The New Criterion

Features March 1996

No Greek & very little Latin: Classical verse in translation

by D. S. Carne-Ross

On The Oxford Book of Classical Verse in Translation, edited by Adrian Poole and Jeremy Maule.

The Oxford University Press recently published portions of Scripture rewritten in politically correct Newspeak with God the Father purged of his offensive masculinity and transformed into our Father-Mother. It is something of a paradox that the same press should now have brought out this bulky anthology of translated Greek and Latin verse with all its sins on its head. Chaucer is allowed to describe the subject of the *Aeneid* as "the armes and also the man." Should not Rome's founder for decency's sake have been surgeoned into an androgyne?

The Bible, disfigured to conform to today's cultural agenda, can apparently be left us; the ancient classics in translation can also remain. The classics of our own language are faring less well. On many campuses now, the study of English literature is being set aside to let students concentrate on the urgent issues of the day, the politics of gender, class warfare, post-colonial studies, and what not. At Georgetown University, it was recently revealed, English majors may graduate without ever having read Shakespeare and Milton.

> The classics might, as it were,
> hold the fort and bear witness.

Those who find themselves wondering if Pope's prediction, "Art after Art goes out, and all is Night," is not being fulfilled may however discern a spark of comfort in an unexpected quarter. Whatever may be happening in English departments, students wishing to graduate in classics are still expected to show some passing acquaintance with Homer and Virgil. Shielded by their traditional inertia, classicists have not been greatly infected by the rage of destruction which their modern colleagues are directing against the riches they are paid to teach and preserve. Deconstruction never bit very deep into the ancient authors; the politicizing ideologies have so far not done much damage. The retention of Homer and Virgil, however welcome, cannot make up for

the loss of Shakespeare and Milton, but at least it provides some ground to stand on and perhaps build from. The classics might, as it were, hold the fort and bear witness. They ran into a dark age before and managed to survive.

A fanciful hope, it must seem, for so few people now read the classical poets in the original that their translators will have to act *in loco parentium*. Can translation bear this burden, a greater one than it has ever been asked to carry? To put the question to the anthology before us[1] is no doubt unfair, since the editors, Adrian Poole and Jeremy Maule, nowhere suggest that salvaging what remains of our literary inheritance formed any part of their intention. Unfair, but as things stand to some extent inevitable. Moreover, the unfairness can be mitigated if we take full account of what the editors do valuably have to offer.

Their aim, they announce, was to seek "the best of classical verse in the best of English translations." This promises well, though it would have been prudent to declare at the outset what they mean by the best. They find room, for instance, for Thomas Drant, who in the 1560s translated Horace's hexameter poems. His version of the *Ars Poetica* begins like this:

> A Paynter if he shoulde adjoyne
>
> unto a womans heade
> A longe maires necke, and overspred
> the corps in everye steade
> With sondry feathers of straunge huie . . .

The best that could be done for Horace's poem? Hardly, but perhaps these spavined verses are the best that could be done then, the *representative* best of a period that was not yet ready for Horace? A proper enough editorial principle, one that governs many of their choices, but not the one that they profess, and anyway surely even the representative should at least be good of its kind, better at all events than poor Drant.

Some detritus there may no doubt be, but this is not a book to snipe at, conducting us through the whole majestic sequence from Homer to Boethius in chronological order. The translations are not given chronologically, being taken from wherever they are to be found. The editors make a virtue out of what was not quite a necessity (nothing compelled them to select this translation rather than that) by letting versions from different periods rub shoulders, thereby creating "an array of juxtapositions" intended to give "the sense of historical friction" which allows each new rendering to come at us with the force of a "renewed discovery." This has the stimulating effect of destabilizing famous translations and preserving their power to astonish. Here for instance is Achilles, as Pope grandly saw him, putting on the new armor made by Hephaestus in heaven:

The silver Cuishes first his Thighs infold;
Then o'er his Breast was brac'd the hollow Gold:
The brazen Sword a various Baldrick ty'd,
That, starr'd with Gems, hung glitt'ring by his side;

And like the Moon, the broad refulgent Shield
Blaz'd with long Rays, and gleam'd athwart the Field.

