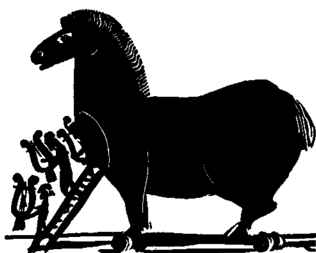
Peter Jones

Winged Words

On Translating Homer



"ET TU, BRUTE? Then fall, Caesar." Shakespeare turns into Latin what, according to Suetonius, Caesar actually said in Greek, i.e. *kai* (also, too, and) *su* (you), *teknon* (child, son). The change of *teknon* to *Brute* is interesting. More interesting still is the possibility that the Greek is not a cry of despair and outrage but of abuse, i.e. as Brutus stabs him Caesar cries "And the same to you" (with, as it were, pommels on). I do not myself see how such an interpretation could be made wholly congruent with the argument of Shakespeare's play, even though Brutus commits suicide by stabbing himself to death with Caesar's name on his lips ("Caesar, now be still;/I kill'd not thee with half so good a will"). But since modern directors seem more interested in effects than argument, I offer it for what little it is worth.

If we care to see central issues of translation in these six small Greek and Latin words—issues of literalness, meaning, interpretation—we would in this instance, I think, be wrong. Shakespeare is not so much translating Suetonius as using for his own purposes what Suetonius offers. The question to ask is not "How far does *et tu, Brute* translate *kai su, teknon*?" but "What were Shakespeare's dramatic intentions in making the use of *kai su, teknon* that he did?". But now that the deconstructionists have moved in, it looks as if we are not going to be allowed to ask the first question ever again. Writing in the *TLS* Roy Harris argues that we need new translations not because old ones become out-of-date (they could be revised periodically) but because the concept of translation has changed.[1] In this post-structuralist era, he argues, translation has "no claim to validity other than as an historical statement . . . intrinsically provisional, corrigible and replaceable". What the translator does nowadays is not imitate, but re-analyse:

> "The criteria of excellence are not simulational criteria. A bad translation is not bad because the analysis it offers requires us to see the original in an unusual, fragmented or controversial way. Errors of representation are not the ground on which to condemn a twentieth-century translator. Rather, the translator's worst possible fault, like the painter's and the photographer's, is now seen as that representational automatism which fails to present any structurally coherent analysis at all."

No one is about to deny, of course, that a translation is an historical statement, and can be analysed in those terms. But Harris produces no evidence for his contention that modern translators do not try to imitate but to analyse, let alone that modern translators work under the shadow of post-structuralism. Let him ring round a few Penguin translators and see what they say. I have, and the answers were on the brusque side.

BESIDES, Harris is wrong. Errors of representation are precisely grounds on which to condemn a translation, 20th-century or otherwise (which does not mean that the translation cannot have its own merits and interest). If I knew what a "structurally coherent analysis" was, I should argue that it depends critically on faithfulness to the text. At least I can think of no useful purpose that could be served by such an analysis if it did not matter whether *arma virumque cano* was translated "Arms and the man I sing" or "'Course it's a bleeding penalty, ref.". Moreover, I can see no logic, only assertion, in the "argument" that it was justified in the past to identify "errors" in translation, but now that we are post-structuralists, it isn't. Post-structuralist theory may well affect our attitude towards such errors, but I can see no reason why it should, as a matter of principle, refuse to acknowledge them. Away with this "social worker" theory of literature.

There is nothing new to be said about translation. It has all been said, and at tremendous length, and in circles.[2] But an important event in the history of translation has just passed, and it is worth considering it in detail. I refer to the publication of Penguin's second *Iliad* translation, by Martin

[1] Roy Harris, "The Ephemerality of Translation", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 August 1987.

[2] E.g. George Steiner's *After Babel* (1975), a massive and almost impenetrable theoretical discussion, best approached through Hugh Lloyd-Jones's review in ENCOUNTER ("The Anatomy of Translation", June 1975), and, most recently, a series of very variable essays by translators of Penguin Classics on the problems they have faced: *The Translator's Art*. Edited by W. RADICE. Penguin, £6.95.

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Hammond.[3] The first was E. V. Rieu's (1951) and indeed his *Odyssey* (1946)[4] started the famous Penguin Classic series. Their combined sales run into the millions, and have brought more people into contact with Homeric epic than any other books have ever done. So there are celebrations to enjoy, as well as questions to ask.

My modest purpose, then, is to use some contemporary translations of Homer, especially the new Hammond, to draw attention to the problem of translating Homeric epic and to the issue of a translator's priorities in 1987. Help me, Muse! for you alone know where to begin the argument.

About 2,000 years ago, the elder Cato gave the following advice to the fledgling orator: *rem tene, verba sequentur*— "Keep a grip on the point/issue/argument, and the words will follow". The distinction between *res* and *verba* is a seductively simple one, and we know that, to a critical degree in poetry, the two are in fact inseparable. But translation, by *definition*, separates them. Whatever else we can have, we cannot have the *verba*. At least, then, we must ensure that we have the *res*. I define the *res* of the original as (*1*) the subject-matter of every word, (*2*) the argument or point at issue in every utterance.

That is an arbitrary judgment. I could have defined *res* in a thousand ways. The great advantage that it offers is that, as a target, it looks as if it can be hit. It is the minimum at which every translator must, perforce, aim if he is to argue that he is translating and not doing anything else.

