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Review Article

The Merit of a Translation: Reflections on Homer's Modern English *Iliads*

Homer: The Iliad. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1990.

Homer: The Iliad. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974.

Homer: The Iliad. Translated by Martin Hammond. Bungay: Penguin, 1987.

Homer: The Iliad. Translated by E. V. Rieu. Bungay: Penguin, 1950.

The Iliad of Homer. Translated by Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Myers. New York: Random, 1950.

The Iliad of Homer. Translated by Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951.

JOHNSON. 'We must try its effect as an English poem; that is the way to judge of the merit of a translation. Translations are, in general, for people who cannot read the original.' . . . BOSWELL. 'The truth is, it is impossible perfectly to translate poetry. In a different language it may be the same tune, but it has not the same tone.' (Boswell 921)

George Chapman, the first great translator of the *Iliad* into English, had little sympathy for his critics. "Envious Windfuckers," he called them (quoted Logue 1). The acerbic tone indicates that already in the early

seventeenth century Chapman was conscious of carrying on a lively and established tradition, in which translators of the classics and the scholarly defenders of the original texts attacked each other with all the considerable rhetorical viciousness at their command. More than egos were involved, of course, since direct access to pagan texts, many of them masterpieces, conferred—and, to a far lesser but still significant extent (at least within the university) still confers—cultural power. Maybe that's one reason why discussions and evaluations of English versions of Homer have always seemed to heat tempers almost instantly to a quick boil and thus to promote intemperate remarks. Scholars tend to get aggressively superior in defense of the Greek text (which is hardly Homer's original poem, but no matter), and poetic translators, seeking the freedom to work in a modern idiom and to win large numbers of English readers, are quick to retort with accusations of dry pedantry. Bentley's famous (and perhaps apocryphal) sneer at Pope is only the most famous in a long tradition of mutual hostility.

Curiously enough, however, translations also seem to prompt from time to time unqualified admiration of a sort rarely witnessed in the generally more cautious world of literary interpretation. So, for example, with a critical confidence foreign to normal evaluations, Andre Michalopoulos could firmly declare that "no translation has surpassed, *or ever will surpass* the magnificent Victorian translation of Leaf, Lang, and Myers for the *Iliad* . . ." (6, emphasis added) or, more interestingly, a reviewer of Lattimore's translation confidently assured us that it "would survive as long as Pope's for in its way it is quite as solidly distinguished." Clearly Robert Fitzgerald had second thoughts about this tribute before his own translation of the *Iliad* first appeared in 1974 ("Heroic Poems" 699).

All this by way of a prolegomenon to the observation that the issue of translating Homer's *Iliad* is very alive these days. With the recent appearance of Robert Fagles's new translation, we now have four major modern English versions of the poem competing for attention: in addition to the new arrival, those by Lattimore, Fitzgerald, and Hammond. Have the general public and the scholarly world ever enjoyed such a rich selection of contemporary English editions? The territory which, not so long ago, was governed for almost twenty-five years jointly by Rieu's prose translation and Lattimore's poetic one, with the Atlantic Ocean

providing a rough dividing line between the two, has in the last few years become much more fiercely contested.

The main reason for the proliferation of English versions of the *Iliad* is not difficult to ascertain: a lucrative market. Rieu's and Lattimore's translations sold millions of copies, and, in the best tradition of Alexander Pope's edition, earned fortunes. For these days the *Iliad* is more popular than ever, especially on college campuses. Enrolments in traditional Classics programs and in classes studying Ancient Greek may have declined, but the rising interest in General Education and in Liberal Arts programs in the undergraduate curriculum has boosted Homer's readership, since the *Iliad* is an obvious and common choice on lists of compulsory reading of past masterpieces—a Great Book if ever there was one. And, of course, increasing numbers of students who not so long ago would have first encountered Homer in Greek now can experience the poem only in English.

The newly enriched choice of translations of the *Iliad* will have many professors of literature scratching their heads and perhaps pounding their fists at departmental meetings when the time for book orders arrives. Such arguments about the most suitable translation of the *Iliad*, no matter how heated, are characteristically circular. One sets out the criteria one deems most important (typically, with a nod in the direction of Matthew Arnold) and then proceeds to explore various options, finally selecting the "best" text, that is, the one which meets the original criteria better than any of the others. So any evaluator might as well confess from the beginning what his or her initial preferences are and accept the fact that there is nothing universal about the choice which inevitably follows.