This is followed by Christopher Logue's 1981 treatment of the same passage. Logue does not so much translate the Greek words as imagine the armor's appearance and find his own words for it:

Bright pads with toggles crossed behind the knees,

Bodice of fitted tungsten, pliable straps;
His shield as round and rich as moons in spring;
His sword's haft parked between sheaves of gray
obsidian,
From which a lucid blade stood out, leaf-shaped,
adorned
With running spirals.

Some juxtapositions are less rewarding. The lines from Drant which I quoted are immediately preceded by a passage from one of Pope's imitations of Horace, verse as accomplished as anything our language has to offer. To switch from one to the other is like driving along a highway in a limousine and then finding oneself in a farm cart jolting over a country road. Readers could surely get all the historical friction they require simply by turning a few pages back or forward. They could moreover gain a fuller sense of changes of style if they were allowed to settle down to substantial passages instead of being so often whisked from one brief specimen to another. The editors suffer from an addiction to snippets that is uncommon now, when anthological practice is rather to present complete poems or whole scenes.

Today's practice is not necessarily better than yesterday's, but today's has this real advantage in that it better meets the needs of the reader who does not possess the originals and wants to discover, for example, what sort of poem the *Georgics* is. He is given a number of extracts, some of no more than ten or twenty lines, from which he learns what Virgil has to say about weeds, about winter, about the way to rear calves, about snakes, bees, and so forth. The connoisseur of translation who has the Latin will be interested to see what modern writers like C. Day Lewis or Robert Fitzgerald made of the poem, how C. S. Calverley turned it in the nineteenth century, or Thomson or Crabbe in their day adapted it in original poems, and what Dryden did with it before

them. Others may find it puzzling that the *Georgics*, apparently a didactic treatise on agriculture, should have been judged by some to be Virgil's most perfect poem.

Homer, who like Shakespeare can transcend linguistic and temporal barriers, comes off best.

To follow the editors in their trek through four and a half centuries of English writing would be impossible, and all that can be done is to ask how the classical poets, first Greek, then Latin, have fared at their hands. Homer, who like Shakespeare can transcend linguistic and temporal barriers, comes off best. Although the harmony of the numbers is lost, in the finest translators much that is essential and eternal is carried across. The 1938 *Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation* provides only two extracts from Pope's *Iliad*. By a welcome change of taste we have moved closer to Johnson's estimate: "that poetical wonder . . . a performance which no age or nation can pretend to equal," and Pope is here given pride of place. Chapman and Dryden are well represented; Cowley has a couple of passages, the Earl of Derby a couple in very respectable nineteenth-century blank verse, with Robert Fitzgerald among the traditionalists speaking up for our own century. Richmond Lattimore does not get in, but his successor Robert Fagles does, with a version of the beautiful lines where Thetis and the Nereids lament the coming death of Achilles—far better translated by William Arrowsmith (*Arion*, vi: 3, Autumn 1967).

What of Sappho? The ode to Aphrodite, one of the high places of lyric poetry, is entrusted to Namby-Pamby Philips:

> O *Venus*, Beauty of the Skies,
> To whom a thousand Temples rise,
> Gayly false in gentle Smiles,
> Full of Love-perplexing Wiles.

Possibly in 1711, when these amiable verses appeared, a century before Greek poetry began to come into its own, there were those who thought that this is how Sappho wrote. Few will think so now, and matters are not bettered when a modern version by Suzy Q. Groden follows. Admittedly there is not much to be done with Sappho (except learn some Greek), and the editors raise our drooping spirits not with another translation but with a poem inspired by Sappho, Swinburne's "Sapphics," not Sappho's own chaste speech but Sappho speaking as she might have done had she lived in London in the later nineteenth century:

> Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
> Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled
>
> Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;
>
> Saw the reluctant

> Feet, the straining plumes of the doves that drew her . . .

The inclusion of original poems with no immediate indication that this is what they are is an excellent feature of the anthology, giving us something we recognize as poetry in a way that even the best translation can seldom do. The same good license allows for the inclusion of Housman's "The weeping Pleiads wester," suggested by the lovely quatrain *Deduke men a selanna*, and room might also have been found for Landor's "Mother, I cannot mind my wheel."

