# Praxis Abraxas: How Tradition, Canonical Reading, and Craft Shape the Poetics of Translation

Niki Lambros

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Signed by the final examining committee:

_____Chair
Dr Cynthia Quarrie

_____Thesis Supervisor
Dr Kevin Pask

_____Examiner
Dr Sherry Simon

_____Examiner
Prof Mary di Michele

_____Examiner
Dr Andre Furlani

_____External Examiner
Dr Peter Constantine

Approved by _____
Dr David Morris (Graduate Program Director)

September 8, 2023 _____
Dr Pascale Sicotte (Dean)

## ABSTRACT

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Niki Lambros
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Examining methodologies of translating poetry developed from an interdisciplinary approach, namely a combination of research creation (Creative Writing, MA 2015), history, theory (Dept of English), and Translation Studies, in combination with insights gained from over a decade as a Greek Orthodox nun in monasteries in Greece, Jerusalem, Russia and South Korea, as well as my experience translating poetry and liturgical works from modern and Hellenistic Greek (Cambridge Theological Federation, UK, 2001), this thesis presents techniques and identifies specialized forms of knowledge and craft that address the very specific task of translating poetry well. After a discussion of the tradition and importance of translation in developing one's own poetic praxis, I offer a timeline of English translation of Greek drama and its expansion to include an impressive array of women now leading the field. A detailed chapter on Sacred Poetics, the translation of sacred texts from Greek to English, and the challenges and solutions offered by the Anglican tradition, is followed by an analysis of Seamus Heaney's contribution to the translation of poetry and Greek drama, and the effects this had on real-world politics, as well as his own development as a poet. Finally, I offer my own translation and an exegesis of my methods using a section from a modern Greek translation of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*. I conclude with a summary integrating the five chapters, to demonstrate an understanding of the spectrum of skills and knowledge required for the successful translation of poetry, and the criteria connected with a poetics of translation in terms of what the future of both poetry and translation can be if it is adopted, as once was standard, as a poetic praxis for poets today.

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## Table of Contents

## Introduction: the poetics of translation

Whether you are amused or annoyed by the avuncular-yet-menacing pedantry of C.S. Lewis, it remains that now and then he has written something that stays with you all your life. On first reading his book, *Studies in Words*, I recognized myself immediately in his description of a translator who suddenly becomes suspicious of a word and breaks off reading to suss the correct sense before she can continue (though with Lewis, of course, that reader is always 'a man').

> In my young days when I had to take my pupils through Anglo-Saxon and Middle English texts neither they nor I could long be content to translate a word in the sense which its particular context demanded while leaving the different senses it bore in other places to be memorized, without explanation, as if they were wholly different words. Natural curiosity and mnemonic thrift drove us (…) to link them up and to see, where possible, how they could have radiated out from a central meaning. Once embarked, it was impossible not to be curious about the later senses of those which survived into Modern English (…) for in the older books one knows what one does not understand but in the later one discovers, often after years of contented re-reading, that one has been interpolating senses later than those the author intended. ***And all the while one seems to be learning not only about words.*** In the end the habit becomes second nature; the slightest semantic discomfort in one's reading rouses one, like a terrier, to the game (…) The wise reader (…) will not accept even the most slightly strained meaning until he is quite sure that the history of the word does not permit something far simpler. The smallest semantic discomfort rouses his suspicions. He notes the key word and watches for its recurrence in other texts. Often they will explain the whole puzzle.[1] (emphasis mine)

This is precisely the kind of Spidey-sense I believe a translator must develop in order to avoid missing the poetic senses and sensibilities of poem and poet. Even his mention of "the whole puzzle" should feel familiar to the translator who correctly sees that each poem is a kind of puzzle;

[1] C.S .Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge UP, 1960), 4.

in the way one learns to fit the pieces together by matching the edges a jigsaw has shaped, so also the translator learns, through the experience of translating, to recognize a jagged edge or a particular curve, and sift through the archives in the mind's ear for a similar cut. And beyond this, we will, ideally, also have a knowledge of what the poet's own mnemonic and cultural archives contain so we don't miss connections that might become felicities in the target language; thus "(…) knowledge is necessary. Intelligence and sensibility by themselves are not enough."[2] This is the premise of this dissertation: that experience and skill must combine with an array of many types of knowledge, for the translator of poetry to succeed at their craft.

Let's take as an example of this in practice, the first lines of Nobel Prize winning poet Wisława Szymborska's poem, 'The Acrobat'[3]:

> From trapeze to
> to trapeze, in the hush that
> that follows the drum roll's sudden pause, through
> through the startled air, more swiftly than
> than his body's weight, which once again
> again is late for its own fall.

Here is the original Polish, 'Akrobata'[4]:

> Z trapezu na
> trapez, w ciszy po
> po nagle zmilkłym werblu, przez
> przez zaskoczone powietrze, szybszy niż
> niż ciężar ciała, które znów
> znów nie zdążyło spaść.

[2] Lewis, *Studies*, 4.
[3] Wisława Szymborska, *View With A Grain of Sand*, tran.. Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (Faber & Faber, 1998), 57.
[4] https://literatura.wywrota.pl/wiersz-klasyka/40437-wislawa-szymborska-akrobata.html

And now at a more literal translation, courtesy of a slightly-tweaked Google Translate:

> From trapeze to
> trapeze, in silence after
> after a suddenly silent snare drum, by
> by startled air, faster than
> than the weight of the body that again
> again hadn't had time to fall.

What we can notice from simply observing the differences here, demonstrates the craft of successfully translating poetry; namely, that the version made by the poets is *more of a poem* than the literal translation, though the poet's words may be somewhat altered. For example, is 'silence' the same as a 'hush'? The Google-generated translation uses silence/silent, whereas the translators — after the poet — use different words, hush/pause (nouns) and ciszy/zmilkłym (noun and adverb). And why have the translators added another "to" in line two? Do not "faster" and "more swiftly," or "the body's weight" and "the weight of the body," mean the same things? So why change them? Is "late for its own fall" different from "hadn't had time to fall," and which is more correct in terms of the Polish, "nie zdążyło spaść"? Which is more correct in terms of the poet's meaning? Would a Polish-speaker be able to detect anything missing from the English, like a play on words the English translators had neglected to catch?

To find some answers, I corresponded with Dr Anna Frajlich-Zajac, Senior Lecturer Emerita in the Department of Slavic Languages at Columbia University in New York. She writes:

> *Cisza silence* is the noun indicating the state of being silent. At no point "cisza" could change its status, it always indicates silence, "cisza". *Zmilknąć* is a neologism based on the perfective verb *zamilknąć*, and imperfective - *milknąć*. It is not used outside this poem, or perhaps some other poems, and it means to suddenly stop creating any kind of sound. Zamilknąć/zmilknąć means to stop uttering any kind of sound. The noun of this root is "milczenie" being silent/ not wanting to utter the sound.