Presumably anyone in search of a translation has to begin by rejecting Boswell's notion (often repeated by later students of the question) that translation is inherently impossible. We may not be able to get the exact equivalent of Homer's poem, whatever that means exactly (since the surviving official text is clearly not exactly the same poem Homer recited or in a language that ever qualified as a colloquial idiom), but we can, with a judicious sense of the limits of the translator's artistic license, get close enough to it to satisfy ourselves that we are dealing with Homer or at least an acceptable version of the original.

Moreover, if the person choosing the translation is a teacher selecting something for students to read, then the situation demands a clear, single preference. Most professors of Classics I know would readily agree that

the best way to study Homer is to read the original in conjunction with as wide a variety of different translations (ancient and modern) as possible, so that one's enjoyment of the Greek text is played off against one's appreciation of the different interpretative talents which the translators bring to bear upon a vision of experience and a language so different from their own. Alas, most undergraduate courses do not allow the professor or the students the luxury of such a rewarding scholarly experience. Teaching the *Iliad* thus requires a single English text, and the instructor cannot evade the need to choose.

In dealing with the matter of evaluating translations, Arnold introduced the useful metaphor of a financial exchange (112). From a translation we do want some attention paid to an exact reckoning, and there is a limit to what we will accept by way of tampering with the exchange rate. Christopher Logue's *War Music*, for example, is a marvellously poetic modern rendition of Books 16 to 19 of the *Iliad*, and no responsible teacher of the epic would fail to recommend the work to his or her students. But by the same token, the book hardly qualifies as a fair exchange for the Homeric text, and few readers, if any, except perhaps Logue himself, would accord it the status of a translation. In addition to the demand for a certain accuracy in the reckoning, however, we want negotiable coin of the contemporary market and preferably in valuable denominations, silver dollars rather than nickels and either of them before groats or ducats. We want, that is, Homer delivered in the best modern English available to us.

Those who, like myself, demand from a translation of a great poetic epic some rich denominations in contemporary currency establish as a very high priority an excellent modern English style. So I find it easy immediately to dispense with purveyors of olde worlde idioms, translators who think that a modern version of an ancient poem requires a Babylonian dialect:

"Ah me, my child, why reared I thee, cursed in my motherhood? Would thou hadst been left tearless and griefless amid the ships, seeing thy lot is very brief and endureth no long while; but now art thou made short-lived alike and lamentable beyond all men; in an evil hour I bore thee in our halls." (Lang, Leaf, and Myers, 1.414-18)

Professors like Michalopoulos, who admire this fustian stuff and inflict it on their students, are immediately removing the epic from any immediate and intelligent contact with the modern imagination and transposing it to some run-of-de-Mille escapist historical fantasy. Of course, they may, in part, be responding in their own curious manner to the often misleading notion handed down to us by Arnold (among others) that the translator has a responsibility to remember that Homer "is also, and above all, *noble*," that "the *Iliad* has a great master's genuine stamp . . . *the grand style*" (103, 104). But the idea that nobility through the grand style is best pursued through a quaint, artificially aged diction is clearly misguided. The best response to such a notion is probably Lattimore's comment: "I do not think *nobility* is a quality to be directly striven for; you must write as well as you can, and then see, or let others see, whether or not the result is noble" (55). Furthermore, any historicist defense of such language is misplaced, since there is no way reliably to ascertain the level of Homer's original diction. Thus, as Martin Mueller has pointed out, Arnold's criterion reflects, not a legitimate demand of the original poem, but his own prejudices about what epics ought to sound like.

Well, Lattimore and Rieu appear to have silenced such sons of Spenser some years ago (at least for the time being). And Lattimore's translation, as Fitzgerald aptly noted, was a landmark of sorts because it "brings Homer back from the prose where he has been getting submerged for the past several generations and restores him to his proper element, which is poetry and magnificence" ("Heroic Poems" 699). That said, however, one has to concede that Lattimore's heroic attempt to deliver Homer line by line into English poetry—"to give a rendering of the *Iliad* which will convey the meaning of the Greek in a speed and rhythm analogous to the speed and rhythm I find in the original" (Lattimore 55)—produced an alternative version of a remarkably odd style, characterized not unfairly by one critic as full of "misprints, mistranslations, obscurities, or outrages to the English language" (Kopff 275). The forty-year reign of this translation (the only contact many Greekless instructors in North America have had with the poem) is sufficient proof that Lattimore indeed was doing something right. But the style has never rung true. For all its dignified weight, one senses throughout that Lattimore's concessions to the Greekness of the original poetic text, the

important factor in his declaration of intent, have sapped the energy and muddled the clarity of his English style.

