
Homer in Translation: The Never-Ending Stream

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SUCH HAS been the hype in the reviews heralding the issue of Stephen Mitchell's translation of the *Iliad** in paperback that one is immediately reminded of Propertius' *nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade* ("something greater than the *Iliad* has just been born"). I had thought that this generation was well served by Robert Fagles, whose 1990 translation signaled to many that it was time to retire the 1974 version of Robert Fitzgerald, which in turn had been supposed to succeed the 1951 offering of Richmond Lattimore. There seem to be two decades intervening between masterpiece translations, and so perhaps we are ready for a new model. But is this the one?

Those who are in the culture or humanities business will insist that knowing something about the Homeric epics is the sine qua non for anyone they would be willing to call educated. But they can assume that almost no one will undertake to read the *Iliad* in Homer's Greek, neither student nor teacher. A knowledge of Homer's *Iliad* pretty much means a sampling of an English-language narrative. An amusing historical curiosity was the mid-twentieth century quarrel between English and Classics departments in American universities over which had the authority to teach Homer, the latter because the text of Homer was actually in Greek, or the former because the translations were in English. It wasn't amusing at the time; the explosion of the student population translated into power and faculty staffing, just as nowadays, when students are the last formidable market for masterpieces of literature, the stakes for the publishers are

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huge. Mitchell's rhapsodic exposition of "the sheer power of Homer's language, even in the most prosaic or mediocre translations" (xvi) is telling. His examples are all drawn from his English-language translation, of course, which with the best will in the world cannot be said to reveal, portray, or even suggest the ancient dactylic hexametric Greek which is, after all, Homer's language.

Mitchell is a professional translator whose translations and adaptations as listed in the front pages of this volume range from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* to the Gilgamesh poems and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Although he admits to consulting the dictionary for the more uncommon words while working on this translation, his command seems secure throughout the poem; still, when he translates οὐ νέμεσις (*Il.* 3.156) as "no wonder," it strikes me as an uncritical reading of the English translation of the Autenrieth Homeric dictionary which specifically cites this line with that meaning, when ordinarily the word has the connotation of moral indignation, certainly appropriate for the Trojan elders here, who seem to be saying, "You can't blame the Achaians and the Trojans for taking on this misery all these years for a woman like that."

Homer's line is dactylic hexameter. (For those whose prosody is rusty an English-language hexameter example is Longfellow's "This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlock"—except that the boldfaced syllables are sounded twice as long in the Greek, rather than being stressed as they are in English.) Mitchell uses a five-beat, loose iambic line which can accommodate itself to more than ten syllables, a commonplace poetic maneuver of contemporary translators, which we may compare with the strict line of Alexander Pope and the semi-strict line of Homer, where any dactyl can become a spondee. Richmond Lattimore used a free six-beat line in his translation, thinking that this better mimicked Homer's six units—the first five, either dactyls or spondees, the last, invariably trochee or spondee. Against the tradition of pentameters in English

poetry, Lattimore's longer line drags, but his very strict literal translation makes his version a teacher's dream, whether or not a student's delight.

What is a translation? What is it the translator is "bringing over"? One thing is certain: not the sense of the Greek. Here are some versions of lines 217–28 from the fifth book.

MITCHELL:

Aeneas answered him, "No more speeches like that.
Nothing will get any better till you and I
mount my chariot and face this strong man in combat.
Come with me now, and see for yourself the power
of these horses, bred by my ancestor Tros—how incredibly
fast they can run, in either attack or retreat.
And if Zeus once again gives the triumph to Diomedes,
they will bring the two of us safely back to the city.
So come up beside me; take the whip and the reins,
and I will dismount from the car and fight him—or else
you go face him, and I will take charge of the horses."

FAGLES:

No talk of turning for home! No turning the tide
till we wheel and face this man with team and car
and fight it out with weapons hand-to-hand.
Come, up with you now, climb aboard my chariot!
So you can see the breed of Tros's team, their flair
for their own terrain as they gallop back and forth,
one moment in flight, the next in hot pursuit.
They'll sweep us back to the city, back to safety
if Zeus hands Tydeus' son the glory once again.
Quick, take up the whip and glittering reins!
I'll dismount from the car and fight on foot—
or you engage the man and leave the team to me.