Move forward a hundred and fifty years to a mountain range, Attic tragedy, a classroom staple in those institutions where the study of literature still survives. A disaster area, alas. Gorgeous tragedy will not come sweeping by in any language within our reach today—the scenes in stately iambics for the most part distant from the Greek spoken by those who attended the plays, the odes far more difficult and metrically more complex than any poetry known to us. The form is nearly untranslatable and yet translations are required—and publishers eager to provide them.

> The form is nearly untranslatable and yet translations are required—and publishers eager to provide them.

For the *Oresteia*, as formidable an obstacle as anything to be found in ancient literature, the editors draw on two modern versions of the whole trilogy, one modern version of the *Agamemnon* alone and two from the nineteenth century. First Browning's: his purpose, he said, was to reproduce "the very turn of each Greek phrase in as Greek a fashion as English will bear," but as the hedging clause reveals, his nerve often fails him. Coming to the passage where the sons of Atreus hear the prophet hinting darkly at the terrible thing that must be done to allow their becalmed ships to sail for Troy, he writes: "So that the Atreidai striking staves on earth/ Could not withhold the tear." Literally the Greek words run: "so that the-earth-with-their-staffs-striking Atreidai did not withhold their tears." These heavily compounded phrases are not natural in English but our resourceful language will bear them, as Hopkins showed when he wrote of the Falcon "in his riding/ Of the rolling level underneath him steady air."

We don't want much of this, but it would have been valuable to have possessed what Browning might have given us and could have done had he been bold enough, one English example of the extreme form of Greek translation achieved in snatches by Hölderlin in his experimental treatment of Pindar. Still Browning's *Agamemnon* was worth including, at least on the representative criterion. This cannot be said of the next extract, Helen's flight to Troy done in trivial ballad meter by Edward Fitzgerald, or of Louis MacNeice's over-praised too literal

rendering of an ode, still less of some rant from Fagles. The selection from the *Oresteia* (only seven pages) ends with Tony Harrison's version of the Furies' Binding Song, acceptable perhaps in the performance for which it was written.

The best that could be done for this great work? No. The editors could have gone to the one translation of the whole trilogy that gives us any real sense of how Aeschylus wrote, George Thomson's, and printed at least a whole scene with the accompanying ode. Apparently it failed to meet their standards, though it met Auden's well enough for him to give it entire in his Viking *Portable Greek Reader*. Listen to Thomson's Orestes as he holds up the clothes in which Clytemnestra, whom he has just killed, entangled and killed her husband:

> And as I greet this web that wove his death,
> I weep for all things done and suffered here,
> For the whole race, and weep for my own fate,
> Marked with the stains of this sad victory . . .
> So then, to tell you plainly—I know not what
> My end will be—my wits are out of hand,
> Like horses that with victory in sight
> Stampede out of the course, and in my heart
> As fear strikes up her tune, the dance begins.2

What of Sophocles? The translator of this poet must seek to write as Milton wrote in *Samson Agonistes*:

> A little onward lend thy guiding hand
> To these dark steps, a little further on.

Words not necessarily remarkable in themselves set down in such a way that we feel no force on earth will ever shift them, the quality that Hopkins may have had in mind when he spoke of finding in Milton's verse something "necessary and eternal." Here and here alone is a match for the perfect gravity of Sophocles. An impossible standard, yes, but are we to continue to foist on the undergraduate classroom this lord of language speaking today's drab? Since there is no use asking for miracles, the only course, it seems to me, is to forget about the poetry and use prose versions of the kind that can be made to serve for Dante.

Still, the extracts chosen show that, while acceptable translation of a complete play is almost too much to hope for (though Robert Fitzgerald's of the *Oedipus Coloneus*, not represented here, is of real quality), single passages that read like poetry can be found. Thomas Francklin, writing sound eighteenth-century iambics, does well with Tecmessa's appeal to Ajax, so too Calverley in the next century with Ajax's great speech on time. Housman is grandly Swinburnian with the ode on old age in the *Coloneus*:

> What man is he that yearneth

For length unmeasured of days?
Folly mine eye discerneth
Encompassing all his ways.

