



Exploring the classical world

Homer - translation through recreation

Let us now turn to our second example, another modern translation of *Odyssey* book I, lines one to five by Walter Shewring.

Leighton Pugh

Goddess of song, teach me the story of a hero.

This was the man of wide-ranging spirit who had sacked the sacred town of Troy and who wandered afterwards long and far. Many were those whose cities he viewed and whose minds he came to know, many the troubles that vexed his heart as he sailed the seas, labouring to save himself and to bring his comrades home.

Naoko Yamagata

How did you find the overall impression of this translation? How does this compare with Lattimore's? It seems to me that this one flows more naturally than Lattimore's and it is easier to follow the meaning of the passage too. What was your reaction? Think about the reasons for the impression you got as well.

If I try to analyse the reasons why I found it easier to follow, one of them will certainly be that it is a prose translation. Some people will see the very act of translating verse into prose as unfaithful to the original for the readers who do not know the original, who have no idea that this is a poem, but instead will think that this is a novel. On the other hand, the prose style has the advantage of being more familiar to us as the medium of longer texts. We are used to reading long stories or news reports in prose whereas in Homer's time it was more natural to put long narratives into hexameter verse. If we are to transport or translate that natural feel to the extended narrative, to us, prose is the natural choice. So here's another factor we have to take into consideration, when reading translation. Cultural differences can affect the way we appreciate each genre and sometimes translation can be more effective by crossing genres such as verse into prose.

Walter Shewring was a classics teacher and was fully aware of the many issues surrounding translating Homer. In his epilogue to his translation of the *Odyssey* he explains why he translated it the way he did. He also notes pitfalls into which some verse translations have fallen, such as, that the regular rhythm of verse can get tedious after a while. He is above all anxious to create something that sounds natural to modern readers, the prose style counts among such features that he used to achieve this effect.

But how does he compare with Lattimore in terms of his choice of words?

Naoko Yamagata

I expect that you have spotted a number of deviations in Shewring from the original and Lattimore. To start with he has 'Goddess of song' instead of 'Muse', 'teach me the story of' instead of 'tell me of', 'a hero' instead of 'the man' and moreover he duplicates the translation of the word 'andra' by putting 'a hero' in one sentence and 'the man' in another. Why did he do this?

Let us take 'Muse' first. To translate 'Muse' as 'Goddess of song' is more like a commentary than translation but it is helpful for modern readers, who may not be familiar with Greek mythology. This is something I was concerned about when I looked at Lattimore earlier and Shewring manages to slip in, the information, that the reader might need, almost unnoticed and, instead of saying, 'tell me of the man', he says 'teach me the story of a hero'. Perhaps this brings out the special relationship between the goddess and the poet more clearly. On

the other hand, I feel that it takes away something of the magic of the goddess speaking through the poet with him as her mouthpiece.

Another interesting example is 'polutropos'. Shewring renders it as 'of wide-ranging spirit', which gives a better idea of what the man is like than Lattimore's 'of many ways', though there is no element of the spirit in the original word.

And what about turning 'a man' or 'the man' into 'a hero'? Perhaps, again, here is the translator's helping hand to prepare modern readers to hold the right sort of expectation by signalling that this is a heroic tale. This is something ancient readers would have known automatically. But there is another complication here too. The late 20th century has developed different sorts of heroes in cinema, sport or even in everyday life so that the connotation of the word 'hero' is ever changing. Each generation will have its own hero or two, which may interfere with the image of 'the hero', which the translator intended to convey.

So, with closer scrutiny, you will find that Shewring's translation is freer than some other translations but I think his major objective is by and large achieved, that is, to create a translation accessible and natural to his modern readers. Whether this works with you or not may be tested by asking yourself which would I rather take, Lattimore or Shewring, for a long journey or holiday read? And which one would you rather use to study Homer seriously?

Let us now go back in time by nearly three centuries and look at the opening lines of the *Odyssey* in the poet, Alexander Pope's translation of 1725

Leighton Pugh

The man for wisdom's various arts renowned,
Long exercised in woes, oh Muse! Resound.
Who when his arms had wrought the destin'd fall
Of sacred Troy, and razed her heav'n built wall,
Wandering from clime to clime, observant stray'd,
Their manners noted, and their States survey'd,
On stormy seas and number'd toils he bore,
Safe with his friends to gain his natal shore.