Now, clearly, we need more than this. If we did not, we would end up with Dr Giles. Here is a passage from his wonderful "Key to the Classics" version of Sallust's *Catiline*, "Construed, with the Text, into ENGLISH, Literally, and Word for Word":

> "*Dum* whilst *hæc* these things *aguntur* are being done *in senatu* in the senate, *et* and *dum* whilst *præmia* rewards *decernuntur* are decreed *legatis* to the ambassadors *Allobrogum* of the Allobroges *et* and *Tito Volturcio* to Titus Volturcius, *indicio eorum* their information *comprobato* having been approved of, *liberti* the freedmen *et* and *pauci* a few *ex clientibus* of the clients *Lentuli* of Lentulus *diversis itineribus* by different routes *sollicitabant* were stirring up *opifices* the handicraftsmen *atque* and *servitia* the slaves *in vicis* in the streets *ad eum eripiundum* to save him, *partim* partly *exquirebant* were seeking out *duces* the leaders *multitudinum* of mobs, *qui* who *solebant* were accustomed *pretio* for hire *vexare* to harass *rempublicam* the state."

Of this one could say a number of things, particularly that it is neither literal, nor word-for-word, but the important point is that it is quite unreadable, even with the Latin removed. There seem to me two instructive conclusions to draw.

FIRST, LET US ABANDON once and for all the chimaera of "the literal translation". Here is an issue which brings to light an exquisite paradox: the paradox of the scholar demanding that, when students translate English into Greek, they "get away" from or "think through" the English to the core of the Greek idiom, but when they translate from Greek into English, the English should be as close to the Greek as possible. The reason is, I suppose, educational. The long-term aim of both exercises is to encourage reflection about the Greek. But since I am assuming that the purpose of translation is to make the author accessible to a wide audience, "reflection about the Greek" is hardly at a premium. In other words, literal translation is not needed.

It also happens to be impossible, in any strict or even loose sense. *Arma virumque cano*, three words in Latin, requires six at the very least to render it into English ("Arms and the man I sing"). Since on this simplest of utterances one has already overshot by 100%, one may as well overshoot by 200% and produce something a little more readable. Dr Giles merely reinforces the argument.

The second conclusion is even more important. It concerns the quality of the English into which the text is being translated. Homer is a cracking good read. Since for most readers the translation *is* the original, we cannot put anything in the way which will hinder that enjoyment. That does not mean we cannot be opaque or ambiguous where Homer is, if we so wish (this is blessedly rare). But the most important question a translator can ask is "Can we say this in English?". If the answer is "No", or "No, but it's jolly close to the Greek", scrub it. There is no room for fustian, pedantry, or translationese. A good translator will, of course, bend every verbal muscle in his body to produce English idiom which faithfully reflects the original, but if it cannot be done, away with the original.[5]

There is an immediate objection to this. Should not poetry be translated by poetry? And do not poets have licences to bend the English language to their will? No and yes, in that order. Here is a second chimaera which badly needs slaying. My reason for attacking it is a wholly pragmatic one: that is, whenever poetic translations of Homer have been made, the resulting text is excruciatingly awful either as a reproducer of *res* or as a poem, or both. I have inveighed elsewhere against the "poet" Robert Fitzgerald's universally applauded modern translations of Greek and Latin epic.[6] But take Pope. In this passage Hera, who plans to take Zeus out of the action for a while, tricks him into making love to her. Zeus responds (and readers can check for themselves whether the Roman type, which indicates Pope's reworkings and additions, is fair):

> Gazing *he spoke*, and kindling at the view,
> *His* eager *Arms around the* Goddess *threw*.
> Glad *Earth* perceives, and from her Bosom *pours*
> *Unbidden Herbs*, and voluntary Flowers;
> *Thick* new-born Violets a *soft* Carpet spread,

[3] *Homer: The Iliad*. Translated by MARTIN HAMMOND. Penguin, £2.95.

[4] Penguin is commissioning a new translation by the "poet" Robert Fagles. My heart sinks at the prospect.

[5] In his famous debate with Francis Newman, Matthew Arnold argued that, since Homeric repetition was foreign to English, a translator should simply omit it. But if Hector always has a flashing helmet in Homer, I can see nothing innately "foreign" about him always having one in English. The issue of idiom is on a quite different scale.

[6] "Reassessment", *Literary Review*, November 1987.

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> And clustering Lotos *swelled the rising Bed,*
> *And* sudden *Hyacinths the* Turf bestrow,
> And flamy Crocus made the Mountain glow.
> *There golden Clouds conceal* the heavenly Pair,
> Steeped in soft Joys, and circumfused with Air;
> Celestial *Dews, descending o'er the Ground,*
> Perfume the Mount, and breathe Ambrosia round.
> *At length with Love and Sleep's* soft power *oppress,*
> *The panting Thunderer nods, and sinks to* Rest. . . .

Sigh. Those who have not at once thrown down the magazine and gone off to read the rest of Pope's *Iliad*[7]—there cannot be many—will be amused to see what the Greek says. Here is Martin Hammond:

> "So he spoke, and the son of Kronos took his wife in his arms. And underneath them the holy earth put forth fresh-springing grass, and dewy clover and saffron, and hyacinth thick and soft, which held them high away from the ground. In his bed they lay down together, and covered themselves in cloud, beautiful and golden: and from it the dew-drops fell glittering round them.
>
> So the father slept unmoving on the height of the Gargaron, overcome by sleep and love, holding his wife in his arms."

Richard Bentley was right when he said to Pope: "A very pretty poem, Mr Pope, but you must not call it Homer." That does not alter the fact that Pope's version is a magnificent reconceptualisation of Homer, embodied with utter confidence into a form perfectly suited to the poetic manner and human *mores* of Pope's Miltonic, classicised, but deeply Christian world. But we earth-bound mortals who seek Homeric *res* will not find them here.