> Magnus J. Kryński and Robert A. Maguire in "Sounds, feeling, thoughts" translate it: *in the stillness after/after the suddenly hushed drumroll*. To me it sounds better, but I am not a translator. So, it is not the *silence* versus *silent;* Szymborska introduces changes of the situation, silence replaces the sound of the rolling drum. She creates that moment, and in the poem that moment will repeat itself – the following movements of the acrobat body will place him in similar but more sudden movements. *Zmilknąć* is not an adverb, it is a perfective verb, *cisza;* a noun is created by this verb. This first strophe is sort of introduction to further movement of the acrobat, and if we think deeper, to life as such. At the end of this strophe, he did not manage to fall, "has failed to fall."[5]

These clarifications have added a further valence to my reading. To my ears, the enlightening exegesis of those keywords that Dr Frajlich-Zajac has offered throws the Barańczak-Cavanagh translation of hush/pause into the shade, while Kryński-Maguire's version, *in the stillness after/after the suddenly hushed drumroll* brings to the English more *poetry*; Google's introduction of "snare" now seems to utterly intrude on the line. Because I don't know Polish, the version by Google Translate gave me the insight I needed: two words that seemed incongruous. By investigating that clue, I uncovered buried treasure.

Beyond all those linguistic subtleties however, lies the most important criterion: did both translations succeed in bringing Szymborska's poetry into English? Yes. From the very first lines we hear and see in our mind's eye the acrobat, swinging back and forth, "from trapeze to trapeze," so that when we get to the final lines after appreciating the performance of his unwinged flight, we are astonished when the poet, who like an acrobat, in an instant snatches away the trapeze of our attention and swings it in another direction in the poem's last lines:

> beautiful beyond belief at this passing
> at this very passing moment that's just passed.

[5] Email correspondence on 28 October 2021.

Because while the poem employs the trapeze artist as a metaphor, as Dr Frajlich-Zajac wrote, it's also about "life as such," and about time. How time leaps from one moment to another with an inexorable forward motion — and if that momentum is broken, the acrobat falls to his death, while if the momentum remains intact, he "fails to fall." So the word "late" is chosen to rhyme with "weight," and when we read, "through/through the startled air, more swiftly," we may think of an arrow, time's arrow, and that not only time, but also people, are said to "pass." Reading the whole poem, it is possible to find a larger subject in one who "works to seize this swaying world/ by stretching out the arms he has conceived —", but this interpretation is not necessary. The poem stands, in its English version, as poetry; it convinces and imparts, it contains the mechanics of the conceit (the doubled words), the spirit of the original language and meaning, enough so that an English reader can say, "I have read Szymborska's poem, 'The Acrobat.'"

Suspicion of words — the ability to recognize what is *off* or curious in a text — is just one of the methodologies I consider essential to the translator's arsenal of techniques. In the first chapter of this dissertation we will consider both theory and praxis; I will try to show how the practice of translation, the experience of doing it as well as determining and then managing a schema of considerations necessary to make decisions on *how* to do it well, has historically been an important part of becoming a poet oneself. I contend that translating poetry is unlike other kinds of translation because in addition to the words and syntax, poetry demands an attention to multiple layers of meaning which are achieved through craft, that is, expertise in arranging not only "the best words in the best order" as Coleridge would have it, but knowing why those words and order are "best"; sonic considerations of metre, timbre and register of the language to be used, techniques such as alliteration and rhyming, but also more sophisticated nuances that, like overtones produced when the notes of a chord combine their vibrations in air, sound others invisible on the printed

score. We will briefly look at the history of Translation Studies as a discipline and discuss the differences between a *descriptive* and *proscriptive* approach, and why I prefer to discuss the translation of poetry by citing specific examples of how it was done successfully or unsuccessfully, rather than trying to apply various theories to those results. This will include a look at Antoine Berman and Henri Meschonnic, and how their ideas on the poetics of translation can bear on and help explain my own. Throughout my work translating poetry, I have found that the close-reading approach to understanding a poem also applies very well to understanding how to translate that poem, that is, determining what is needed for the poem and its singular poetry to come through in the target language.

In the second chapter, I map the history of translating Greek in the English public school system, and how what was once an almost entirely male-dominated rite of passage became with time an exhilarating arena from which women scholars are refreshing and revitalizing these texts, letting us hear newly chromaticized scales and tempos and allowing us to hear them anew. I will also discuss the importance of tradition to translating poetry, both in the sense of what has come before as well as traditional methodologies for its practice. Poetry exists on a continuum longer than almost any other literature, religious and legal writings being the other known candidates. To take a poem at 'face value,' shorn of the poet's identity as one who holds a place on that long line, would be like claiming all coins should have one value, pennies and dollars considered only as different examples of numisma without distinguishing them for their age, weight, material, rarity, or design, let alone the monetary value of each. This proper contextualizing, this proper weighing of things, is what Anne Carson does in her translation of Sappho, and Emily Wilson does in her *Odyssey* (as well as her upcoming *Iliad*, of which I've heard sections read by her in a web preview). Both their translations will be discussed not only for their artistic excellence, but for how they

challenged centuries of entrenched interpretations, “correcting,” in a sense, the course these texts will take in the future.

The third chapter is a chronicle of my own work in translating sacred texts, and the difficult challenges for anyone attempting to bring the liturgical canon of the Eastern Orthodox Church into English — or any other modern language. Over more than a decade as a Greek Orthodox monastic, I became intimate with the hymnology and liturgical body of texts and Holy Scripture around which the mystical life of a nun is centred. The practice of a simple form of hesychasm, along with the cyclical hours of the monastic day and the feasts and fasts of the Church year, supplemented my understanding of religious Orthodox literature, from the *Apophthegmata* ("Sayings of the Desert Fathers") and St John's *Climax*, or "Ladder of Divine Ascent", to the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers and Athonite Saints, which made up much of our reading outside of church. Each day the Lives of the Saints, the many hymns chanted in the eight+ Byzantine tones, the rhythmic and tonal recitation of the prayers day in and day out, which internalized them as almost a second heartbeat, brought the abstract teachings of canonical theology into lived experience. To enter the apophatic, to allow the 'logic' of the mystical Logos to guide one's thinking, to sublimate the mind's ever-roaming thoughts to a single line of prayer repeated a thousand and more times a day, a metamorphosis of sorts must occur over time. One develops an equal measure of both enlightenment and wilful blindness. To borrow a phrase from David Foster Wallace, "this is water": lungs adapt their way of breath to the new medium in which they must remain immersed, or else be thrown gasping back into the world of common air. And so I was, eventually. But how to capture all of this in a translation of a sacred text which is not meant to *represent* the truth, but *be* the truth, literally? From this side of the chasm which separates the mundane from the marvellous, I examine the work of my previous MA supervisor, Rev Dr Malcolm Guite

(Cambridge, UK), in order to map the different path the Anglican Church has taken in its approach to sacred hymnology and the translation of poetry for use in a liturgical and devotional context. As we will see, since the Anglican tradition was, in a certain sense, born out of translation, it tended to accommodate creative transpositions of sacred texts, adapting them to current social and historical circumstances, making the words themselves more malleable in order to serve the message, the "truth," they are meant to convey.

Continuing with this idea of transposition, the fourth chapter deals with Seamus Heaney's translations, especially his versions of two Sophocles plays: *Philoctetes* and *Antigone* (renamed by Heaney *The Cure at Troy* and *Burial at Thebes*, respectively). A standard dictionary definition of the word "transposition" gives, as its first entry, the simple act of changing the places of things, substituting A for B or B for A. The second two describe an act of moving or changing something to a different place or environment or into a different form; or in music, an act of writing or playing a piece of music or a series of notes in a different key. I will attempt to demonstrate not only the importance translation had in Heaney's development as a poet, but also its significance and impact on a more socio-political scale, since translation afforded Heaney a "third option" when it came to the question of the Troubles and the pressure he was under to pick a side. Translation, then, not only shaped him as a poet, but it also allowed him to step out of time and geography and the historical circumstances of his birth in order to speak from a place that was more rarefied and removed, and thus freer from partisan pressures. In fact, his translations of the Greek tragedies helped him get some distance from the Troubles by offering him the opportunity to speak in a language that rises above fixed ideological dichotomies, in order to speak to the human in us, appealing to ethics and a sense of civic patience and generosity that was so sorely lacking in the discourse surrounding the Troubles.