FITZGERALD:

Better not talk so. Till we act, he wins.
We two can drive my car against this man
and take him on with sword and spear.
Mount my chariot, and you'll see how fast

these horses of the line of Tros can run:
 they know our plain and how to wheel upon it
 this way and that way in pursuit or flight
 like wind veering. These will save us, take us
 Troyward if again Zeus should confer
 the upper hand and glory on Diomedes.
 Come take the whip and reins; and let me mount
 to fight him from the car—or you yourself
 may face the man, and let me mind the horses.

LATTIMORE:

Speak no more this way; there will be no time for changing
 before you and I must face this man **with horses and chariot**
 and strength against strength fight it out with our weapons. Therefore
 mount rather into my chariot, so that you may see
 what the Trojan horses are like, how they understand their
 plain, and how to traverse it in rapid pursuit and withdrawal.
 Those two will bring us safe to the city again, if once more
 Zeus grants **glory** to Diomedes the son of Tydeus.
 Come, then, taking into your hands the goad and **the glittering**
reins, while I dismount from my chariot and carry the fighting;
 or else yourself encounter this man, while I handle the horses.

POPE:

Be calm, nor Phoebus' honor'd gift disgrace.
 The distant dart be praised, though here we need
 The rushing chariot, and the bounding steed.
 Against yon hero let us bend our course,
 And, hand to hand, encounter force with force.
 Now mount my seat and from the chariot's height
 Observe my father's steeds, renown'd in fight;
 Practised alike to turn, to stop, to chase,
 To dare the shock, or urge the rapid race:
 Secure with these, through fighting fields we go;
 Or safe to Troy, if Jove assist the foe.
 Haste, seize the whip, and snatch the guiding rein;
 The warrior's fury let this arm sustain;
 Or, if to combat thy bold heart incline,
 Take thou the spear, the chariot's care be mine.

BEYE:

Stop pushing that idea. Nothing's going to change
Until we two try our luck with that guy face to face,
Horses, chariot, weapons—the whole bit.
Come on, you get into my chariot, so you can see
What kind of horses King Tros bred, how they know this terrain,
Every inch of it, on the pursuit, or in flight.
They'll get us back to the city safely, if yet again
Zeus gives the glory to Diomedes, son of Tydeus.
So come on, take the whip and the shining reins,
I'll leave the horses to you, and get down and fight.
Or you go after him, and leave the horses to me.

You will note that I have the impudence to include my own version, just to show that it really is no better or worse than the others, save for Alexander Pope's, which is the work of a genius and poet in a class all by itself. I say this simply to show that the contemporary versions are to my mind essentially readable prose arranged in line segments, except for Lattimore who adheres closely enough to the Greek text of each line as to provide some demonstration of what Homer was saying (although, surprisingly enough, I noted that passages exactly repeated in the Homeric text are so respected by Mitchell, whereas Lattimore sometimes varies the language).

The language of Homer is a complex amalgam of several dialects and anachronistic usages, brought together over time by the necessity of finding an elaborate linguistic scheme that would accommodate meaning to a rigid metrical system of dactyls. Nobody talked like Homer, which is to say that this was an artificial combination of words to serve the needs of simultaneous invention and transmission without benefit of writing; it depended upon the meter, and bent itself to the demands of the meter. Artificiality and peculiarity are key; one might say that contemporary rap is a simplified version of this process. In every line of the Greek passage which I have quoted here in these different versions, there occur commonplace phrases as well as individual words that are fit to the meter and thus routinely appear

elsewhere in the poem in the very same metrical position. I have used bold face to indicate three such examples of this phenomenon in the Lattimore translation. Naturally, one cannot expect a parallel in the other translations nor that Lattimore will always repeat exactly. The English language with which these translators are working is constructed from individual words placed in some kind of aesthetic and semantic sequence which allows for innumerable variables. There is no way a translator can reproduce in English the tight organization of the language of the original where the reader or auditor senses the “rightness,” “the inevitability,” of the majority of the words in the line—line after line after line. That is the great virtue to the Pope translation despite its many other limitations: it is strict, it repeats, it makes for an inevitability in every pair of rhymes. It at least suggests the extraordinary contrivance that is Homeric hexametric Greek. Without that, all you have is the story, and you might as well get it in straightforward prose.