The diction is as far from today's required *sermo pedester* as Sophocles' diction is from everyday talk but close to the way that he wrote. Dudley Fitts and Fitzgerald are rather splendid with the parodos of the *Oedipus Rex*, even if there may be a touch of tinsel here and there; E. R. Dodds handles an ode from the *Antigone* at a level seldom achieved by Greek professors; the ode in praise of Colonus is given to Yeats. The master poet of our own century could not be more unlike the Athenian master, but his presence here serves to remind us that we are in the presence of a great poet.

Euripides, in whose Greek there is less to make the translator despair, comes across passably well, with Shelley on the *Cyclops*, both Brownings (Robert not trying here to sound Greek, Elizabeth Barrett a more skillful performer in this difficult art than I think is usually recognized), and other lesser names. The most vivid poetic presence is an ode from the *Iphigeneia at Aulis* by H. D. in the Imagist manner, cut, shaped phrases more like Greek lyric than anything we have. Gilbert Murray is not included, the Greek translator general of his day as Lattimore, who is included, has been of a more recent day. Murray's translations have admittedly not worn well and never really recovered from Eliot's brilliant, waspish essay of 1918 (he "has simply interposed between Euripedes and ourselves a barrier more impenetrable than the Greek language"), but he brought Euripides to the general public, and there is no doubt that many people enjoyed him. Something could and should have been found from Murray—the agile little ode from the *Rhesus*, for example, beginning "Say, whose is the watch?"

Two great fifth-century poets still lie on our path, Pindar and Aristophanes, both in their different ways as resistant to translation as the tragedians. Though seldom much loved, Pindar has traditionally been granted high status, a great poet, Poole and Maule would have us believe, who wrote like this: "The lov'd *Syracusian*, the prince of the course,/ The king, who delights in the speed of the horse."

Namby-Pamby at it again. The difficulty of finding even adequate translations of Pindar is so great that the editors may have envied the liberty of exclusion enjoyed by Charles Tomlinson, whose judicious *The Oxford Book of English Verse in Translation* includes nothing from Pindar. For historical reasons they probably felt bound to give one of Cowley's Pindaricks. Though preposterously inflated and unfaithful to Pindar in everything that matters, Cowley was a poet and comes out with some resounding lines. Since we believe that we have now reached a truer sense of Pindar's art, it might be hoped that today's translators would serve him more faithfully. The two moderns to be found here are Robert Fagles and Frank J. Nisetich. Fagles, who is not a poet, can be as tumid as Cowley:

O Aglaia the glow
of Triumph, throb of the choirs Euphrosyne
sprung by the Spanning Arch of Gods.

What is the Spanning Arch of Gods? No use asking Pindar; he is not to blame. Nisetich is at least dull, inert phrases splayed across the page in a spurious colometry that presumably hopes to pass as verse. He usually gives you the sense, but prose could do it more decently. With less than their usual diligence the editors missed two modern translators who show that Pindar did write poetry. That gifted latter-day makar Robert Garioch, too little honored in his lifetime, rendered in a gloriously aureate Scots that recalls Dunbar the substantial fragment composed for a Corinthian victor who celebrated his achievement by dedicating a hundred hierodules to the temple of Aphrodite:

Your daywerk is the amber tears to brenn

of frankincense in reikie sacrifie
and aftentimes ye ettle, figan-faine
to birl in tourbillions of ecstasie
abuin the beryall firmament on hie
whaur luve consecrat bleizes til a sterne
and preclair Aphrodite reigns superne.

There may well be no way of letting opulent Pindar, as Lionel Johnson called him, speak out full-throated in today's English, but another line of approach is open. A leaner more parsimonious Pindar emerges in some free versions by the Canadian poet David Wevill, watercolor sketches that help one to understand why an acute verbal critic M. S. Silk called Pindar the "master of the delicate style."