Finally, in chapter 5, I elaborate on the concept of giving poets a "voice" in the target language through examples of translations of Constantine Cavafy and Frederico Garcia Lorca. Through the concept of voice – by which I mean, more specifically in translation, giving to a poet a voice that may or may not be there in the original – we can observe how important the translator's every choice really is, since voice affects higher-order concerns such as tone, mood, and register, mediating every aspect of the content presented. In this sense, voice represents the synthesis of so many poetic components, and remains that slippery, ever-elusive thing that the translator attempts to capture: voice as the mortar holding everything together. Again, when we think of symphonies that are stripped-down to become, say, piano works or string quartets, what must be retained are the important melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and tonal components that make the original recognizable in the new form. By using such a linguistic camera obscura, the whole can be projected — perhaps upside down, but in colour — onto a new canvas, where the artist will make the necessary adjustments so that the viewer, or in this case, reader or listener, will feel the intensity of the original. I will demonstrate this with a detailed exposition of how I translated a large selection from a modern Greek translation of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*.

A final note on the terminology used in this dissertation. I employ the term "translation" to designate the bringing forth of a work of literature from one language into another, but I also make room for 'versions' and 'transposition' in my use of the term, as we will see in chapters three and four. I don't specifically deal with adaptation, whether inter- or intra-medium, since too much of the source text tends to be altered in adaptation, making it less of a "representation" of the original than its own, independent entity – for example, no one would watch Kurosawa's 1985 film *Ran* and say "I have seen *King Lear,*" the source which the movie is based on. Although the borders separating adaptation and translation are far from hermetic, adaptation simply lies beyond

the scope of my argument. When I use the term “translation,” then, I make room for creative choices that don’t necessarily have a 1:1 relationship with the original, but only up to a reasonable degree. This will become apparent in chapter three, which deals with sacred texts, and chapter four, which explores translation’s role in Seamus Heaney’s work, as well as his two “versions” of Sophocles.

## Chapter 1: Theories, Poetics, Practical Concerns

There is a major decision to be made by the translator before embarking on any translation. Namely, for whom is the translator working? Seamus Heaney famously confessed to curbing a "lovely tight alliteration" in his Booker Prize winning version of *Beowulf*, simply because, despite its ubiquitousness in English literature curricula today, it had originally been geared towards Anglo-Saxon language students:

> The example I have used to show how correctness won out over pleasure is a line very early on, when the big funeral is taking place and the poet tells us how the ship is ready to go out with the body of Scyld Scefing on it. The funeral ship is in the harbour, and it is *ut-fus*, a wonderful Anglo-Saxon word, out and *fus*-ing to go, eager to go, *ut-fus, æþlingas fæs*, fit for a prince, *isig*, icy.
>
> In the original version I had a line which I was delighted with, which I would have wished to keep. The boat, it said, stood in the harbour, "clad with ice, its cables tightening." There are no cables in the Anglo-Saxon of course, but I felt that this is *ut-fus*, you know, ready to move. Then my censor came at me and said, "Come on, take that out, kill your darling. Take out the cables. Lose your lovely tight alliteration." So I did. I mean it was a sin against the gift, the grace of the line, but in order to be faithful to the literal sense I ended up with 'Ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince' — fine, it's what's in the line, but it's not as alive, as eager, as *ut-fus*.[6]

Translation, then, is a delicate balancing act, a point of friction, like the trapeze artist caught between soaring and falling. This is especially true for the poet who translates, who must constantly learn to "sin against the gift," as Heaney puts it, in order to treat the source material ethically, often at the expense of aesthetic considerations. But these choices are conditioned, first of all, by a set of principles that shape a particular horizon for the translation: in this case, since Heaney's intended audience might have included Anglo-Saxon students invested with the knowledge of their field, he was less inclined to keep the alliteration. As this example

[6] Seamus Heaney and Robert Hass, *Sounding Lives, the Art of Translating Poetry* (UC Berkeley Press, 1999), 7.

demonstrates, the methodology of the translator, perhaps even more than their individual talent, is key in shaping the outcome of a translation. Who the translation will be addressing informs the very germ of the translation; each subsequent choice is then made in its light. Of course, considerations such as "address" or "intended readership" or the "purpose" represent only a few considerations a translator must juggle in the process of translation.[7] In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of two theories of translation that are particularly attuned to the poetics of the craft, before addressing practical concerns that end up shaping a translation as much as poetics does.

**Theories of poetics**

Although theories of translation abound, and Translation Studies, as a discipline, offers an array of paradigms through which one can approach translation, the fact remains that every source text presents its own unique challenges, with its own unique nuances of register and tone, of cultural and historical references, not to mention the singular genius and music of the languages themselves, to the point that any theory that claims to be all-encompassing and absolute will always end up shattering against the shore of the particular. There is no one-size-fits-all theory for translation. Perhaps this is why Umberto Eco's two books on translation remain painstakingly close to practical, concrete examples; he seems to be aware that the claims he makes about one text are, in the end, only applicable to that specific text, that unique configuration of words, music,

[7] For example, the .purpose of the translation in determining methodology is considered at length in what Hans Vermeer termed, "Skopos theory". Hans J. Vermeer, "Skopos and Commission in Translation Action," *The Translation Studies Reader*, trans. Andrew Chesterman, ed. Lawrence Venuti, 2nd Edition (Routledge, 2000), 227

tone, and register that, like a symphony, produces a meaning greater than its parts. That doesn't mean translation can't be theorized; it simply means that an approach that takes into account the poetics of translation is more liable to provide a flexible and more useful schema for translators, as opposed to over-analytical or pseudo-scientific approaches to the art – approaches which tend to flatten, or worse, neutralize altogether, the "art" part of the equation.

Thoughts, theories, and opinions regarding translation have been around since the beginning of written history, but it wasn't until the mid-20th century that Translation Studies, as an empirical field of academic study, began to take form. For the first few decades of its existence, Translation Studies was mostly concerned with structuralist approaches to translation; Roman Jakobson's influential 1959 paper "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" is a prime example of this.[8] Structuralism quickly gave way, in the 1970s, to a turn towards the sociological, and ultimately, towards cultural studies – often called the "cultural turn" in Translation Studies – a turn that persists to this day, constantly attracting more disciplines into the orbit of Translation Studies. Despite my brief sketch of its trajectory, the main thing that differentiates Translation Studies from all of the writings about translation done by philosophers, writers, and religious figures throughout the ages, is that it sought a descriptive (and hence more scientifically-minded) approach, rather than a prescriptive one: in other words, *this should be done* gave way to *this was done.* While most theorists of translation tend to stick to a descriptive approach, some are more interested in the poetics involved in translation, and so, if probed, can yield insights into the art of translation. In other words, when it comes to translation, the horse should come before the cart: from the close observation of the unique intervention that a poem performs on language – the 'event' that a poem is, to use Robert Lowell's expression – we can glimpse ways in which we can begin to prescribe

[8] It was in this essay that he famously came to the conclusion that translating poetry is, strictly speaking, impossible, claiming that "creative transposition" is the only possible avenue. I obviously disagree.

an ethical way to proceed when it comes to the translation of poetry, one that is imbued with a sense of poetics rather than an overly determined theoretical approach. Translation theorists Antoine Berman and Henri Meschonnic are, for the purposes of brevity, paradigmatic in their regard to the central role poetics play in their theories of translation.

