

NOTES

On Translating Verse

People who know languages well need not be told how far even the best translations fall short of the original. Thus, when it is said that Heine is the hardest poet to translate it might be added that he is the easiest to read and understand. His language is direct and simple; but when one tries to put his thoughts into direct and simple words in English, the spirit is lost and it is a dead thing that is left in place of a little song that was as vivid as a lark. Hence, Andrew Lang was justified when he declared that most verse translations were not worth the paper on which they were written. When a translation is good, you will find that it is not a translation at all, but a new poem which had the old one for a motive, as witness Fitzgerald's *Omar*. In an article on translation from Greek verse, Professor Gilbert Murray says:

Nevertheless, it will be urged, though deluded people may like them and even buy them, verse translations are essentially and inevitably an *Unding*—an absurdity, a *res nihili*. You can translate a proposition of Euclid into English, because the words have their equivalents: *gramma* is line, and *gonia* is angle, and *duo* is two, *isos* is equal, and so on. And all prose which is concerned only with definite fact, untouched by light or shade, is in the same category as Euclid. As soon as the prose begins to have the qualities which specially constitute poetry, such as rhythm, beauty, imagination, the impossibilities begin. The words no longer correspond. Partly they do not denote the same objects. Partly where the objects are the same the associations are different, and in poetry it is the associations and overtones that matter most. Then the rhythm. It is easy enough to reproduce in English the rhythms of Heine or Goethe; but impossible to reproduce a Homeric hexameter. We have largely lost the sense of quantity. Our stress accent is very strong. Our individual words are short and abrupt, our vowel sounds thin and unsonorous. Our ears are unaccustomed to those long, rolling, and intensely clear rhythms in which every syllable has an exact value and the laws are never broken. So the thing cannot be done.

No Rules

A perfect translation is impossible; a good one difficult. And there are no hard and fast rules that will help us to make the rendering even good. Professor Murray gives some useful hints to those who will persist in trying to translate Greek, and what he says applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other languages also. His first advice is to avoid carefully all theories of translation which imply that there is a correct method to be followed; for there is no such thing. His second is to be sure that you clearly comprehend the poem in its original words—a matter not always attended to by English translators. And this full understanding or comprehension means not only understanding of the meaning of the words, but also grasp of the rhythm, intelligence of the order, sense of the emotion, of the literary color, of the dramatic emphasis, and so forth. So much being certain, and it being equally certain that all these things cannot be reproduced, one has to determine on what things he will concentrate and what he will be content to sacrifice. Even then, when you have done all that taste and talent will make it possible for you to do, you must realise that unless your translation is a poem you have failed. So that the moral seems to be: Never try at all unless you have the poetic instinct, and even then nine times out of ten you will fail. In the way of positive hints, he suggests that one must beware of triviality; avoid the fallacy of attempting to reproduce strictly the original metre (in the

case of Greek, at least); and (for the classical languages) the verse ought to have that severity and precision which mark out ancient prosody and give it the quality called classical. And now for the Professor's idea of how it ought to be done.

An Object Lesson

In the "Hippolytus" there is a chorus beginning:—

*Elibatois hupo keuthmosi genoiman,
Iau me pteroussan ornin agelesin
Potanaís Theos entheie.*

The prose crib of this will be: "Would I might be beneath some precipitous cavern, in order that God might set me, a winged bird, among his flying droves." That is what is called the "meaning," with all æsthetic exactitude neglected. What shall we do with it?

First, is there any specially important rhythmical quality? Clearly, yes: the ionic beat "hupo keuthmo—si genoiman—agelesin"; that must, as far as possible, be kept. And it can be kept in English if you are very careful to avoid a double trochee at the beginning. Next, are there any words of special value? There is *keuthmosi*, a hiding-place, generally a hole or cave. There is *elibatois*, a strange word, put first in the sentence and rhythmically separated from the rest. It must have its full value. Its real meaning was uncertain in Euripides's time, but it was supposed to mean "sun-trodden," in the sense of "not-trodden except by the sun," and was applied to precipitous crags and the like.

Now to translate. "Could I take me to some cavern" gets the rhythm; let us add "for mine hiding," to satisfy the feeling of *keuthmosi*. Then there remains *elibatois*, precipitous, sun-trodden:—

"Could I take me to some cavern for mine hiding,
In the hill-tops, where the Sun scarce hath trod."

(In strictness "scarce" takes the place of two short syllables, a common variation.)

In the next verse the most interesting thing is the idea of "droves" of "winged birds" which belong to "God," and in which we want to be numbered. Let us get emphasis on these points:—

"As a bird among the bird-droves of God."

Now there is a lot of space left over: the Greek says "in order that God might set me," etc. Such a grammatical construction would be a nuisance in English: let us make a shot:—

"Or a cloud make the home of mine abiding,
As a bird among the bird-droves of God."

The Greek does not happen to mention a cloud, true; so the translation is clearly not "right"; but, then, neither is any other. It is all a question of degree. The good prose crib tries to reproduce, quantitatively, as many items as possible of the original (prose) meaning; the good verse tries to reproduce as much as possible of the essential quality and the beauty. It tries to give just what the prose crib does not think about, and, of course, it generally fails. It can only succeed by selecting, at its own peril, what matters most, and letting the rest go hang. If it succeeds, it produces both something which has beauty of its own and is really "like" the original, which the prose crib can never be; if it fails, it is much worse than the prose crib, for it does not even give trustworthy information.

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