As a very different alternative to prose, there is a suggestive idiosyncratic version, a poem based on someone’s explanatory notes. Some years back, the English poet Christopher Logue was encouraged to try his hand at translating the *Iliad* despite the fact that he knew no Greek. Having the text explained to him, Logue started out with book 16. The results were sensational as a major poet’s way of “translating” the poem, and in the decades remaining to his life he managed to get through most of the text. It is easy to say, as Bentley was supposed to have said to Alexander Pope, “A pretty poem Mr. Logue, but you must not call it Homer.” Here is Mitchell translating the opening lines of book 16:

As the armies kept fighting by Protesiláüs’s ship,
 Patroclus came to Achilles shedding hot tears
 like a spring of water that pours its dark stream down over
 some goat-steep cliff. And Achilles felt pity and said,
 “Why are you crying, Patroclus, like some little girl
 who runs to her mother and tugs at her skirts and begs
 to be comforted until the mother at last picks her up?”

and here is Logue:

Now hear this:
While they fought around the ship from Thessaly,
Patroclus came crying to the Greek.
“Why tears, Patroclus?” Achilles said.
“Why hang about my ankles like a child
Pestering its mother, wanting to be picked up,
Expecting her to stop what she is at,
Getting its way through snivels? . . .

Pope was free to create a poem independent of his original for an audience he presumed would be fully conversant with the Greek, just as Logue, who knew no Greek, was freed from a text to create from a notion lodged in his head from another's promptings. The independence of Logue's version is striking. His beginning is terse like a film script, he then omits the simile comparing Patroklos' tears to a mountain stream, and continues in that abrupt mode by dropping Homer's reference to Achilles' pity for Patroklos. One could read the harshness in Achilles' simile of the crying child as a means to stifle his pity. Logue seems to want to get out of the necessity of “reading,” which is peculiar but economical.

Mitchell's program of translation includes eliminating the so-called ornamental epithets which attach to most characters and some staples of the environment—remember “wine-dark sea” and “swift ships”? He argues that even the great theorist of Homeric orality, Milman Parry, admitted that the epithets were probably unheard. I object that what is not heard is not necessarily not absorbed, a homely example being a mother's shout to her offspring, “Don't forget your lunch,” which the child does not consciously hear, perhaps, but absorbs psychologically, as either the buttressing force of mother love or castrating control of maternal power. The epithets which describe Achilles as “swift of foot” or Aigisthos as “blameless” are true even when the former is lying about his campsite, sulking, and the latter is being castigated by

Zeus for his behavior, just as Prince Charles is “Your Royal Highness” even when his valet is handing him his toothbrush prepared with the toothpaste. These are immutable conditions in the Homeric view of things, and they are key in establishing the tragic irony with which the action of this epic is imbued. Like the figures in a Giotto painting, which are just partly emerged and lifelike from their existence as Byzantine icons, the eternity is there in every gesture and movement. Mitchell acknowledges a debt to the great Homeric scholar and textual critic Martin West, who has not only published a text of the *Iliad*, but issued a volume with his detailed comments on the integrity of the text as it has come down to us. This fascinating work, which is considered highly eccentric by some Homerists (including me), was probably not the best vade mecum for someone perhaps not so versed in Homeric studies as he might have been. The result is that Mitchell excises lines that West deems suspect, and, indeed, relegates the entire tenth book to an appendix.

As a teacher, I would have to say that this maneuver vitiates the pedagogic value of Mitchell’s translation for once and for all. It is enough to help students to understand the poem, it is too much to expect them to take on the ins and outs of oral theory versus the neo-analytic belief in a Homer who was writing down his poem as early as the seventh century BCE. What is more, anyone keen on reading this poem for its narrative value as opposed to interrogating it sternly as to its logic can easily accommodate the tenth book into the narrative structure. For instance, on the most superficial level of narrative thrust, we can note that, toward the close of the ninth book, Ajax castigates Achilles for his intransigence, his indifference to his fellow soldiers who need him, and in the tenth, the narrator sends Odysseus and Diomedes out on a night raid which demonstrates the virtue of buddies as nothing else would, and ironically looks ahead to Patroklos’ fatal scheme to enter the battle disguised as Achilles, when the latter is too self-engrossed to consider going out with his companion and thus possibly saving his life. In ad-