It would be impossible to cover every single aspect of these thinkers' visions, so I'll focus primarily on the aspects that pertain to the act of translation itself, that is to say, that while not being prescriptive *per se*, tend to deal with aesthetic concerns rather than cultural or political ones (although these aspects both play an important part in the thinking of Berman and Meschonnic). For Berman in particular, throughout his oeuvre, "key terms such as *experience*, *reflexion, translating subjectivity, drive to translate, tradition, ethics,* and *truth* remind us (...) that translation is a space of hospitality for a creative subject,"[9] immediately casting the translator in a literary and creative role. One of the most practical and concrete contributions Berman has made to translation theory is his identification, or cataloging, of twelve "deforming tendencies"[10] that are committed, mostly unconsciously, very rarely on purpose, during the act of translation. The twelve tendencies are:

1. Rationalisation
2. Clarification
3. Expansion
4. Ennoblement and popularization
5. Qualitative impoverishment
6. Quantitative impoverishment

[9] Françcoise Massardier-Kerney, "Antoine Berman's way-making to translation as a creative and critical act," *Translation Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2010): 259.
[10] Antoine Berman, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign" in *The Translation Studies Reader*, trans. Lawrence Venuti, (Routledge, 2000), 285.

7. The destruction of rhythms
8. The destruction of underlying networks of signification
9. The destruction of linguistic patternings
10. The destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization
11. The destruction of expressions and idioms
12. The effacement of the superimposition of languages

What each individual deforming tendency entails for a translation is pretty straightforward, so I will focus on the two that are particularly applicable to poetry: "the destruction of rhythms" and "the destruction of underlying networks of signification."[11] Beyond mere metrics, rhythm in poetry spans the gamut from Hopkins' "sprung rhythm" to the speed of a sentence, the breath of a line, not to mention the role line breaks and repetition play in creating movement, as evidenced in the repetition of words at the end and beginning of certain lines in "The Acrobat." In a stressed language such as English, the stressed syllable's position in each word, combined with monosyllabic words with long vowel-sounds such as the word "long," all come together to create certain effects. In French, a language that gives equal weight to every syllable and which tends, like Spanish and Italian, to sound like a stone skipping over water, resorting to those stresses for rhythm has to be achieved in other ways – mostly in the length of words, or how "long" words

[11] Perhaps not that straightforward. It may be necessary to explain the distinction between "Qualitative impoverishment" and "Quantitative impoverishment." The former refers to "the replacement of terms, expressions and figures in the original with terms, expressions and figures that lack their sonorous richness." Berman uses the different textures, or "iconicity", of the English word 'butterfly' with its French equivalent, 'papillon.' The signifiers 'feel' different, since they produce very different sounds, even if they are referring to the same signified. The idea is to employ words that elicit a similar 'feeling' to the original. Quantitative impoverishment, on the other hand, refers to "lexical loss," wherein the "proliferation of signifiers and signifying chains" are cut short in the translation. One example would be a sentence that refers to a face, but uses within the sentence several synonyms to signify "face": visage, appearance, looks, features. So, for example, the sentence could be "She looked at her face, her visage, her appearance, her features" and the translation would only retain the word "face." This would constitute a quantitative loss (p. 292).

(such as “rouge”) and “quick” words (such as “chat”) alternate between each other. Ways must be found to maintain the original rhythm of every line while not completely deforming the meaning of the original. “The destruction of underlying networks of signification,” on the other hand, is more concerned with abstract patterns, or networks, of images, metaphors, and similes. To use “The Acrobat” as an example, Google’s “snare-drum” is not the same as “drumroll” – the connotations of expectancy, as epitomized in the expression “drumroll please,” is completely lost in “snare-drum”; and for its part, “snare-drum” can have sinister, militaristic undertones, given its widespread use on European battlefields, and so on. So “drumroll” then connects to “hush,” taking on meaning, agglutinating with other connotations, expanding the subtextual web like the roots of some underground mycelial network. For Berman, damaging this network of signification is somewhat akin to a string of Christmas tree lights: if one goes out, it puts the whole thing at risk. What’s worth remembering in these short examples is how poetics encompasses modes of meaning that go beyond purely semantic meaning, and as much as Berman must separate each individual deforming tendency in order to better analyze and explain what they consist of, in reality, these things can’t be separated. Poetics involves the holistic interpretation of the poem, and its subsequent transposition into a new language.

Henri Meschonnic approaches things much more obliquely, if not to say mystically at times, centering his poetics around the primacy of rhythm, or perhaps more accurately, the living pulse of the text. Whereas Berman’s deforming tendencies form a negative analytic – that is to say, a list of “don’t”s – Meschonnic encourages attention to the beating heart of the text, a pulse that goes much deeper than the simple semantic meaning of words and which is too often ignored

when translating, ultimately leading to what amounts to a "cultural deafness," which is another way of saying it lacks an ethics of translation.[12]

> An ethics of translating is listening to the continuum in the poem, listening not to what the poem says but to what it does, and which conveys in its movement what it says. Because if we only see what it says, we only understand what words say, and [as a result] we practice hermeneutics without knowing it. Just as there can be no poem without an ethics of the poem, there is no ethics of translating without listening.[13]

He even goes so far as to say that, in translation, "it is the ear that sees," inverting Paul Claudel's famous dictum that, when reading a literary text closely, "the eye listens."[14] Flow, momentum, continuum, movement, life, becoming, listening – these terms are abundant in Meschonnic's theory of translation, which is also an ethics, which is also a poetics. "Epistemologically, then, poetics entails the sensory skills of the poet as much as the knowledge of the linguist."[15] It's not a question of totally evacuating the rational, linguist's task from the process of translating; it's rather a question of affording the other part of the equation, the intangible thing that makes poetry poetry, more space to operate. In essence, he proposes a new way of *listening* to the text, rather than limiting ourselves solely to the understanding of a text's rational significance.

In theory, Meschonnic's musings remain vast and somewhat vague, as all theorizing about translation inevitably ends up doing. He also tends to contradict himself, or at least, *seems* to contradict himself, which can lead to further obfuscation. In the end, as specialized as translation theory is, it starts to resemble the Zen saying: everything and nothing are next door neighbours. In other words, after every possible avenue of thought about translation is examined, you come full circle and find yourself at the beginning, in front of a new untranslated text, where your knowledge

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[12] Henri Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translation,* trans. Pier-Pascale Boulanger (John Benjamins, 2011), 14.
[13] Meschonnic*, Ethics*, 54.
[14] Meschonnic, *Ethics*, 74.
[15] Pier-Pascale Boulanger, "Introduction," in *Ethics and Politics of Translation*, 14.

may not be of much help in the face of its specific configurations, its irreducible manifestation, of language. In the end, each text – and especially poetry – *does something to language*, and it's only by attending to what that something is that a text can be successfully translated into another language.

