. The former view is by far the more attractive. For pseudo-sciences are always appealing. Criticism nowadays all too often tends to resemble phrenology—a sophisticated methodology with an erudite jargon, dealing with material on the face of it closely connected with the subject, but in reality almost totally irrelevant to the main questions. This would not matter, perhaps, were it not usually in the service of the vicious or absurd. As Housman remarked in another context:

The old unscientific days are everlasting; they are here and now; they are renewed perennially by the ear which takes formulas in, and the tongue which gives them out again....

Nowadays we have, Dr. Steiner feels, "a hunger for lineage." English literature does, in fact, already have a genuine lineage. But, like some boutique boy ashamed of his descent from a great statesman, it seems that this won't do. Instead of our real origins we are to create a fake genealogy. Dr. Steiner says—in approval—that Pound writes English "as though Shakespeare had not written before him."

John Betjeman has spoken in a similar context of "the nitwitted, arrogant art students, who dared to think they could create mouldings and motifs, which it has taken centuries to evolve." Our culture is to cease to have roots. Once an oak, it is to become a mangrove, with adventitious shoots dipping shallowly into a range of iridescent mudds.

Who, Dr. Steiner asks, can read Homer, the Bible, Shakespeare, Pascal, The Brothers Karamazov, the poems of Li Po, and The Tale of Genji in the original? "Yet which would one be prepared to do without...?"; and of course this syllabus could be vastly extended. But even the effort truly to master it could almost certainly be made only at the expense of defects in the knowledge of history or philosophy or science which are at least equally components of the civilised man. More to the point still, nowadays there are all too many attempts on the whole of world culture by people who have not properly established their base camp in their own language and literature. What is the good of the student knowing—what is meant indeed by saying that he can know—Lao Tse and Apollinaire if he is ignorant of Herrick and Praed—let alone Hobbes and Gibbon? But of course, there is no true mastery of Weltschreibung on the scale here envisaged. One gets instead a varying degree of real contact with the original—more with French, less with Chinese. We may eventually stand in the same relation-ship to Chinese culture as we do now to French. But it will be a long, long process, and will not be achieved by fiat.

There are few Länder with which we are likely to be able to gain the necessary familiarity. But since it is now thought preferable not to "understand" or represent the poet, but to construct a Jenny Haniver from bits of his pickled corpse, we can stay home, or visit the literary non-world of cosmopolis.

If the "meaning," the background, and the poetic all come across in a defective and misleading way, we cannot speak of the experience of a foreign poetry as a poetic one. The influence of the original on the final assimilation is rather a stimulus, comparable to that given by an interesting scientific theory, or a piece of striking, though ill-told, folklore, or a random pattern of stars. The sort of translation that fails to do the utmost to overcome these barriers is merely a conveyer of chance misunderstanding.

Moreover, when it comes to poetry other elements are not just important, but decisive. Rhythm alone would make access to French verse far harder in principle than to Italian, Spanish or Russian. And how, for example, can Baudelaire's sensuousness through general words be conveyed in an English more than ever crazy for the particular?

Dr. Steiner rubs in the difficulty of the task, and hence the reasonableness of not even attempting it, with such remarks as "Anyone reading...almost any poem or fiction composed before 1915...is, in the fullest sense, translating." Well, of course, this is, to put it mildly, not so. The grain of truth in it is that in reading any work without a total grasp of the writer's cultural context we miss something—as we do, indeed even in our own time and language, as (for example) non-Catholics reading a contemporary Catholic novelist. But it does not follow even on this view, let alone from more commonsensical considerations, that it is all right to prefer a misapprehension in our own terms—a "re-enactment"—rather than to work at making the very best possible of a bad job.

Pound is commonly represented as the initiator of the "modern" method of translation. Fortunately, this is not to be taken without some reservations. For the Poundian method of mistranslation is a special one—not "imitation," nor yet loose additions, but a fairly strict adherence to the text for the purpose of render-
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ing it often word for word, with, however, the wrong word substituted on the grounds that it looks like the original, or alternatively the right words put in the wrong order to give the opposite meaning to that of the original. “The Parthians shall get used to our statuary and acquire a Roman religion,” for example, replaces

Asscescent Latio Partha tropaea lovi

The method is in fact Tachisme, a technique in which the original substratum is only accidentally relevant. And the rare lapses into a reasonable literalness are sometimes saved by a judiciously inserted particle which reverses the original sense, as in Pound’s rendering of the last two lines of Propertius’ Book II Elegy 26.