The main problems I have with responding more favorably to Lattimore are his flaccid and frequently awkward vocabulary and the uninspired syntax. Too often the sentences sound padded with Miltonic imports and other unnecessary impedimenta, and the punctuation and sentence structure fail to add a characteristically English rhythmic vitality to the clauses. On a literal level, Lattimore's style is clear enough, I suppose, certainly much more so than in his translation of the *Oresteia*, but I don't recognize the language as vital English poetry. It has about it the constant flavor of an *Anglice reddenda* exercise stuffed to fit slow hexameters, so that the full dramatic impact of a moment or a speech constantly gets muted. The translation is always drawing attention to itself as a translation: "And the shivers took hold of Hektor when he saw him, and he could no longer / stand his ground there, but left the gates behind, and fled, frightened, / and Peleus' son went after him in the confidence of his quick feet" (22.136-7). The occasionally odd phrase ("shivers took hold," "confidence of his quick feet") and the limp, linear accumulation of independent clauses loosely tacked together with coordinating conjunctions, without any sense of emotional compression, both typical features of Lattimore's style, quite defuse a crucial moment in the action. The effects are equally noticeable in the long Homeric similes, which in Lattimore's style never seem to acquire the increasing emotional momentum so necessary for their proper contribution.

One of the most immediately welcome features of Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the *Iliad* is the way in which it offers us a recognizably modern English version of the poem. Fitzgerald abandons the notion of adhering faithfully to the hexameter (and thus of any line-by-line rendition of the original) and concentrates on a more colloquial idiom in a much more familiar pentameter rhythm. The result, especially given that Fitzgerald is a much better English poet than Lattimore, is a version of the *Iliad* which, with its rapidity, directness, and nuanced variety, holds the reader's attention far better than Lattimore's. Thus, for example, one gets from Fitzgerald a much more graphic sense both of the sudden violence and of the paradoxical beauty of warfare. Many scholars of the *trudittori traditori* school grow petulant about Fitzgerald's liberties in the service of his English style, but the odd thing is that, although Lat-

timore's translation has far fewer lines than Fitzgerald's, the former seems much longer, slower, and more unnecessarily tortuous.

Especially remarkable in Fitzgerald's style is his ability to convey with a very sensitive and often unexpected subtlety the complex emotional shifts of a paradoxical experience:

So down the ranks that dazzling goddess went
to stir the attack, and each man in his heart
grew strong to fight and never quit the mêlée,
for at her passage war itself became
lovelier than return, lovelier than sailing
in the decked ships to their own native land.

As in dark forests, measureless along
the crests of hills, a conflagration soars,
and the bright bed of fire glows for miles,
now fiery lights from this great host in bronze
played on the earth and flashed high into heaven. (2.450-458)

Here the effect of Athena's presence on the spirits of the men manifests itself in the sound and movement of the lines. The contribution of the adjectives "dazzling," "strong," "lovelier," and "native," words as familiar as one could wish, evokes the complex sense of the divinely inspired and desirable creative urge paradoxically at the very heart of the bloody enterprise. And with characteristic ease, Fitzgerald then transfers that insight into the different key of the Homeric simile, which suddenly transforms the moment into something of ominous cosmic significance and enormous power, simultaneously beautiful and irresistibly destructive, something which "played on earth and flashed high into heaven." This tonal quality, more than anything else, invites one to read Fitzgerald with a very careful attention to poetic detail, a manner different from that encouraged by other translators, like Lattimore, who to some extent rely upon the reader's closing down part of his or her full sensitivity to a modern poetic idiom.

The major reservation I have about Fitzgerald is that the pentameter at times makes the poem almost too rapid, so that one often desiderates the solemn weight of the original, the sense in the basic rhythm of the tragic fatality of the narrative. The poetic style so suitable to the *Odyssey* is less appropriate here. Perhaps this quality is what Arnold meant, in part, by nobility. Fitzgerald's most obvious way of dealing with this

difficulty inherent in the pentameter is to add weight to the names by altering the customary spellings and using a range of different accents (a surprisingly effective and simple device): Akhilleus, Hektor, Aías, Diomédês, and Meneláos for example, are grander and considerably more remote than Achilles, Hector, Ajax, Diomedes, and Menelaus. The technique can, however, create difficulties for student readers.

Another really impressive feature of Fitzgerald's translation is the way he meets the most important challenge in the task: the ability to shift gears and follow the original at those decisive moments when the power of the poem, especially the dramatic force of a character in crisis, rises suddenly above the level we have grown accustomed to: for example, Akhilleus's declaration to Thetis that he is accepting his destiny now that Patroklos is dead, the speech to Lykaon, the final meeting with Priam, and so on. More than any other feature of the style, these transcendent moments—then, to use Hopkins's terminology, the poetry of inspiration seizes the reader and lifts us suddenly far beyond the Castalian or Parnassian plains (Hopkins 154)—keep Homer (or any great epic poet) alive from one century to the next, and they obviously present the most daunting challenge to the translator. With his own considerable poetic gifts Fitzgerald's text meets this particular challenge better than any other modern translation.