And there is Aristophanes, the reigning poet of Old Comedy, the marvelous unrepeatable genre that died with the fall of Athens: knock-about often decidedly rough fun that has at call the most refined verbal artistry, elect lyric poetry, and rural piety shot through with what we wrongly call obscenity. (How can sexual horseplay that makes the crops grow be obscene?) All too often this great writer has been thought to deserve nothing better than red-necked buffoonery so blatant that even the groundlings hardly guffaw. The editors spare the poet and ourselves this indignity and are to be commended for providing some agreeable pieces. Benjamin Blickley Rogers obliges with a good Gilbertian patter song, sub-Aristophanic but better than the meterless stuff we often get; Oscar Wilde does an ode from the *Clouds* tastefully; and from the same play, a real trouvaille, we have the argument between Strepsiades and his son by the admirable Thomas Stanley, whose 1664 Aeschylus, the Greek faced by a Latin translation, brought this poet within reach of the general

reader. One strange omission has to be deplored. Instead of Swinburne's ode from the *Birds*, in ringing anapaestic heptameters little inferior to the superb original, we have the 1839 version by John Hookham Frere, which jiggets along merrily enough but without a trace of poetry.

A more understandable but still regrettable omission is the very lively and inventive version from America of the *Peace* by Tim Reynolds, fueled by the turmoils of the Vietnam War and done in a variety of parodied southern dialects. It never received more than periodical publication (the first part in *Delos* 1, 1968, the remainder in *Arion*, vi: 4, Winter 1967). The editors would have done Aristophanes a service by bringing this work to the attention of a wider public.

The great wave of Greek poetry returned no more after the end of the fifth century.

The great wave of Greek poetry returned no more after the end of the fifth century. The final section of the Greek part of the anthology has less to detain us, but there is one notable name, Theocritus, whose pastorals created a tradition that lasted till the middle years of Victoria. Calverley does well with the beautiful conclusion of the seventh idyll, but the sweetness of this poet's best work has proved out of reach. The translator would need not so much to translate the words as to bring alive in himself the world that lies behind the words, the world to which Baudelaire pointed when he wrote: "Tout poëte lyrique, en vertu de sa nature, opère fatalement un retour vers l'Eden perdu." Two later, less-demanding pastoralists are more approachable, Moschus with his lament for the poet Bion ("that lovely wail beside the Sicilian waters," J. W. Mackail called it in an earlier day), and Bion's lament for Adonis. Both poems are given in the translations by Dryden's protégé John Oldham, writing with a lyrical grace one does not associate with this poet, better known for the rough-edged Juvenalian cast of his satirical verse. These two translations are among the vivid pleasures of the anthology.

Roman poetry on the whole fares better. Latin, though less dear to some of us, is closer than Greek, which is often half out of reach. And in the present situation where many translators lack a classical training and have to rely on prose trots, Latin has the advantage that many of the words look like English words, even if they don't mean the same thing.

As with the Greek selection, all that can be done with the three hundred pages of translation is to see which poets come alive in our language, and, to put the question I am asking, how far a reader with little or no Latin can from the work provided here form an idea of the poetic achievement of Rome.

The editors begin with Ennius, father Ennius as Horace called him, a reasonable place to start, but it would have been exciting to reach further back to that antique *sacre du printemps*, the Hymn of the Arval Brotherhood, a song for seedtime still potent with the urgencies of survival even if the

words are only in part comprehensible:

> neue lue rue, Marmar, sins incurrere pleoris.

Janet Lembke, another American poet the editors missed, made a bold stab at this mysterious piece:

> guard fiercely the pale sprout that roots
>
> in the tender earth
> guard fiercely the soft calf that swims
> in the dark before birth
> guard fiercely the red life that screams
> into this world.

With Ennius, too, a substantial poet surviving only in fragments, Lembke could again have been called on. She adventurously knitted together bits and pieces of his work and made poems out of them. The scholar, the purist, would no doubt prefer to leave him in the ruined state in which time has handed him down, but the poet who wrote of himself, "I wing my way living on the lips of men," would surely have welcomed the attempt to bring him back to life, even if the life is only partly his.