The fact that Homer has not been translated successfully into poetry does not prove that the exercise is impossible or that it should not be tried. And it does have, in my view, one very considerable advantage. "Poetry", or what passes for it (poetic vocabulary set in lines with unjustified right-hand margins and a passing shot at rhythm) is able to create (however falsely) the illusion of a "world" in which the literal translation of Homer, with all its repetitions and oddities, somehow seems to make sense.

Take the famous Homeric "winged words". No such idiom exists in contemporary English (words "flying" is a metaphor restricted to "heated exchanges" in our language). But smear a little archaic gloss-paint on the whole translation—a "thus" here, a "spake" there, a sprinkling of "forsooths"—and "winged words" suddenly seem perfectly at home. This is, in my view, simply a fraud. Archaic gloss cannot cover the differences. It requires wholesale uplifting and moving of the Homeric world into another for that tactic to succeed, and unless one is Tony Harrison, that is best left unattempted.[8] In this context it is easy to praise the efforts of 18th-century translators, who can be both literal and poetic, but they were living at a time when English poetry spoke with a heavily classicised "voice". The issue is what we do in the 20th century, when that classical "voice" is long since dead,[9] when the concept of "epic" is almost entirely alien to us, and (indeed) metre in the sense of anticipatable rhythmic patterns is scarcely in fashion.[10]

If we abandon poetry, we are left with prose. Some will call this pros[e]titution. I admit that it rankles to suggest giving the impression that all ancient literature was written in prose. Perhaps we should signal "poetry" typographically without claiming to be writing the stuff. But there is nothing wrong with English prose as a medium of communication. Far from it. While I concede that, in its command of register, prose is unable to control the range that poetry does, it is, in my view, a loss worth bearing for the other gains. I say that with regret. The intellectual and emotional "world" which a poem constructs for itself admits and validates a quite different complex of reactions from the "world" of prose. Much of that will be lost. But much more solid *res* will be retained in prose than, so far, has been retained in the efforts of those who tried to reproduce the poetry; and the translator who trusts Homer enough to let words and argument come through in good, contemporary English will find, miraculously, that the translation is not at all bad.

Most of the problems of translating Homer are not unique to him (or her, as Samuel Butler would insist). The cultural gap between Homer's world and ours, which led a critic such as C. S. Lewis to describe Achilles as "little more than a passionate boy" when he withdrew from the fighting in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, presents serious problems of acclimatisation to contemporary readers, but no more serious than those presented by Vergil, say—and in number probably considerably less. More than any other ancient author, Homer has the capacity to put his finger on and share common human experience. We need no commentator or literary critic to tell us how to enjoy the simile deployed by Homer when Apollo destroys the Greek wall:

> "And he threw down the Achaians' wall with utter ease, as when a little boy knocks over sandcastles on the sea-shore—he builds them to play with in his childish way, and then amuses himself by flattening them again with hands and feet."

Though, of course, one has to be careful in these post-structural days. There is no knowing what deeply pensive alter-

[7] Penguin is to publish Pope's *Iliad*, complete with Pope's notes, in 1988. Felicity Rosslyn's useful *Pope's Iliad* (a selection with commentary) is published by Bristol Classical Press (1985).

[8] Consider, for example, Harrison's famous *Oresteia* (1981), in which the language of Aeschylus becomes the language of Anglo-Saxon epic.

[9] Compare Charles Martindale's toughly argued but, in my view, unsuccessful defence of 18th-century "metaphrase" (literal translation, or *verbum e verbo* translation as Martindale prefers to call it) in "Unlocking the word-hoard: in praise of metaphrase", in E. S. Shaffer, ed., *Comparative Criticism* (1984), vol. 6.

[10] Efforts to duplicate classical metres in English always fail. English metre works by a system of stress or accent, classical by one of syllable weight, in which *every* syllable counts. The two systems are incompatible. "Géntlemen áre not allówed to wálk on the gráss of the cóllege" is taken as the example of the classical dactylic/spondaic hexameter, but the first half could easily be scanned trochaic ("Géntlemén are nót allówed").

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Derrida will not urge us to consider the polarity between the temporary and the permanent innate in the concept of "sand" and "castle", and the exquisite irony which unites the two in one. And what of ancient attitudes towards sandcastles? Can we really *assume* they are the same as ours? The "castle" to 20th-century ears conjures up a deeply ambiguous image of feudal oppression on the one hand and. . . . Oh well.

BUT THERE IS ONE PROBLEM which the translator of Homer uniquely faces, and which goes to the very heart of the Homeric style and idiom. The translator faces it constantly, because it constantly recurs. It is the problem of Homeric repetitions.[11]

Briefly, and very simply. Poets composing in an oral tradition (i.e. without the aid of writing) need help if they are to rattle off a tale of Troy running to 15,000 Greek hexameters, in which the quantity of *every single syllable* is relevant to the successful scansion of the verse. It is an impossibility, clearly, unless one has learned a technique; and the technique, developed over hundreds of years of recitation, depends upon the successful memorisation and adaptation to context of thousands of fixed, hexametric ways of saying things. Hence all those Homeric repetitions: "swift-footed Achilles", "much-enduring Odysseus", "Agamemnon lord of men", "he fell thunderously and his armour clashed about him", "winged words". Repetition is not confined to the phrase or line: whole scenes, of arming and sacrificing and welcoming guests and eating (for example), can be shown to follow the same basic pattern, often with identical means of expression.