I would myself add, with such critics as Graves, Larkin, Grigson and Enright, that the result is unimpressive as English verse. But even those who take the opposite view should at any rate concede that considered as a representation of Propertius, it goes far beyond the most libertine theories of translation. (As far as I know, Dr. Davie is the only Poundian to accept this). However it is looked at, Pound retains neither the meaning, nor the specific poetic virtues, nor the personal tone, nor the form (scarcely even the mere fact of a strict form being in the original at all). And even if we assumed that it was successful in some other way, Dryden’s devastating criticism of the whole notion stands:

“Tis not always that a man will be contented to have a present made him, when he expects payment of a debt.”

Some at least of the loose variations of the past were presents worth having, largely because they were seldom undertaken in a wanton, self-expressive vein. As for Fitzgerald, I suppose (pace Mr. Burgess) that the Persian, though an extraordinarily easy language to learn, is not one of the great affluents of our own culture. Perverse though Fitzgerald’s method is, it is not an attempt to ruin, before our very eyes, something which is already, but precariously, in our possession. On the other side, Swift’s or Dryden’s imitations were versions of or variations on originals every educated man knew, or had easy access to. Moreover, they preserved the key lines: “The smoke, and wealth, and noise of Rome!”

But as fewer and fewer people are genuinely at home in a dead or foreign language, as we approach (culturally speaking) a condition which has not affected this country since the Rescript of Honorius, translations are wanted more and more, but are more and more able to pass muster without their misleadingness becoming widely known. Better the originals and prose than this half-art. “Egad, I think the interpreter is the hardest to be understood of the two” was once a joke. Nowadays Dr. Steiner actually prints—a bad example indeed—

Distinguishing marks if any? (O anthropometrics!) Now the thumbprints for filing. Colour of hair? of eyes? or hands? O Bertillon!

And this (by Mr. Basil Bunting) is meant to represent—Villon! One can only imagine that it was put in with a view to making Pound and so on a welcome change, as with “Hiawatha’s Photographing”—

And so fearful was the picture
In comparison the others
Might be thought to have succeeded
—To have partially succeeded.

From the manifestos one would imagine that we might be getting set before us a full re-poeticising of all major foreign verse. As well as some dreadful little rats the mountain has produced some very attractive mice, and even the odd gazelle, basset hound or dolphin. But these don’t, as implied, cover the range of necessity—or even a good part of it. Nor is the “necessary” inevitably successful. In a way it is true (as Steiner says) that each generation, or century, needs its own translation of Homer. His mistake seems to be to assume that because we need them we are bound to get them, that the Zeitgeist will provide. No; this is a sphere in which we will rarely and erratically be satisfied. A modern translation of Homer would be splendid. But even the best ones (like Robert Fitzgerald’s) are no better than respectable, while as for the worst, like the “survivance” Homer (by Mr. Christopher Logue), they give at most a certain energy at a Mickey Spillane level—which is something, no doubt, but not enough for the occasion.

Logue conveys urgency by having Achilles cry that the Greeks must attack “Immediately—at once,” a method which is, of course, not only not Homeric, but remote from any form of real poetic at all. It is more “readable,” more easily assimilable, than adult modes of emphasis, just as a strip cartoon is more easily assimilable than Anthony Powell.

For Logue’s view of actually translating the Iliad seems to be that it is necessary at all costs to render it palatable to a modern audience. The sort of audience he has in mind is clear enough: it is one that cannot tolerate regularity in verse; that requires formal and subtle words to be rendered by short and obscene ones; that loses interest unless continually titillated by typographical variety; and that must have its images taken, at whatever price in anachron-
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ism, from the immediate present—as with a reference to "Cape Kennedy." (Perhaps this is the motive—it is difficult to think of another—for telling us that Achilles' armour is made of "tungsten.") But clearly such an audience is one that doesn't want Homer at all, so the work seems quite supererogatory. (Leaning over backwards to be fair, one does at least find, quite often, passages which—unlike those of Bunting and Zukofsky—show something of an "ear.")