Lucretius is splendid with Spenser in the sixteenth century and with Dryden in the seventeenth, despite that author's perhaps undue relish for passages that allow him to be raunchy. The years that follow offer Lucretius less, and today there is no translation of the *De rerum* that reads like a poem. Catullus too does best in earlier centuries, in the seventeenth a prince of lyric poetry for Jonson and his tribe and for Campion, who brings to that clenched, painful poem, *Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire*, a note of enchantment: "Silly Tray-tresse, who shall now thy careless tresses place?" Hyphenated, if that is how it should be, "Tray-tresse," echoed by "tresses," sounds like a playful love name, keeping below the level of attention the ugly word traitress, further softened by the adjective. Seldom if ever again was Catullus to be open to so delicate a *détournement*. (Students of historical friction will look across the page to observe Louis and Celia Zukofsky at their antic homophony: "Miss her, Catullus? don't be so inept to rail.")

Leigh Hunt two centuries later is pretty, but no more than pretty, with the radiant marriage poem for Julia and Manlius, where Catullus makes his Aeolic meter sing as though he were writing Greek not Latin. To today's lumpenproletariat of translation, Catullus has proved all too appealing, and people lacking the minimal requirements turn disciplined verse into a formless shambles. These productions the editors spare us, but there is one bad fall from grace, their treatment of the Attis poem, the strangest and some have thought the greatest in Latin, about a votary of the

Phrygian Mother Goddess who castrates himself in his service to her. Fifty lines are lopped from this poem of ninety-three lines in which there is nothing to be spared, though it must be admitted that the translation they choose, stuffed with much unwanted free invention, by one Robert Clayton Casto, can be lopped with advantage. But why choose it, when we have from Peter Whigham as fine a version as one can hope for? As no one else has done, Whigham conveys the jerky, convulsive movement of Catullus's very difficult meter and, in lines like "with rabid abandon brighten Dindymia's face," the obsessive drumbeat of the Goddess' savage cult.

And then Virgil. As Dryden knew, Virgil cannot be translated and yet must be and through all our centuries repeatedly has been, even though the answer to Dante's awed question, "Or se' tu quel Virgilio?" is always no. There is little to be done with a poet who has the Shakespearian gift of writing lines that seem not the creation of a single author but the choric voice of all mankind. The editors nonetheless serve him well and the only bad fault is the inclusion of Charles Cotton's 1664 travesty of the prelude to the *Aeneid*, worth a snigger perhaps in the days when schoolboys were hauled through the poem line by line but quite out of place in a modern anthology claiming to offer the best of the best.

Apart from this buffoonery, the *Aeneid* is left in the hands of translators who can write, even if here again one would have wished for longer passages from the major figures, Gavin Douglas and Dryden, with less space for those who, while decent enough, are primarily representative. Not that one grudges, if only for the fun of it, the page given to Richard Stanyhurst, who is not decent at all and representative only of himself, for his manhandling in uncouth Tudor hexameters of the first four books of the poem is a *monstrum horrendum* unparalleled in the annals of translation. (Polyphemus: "His tusk grimly gnashing, in seas far waltred, he groyleth." His companions follow: "the rowncival helswarme/ Of Cyclopan lurdens to the shoars in coompanie clustring.")

Virgil's friend Horace comes next, rightly granted ample space (fifty-nine pages—one recalls though that the *Oresteia* only got seven). Often called untranslatable, Horace's odes have in fact inspired a host of translations and imitations by writers of great and lesser note. The roll call is impressive. In the sequence imposed by the editors: Robert Lowell, Milton, the Edinburgh scull-thacker (wig-maker) Allan Ramsay, Smart, Crabbe, Dryden, Bunting (overrated as a translator?), Cowley, tragic Robert Fergusson who died at twenty-three a pauper lunatic in the Edinburgh Bedlam, Pound, Cowper, Louis MacNeice, Thomas Creech (more deserving than his reputation would suggest), Surrey (but not Sidney, a finer sixteenth-century Horatian), early Byron and Tennyson, Pope, Housman, Jonson (but not Johnson?).

Far more unpardonably, Philip
Francis is completely ignored.