These are the "building-bricks" of the poet's trade. He did not invent them. He took them over from his masters when he learned his trade from them. And there they are: recurring again and again and again. Of the 27,000 lines or so which make up the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, some 9,000 are repeated. To repeat, therefore, or not to repeat?

But our problems do not end there. Even if we decide to repeat, will English allow us to? These "formulas", as they are called, tend to express perfectly simple ideas, the common and essential coinage of narrative or description ("he came", "he spoke", "he looked angry", "he threw his spear") but some of them do so in the most individual language ("he spoke winged words"), while others are used in such a strikingly wide variety of contexts that it is often difficult to produce one translation to cover all instances.

It is, of course, self-evident that individual *words* in one language do not occupy the same area of meaning as words in another. A difficult word in Greek like *sōphrōn* covers an area requiring any of the following translations (and then some) in English: "moderate, law-abiding, discreet, prudent, chaste, temperate, self-controlled, disciplined, sensible, modest. . . ." But the formulas are so commonplace, so frequently repeated, so much a part of the essence of Homer, that one yearns to translate them all in the same way.

A good example of the problems a translator faces in this context is the sentence: *luto gounata kai philon ētor* (lit. "released knees and dear/own heart"), i.e. "(his/her/their) knees and dear/own heart were released/loosened". A translator of Homer's *Odyssey* will find that formulaic utterance used in the following contexts.

(*1*) Where great danger, or imminent death, is faced (e.g. when Odysseus throws off his disguise and challenges the suitors to fight).

(*2*) Where tragic news is received (e.g. Penelope hears the suitors are planning to kill her son Telemachos).

(*3*) In recognition scenes (e.g. when Penelope recognises that it is indeed Odysseus who has returned).

Since the formula describes a reaction which involves the knees as well as the heart, we are presumably talking of a physical as well as an emotional reaction. English can do this: we talk of knees trembling or giving way, of hearts stopping or failing. The problem is to find an idiom which covers the tragic (*1*) and (*2*) and the joyful (*3*). "X's knees trembled, X's heart failed" will do very nicely for the suitors faced with death at the hands of Odysseus or Penelope hearing that Telemachos's life is threatened. But would one describe a *swimmer's* knees as "trembling" or "giving way", as happens when a stormed-tossed Odysseus hears the rollers smashing against the reefs? And does the idiom work for a person who has received joyful news? Such people may "collapse", their heart "stop". Perhaps we would do better to abandon "knees" altogether, and opt for "X's strength left X, X's heart stopped". This would cover three situations more satisfactorily, but still does not sit easily in *all* contexts.

I seek for an ideal solution. Most translators opt to bend with the wind of each situation. So Walter Shewring[12] offers "her knees and her heart alike failed her", "her knees failed her, her heart melted", "Odysseus felt his knees and his spirit quail", "the king's knees quailed and his heart sank". I do not myself think knees "quail" (E. V. Rieu is keen on them quaking[13]), and Shewring (like Rieu) gives us more options than we strictly need. Maybe it is hopeless to seek for a single translation of even such work-a-day formulas as these. But it is such an important feature of Homeric style that I think we should try harder in this respect.

To summarise: it will be clear from the above that in matters of a translation I am part purist, part modernist, and an emotional minimalist. I want the English to say what the Greek says and I can see no reason why it shouldn't. I want it said in clear, strong, idiomatic English. I would also like it to

[11] I ignore the problem of Homeric dialect, a unique mixture of Attic-Ionic, Aeolic and Arcado-Cypriot, which was restricted entirely to epic and never actually spoken. Arnold and Newman again crossed swords on the desirability of trying to represent this feature in an English translation. In his translation of Herodas's *Mimes* (Loeb, 1929), A. D. Knox (brother of Ronald and E. V., which may have something to do with it) attempted to reproduce the effect of Herodas's dialect (as if we could tell), with predictably risible results: "Whence gat she it?"—"Wilt bewray an I tell thee?", etc.

[12] *Homer: The Odyssey*, translated by Walter Shewring (The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1980). This essentially prissy and inert translation cannot break free from the 19th century. Here Penelope addresses her nurse: "Why do you mock my sorrow thus, waking me now to hear this folly?"

[13] *Homer: The Odyssey*, translated by E. V. Rieu (Penguin, 1946). Rieu is a good, racy read but he trivialises, is cavalier about repetitions, and his particular brand of slang and cliché grates on every page.

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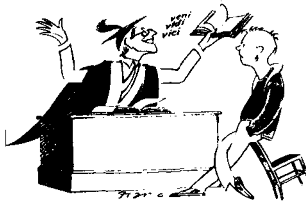
convey something of the poetry of the original, but entertain little hope that it will. On the whole, however, I regard this as an acceptable, though very regrettable loss. Homer is to be trusted. Say what the poet says in good English prose and something will come through.

Put it another way: the art of translation is a constant struggle between the *quid* and the *pro quo*. A translation cannot do it all. What are we going to jettison? Do we gain more than we lose by jettisoning this or that or the other? I would contend that above all else we must stay faithful to the words and argument of the original, and that prose is the least distorting form into which we can safely transfer that argument into English. Perhaps we are wrong to think of "translation" at all. "Rewriting in English", or even the despised "paraphrase", may be a better starting, but not finishing, point.

Let us now try these principles out on Martin Hammond's new *Iliad* translation. It is in prose (good start) and does not thee-thou all over the place (even better). The introduction to the world of Homeric values, to the conditions of oral

Ave atque Vale?