In a sense, this brings us back to square one. The word translation comes to us from the early 14th century, with the meaning "to remove from one place to another," from the Latin *translatus,* "carried over." But this is not the same as being carried away… Even Berman is quite explicit on this point, when he says that "the negative analytic [the deforming tendencies] is primarily concerned with ethnocentric annexationist translation and hypertextual translations (pastiche, imitation, *adaptation, free rewriting*), where the play of deforming forces is freely exercised"[16] (emphasis mine) – that is to say, what deforms a translation, what does the most "harm" to the original, is the free play mostly found in postmodern translation practices (for lack of a better term), practices which are, according to Meschonnic, just as guilty of a "fetichism of the signifier"[17] – but in the opposite direction of a word-for-word approach, that is to say, in its straying from the signifier. In the end, whether a translator is overly loyal to the signifier or overly straying from it, the signifier is still planted firmly at the centre of the practice, as the main measure of its success, thus ignoring what a text *does* at the cost of what a text is signifying semantically. As a result, adaptation, free rewriting, and pastiche end up being "as dogmatic as structuralism,"[18] which is ironic since these practices see themselves as emancipated from systematic paradigms such as structuralism. You can have a mental institution in which the orderlies distribute cigarettes under the gauzy cloak of muzak, or the opposite scenario, in which the patients have taken control

[16] Berman, "Translation," 286.
[17] Alexis Nouss, "Preface," in *Ethics and Politics of Translating,* 5.
[18] Nouss, "Preface," 5.

of the ward, burning the nurse's station, hurling chairs through the windows: in the end, both are centred around the same figure of the asylum. Whether you are translating too literally or too freely, it is still determined by the primacy of the signifier, at the expense of other ways of apprehending the text. For that reason, this thesis will champion the middle path: attention to the letter *as well as* the spirit of a text, each acting as a check against the other, allowing room for some (inevitable) distortions – distortions which should tempered by informed and ethical choices – in order to achieve the traditional aim of bringing the original, other-language poem successfully into the English language.

A traditional focus, however, is far from a narrow focus; because tradition builds its foundation on a deep and broad consensus — filled with exceptions from *hapax legomena* to the associative translations of dialect poets and innovative modernizers — of what poetry is and is not. Despite what I like to call the strictures of the new inclusiveness, i.e., it's a poem if I say it is, there are in fact criteria for judging whether or not a set of words or lines is poetry. One criterion which I have developed through my years of translation study is to look at how translatable — or untranslatable — a poem is. Translation, then, as litmus test. Generally speaking, the less difficult it is to translate, where there are no questions about words or style and one language flows easily into the other untroubled by the loss of rhyme, metre, form, et. al., the less poetry there is to be found. In this respect, I'm forced to agree with Robert Frost's assessment that "poetry is what gets lost in translation." But I have to put an important caveat on that assessment by examining exactly what type of "loss" Frost is concerned about. It seems to me that Frost is primarily referring to "qualitative impoverishment," to use Berman's terminology, a loss which mostly involves the different sounds and textures of individual languages – the English 'butterfly,' for example, as irreducible to the sound of the German 'Schmetterling.' This is undoubtedly the first thing to suffer

in translation, and the problem is only exacerbated when we keep in mind that poetry is made of a whole order of words, rather than single words taken out of context; as result, the problems for translation only compound as we move through the poem. But that doesn't mean the textures and effects of a specific language can't be invoked in the target text. It simply means the translator must attend to those deep affinities that chime across languages, trying her best to tune into that quality and preserve its specific music. The fact that Frost was predominantly monolingual should also give us pause here; people who speak two or more languages may know what he's talking about, but they also know that languages, especially European languages, share traces of each other which can be accessed and exploited in translation, given the proper knowledge and attunement of the translator. I base my conclusions on this criterion, seeing how it has proved true throughout my many excursions into translating various works.

Sometimes though, untranslatability is not the result of the poem's author, but of distance between the time of original composition and our own time, or the distance between the style and development of the original language and modern English, or cultural allusions that have been lost to recorded history that may once have been quite universally recognizable, and so on.[19] In that case, the translator may choose recourse to a methodology requiring more creative impulse in their efforts – this is where adaptation may come into play. But before one can flex their creative muscle,

[19] Lawrence Venuti's evocation of "interpretants" — a concept elaborated by Umberto Eco in the 1960s — is a useful way to approach this problem. For Venuti, interpretants, which are applied "intuitively and without critical reflection, not only guide the translator's verbal choices but ensure that they are more than merely verbal, that they effectively constitute interpretive moves which inform and nuance various textual structures and meaning." While Venuti and Karen Emmerich have recently written about the need to emphasize the "unstable" nature of so-called original texts, the crucial point for most poetry is to translate the selected poem in light of its relation to the canon of its own language and culture as well as that of the target language. For example, if the poem I am translating has more than one extant manuscript that contains variations, whether they be the author's revision, scholarly interpretation due to missing text, scribal or typographical errors, or any other reason, what is crucial is to understand the poem's meaning insofar as possible, to grasp its idiom, hear its music, and transcribe that into the target language. Taking variations into account may at times be useful; but as we have said, many times the audience for the translation will determine our approach. If the audience expects the full range of variations in known texts, it is the ideal function of the end note or footnote to include these, leaving space to provide a coherent master-translation of the version the translator has chosen to work on.

their own craft must be evident and well-exercised. This can only be developed through practice; not only one's personal practice in writing original poetry, but practice in translating the poetry of others. And this is why poets make the best translators of poetry, which is ultimately the main claim and subject of this thesis. Umberto Eco says it well: "When I buy or look for a translation in a library that a great poet made of another great poet, I am not expecting something literally similar to the original; usually I look for a poetic translation because I already know the original, and I want to see how the translator has challenged and emulated his source in his own language."[20]

> *Abraxas: a sequence of Greek letters considered as a word, formally inscribed on charms, amulets, and gems in the belief that it possessed magical qualities.*[21]

The tension between challenging and emulating the source text is precisely the space where good translations are made. Most of the choices a translator must make have to do with how the final version will strike the ear of, or *register* with, the reader/listener; if a cohesive exegesis of the text's meaning is wanted, one will choose not to worry about preserving poetic considerations such as rhyme, metre, or form, opting for a prose that conveys the sense best. But the power of a really successful translation of poetry, how it achieves fidelity and felicity, comes from grasping the nuances of register, tone and timbre, accomplished by having the experience and knowledge of the literary canon including new but significant developments, a wide command over word choices, syntactical strategies, formal techniques, adeptness in craft, and finally, a willingness to seduce the Muse by labouring at what you are making, just as the poet laboured to bring the original into being. The lighter the verse, the easier it is to translate, as there is not much at stake for getting

[20] Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation* (Orion Publishing, 2003), xii.
[21] Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

it wrong. What we call Muse is the agent of alchemy, the Philosopher's Stone by which base material is transformed through an internal process of enlightenment, the translator's *vision*, and turned into poetic gold. Words come together in a powerful abraxas as a result of practice (praxis) in identification and word creation to achieve a transubstantiation of meaning, changing a plain text into poetry.