By contrast, Martin Hammond's version of Homer's war epic is altogether pedestrian. Why Penguin books would want a fresh prose translation and settle for one less readable than Rieu's widely known edition is a mystery. Given the importance of reading the *Iliad* as a poem and the availability of Lattimore's and Fitzgerald's works, I find it difficult to imagine why anyone would settle for Hammond, unless a student needed a convenient and reasonably accurate crib to assist in a reading of the Greek text. To begin with, there's the matter of the form of the text. Four hundred pages of prose in relatively small print create quite a different reading experience than Lattimore's solemn hexameters or Fitzgerald's leaner pentameters. Homer requires no printed justification and suffers from the attempt to impose one. Beyond that, there's the matter of Hammond's style, which may be more consistently faithful to the literal meaning of the original Greek than the other two, but which reveals all too clearly the corrupting influence of a lifetime of dealing with traditional school translation exercises, a consistently awkward idiom striving for word-by-word fidelity without much regard for colloquial

English in the final product. The result is like hearing Mozart played in a continuously off-key monotone: the melody is recognizable but the arrangement insipid and eventually grating.

Take, for example, a sentence like the following (selected at random): "Meanwhile Achilles was urgent above all to enter the fighting against Hektor, son of Priam—his was the blood more than any that his heart pressed him to feed full to Ares, the fighter with the bull's-hide shield" (Hammond 335). This translation may be in its own way accurate enough phrase by phrase, but expressions like "urgent above all to enter," "his was the blood more than any that his heart pressed," and so on are not written in any language that I am intimately familiar with. The effect is awkward enough in the descriptions, but the style is truly disastrous in the dramatic speeches:

There are three cities dearest of all to me, Argos and Sparta and wide-wayed Mykene. Sack these, whenever your heart feels strong hatred for them. I shall not stand to defend them, or grudge their destruction. Because even if I should resent it and try to refuse you their sack, I can achieve nothing by resentment, as you are far the stronger. (97)

This selection is a fair example of what is typically missing from Hammond's prose: any dramatic vigor, any colloquial rhythm which might convey the sense that particular (and strong) feelings are engaged in this famous exchange. The flat, flaccid, and awkward faithfulness to the original ("your heart feels strong hatred," "refuse you their sack," and so forth) constantly saps the imaginative energy of the text. By contrast, Rieu's consistently more colloquial idiom is, to my mind, far more intelligently readable:

'The three towns I love best,' the ox-eyed Queen of Heaven replied, 'are Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae of the Broad Streets. Sack those, if ever they become obnoxious to you. I shall not grudge you their destruction nor make a stand on their behalf. Even if I do object and meddle with your plans, I shall achieve nothing—you are far too strong for me.' (78)

This passage at least sounds as if it is something someone in the midst of a domestic argument might actually say—"meddle with your plans," for example, being a recognizably English expression with some emotion behind it and thus far superior to a phrase like "refuse you their sack."

The arrival in 1990 of an alternative Penguin translation by Robert Fagles perhaps indicates a certain disappointment on the part of the publisher with the Hammond edition. Whatever the reason for the duplication, the new version is welcome indeed. Fagles, who has earned a justifiably high reputation as a translator with his work on the *Oresteia* and Sophocles's *Theban Plays*, has clearly attempted to combine the best elements of Lattimore and Fitzgerald. Following the former, Fagles uses a six-beat line as his basic metre, but without the self-imposed line-by-line faithfulness to the original and thus with considerably more flexibility. And following the latter, he strives to keep the diction plain, colloquial, and clear. The result is a poem that feels solemn and direct, with only the occasional addition of artificial ageing or grand style pretensions ("I'll roil his body," "a bowyer good with goat horn," "armored in shamelessness," "Achaean battalions ceaseless").