Classics is already in clear decline. One link with the ancient world is all but severed. Hardly more than 1,000 pupils took Greek at O-level this year. Over the past 20 years, the numbers sitting Latin have fallen steadily from more than 50,000 to around 20,000.

By excluding Latin from the proposed national curriculum, Sir Ernst Gombrich wrote recently, we risk cutting loose our civilisation from its moorings. He and other campaigners for classical studies have been since accused of exaggeration, special pleading, elitism, even of taking a perverse delight in inflicting upon a new generation the pain of learning which they had to endure themselves.

It needs to be made clearer exactly what is at stake. Latin has been studied for different reasons at different times since the fourteenth century: first for the practical lessons in science and medicine which the ancient manuscripts contained; then for its Christian learning; for its value to historians, to art critics, to nationalists, Marxists, anthropologists and architects.

Enthusiasm for **Latin has fluctuated over those years—often suffering from the fatal combination of dry scholasticism and utilitarian neglect. But it has never been more in danger in Britain than it is today. We risk depriving future generations of the opportunity to place their own feet—for whatever purpose or pattern—on the floor of their own civilisation. It is that risk which makes the threat to Latin of a different kind to the threat to other so-called minority subjects.**

All that is required *is the curricular protection which will enable any secondary school that so chooses to offer Latin to pupils whose interest in the subject has been, or is capable of being, aroused. That is not the protection Mr Kenneth Baker is offering. In fact, he is not offering any protection at all. . . . Latin will be in the same no-man's land as home economics, careers guidance, health education and road safety.*

The Times (*London*)

These days *the phrase* **Loquerisne Latine?** *is what the old Latin grammars used to describe as "a question expecting the answer 'No'." Time was when Latin was the* **lingua franca** *of Church, State, commerce, science and literature—the* **sine qua non** *of civilisation. Now with scarce an* **Eheu!**, *it has all but faded from the school* **curriculum** *and certainly plays no central part in Kenneth Baker's educational reforms.*

Must we say **Ave atque vale** *to Latin? No. Let Mr Baker appoint itinerant teachers, like the sophists of old, to visit one school each day on a weekly cycle, to cater inexpensively and economically for Latin and other minority subjects that might otherwise be lost. And let the EEC, in recognition of its history and heritage, sing,* **una voce**, *"Auld Lang Syne" together:*

Sodalitatis veteris
Cur immemor ero?
Cur temporis praeteriti
Fiet oblivio?

London Evening Standard

Without making *ad hominem* remarks, I can construct a *prima facie* case for the adoption of Latin as a *sine qua non* of education; *ad lib.* perhaps but surely *nem. con.*

Once our leaders spoke and thought almost as much in Latin and Greek as they did in English.

The Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston won a celebrated vote of confidence in Parliament in 1850 in an oratorical tour-de-force defending an act of gun-boat diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The speech lasted four and a half hours and culminated in the ringing phrase "*Civis Britannicus sum*", which brought the house down.

Sir Charles Napier, announcing his conquest of the Indian province of Sind, is alleged to have dispatched a punning one-word message: "*Peccavi*" (I have sinned). The worldwide maintenance of order and peace by the British Empire was widely dubbed the *Pax Britannica*.

Is it *pure coincidence that when Latin dominated the curriculum Britain governed a quarter of the globe and was the industrial workshop of the world?*

As to relevance, there is nothing more relevant to the needs of Britain than the creation of a civilised population, fluent in language and thought, who can discipline their minds and channel their mental energies in the right direction. Learning is not always easy. Nor should it be.

The tender-minded might complain that ancient narratives are often overly concerned with war. So what? We need a martial spirit. For there is a war to be fought in this country—a war against ignorance and apathy, against mean-spiritedness and poverty of aspiration.

It is time **for the legions of Rome to march again, armed with grammar, vocabulary and etymology, to rout and vanquish the fainthearts and the Philistines. *Floreat Latina.***

Jeffrey Richards
in the Daily Mail (*London*)

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poetry recitation, and to the dramatic sweep of the whole poem is brilliantly done. This groundwork is important. No one reads epic these days. People must be prepared.

I have chosen a brute of a passage. Hector has challenged the Greeks to a single combat, and no Greek can rise to it. Menelaos breaks the embarrassed silence (*Iliad*, 7.94-102):

> "But then finally Menelaos stood up and spoke among them, scorning them to shame, and groaning in the sorrow of his heart: 'Oh you braggarts, mere women of Achaia now, no longer men! Oh, this will be ruin and
> *5* disgrace indeed, the horror of horrors, if not one of the Danaans will now go to face Hektor. Well, may you all rot into water and earth, each one of you who sits on here in stark ignominy, spiritless. I myself shall arm against this man—the threads of victory are not in our
> *10* hands, they are held above, among the immortal gods.'"

This will not do.

Line 1 "then finally": the Greek says "after a long time", which is clearer.

Lines 1-2 "among them": not in the Greek.

Line 2 "scorning them to shame": the Greek says "abusing them with insults", which is not the same thing.

Lines 2-3 "groaning in the sorrow of his heart": the Greek says "he groaned greatly in his heart". "In his heart" means that no sound comes out. These are emotions he is feeling.

Line 3 "Oh": the Greek begins with a cry of despair. Is "Oh" strong enough?

Line 3 "braggarts": not contemporary English.

Lines 3-4 "mere women of Achaia now, no longer men!": a mouthful (three words in Greek: Greek-women, no-longer Greek-men).

Lines 4-5 "Oh . . . horrors": as insults, these words ring very unconvincingly in my ears.

Line 7 "rot into": the Greek says "turn into". The whole curse may be the equivalent of "rot you all", but combining that with the Greek "into water and earth" (i.e. "where you come from") is not comfortable English idiom.