dition, the poet names and describes several of the chieftains as they gather for council, then lists them and others who stand ready to be selected for the nighttime sortie, which is the central feature of this book. It has the flavor of a truncated *dramatis personae*, the narrative value of which is to provide a hint of an introduction to the war story again, a kind of threshold, suitable here to signal a resumption of the onward flow of the narrative after the pause for the startling moment of decision and fatal rejection in the ninth. Which is to say, Achilles' personal decision which is central to the ninth stops the flow of the action—the die is cast—and now the story can continue to its necessary conclusion.

Patroklos is one of the three best-loved characters in this poem, Mitchell asserts, in a surprisingly feel-good appraisal of the story in his pages of introduction. It never occurred to me that anyone is loved in this story; as for Patroklos, I think of the observation at *Iliad* 19.301–2 where the narrator tells us that the women out there doing the formal grieving over his corpse had the pretext of Patroklos, but actually they were crying over their own misfortunes. And one ought not to forget Patroklos' murdering his cousin over a chess game in his youth, which makes him sound like a mean little kid and not likely to grow into a sweetheart, even though so august an authority as the Oxford Classical Dictionary calls this flare-up over a game “an accident.” One must not confuse a desire to be loved with a thirst for fame and glory. Sometimes, I have a hard time understanding the translator's mind. See, for example, Mitchell's surprising translation of *Iliad* 6.441, ἦ καὶ ἐμοὶ τάδε πάντα μέλει γύναι, as “Dearest, what you have said troubles me too”; apart from sounding exceptionally sappy, this does not to my mind render what I read as, “Woman [or if you must, “wife”], all that has been on my mind, too” in the famous dialogue between Hektor and Andromache, which after the horrible foretelling of their fates, ends in the supremely ironic prayer that their infant son—whom they are dandling in this Mommy-Poppy scene—grow up to go out and kill as his father has done before him.

It is the supreme Michael Corleone moment, that is, the revelation that the son has been born into the killing game whether he likes it or not. In fact, we have marvelous examples of the tenor and action of the *Iliad* in our own time in the filmed dramas of “The Godfather” and “The Sopranos.” The situation is much the same. In a world where civilized protections either don’t exist (Bronze Age Greece) or have broken down (immigrant ghettos in major cities), strong men give protection and take the toll. Plundering, subjection, rape and pillage, this is the back story of the *Iliad*, the Mafia world all over again. Mitchell again and again in his introduction feels compelled to apologize for the violence and mayhem of the *Iliad*’s story line, as though his readers cannot handle it. But his readers? Citizens of the most belligerent nation on the globe, from waterboarding to drone flights from one presidential order to another, who can participate in violence twenty-four-seven on their television screens, and if not from reality shown on screen then in the extraordinarily prurient violence of filmed fictions. And just as the absence of a national draft makes our citizens viewers rather than doers in the bloodbath their taxes pay for, so here the conventions of the screen distance the viewer, again, just as the dactyls and the contrived language keep the auditor/reader at a remove from the often truly grisly depiction of killing, death, and dying in the poem.

The *Iliad* is the first great statement in our civilization’s cultural history of the essential emptiness of life, the tragic sensibility against which one must fight back with redeeming acts, the means to establish one’s sense of self. Essentially, the poem is about killing. The sharp particularity and immediacy of every act of killing, death, or dying is immediately distanced in its effect upon the hearer/reader by the formulaic language which makes the moment part of a mosaic, immediately imbedded into a grander scheme of humanity where life is acted out in a minuet of inevitabilities. The frequent similes that the poet introduces within the battle narrative remind the reader/auditor of specificity, life lived in that alternative universe, peacetime, itself acting as a brake upon the intensity of anguish the battle

narratives might otherwise induce. But it is killing and death that are the eternal truth to which the reader/auditor submits in thrall to the idiosyncrasy of this language, surrendering upon entrance into another psychic, spiritual world where only this language reigns. No English translation of the last two centuries can do justice to this, although Lattimore's literalness maybe offers something seen through the glass but darkly. I do not think that loose iambic pentameters in any way reports this extraordinary text.