"The nobility of poetry," says Wallace Stevens, "is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality."[22] Heaney wants us to see what is at stake when poetry is degraded, a theme which recurs in his translation of Greek tragedies, which I will return to in chapter four. "I credit [poetry] because credit is due to it, in our time and in all time, for its truth to life, in every sense of that phrase."[23] The translator of poetry must feel the weight of this responsibility. To translate poets like Czeslaw Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and other East Europeans was considered by Heaney almost a sacred duty. He revealed his process for his work on Polish poets: only after a Polish-speaker has given him a 'correct' text, he'd enhance it with nuances that bring poetry into English. Although Heaney worked from a barebones, semantic rendering of the poem – a rendering that could barely be called a poem if left standing as it was – it was necessary for him to glean a sense of the source text, after which he could calibrate different elements such as diction, tone, nuance, and music in order to turn the rendering into a poem in English. But that doesn't mean Heaney was translating simply on a semantic level; rather, his attention to what holds a poem together *between* the words is what allowed him to turn the straightforward translation into more than mere cut-up prose. In a sense, the rendering he was working from allowed him to understand the poem holistically, to grasp its

[22] Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in *The Necessary Angel* (Knopf, 1951), 13.
[23] Seamus Heaney, "Crediting Poetry: Nobel Prize Speech," Oslo, Norway, 1995. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/

scope, and the rest of the process involved him writing *alongside* the original poem, that is to say, along the same grain as the original poem, working mainly on the level of the connotative field, making sure to capture the divergent possibilities of the original, and keeping those possibilities intact in the English poem. Because he didn't speak the source language, he couldn't 'settle' the original, and he refused to 'raid' it, Lowell-like, for his own poetic gain.[24] In the end, collaboration with a native Polish speaker was his only option. Working 'blind,' that is, with no immediate access to the textures and contours of the source text, takes all the skill a poet can bring to the table, because the stakes are very high for getting it wrong. It takes all the skill a poet can bring to the table to produce a poem that remains accountable to the original while still holding up as a poem in English: it requires "seeing with the ears" and "hearing with the eyes," intuiting what made the source poem a poem in the original language, and then keeping that intact, like a sheet of glass, as it's carried over.

**Practical Considerations: Cribs, Literals, Distance**

*Cribs*

If you don't know Greek, your ability to judge the quality of the crib, by which I mean any previously translated version, will be limited. For example, when a translator is not conscientiously being absolutely literal, how will you know if poetic license has been taken? How useful can anything but an interlinear translation be – and those make no sense, as we can see in a random

[24] Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (Faber & Faber, 2008), 428.

example from the most famous of this type, the Nestle Interlinear Translation of the New Testament: Ἁγίασον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ σου· ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθειά ἐστι, becomes, "you sanctify/ them/ in(to)/ to the/ to truth/ of you/ the/ word/ the/ your/ truth/ it is" (John 17:17). The sense must come from at least a partial understanding of the text, and the more incomplete that is, the more worthless the crib. Reading dozens of different translations will give you ideas, but they will be the sum of many visions – to pick and choose between all those styles leaves you with a hodgepodge.

Heaney refers to this sense of the language in several interesting ways. With Anglo-Saxon, he spoke of the "growth-ring in my ear from having studied it at university."[25] Like a tree which has buried within it the "memory" of past season-cycles, he retained the imprint of those words and sounds, once green but now dormant within, revivable when exposed to present light. I will discuss Heaney's distinction between "raiding" and "settlement"[26] as strategies for translation in more detail later, but suffice to say that this innate sense of the language, once it had formed an impression on him, provided a "notion" of Anglo-Saxon as a spoken language that had a life off the page, a settlement. And Latin, which he studied from childhood, was an even more permanent dwelling, associated with Catholicism, and later with a much deeper spirituality that Heaney accessed in poems such as his translation of the Spanish Jesuit Saint Juan de la Cruz's meditation known as Sequence IX in his book *Station Island.*[27] His fluency enabled him to access the poetry and bring it into English with astonishing depth and clarity.

Heaney revealed that while he did consult cribs for *Beowulf*, he began with one by E.T. Donaldson, a contemporary version in scholarly prose. I also find scholarly prose to be the most

[25] O'Driscoll*, Stepping Stones,* 5.
[26] Seamus Heaney and Robert Hass, *Sounding Lives, the Art of Translating Poetry* (UC Berkeley, 1999), 7.
[27] "Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fe," *Sing of the soul that fails to know God by faith* (John of the Cross).

useful way to begin, because as soon as you see how others have rendered it into poetry, no matter what their degrees of success or failure, certain words or phrasings become unusable, having belonged to previous versions. Of course *þæt wæs god cynning* is almost always going to come out something like "that was [a] good king," but the first word of the poem, Hwæt, has been rendered many different ways, which might cause a translator to feel influenced, or as if they'd "stolen" someone else's translation. (Heaney, uniquely, went with the understated and colloquial yet confident, "So," as one often does when beginning a story.)[28] He then had to find a 'voice' to embody, as it were, this sound and speak the words of Beowulf's narrator: *Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum…* Envisioning an old Irish farmer 'type' who could hold attention around a fire, he began to hear the Anglo-Saxon coming out of that Irish background and into English. This emboldened him to include Gaelicisms as a linguistic Anglo-Hibernian bridge.

The Greek dramas were different. Asked how hampered he was by his lack of Greek, he answered, "I'll never know just how hampered."[29] For the translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes,* he began with a traditional crib, the "old-fashioned Loeb version, full of pseudo-Shakespearean diction… a parallel text, done in verse, and it followed the metrical shifts of the original Greek, so that was useful… Also, a late-19th century crib, a literal translation obviously prepared for us in grammar schools… that gave the word order and the word-for-word meaning," and he also used a modern translation by David Green as a third source.[30] However, once he had gotten a complete picture of what the play looked like in English, he began to bring his own language to the phrases according to the slant of meaning he intended.

[28] In Greek, we would say λοιπόν.
[29] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 420.
[30] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 420.

The play contained more than one fairly overt reference to the Troubles and Northern Ireland, which I will discuss in more detail elsewhere, and he came to regret the topical references, considering it patronizing to the audience.[31] This caused him to stay closer to the original for his translation of *Antigone*, which he called *The Burial at Thebes.* Just as he'd wanted to bring the audience closer by changing the title of *Philoctetes* to *The Cure at Troy*, (the notion of a 'miraculous cure' being familiar to the Irish) in this case, because *Antigone* is so well known, he thought to give it some distance by changing the title. Having read many other English versions of the play before, the close acquaintance gave him a species of power over the Greek to create metrical identities for the characters and scenes, which he called "mining a verbal face."[32] But he carefully mediated the textual strictness with contemporary allusion. For Heaney, using a literal crib gave him a purchase on the shape of the language which empowered him to create his own version, while avoiding other poetic versions freed him from fear of imitation.

*On Translation from "Literals"*

When we do not know a language, and yet for some reason – as in the case of Ted Hughes and János Pilinszky, a mutual admiration that conveyed a sense of kinship arises – there is no other way than to make use of a colleague who speaks both languages well but is native in the source language (in this case, Hungarian for Hughes and English for Pilinszky). A mutual friend, János

[31] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 421.
[32] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 422.