Line 8 "in stark ignominy, spiritless": these are weak insults. The Greek says "without heart, without reputation/fame". These suggest that the Greeks no longer have the courage or pride to win the glory which alone justifies heroic privilege and brings immortal fame.

Line 9 "threads of victory": the Greek could mean this, but it is not a comfortable piece of English idiom. The Greek word for "threads" also means "execution, completion, achievement". That meaning sits more easily here.

Lines 9-10 "Not in our hands" is redundant—perhaps taken over unconsciously from Fitzgerald.

INSULTS ARE desperately difficult to translate from one language into another. Martin Hammond has stuck close to the Greek, but he has, in my view, buried himself too deep in the dictionary and commentary to feel what he has written. We just do not insult each other like this. Yet it is perfectly possible to keep faith with the argument of the Greek and utter insults with the genuine ring of abuse about them.

"Eventually Menelaos stood up and spoke out. He poured abuse and insults on them, but there was great sadness in his heart as he did so: 'I despair of you Achaians. Loud-mouths! Women! Not a man anywhere! Here is dishonour, the humiliation to end all humiliations, if no Greek will now step up to face Hector in battle. Very well. You can all crawl back to the mud you came from, every spineless man-jack of you—just sitting there. Where's your pride? I shall arm *myself* for combat with Hector. But the outcome lies in the hands of the immortal gods above.'"

This reads like abuse and misses nothing important in the Greek. True, it runs the risk of being undignified and clichéd ("man-jack"). But Menelaos, uniquely in the *Iliad*, is genuinely angry here. A change of register is justified. Rieu too goes this way:

> "At last Menelaus, after many an inward struggle, rose to his feet and reproached them bitterly. 'What does this mean, you women of Achaea—I cannot call you men—who used to be so ready with your threats? Not a single Danaan willing to meet Hector? This is infamy, this is utter degradation! Very well then, sit there and rot, the whole crowd of you, inglorious cowards to a man—and I will arm and fight him myself. The issue lies with the gods above.'"

Rieu plays fast and loose with the structure (both Hammond and I have kept close to the order of the Greek clauses), over-interprets (for Rieu, Menelaos groaning in his heart becomes "after many an inward struggle"), and leaves out too much. But the overall effect is right.

Fitzgerald, as usual, gets almost everything wrong:[14]

> *. . . at length Lord Menelaus arose*
> *groaning in disgust, and stormed at them:*
> *"Oh god, you brave noise-makers! Women, not men!*
> *Here is disgrace and grovelling shame for us*
> *if none of the Danaans fight with Hector!*
> *May you all rot away to earth and water,*
> *sitting tight, safe in your ignominy!*
> *I will myself tie on a breastplate with him.*
> *Out of our hands, in the gods' hands above us,*
> *ultimate power over victory lies."*

"Groaning in disgust" is simply wrong. "Noise-makers" is not a term of abuse that I am acquainted with. "And grovelling shame" is hot air (the Greek is odd, but the idea of one disgrace being heaped on another seems to be implicit: Fitzgerald ignores it). "Sitting tight, safe in your ignominy" is impressionistic flannel. Fitzgerald's unerring sense of the fatuous produces an outright winner in the hilarious "I will myself tie on a breastplate with him", and "Out of our hands" is pure line-filling rodomontade. As verse, the lines hop about like one-legged kangaroos and may as well be written in prose for all the effect they convey. This is what happens when a "poet" gets to work on Homer. And he wins literary prizes for it.

[14] *Homer: The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1984).

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Richmond Lattimore[15] holds the ship steady as she goes:

But now at long last Menelaos stood forth and addressed them
in scorn and reproach, and stirred within the heart to great sorrow:
"Ah me! You brave in words, you women, not men, of Achaia!
This will be a defilement upon us, shame upon shame piled,
if no one of the Danaans goes out to face Hektor.
No, may all of you turn to water and earth, all you
who sit by yourselves with no life in you, utterly dishonoured.
I myself will arm against this man. While above us
the threads of victory are held in the hands of the immortals."

There is Hammond's accuracy here; and the verse-form does not intrude or distort. But the archaising ("stood forth", "Ah me!", "shame upon shame piled") and portentousness ("stirred within the heart to great sorrow"), while enabling "winged words" and suchlike to stand, give a hollow ring to the whole. Again, there is a tendency for the verse, rather like the sentiments, to clump ("who sit by yourselves with no life in you, utterly dishonoured" lacks the whiplash), and Lattimore's closeness to the Homeric form can lead to ugliness. Still, Lattimore has held the field for over 30 years now. Maybe the compromises and archaisms have worked.

LET US TRY Hammond, then Lattimore, on a narrative stretch (*Iliad*, Book 16, lines 462-491):

"When they had advanced to close range, Patroklos cast and hit famous Thrasymelos, the brave lieutenant of lord Sarpedon, in the lower belly, and collapsed his strength. Sarpedon then made his attack. He missed
5 the man with his shining spear, but the spear struck Pedasos the horse in the right shoulder: he shrieked as the life breathed from him, and fell screaming in the dust, and his spirit flitted away. The other two horses shied apart, so the yoke creaked and their reins tangled
10 together, now the trace-horse was lying in the dust. Automedon the famous spearman found the remedy for this: he drew the long sharp sword from beside his thick thigh, and with a quick dash cut away the trace-horse without delay. The others then straightened, and
15 pulled in the harness. And the two men joined again in heart-consuming battle.