Only two bad omissions. Of *Odes* ii.14, *Eheu fugaces, Postume, Postume*, there is one decisive version, from our own day, by C. H. Sisson. The editors read Sisson for they include part of his witty imitation of the once much loved second epode, *Beatus ille*. Yet instead of his translation of the Postumus ode they give one by a John Potenger from 1685, one by the Swan of Lichfield, Anna Seward, emollient verses unsuited to this great and somber poem. Far more unpardonably, Philip Francis is completely ignored. His translation of the complete *Odes* (and at a lesser level of the *Satires* and *Epistles*) appeared in the 1740s, was reprinted nine times in the course of the century, and praised by Johnson: "Francis has done it best; I'll take his, five out of six, against them all." A judgment that can still stand, even though this great translator now has a companion. It is heartening to be able to report that a Horace speaking with the voice of our own day is being reborn on the banks of the Charles in Cambridge, Massachusetts. David Ferry has been working on the *Odes* for some time and his book of translations, all one hundred and three odes plus the *Carmen saeculare*, will be before the public in a year or so.

The hexameter poems come off less well, thanks to the editorial addiction to snippets, and there are a number of odd choices. The assumption seems to be that whatever is not known to the general is thereby caviar, and the editors go to the trouble of digging up a passage from William King's 1709 *The Art of Cookery*, a would-be funny mimicry of the *Ars Poetica*, and some lines from *The Harlequin Horace* of 1735 by James Miller. It is unconscionable to exhume these trivia from the soft underbelly of Augustan imitation when no sustained attention is given to Pope's *Imitations of Horace*, complex recreations which bring two great poets together in a vital interplay hard to parallel in literature.

Pope imitated Horace, in the special sense the word had then, he did not translate him. For what is arguably the best rendering of the hexameter poems the editor should have drawn on Francis Howes, whose *Epodes, Satires, and Epistles of Horace*, though published as late as 1845, still has the idiomatic verve and poise of the best eighteenth-century work. Howes's book was quickly forgotten and today is buried in still deeper oblivion than Francis's translation of the *Odes*. (One of Howes's epistles, included in Tomlinson's anthology, could have alerted the editors to his merits.) Translators, to whom the ongoing life of literature owes so much, have always been an ill-rewarded tribe.

Ovid comes next, a great figure in the Middle Ages, no less so in the seventeenth century; both Shakespeare and Milton saw fit to draw on him. His reputation began to fade in the years to come and in our own day he has had few whole-hearted admirers except Pound, whose retelling in his second canto of the story of Bacchus on the pirate ship from the third book of the *Metamorphoses* could well have been included. With Ovid this book does one of the things I think it ought to do, provide the general reader puzzled by his former celebrity with the means of judging why he was so much loved. Pound saw a poet very close to him in Arthur Golding's sixteenth-century translation of the *Metamorphoses*, well represented here, which he went so far as to call "the most beautiful book in the language." The medieval note that he admired in Golding vanishes with Dryden, also well represented, but other virtues come to take its place.

Not much of interest has been done with Ovid in the present century, but two admirable translations are to be found here, one from the *Amores* by the Ulster poet Derek Mahon in cleverly handled octosyllabic couplets with much pleasing variation in pause and rhythm, the whole treated with a playful elegance that catches the tone of the Latin. A more troubled Ovid is heard in another contemporary version, from the *Tristia*, by David R. Slavitt, which carries the original to us across two millennia with the directness of personal address while observing the proper decorum of verse. Here is Ovid, a man pre-eminently of the capital exiled to a barbarous region of the world, remembering the desperate night when he packed his bags, trying to decide what to take with him. "That preposterous shepherd's cloak"? Oh well, put it in—I may need it there. These two poets are among the book's rewarding presences.