On the other hand, how good on the whole are our present translations of Horace (such as that of Mr. James Michie, who has also just published a good, though not quite so good, Catullus*) and Richard Wilbur's Molière too: felicity and balance rather than intensity seem to make the best targets. Auden has said of Cavafy that though the linguistic barrier in verse is almost insuperable, yet paradoxically a personality may come through clear, even in quite various translations. This is doubtless part of what Dr. Johnson meant when he spoke of "the proper choice of style" as the crux. But in those poets whose personal tone is most marked, a similar personality is required at the other end of the translation. And thus, for example, Robert Lowell does very well with Baudelaire. Indeed, in a curious way Baudelaire seems to compensate for that lack of a central core to be found in most of Lowell's own verse. The personality overlap is by no means complete, of course, but joined to a similar rigour of form it carries one over what would have been thought fatal lapses (like blunting the key word of the key line of the Voyage à Cythère, with "only the pageant of immortal sin," for "le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortel pêché.").

On the other hand, Lowell was mistaken, it seems to me, in undertaking a translation of Anna Akhmatova's Requiem. Here we still find a proper respect for the original, both in form and in meaning, with only the rarest lapse ("No one will give the dog a bone" is a curious rendering of the literal "It is a woman ill" but at least even this is the result of heavy pressure from the rhyme scheme, a good thing to be under heavy pressure from.) The more basic error arises in rendering the literal

And innocent Russia writhed
Under blood-stained boots
Under the wheels of Black Marias

Russia consolation, as ominous
removal trucks and black
police boots broke her back.

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*Atlantic Monthly, October 1965.
excesses which, far more than his genuine translations, have got him accepted by Moab. His liberties are even then not of the extreme Poundian type. Still, the lapses are grave, as with a poem he calls "Hamlet in Russia, A Soliloquy." He has put together two of Pasternak's poems—first an early lyric, Slozha Vesla from the 1917 series "Diversions of the Beloved" (into which he has inserted a verse from another early poem); second, "Hamlet," the first of the Zhivago poems, written over thirty years later in a totally different tone. The only thing the three poems have in common is that they are in rhymed quatrains; but the translation is not. As to the method of rendering this disparate material, the penultimate line of the Russian goes, "I'm alone, all sinks (or drowns) in Pharisaism." Lowell gives us,

\[\text{but I'm alone, and there is none... All's drowned in the sperm and spittle of the Pharisee}\]

—than which nothing more unPasternakian can be imagined. Nor, I think, would any apart from those who represent Lowell as, unlike Homer, incapable of nodding, maintain that the piece as a whole is a success, even at its own level, or levels. But the worst of it is that we find here a writer capable of normal rigour who has been seduced by bad doctrine, not the least of Moab's crimes. This is not to be taken as a general denigration. It has been rare for more than half the work, if that, of any poet writing in English to be even tolerable, and susceptibility to the flashier modes of the moment has been one of the main causes. To have written one or ten excellent poems is not a thing that can be cancelled, even by reams of bathos and eccentricity. But neither can the prestige of a poet's best work exempt his failures from criticism. That way lies the total collapse of standards, rather than the partial collapse we already have.

In this brief conspectus we have ranged from the Zukofskyan worst to the Lowellian best. In every case we have found Pope's chimera indulging its caprices. One either thinks all these procedures justifiable or one doesn't. What is clear is that they are not "translation," or even "imitation" in the old definition. They hob us off with something which, parasitical on an original text, and cloaked in the prestige of an earlier and greater name—even claiming to give those conveniently indefinable qualities the "spirit" or "truth" of the original—is no more, from the point of view of the art, than what the psychologists call an "attention-getting device." But the ancient and foreign literatures are real. For many of us the victims writhing mutilated on the altars of Chemosh are not just lay figures: their screams are frightful to hear.

The Moabite penetration of the literary and artistic establishment of course goes far beyond this particular field. But a glance at it may remind us, as much as anything, of the need for vigilance. We need not be too discouraged by the pervasiveness of these infiltrations and obfuscations: after all, the prophets prevailed in the end, and Moab was their wasnpot. All the same, we are not out of trouble yet, not by any means.
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Mirable Annals

By Anthony Burgess

What a year that was!