Once more Sarpedon missed with his shining spear: the point of the spear passed over Patroklos' left shoulder and did not hit him. Then after him Patroklos rose
20 to his cast, and the weapon did not fly wasted from his hand, but struck him where the midriff is close to the beating heart. He fell as an oak-tree falls or a poplar, or a tall pine which carpenters cut down in the mountains with fresh-whetted axes to make a ship's timber. So
25 he lay there stretched flat in front of his horses and chariot, bellowing, and clutching at the blood-soaked dust. Like a bull that a lion kills in attack on the herd, gleaming and proud among the shambling cattle, and it dies roaring under the jaws of the lion, so the leader
30 of the Lycian shield-fighters struggled as he died at Patroklos' hands."

Hammond's "lieutenant" (line 2) does not sound right on the Homeric battle-field, and "collapsed his strength" (lines 3-4)—"released his knees", literally—is no more English than "as the life breathed from him" (lines 6-7). "Flitted" (line 8) reminds me of fly-spray. "Thick thigh" (line 13) is ugly ("massive"? "great"?), and "with a quick dash cut away the trace-horse without delay" (lines 13-14) is clotted. "Rose to his cast" (lines 19-20) is the sort of thing a fish does. "Gleaming . . . cattle" (line 28), fine in itself, needs to be more closely joined to "bull" to avoid confusion. But the pickings are thin, and the virtues of this passage seem to me to be many. It reads easily but misses nothing, it is accurate, the action never flags.

Lattimore, quite apart from the falsely archaic air, strikes me as inferior in other ways to Hammond:

Now as these two advancing had come close to each other
there Patroklos threw first at glorious Thrasymelos
who was the strong henchman of lord Sarpedon, and struck him
in the depth of the lower belly, and unstrung his limbs' strength.
5 *Sarpedon with the second throw then missed with the shining*
spear, but the spear fixed in the right shoulder of Pedasos
the horse, who screamed as he blew his life away, and went down
in shrill noise into the dust, and the life spirit flittered from him.
The other horses shied apart, the yoke creaked, the guide reins
10 *were fouled together as the trace horse lay in the dust beside them;*
but at this spear-famed Automedon saw what he must do
and wrenching out the long-edged sword from beside his big thigh
in a flashing stroke and without faltering cut loose the trace horse
and the other horses were straightened out, and pulled in the guide reins,
15 *and the two heroes came together in the heart-perishing battle.*
Once again Sarpedon threw wide with a cast of his shining
spear, so that the pointed head overshot the left shoulder
of Patroklos; and now Patroklos made the second cast with the brazen
spear, and the shaft escaping his hand was not flung vainly

[15] *The Iliad of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, 1951).

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20 but struck where the beating heart is closed in the arch of the muscles.
He fell, as when an oak goes down or a white poplar,
or like a towering pine tree which in the mountains the carpenters
have hewn down with their whetted axes to make a ship-timber.
So he lay there felled in front of his horses and chariots
25 roaring, and clawed with his hands at the bloody dust; or as
a blazing and haughty bull in a huddle of shambling cattle
when a lion has come among the herd and destroys him
dies bellowing under the hooked claws of the lion, so now
before Patroklos the lord of the shield-armoured Lykians
30 died raging. . . .

"Advancing had come close to each other" is very close to the Greek but plods (a general fault); "unstrung his limbs' strength" (line 4) jingles clumsily. The repeated "with" (line 5) is ugly, and "fixed in" (line 6) is too static for a spear-cast. We need a full-stop after "horse" (line 7). "In shrill noise" (line 8) is not English, "life spirit" sounds '60s hippy, and "flittered" sounds to me as trivial as Hammond's "flitted". The Greek says "away flew his spirit". If we do not like that (why, I wonder?), try "took wing" or "took flight"; or let us emphasise the speed of the take-off with the simpler "fled"; or, since Greeks often envisaged the "spirit" as a smoky sort of substance, we may wish to emphasise its ephemerality—"faded" or "vanished", perhaps. (Fitzgerald, deploying every poetic and imaginative resource available to him, produces even by his own high standards a translation of majestic ineptitude: "the spirit left him with a wing-beat". I suppose this is the poetic equivalent of "flapped off".)

"Fouled together" (line 10) is not clear, nor is "pulled in the guide reins" (line 14), though Lattimore's 13th line is clearer than Hammond's. I feel the need for a full-stop at the end of line 14, and "again" somewhere in line 15. "Pointed head overshot" (line 17) is clumsy, and lines 19-20 plod. "Blazing and haughty" to describe a bull (line 26) is almost Fitzgeraldian and for "claws" (line 28) read "jaws". "Before" (line 29) does not carry the point of the Greek ("at the hands of"), and "died raging" (line 30) misses the change in direction of the Greek simile. We should expect the simile to run "As a bull dies . . . so Sarpedon died", but Homer gives us "As a bull dies . . . so Sarpedon raged, dying". The *manner* of the bull's death (line 28—"bellowing under the (jaws) of a lion") has influenced Homer to change the direction of the simile to describe the *manner* of Sarpedon's death. Such changes of direction are common in Homer.

LET ME MAKE a confession at this point: some of my criticisms are nothing but matters of taste. What is striking and lively to another may well seem flabby and inert to me, and vice versa. We cannot escape this bind. Further, a theory of translation cannot but reflect the critic's own inabilities. I could not write a line of poetry if wild horses went down on their bended knees and entreated me in the name of heaven-and-earth to give it a whirl. That does not mean that I am hostile to the activity—far from it—nor that in an ideal world I would not much prefer a poetic translation of Homer to one in prose. But my experience is that "poetic" translations of Homer (and of most Greek literature, as a matter of fact) represent so little that is in Homer and are so far from anything I should dare to call "poetry" that the effort seems to me wasted. I shall be the first to cheer when proved wrong.