Fagles is at his best in conveying moments of personal crisis with a sense of urgent clarity. His version of the passage when Hector runs away (quoted above in the Lattimore translation) is as good an indication as any of why the new translation is so much more effective than Lattimore's:

Hector looked up, saw him, started to tremble,
 nerve gone, he could hold his ground no longer,
 he left the gates behind and away he fled in fear—
 and Achilles went for him, fast, sure of his speed. . . .
 (22.136-7)

One senses in the syntax and the sound here the very process of the action at a critical juncture. That laconic compression in the distinctly modern phrase "nerve gone" (for which there is no exact equivalent in the Greek text), for example, a terse and sudden intrusion in the sequence of Hector's reactions, illuminates exactly and decisively the key moment of transition when the warrior code fails Hector, when his uncontrollable terror intervenes to destroy his proud individuality and send him scurrying ("fled in fear") away from battle for the first and last time. And the deceptively simple description of Achilles's reaction conveys well in the sound and the movement of the line the confident, irresistible power which will soon destroy Hector. The vocabulary—and the literal sense—could hardly be plainer, but the structure of the sentence gives us

a revealing and complex emotional insight into the moment when the always proud and brave hero, for reasons he does not comprehend, becomes a terrified animal in the face of certain destruction.

Fagles deals with the potential slowness of the hexameters with an unvarnished vocabulary and a characteristic but not overfrequent repetitiveness that works generally to good effect: "fighters killing, fighters killed," "there he climbed and there he slept and by his side. . . ." This translation never bogs down. However, I'm less happy with the Sir Gawain style alliterative emphasis, which at times is so frequent and emphatic that one learns to anticipate it, and thus the sound begins to preempt the sense: "As a burly farmhand wielding a whetted ax, / chopping a field-ranging bull behind the horns, / hacks through its whole hump and the beast heaves up . . ." (17.593-5). And the punctuation is a minor irritant, since Fagles is addicted to dashes and ellipsis dots, to the point where the different effects of these symbols lose any clear significance.

For all the virtues of his style, which should (one sincerely hopes) decisively end Lattimore's reign as the king of the English hexameters, Fagles does not match the poetic quality of Fitzgerald's translation. The main reason for this is that Fitzgerald has a much more subtle understanding and intelligent control over the metaphors and the poetic tone, both in the long formal Homeric similes and in the more complex and compressed tropes. One example will have to suffice, this one from Book 18 where Achilles declares his new awareness of destiny. The first version below is by Fagles; the second by Fitzgerald.

If only strife could die from the lives of gods and men
and anger that drives the sanest man to flare in outrage—
bitter gall, sweeter than dripping streams of honey,
that swarms in people's chests and blinds like smoke—

Ai! let strife and rancor
perish from the lives of gods and men,
with anger that envenoms even the wise
and is far sweeter than slow-dripping honey,
clouding the hearts of men like smoke. . . . (18.107-110)

Fagles, not untypically, muddles the image rather with the odd and somewhat illogical metaphors ("swarms," "dripping streams," and "blinds") and the awkward "flare in outrage." By contrast, Fitzgerald's

evocative "envenoms" introduces the metaphor of poison, which is then sustained in the image of sweet, steady, and silent inner devastation, the essence of Achilles's sudden tragic recognition of what the warrior code really demands. And a careful recitation of both passages indicates which of the two translators really understands the poetic subtleties of the sound, an important point given that Fagles's often insensitive alliterative style sometimes strains a tonal effect too far: "belching bloody meat, but the fury, never shaken, / builds inside their chests though their glutton bellies burst" (16.162-3). A little more than a little of this sort of poetry is by much too much.

No doubt the arguments over the merits of Fagles, Lattimore, Hammond, and Fitzgerald will continue for a while yet. My own view is that any of the poetic translations is preferable to Hammond and that the Fagles translation is clearly a vast improvement on Lattimore's and, in some respects, just as good as Fitzgerald's, even if it does not match the latter's poetic quality. A final preference for Fagles or Fitzgerald will depend, more than anything else, upon the relative importance one assigns to a sense of traditional epic weight as opposed to poetic subtlety. One point, however, is beyond dispute. The Fagles edition comes with a critical apparatus so superior to any of the other translations that it will be difficult for anyone seeking a class text to resist. The Fitzgerald *Iliad* makes no concessions to its readers; they get the translation in a fat paperback edition that will not lie flat open on the table, and that is it. The Lattimore and Hammond editions have workmanlike but generally uninspiring introductions and glossaries. The Fagles translation, by contrast, comes with an excellent sixty-page introduction by Bernard Knox, quite simply the finest short preface to the *Iliad* available anywhere. There's a wealth of background detail from one of our best-known scholars presented in a very readable and concise fashion. Moreover, as an ex-soldier, Knox brings to the epic a much more intelligent sense of the paradoxical complexities of the battle experiences Homer is dealing with than do many modern interpreters. In addition, there are six pages of maps, twelve pages of notes, a judiciously chosen bibliography, and a very generous glossary. This Penguin-Viking edition sets a new standard for supplementary material in a classroom translation. Now that the paperback edition is available, there is no doubt which of the available English *Iliads* has been best prepared with the student reader in mind.

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