The parade of fine once famous names continues. Propertius: a sequence from Pound's "Homage" rightly comes first, followed by Jim Powell with the poem where Cynthia's ghost reproaches the poet for his neglect, a good translation without doubt, but not so good that it should have excluded the superb version by Lowell from *Lord Weary's Castle*. Tibullus: two from the eighteenth century, one modern by Michael Longley, inferior to George Fraser's version of the opening elegy of Book One, which does not insist so hard on its modernity. Seneca: far from the great figure he once was, though he was successfully brought to the London stage some years ago by Ted Hughes in the staccato version included here, which probably acted better than it reads. Lucan: only twenty-four lines from Marlowe's translation of the *Pharsalia* where the art of narrative blank verse is captured at one stroke. "It is of very great merit," C. S. Lewis, who hated Marlowe, reluctantly admitted. Martial: often and finely translated in the seventeenth century, less well today. One is perplexed not to find Peter Porter, whose versions from Martial are always stylish and sufficiently formal. Few if any Latin poets can be done in "free" verse, a misnomer that should never have been allowed to stand. (Pound's "Homage" is another matter: Pound is Pound.) And then there is Juvenal, the one classical poet of whom it can be said that those who know him only in translation find much of what they should find there, thanks to his luck in falling into two great hands. Dryden, who writes with a massive, magnificent effrontery unmatched in our language:

> Mean time his Lordship lolls within at ease,
> Pamp'ring his Paunch with Foreign Rarities:
> Both Sea and Land are ransack'd for the Feast,
> And his own Gut the sole invited Guest.

Then, a graver moralist than Dryden and indeed than Juvenal, comes Johnson with "London" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes," a poem some would have thought good enough to be given complete. Poole and Maule find room for two extracts.

The final section, "The Late Empire," brings a new note which some may find more appealing because more intimate, closer to us, than anything that went before. The selection opens with the *Pervigilium Veneris*, the Vigil of Venus, rather coarsely translated by Parnell in the early eighteenth century, efficiently but coldly by Allen Tate. This very beautiful poem still awaits its poet. In *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater sensitively imagines the circumstance of its creation. Listening

to the poem which catches "something of the rhyming cadence, the sonorous organ-music of the medieval Latin," Marius seems to experience "the foretaste of an entirely novel world of poetic beauty." From Claudian in the later fourth century we have a piece that strikes a disturbingly topical note, well translated by Helen Waddell, about the withdrawal of the Roman legions: "Tonight there is no watch upon the Rhine." nato's watchmen were stationed not far east of there for much of the second half of this century. They are presumably no longer needed now, but the barbarians are alive and well in once civilized western cities. From Ausonius there are a few charming lines of nature poetry, "Evening on the Moselle," again translated by Waddell, and from the same poem a passage unlike anything in classical verse on the suffering of fish, hooked and hauled to die gasping on the land.3 Ted Hughes is a strong fish poet, but his fish, habitants of a timeless *Urwelt*, inspire dread rather than compassion. The long story comes to a close with some pieces from Boethius, including one by King Alfred in the original Old English with a prose crib, and one beautiful poem by Vaughan.

This anthology into which much learning and editorial punctilio have gone is, I think, going to prove most valuable to the connoisseur of translation who will enjoy comparing specimens of the art as it has been practiced over the centuries. There is plenty too for the general reader, though he may regret that he is not more often permitted to settle down with substantial passages from the major authors. His opportunity for thoughtful inspection somewhat resembles that of the person on a bus tour of Rome. "This is the Pantheon—please be out in five minutes. We are now driving round the famous Piazza Navona pausing to allow you to admire Bernini's fountain." Celerity, the visitor may murmur with Sir Thomas Browne, should be contempered with cunctation.

Notes

Go to the top of the document.

1. A retelling of the *Mosella* in exquisite prose is intricately let into Guy Davenport's story "Wo es war, soll ich werden," included in his collection *The Drummer of the 11th Devonshire Fusiliers*. Go back to the text.

1. _ *The Oxford Book of Classical Verse in Translation*, edited by Adrian Poole and Jeremy Maule; Oxford University Press, 606 pages, $29.95. Go back to the text.
2. _ "The dance" depends on a plausible emendation. Thomson's Greek text is unfortunate to say the least, but does no serious damage to his translation. Go back to the text.
3. _ In a brilliant essay in *Arion* V: 4, Winter 1966, "Senecan Tragedy," John Herington pointed to the qualities which made Seneca so strong a presence for the Elizabethans and might, he argues, do so again today. Go back to the text.

D. S. Carne-Ross is Professor Emeritus at Boston University.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 14 Number 7 , on page 18

https://newcriterion.com/issues/1996/3/no-greek-very-little-latin-classical-verse-in-translation