Csokits, was able to produce "literals" for both Hughes and Pilinszky, allowing these two poets to become translators of each other's work. I have also worked from literals during my first formal book of translations; creating a word-by-word version, then checking it with a native Greek speaker for errors, and then proceeding to create English phrases that, I felt, brought the metres, rhymes, and tone of the poem forward. In my case, I was able to create my own literals, and this is the case for most poets who set out to translate; they work from another language with which they are at least somewhat familiar enough to create literals.[33]

However, the production of literals is not without controversy. Csokits writes, "how are the translators of literals valued? In Hungary, as in many other places, they are the pariahs of the realm of letters, unnamed and forgotten already on this side of the grave."[34] In a 1972 interview, though, Pilinszky was "unequivocal about their role":

> [he] compared the translation of poetry to space flight. To the Hungarian poet to be translated he assigned the role of a space pilot, to the English poet doing the translation that of a co-pilot. As to 'the Hungarian poets, literature and sensitive non-professionals living abroad,' who peddle the home-based poet's products because 'they are in love with it' and who prepare the literal translations for the foreign poet, Pilinszky compared these to booster rockets which at the second stage of the flight detach from the spaceship, 'and the Hungarian poet with the English co-pilot flies on.'[35]

So Pilinszky had felt a need to seek a co-pilot who understood his mission, a fellow-poet who would fly with him, not just using his work as a vehicle for his own advancement, riding the coattails of a great poet. But in the case of Hughes and Csokits, even though sanctioned by Pilinszky, the collaboration, as Csokits, writes, complicated things and raised many questions:

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[33] I used Google Translate to create a "literal," but it is only useful to someone skillful enough to detect flaws and approve what is correct.

[34] Daniel Weissbort and Ted Hughes, *Modern Poetry in Translation,* issue 1 (1966), 9.

[35] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry,* 14.

> (...) my role in the rendering of the *Selected Poems* [of Pilinszky] consisted exclusively in linguistic mediation; that is, furnishing Ted Hughes with word-for-word translations and suitable notes. It was clear from the beginning that he wanted literal versions without metrics and rhyme schemes, but how much of the original stanza structure and line arrangement was I to keep? How far could I stray from poetic language without turning the text into flat prose? And what about the style and tone? Hughes did not want smooth and polished renderings in what he called 'magazine English' (...) Because he could not read Pilinszky in the original, I had to find a substitute for the verbal excitement a poem in another language offers its translator.[36]

Csokits solved the problems as pragmatically as anyone could given such parameters: "I thought it best to stick to the meaning and as far as possible to the spirit of the original. I tried to keep the poetic idiom of Pilinszky in English without exaggerated respect for the host language, hoping to preserve both the peculiar Hungarian flavour and the poet's personal style."[37] He goes on to further describe the process, how the text was eventually turned into poetry by Hughes, including a statement that seems to really get to the heart of the matter:

> I am convinced that my approach would never have worked without the special faculty of Ted Hughes to feel the quality, style, and characteristics of a poem even in the crudest word-for-word translation. It is almost as if he could x-ray the literals and see the original poem in ghostly detail like a radiologist viewing the bones (...) of a live human body (...) Hughes can see and visualize the whole astral body of the poem.[38]

Hughes' x-ray vision is comparable to Walter Benjamin's claim that "true translation is transparent, it does not obscure the original, does not stand in its light," but rather shines "even more fully on it," as if "strengthened by its own medium."[39] At its most basic level, this is why I

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[36] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry,* 10.
[37] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry,* 10.
[38] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry,* 11.
[39] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock et al. (Belknap/Harvard UP, 1996), 254.

believe poets usually succeed better at translating poetry than non-poets; not to say that poetry cannot *be translated*, but that the poetry within the poem – in Csokits' words, "the verbal excitement" or what I have called poetic felicity – is more likely to occur when the translator has achieved that in their own poetry. They can create it because they understand how it is done in the first place.

While many, including Pilinszky, recognized Hughes' "extra-sensory perception" (presumably when Csokits had explained to him what had been rendered in the English), much was of course lost when the "outer shell, the Hungarian language, the most distinctive feature of the poetry's appearance," as Csokits expressed it, was stripped away. But obviously, it's an observation that goes without saying: it's another way of articulating Frost's famous dictum, that the poetry entwined in the unique musicality of a language – the process Berman called "qualitative impoverishment" – gets lost when transposed in a different tongue. Still, Csokits claims, "we remained faithful to the inner core of his message and its mode of expression: the unadorned language of the dispossessed."[40]

Of this language, Miłosz has much to say. Commenting on his (and Pilinszky's) contemporaries in Poland (and the poetry written between 1939 and 1945), he writes:

> The specific features of Polish literature notwithstanding, Poland belonged to the same cultural circuit as other European countries. Thus one can say that what occurred in Poland was an encounter of an European poet with the hell of the twentieth century (...) This situation is something of a laboratory, in other words: it allows us to examine what happens to modern poetry in certain historical conditions (...) To define in a word what had happened, one could say: disintegration.[41]

[40] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry, 9*.

[41] Czeslaw Miłosz, "Ruins and Poetry," *The New York Review of Books* (March 17, 1983 issue): 79.

The atrocities of the war and the Nazi and Stalinist death-machines swallowed up any previously understood notions of European culture, and the more the East European poets were able to stand and survey the ruins, the more the inability to centre humanism became pronounced; as with Zbigniew Herbert, in whose work

> a space filled with human struggles and suffering gives objects their background, and thus a chair or a table is precious simply because it is free of human attributes, and for that reason, is deserving of envy (...) In Herbert the object is an element of his encounter with History. History is present in an object as an absence: it reminds us of itself by a minus sign, by the object's indifference to it.[42]

Could it be that Hughes, as a poet in his own post-WWI and WWII consciousness of loss and decay, had obtained his penetrating x-ray vision by intuiting in Pilinszky that view of history, where the "unadorned language of the dispossessed" might meet his own poetic voice on a neutral field, forming the basis for their ability to find common ground? If this were the case, it would also go some way in explaining why poets rise and fall in popularity in response to the times. I think of T.S. Eliot reviving Thomas Hardy's stark and sometimes bleak verses on death and loss, or again, how Cavafy continues to speak to generations far on from his contemporaries, depending on how he is being translated at any given moment. Perhaps poets become interested in other poets because they are like Aeolian harps whose strings quiver and sound at the touch of a breeze, and where a strong wind prevails they cannot fail to pick up the strange melody and transmit it into their own music. This certainly seems to be the case with Hughes and Heaney and the East European poets they championed through translation.

Returning to Plinszky, Hughes writes that his style is "simple, unambiguous, direct, while Csokits asserts that "[his] inner world on the other hand is in part hidden and extremely complex.

[42] Miłosz, "Ruins and Poetry," 90-91.

As a result (...) those short sentences without frills can easily trip the translator."[43] This is true where the circumstances of the poem are depths of meaning deliberately expressed in direct language. I have said that a poem is easier to translate the fewer layers it works on, and here we see the inverse: sometimes, the pressure of a certain sparse, stripped down aesthetic can be more challenging to translate than a carefully nuanced and multi-layered work, making what is *not there* so charged with silent meaning as to make any kind of translational choice an exercise in futility. Miłosz describes the later poetry of Miron Bialoszewski as "fragmentary, stenographic notation" and calls him "untranslatable"[44] as a result – what must be understood from what is *not* written is too great to carry over. But in his earlier work, which can be rendered into sentences, one must still grasp the sense from the poem or the poetry becomes elusive:

A BALLAD OF GOING DOWN TO THE STORE (Translated by Miłosz)

First I went down to the store
by means of the stairs,
just imagine it,
by means of the stairs.

Then people known to people unknown
passed me by and I passed them by.
Regret
that you did not see
how people walk,
regret!

[43] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry,* 12.
[44] Miłosz, "Ruins and Poetry," 88.