There was Jane Austen’s Love and Friendship and Other Early Works Now First Printed from the Original MS, with a preface by G. K. Chesterton. Galsworthy published The Man of Property. In Chancery and To Let as a major triad called The Forsyte Saga. From Aldous Huxley came Mortal Coils, and from D. H. Lawrence Aaron’s Rod and England. My England. Katherine Mansfield published The Garden Party and Other Stories. Rebecca West The Judge, Virginia Woolf Jacob’s Room. It was the year of Sinclair Lewis’ Babbitt, Scott Fitzgerald’s The Beautiful and Damned and Gertrude Stein’s Geography and Plays. From Aldous Huxley came Mortal Coils, and from D. H. Lawrence Aaron’s Rod and England. My England. Katherine Mansfield published The Garden Party and Other Stories. Rebecca West The Judge, Virginia Woolf Jacob’s Room. It was the year of Sinclair Lewis’ Babbitt, Scott Fitzgerald’s The Beautiful and Damned and Gertrude Stein’s Geography and Plays. From Aldous Huxley came Mortal Coils, and from D. H. Lawrence Aaron’s Rod and England. My England. Katherine Mansfield published The Garden Party and Other Stories. Rebecca West The Judge, Virginia Woolf Jacob’s Room. It was the year of Sinclair Lewis’ Babbitt, Scott Fitzgerald’s The Beautiful and Damned and Gertrude Stein’s Geography and Plays. It was also the year of James Joyce’s Ulysses, which Virginia Woolf called a misfire: “The book is diffuse. It is brackish. It is pretentious. . . . A first-rate writer respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts.” D. H. Lawrence said: “What old and hard-worked staleness, masquerading as the all-new!” There was also David Garnett’s Lady into Fox.

That was just some of the fiction. In poetry, Blunden, de la Mare, Yeats, Carl Sandburg and A. E. Houseman produced volumes; T. S. Eliot produced The Waste Land. Edith Sitwell delivered her Façade poems over a Sengerphone (a special amplifier named for its inventor), to the accompaniment of music by young William Walton. Ezra Pound translated Rémy de Gourmont’s Physique de l’amour. The one-volume edition of The Golden Bough appeared. Also Forster’s Alexandria, Lawrence’s Fantasia of the Unconscious, Clive Bell’s Since Cézanne, Somerset Maugham’s On a Chinese Screen, Middleton Murry’s Countries of the Mind. And e.e. cummings’ The Enormous Room.

Proust died at 51, “of exhaustion and chronic asthma aggravated by bronchitis,” but he saw his Sodome et Gomorrhe II in print. Brecht wrote his first play—Baal. Cocteau had two works out—Vocabulaire and Le Secret Professionnel. From Pirandello came Enrico IV, from Hesse Siddhartha, from Valéry Charmes, from Stefan Zweig Amok. Two plays of Maugham were running—East of Suez and Rain. Eugene O’Neill, who got the Pulitzer that year for Anna Christie, put on The Hairy Ape. The James Tait Black Prize went to Walter de la Mare for Memoirs of a Midget and to Lytton Strachey for Queen Victoria. Eliot got the Dial Award. Charles Ives published, at his own expense, 114 Songs with Postface. Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North had its first screening. Robert McAlmon started Contact Editions in Paris and prepared to publish Hemingway in the following year. The Criterion made its debut. So did, at Nashville, Tennessee, The Fugitive (Ransom, Tate, Penn Warren, etc.).

Lawrence arrived at Mabel Dodge Luhan’s ranch. Ronald Firbank paid a visit to Haiti (“They say the President is a Perfect Dear!”). George Orwell, nineteen years old, left Eton and started his Burmese days. V. S. Pritchett, at twenty-two, appeared in print for the first time with a joke in the New York Herald. Vladimir Nabokov, twenty-three, took his degree in Slavic and Romance Languages at Cambridge, England. W. H. Auden, fifteen, decided he had to be a poet. T. E. Lawrence published eight copies of Seven Pillars of Wisdom and then enlisted in the R.A.F. as J. H. Ross, serial number 352087.

This is no composite annus mirabilis but a single genuine year—1922. By God, what a genius we had then, as Swift almost put it. But any long-dead year has a trick of being artistically mirable (1939, for instance, with Finnegans Wake, Goodbye to Berlin, After Many a Summer, The Map of Love, Tropic of Capricorn, The Family Reunion and so on, with Yeats and Freud and Ford Madox Ford dying and The Criterion closing down). A lot depends on how the year is gutted and filleted. Read, as I did recently, through the two 1922 volumes of Punch and little seems to be going on in the book world, except for A. A. Milne and If Winter Comes. Robert Phelps and Peter...