Naoko Yamagata

How did you like Pope's translation? Does it sound more or less Homeric than the other two? Was the meaning of the passage clear at the first hearing? I thought that this made a striking contrast to Shewring's. This is unmistakably a poem, put in heroic verse or heroic couplets in which each pair of lines rhymes. Not only the rhyming scheme but also the wording sounds rather lofty and poetic. Instead of 'man of many ways', Pope has 'for Wisdom's various arts renown'd' and Muse is to 'resound' not tell or teach. The rather pedestrian 'he sacked' becomes "'his arms had wrought the destin'd fall' and so on. We still recognise the same sequence of narrative and the gist of the passage but Pope has consistently elaborated the expressions to create his poetic style. Have you noticed that he has added so much volume to the passage that the equivalent of *Odyssey* book I lines one to five stretches over eight lines in his verse.

But you may then ask, shall we call this a translation of Homer or Pope's version, his re-working of the tale of Odysseus, roughly based on Homer? Richard Bentley, Pope's contemporary and an eminent classical scholar, famously said of Pope's translation of the *Iliad* which was published several years earlier than his *Odyssey*, "a pretty poem Mr Pope but you must not call it Homer". You can argue that this is also a faithful translation insofar as it translates poetry into poetry and it is no surprise, given Pope's talent and accomplishment that his Homer is widely regarded as the best verse translation to date. Just as the ancient Greek readers heard or read Homer's Greek verse as an original poetic creation, English readers, certainly in Pope's time, would have heard or read it almost as an original poem, written in their own language. The vibrant rhythm of the verse and phrases, such as 'heav'n built wall', 'Manners' and 'States' which hint at the religious and social atmosphere of the poet's age, make us almost forget that this is a translation of an ancient Greek poem. On the other hand, the use of his words, in particular, does remind us of the age in which he lived

and our reading experience of his translation is different again from that of his contemporary readers.

So once again we are made aware of a number of issues surrounding translation. Translators have to make a number of decisions as to how to translate both the form and meaning of the original, while taking into consideration the cultural and literary backgrounds of the target readers. Depending on whom the readers are, and what their purpose is for reading it, even the same translation will be differently perceived. This is why no two translations look the same and there is no such thing as the exact translation. We read Homer as mediated by the translator, whose role, we may say, is that of a co-author in re-creating an equivalent literary experience for his or her age in another language.

Naoko Yamagata

Finally, I would like to leave you with the prologue of Derek Walcott's, *The Odyssey, A Stage Version* published in 1993. This play is a modern version of the *Odyssey*, which is not a translation, but a free re-creation of the tale. The prologue is particularly interesting as it was originally intended to be sung on stage and was sung in a style of blues in its 1992 stage production. It has a rhyming scheme, which gives it a regular rhythm. Listen out especially for the quotation of the first line of the *Odyssey* in Greek, which blends in with the rest of Walcott's verse. Also striking are the connections, which he makes between different elements of Odysseus' story, such as Penelope and Dawn's rosy fingers or the note on the singer's lyre and swallow's song, which do not feature in the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*. So listen and enjoy, and imagine what it would have been like to be ancient Greeks listening to Homer in their own language as their contemporary poet.

Leighton Pugh

Gone sing 'bout that man because his stories please us,
Who saw trials and tempests for ten years after Troy.
I'm Blind Billy Blue, my main man's sea-smart Odysseus,
Who the god of the sea drove crazy and tried to destroy.
Andre moi ennepe mousa polutropon hos mala polla...
The shuttle of the sea moves back and forth on this line,
All night, like the surf, she shuttles and doesn't fall
Asleep, then her rosy fingers at dawn unstitch the design.
When you hear this chord
Look for a swallow's wings,
A swallow arrowing seaward like a messenger
Passing smoke-blue islands, happy that the kings
Of Troy are going home and its ten years' siege is over.
So my blues drifts like smoke from the fire of that war,
Cause once Achilles was ashes, things sure fell apart.
Slow-striding Achilles, who put the hex on Hector
A swallow twitters in Troy. That's where we start.