This brings me back to Richmond Lattimore. Here is a quasipoetic translation which has held the field for over 35 years. It appeals to Greek scholars, I suspect, because it keeps close to the Greek (and so to the line numbers of the Greek text), and looks like hexameters on the page. For non-Greeks, the language is archaic enough to feel "alien" without ever becoming abstruse or absurd. Overall, the tone is consistently maintained, and the literal translation of Homeric idiom does not jar. In any terms, Lattimore's is an heroic effort and may well turn out to be the lasting, "classic" translation of Homer of the 20th century.

NEVERTHELESS, the more closely I look at Lattimore, the more awkward and falsely glamourised it seems. Martin Hammond is imperfect, of course; but for long stretches he shows what good, strong English prose can do. He trusts the poet and, within the limits of prose, lets him speak out. Here Hector, who has just foreseen with chilling clarity the destruction of Troy and his own death, takes his child Astyanax to his arms (*Iliad*, Book 6, lines 466 ff.):

> "So speaking glorious Hektor reached out to take his son. But the child shrank back crying against the breast of his girdled nurse, terrified at the sight of his own father, frightened by the bronze and the crest of horse-hair, as he saw it nodding dreadfully from the top of the helmet. His dear father and his honoured mother laughed aloud at this, and glorious Hektor took the helmet straight from his head and laid it gleaming bright on the ground. Then he kissed his dear son and dandled him in his arms, and said in prayer to Zeus and the other gods: 'Zeus and you other gods, grant that this my son may become, as I have been, pre-eminent among the Trojans, as strong and brave as I, and may he rule in strength over Ilios. And let people say, as he returns from fighting: "This man is better by far than his father." May he carry home the bloody spoils of the enemy he has killed, and bring joy to his mother's heart. . . .'"

To me at any rate, the simplicity and clarity of that piece of prose, which misses nothing in the Homer and still manages to convey something of its moving dignity and pathos, are worth far more than any amount of bogus poeticising.

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Brian Backman

The Plane in the Woods

He remembers a high-flying plane buzzing like a locust in the heat of August, although it was winter then, and mole-diggings at his feet so demented that in trying to imagine what drove the animal, as if that mattered, he'd given up in despair and wondered yet again why a village so close to the war had not been touched.

It lay off a kilometre or two, its orange roofs the only colour in the day, which was black and white. They looked drawn on tissue paper with a crayon, a picture of another place and time, or of a dream of things left alone; of an island, like England's, with peace in its self-containment.

He was deserting, and the reason he was doing so now, and not in some other place where it might have been easier to get away from the battalion unnoticed, had to do with the village. Every time he'd seen it since he'd come out to France in 1915, it had whispered his name. He'd put the oddity of that together with the fact that it was apparently unharmed when so many other villages the battalion had marched past were wrecked to the last brick, and after a while it'd got to be more than the only friendly landmark in the war. It began to look like the place. He'd always believed there was a place. If you found it, you were safe.

And then today, going past it on his way up the lines once more, he'd made up his addled mind. Looking up at the plane away and blithe above it all, he'd decided he'd gone far enough. He'd done his share. And he couldn't go on any more. So he'd waited in the woods until the battalion had finished its halt, re-formed on the road and marched on. Then he'd run.

He'd climbed awkwardly over a wooden fence and wished he'd had enough of the courage of his conviction to leave his kit and gun behind. Together, they weighed more than seventy pounds and the ground was soggy from melted snow. No matter how he tried to pick his way, his feet sank. The danger was that he was in full view of the road behind him. Any officer happening along it and worth his salt would spot him at a glance and want to know what he was supposed to be doing.

The soldier hurried on, panting, and then he stopped. Something blue, out of place—foreign—shining up at him from the ground, caught his eye. Unsteadily, knees shaking from nerves and abuse, he bent down and picked it up, an empty packet of cigarettes. They were German. He wiped sweat from his eyes and squinted at some woods up a rise on his left. There were rumours all up and down the lines about French being in cahoots with the Boche, the country lousy with spies. His intuition whispered that his death as a soldier had only ever been going to come like this, because he would do something stupid to make it happen—as he had, caught here with the road at his back and the woods up there, watching him.

He took a deep breath. There was nothing sinister about the fags. There were no Germans cooking sausages up in the woods. Whoever'd taken the smokes off a dead Heinie had dropped them here, that was all; some worn-out book-binder never going to get home to Middlesex again, and smoking anything he could light and suck on, like him.

Only there never would have been a packet of German cigarettes in his pocket. He did not pick things up. He did not meddle, ever. He had an idea that you might be unlucky just passing through, but changing anything around was fatal. He hurried on.

Then in the woods he found the aeroplane. He had no business being in the woods. They had nothing to do with his getting across the fields into the village. It was just that one arm of the trees did stick out into the grass like an invitation for cover from the road and, besides, he also needed to move his bowels.

Somebody'd covered the machine over with a big, dirty tarpaulin. Then they'd piled underbrush in front of its wheels to camouflage them. He'd only noticed all this because in squatting he had been looking straight at the thing and after a while he'd got to wondering what it was. Then when he'd taken a look under the canvas, he'd found it hadn't crashed. It wasn't even damaged. It had been rolled into the woods on a woodcutter's road behind it.

It was hidden. It was German.

Appalled, feeling wearied to collapse with panic and this revelation of his poisoned luck, the soldier backed

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