I entered a complete store:
lamps of glass were glowing.
I saw somebody — he sat down —
and what did I hear? What did I hear?
rustling of bags and human talk.

And indeed,
indeed,
I returned.

Without the consciousness of what the poet has experienced, i.e., the levelling of what he had previously understood as Western civilization into rubble and betrayal, it's not possible to grasp why the tone is one of marveling at commonplaces that have since become almost incredible. The details, "a *complete* store" – meaning one with a full complement of actual stock on the shelves – and the almost mundane fact of running electricity in the "lamps of glass" that are "glowing," represent the traces of a vanished normalcy. While Pilinszky did not use the 'pessimistic' style of Herbert or Alexander Wat, his human compassion for the sufferers and the victims of the death camps informed his work just as much, though he expressed it in more humanist, even Christian, terms, much like Miłosz himself. Bringing these East European voices into English is Ted Hughes' most important contribution to poetry after his own work. He sought to restore translation as not only sound practice but also a duty of English-language poets, and as Poet Laureate he devoted much energy into foregrounding the centrality of translating poetry to poetic development itself. For Csokits, it had long been ingrained in the consciousness of Hungarian poetic tradition so that Hungarians might know the works of other-language poets around the world, and be known in their turn:

> Translating poetry is part and parcel of the poet's "mission." In the service of national culture Hungarian poets are expected to produce translations of quality, and in the past hundred and fifty years the majority of the best poets have indeed translated countless poems from foreign languages. The mission transcends national frontiers: according to Gyula Illyés (1902-83), who carried out his task with a prophet's fervor, one of the first duties of Hungarian poets living abroad is to translate and propagate the works written by their fellows at home. When the *Selected Poems* of Pilinszky were published in English, a Hungarian poet wrote to me, not without sarcasm, "now you will be in the good books of Illyés" – meaning that I have at last discharged my duty as a poet in exile.[45]

The influence translating these poets had on the cohort of Hughes and Heaney can hardly be overstated; not that it influenced their personal style, but it informed their idea of what poetry in the twenty-first century could be.[46]

When Anna Akhmatova and Nadjezda Mandelstam presented their witnesses to the world, of what their husbands and they had been through, poetry was never the same. Stanley Kunitz, though he didn't know Russian, intuited from the few translations he had read that "behind those poems there was a tone of voice, an urgency, a moral and political passion that excited me (...) the more I read her poems, the more I understood that in a curious way, in the fulfillment of her destiny, she had become an allegorical figure. She was the history of Russia in her time."[47] The translation of these works that began as samizdat scrawled on tiny scrolls or simply memorized and repeated, brought English speakers an entirely new dimension to their understanding of what had happened in the 20th century. Translation's role as the bridge across which the painful knowledge arrived in the West is undeniable; not without controversy, but about the possibility of overcoming the distance.

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[45] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry,* 15.

[46] For a different claim, see Carmen Bugan's *Seamus Heaney and East European Poetry in Translation: Poetics of Exile*; Legenda MHRA: London, UK; 2013. She sees influences which on reflection appear to me anachronistic projections. In my view, which is I think more common, Heaney's work, while intellectually and spiritually engaging with poets like Mandelstam, Herbert and Miłosz, did not reflect a stylistic change toward their way of writing.

[47] Weissbort and Hughes, *Modern Poetry,* 108.

*Distances; how far is too far for a poem to "carry over"*

"The greatest problem facing anyone wishing to read the Bard in Japanese is choosing from so many accomplished translations, including translations into the speaking style of kabuki or the Tohoku dialect," writes Damian Flanigan, a Cambridge scholar who has written prolifically on the subject. "From 1868 to the end of the Taisho Era (1912-1926), Shakespeare became so naturalized in Japan that he assumed his own Japanese name, 'Sao.'"[48] And yet, no matter what the skill of the Japanese poet, because of the nature of English – which was itself deeply conditioned by a symbiotic relationship with native poetic traditions, just as Japanese was with haiku – preserving the sonnet-form of Shakespeare would most likely provide only disappointing results, as the familiar sound-shape of the sonnet's iambic pentameter could be attained only by distending or distorting the Japanese to match it.

Translations into dozens of likely and unlikely languages have been attempted: *William Shakespeare's Sonnets, for the First Time Globally Reprinted: A Quartercentenary Anthology 1609-2016*, a 752-page tome, collects translations from two hundred contributors in over seventy languages (including "Klingon"). "Who has ever read a Shakespeare sonnet in Pennsylvania German, in West Frisian, or in Rhaeto-Romanic? The most extreme case is Cimbrian, an old

[48] Damian Flanigan, "In search of Japan's own Shakespeare," *The Japan Times Book Review* (23 April 2016): 78.

Germanic language in Northern Italy that was 'already said to be dying out before the beginning of the 20th century' and that is 'nowadays still spoken by a few hundred people.'"[49]

Dr Merimeri Penfold of the University of Aukland, taught the Maori language for over six decades. Why did she decide to undertake the work of translating Shakespeare's sonnets into Maori? "[T]o find out whether it could accommodate a Shakespeare sonnet and be flexible enough to handle its ideas and convey the range of meanings."[50] However, this is somewhat misleading if we think of Maori as "handling" ideas and meanings exclusively through language. What comes into play most of all is a trans-lation — a moving to another place — into the tradition, in this case, of Maori mythology and its attendant storytelling tradition. And according to tribal rules, while only men are orators, only women can compose, sing, and perform love songs.

Penfold explains that while, due to the cultural disparity between the language of island aboriginals of New Zealand and Elizabethan England, obviously literal English equivalents could never be found, it was still possible to offer what she called "close renderings." As a linguistic expert (who collaborated on the seventh edition of *Williams' Dictionary of the Maori Language*, published in 1971), her versions were "multilayered"; she accomplished this by fully giving over to Maori forms of word-play and allusion to their own literature and cultural traditions. In fact, the Maoris have a bardic tradition: "an elaborate cosmology, beginning with subtle distinctions

[49] *William Shakespeare's Sonnets, for the First Time Globally Reprinted: A Quartercentenary Anthology*, ed. Manfred Pfister and Jurgen Gutsch (Signathur, 2009), 12.
[50] MacDonald P. Jackson, "Translating Shakespeare's Sonnets into Māori: An Interview with Merimeri Penfold," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2001): 492.

between the great void, the lesser void, the lesser-lesser void, and so on. Everything was categorized, traced to its origins, and explained," [51] providing a theological, poetic and mythological template onto which Shakespeare could be overlain and transformed.

Her edition of nine sonnets came out in July 2000, and so far are the only other Shakespeare in *Te Reo Maori* (the Maori language) besides a 1946 adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. In a 2000 interview, she explains her methodology: first, long meditation on the "main thoughts" of each sonnet; then, she contemplates "Maori equivalents" for Renaissance images and allusions. Finally, she gives conscientious attention to the "flow of the lines…as something to be spoken aloud." "The Maori language itself was dictating the way I addressed each concept."[52]

First, we must decide if a "sonnet" can only be a poem of 14 lines of iambic pentameter, with an alternating rhyme scheme and a rhyming couplet at the end. If that is so, then we must conclude there are some languages which will not support the sonnet form. But when talking specifically about *Shakespeare's* sonnets, what appears most important is theme, and how the poems *turn* in the couplet. These things can and have been successfully translated, and I will elaborate on this argument further in the thesis.

In the case of Penfold's effort, similarities outnumber differences: lovers, seafarers, honour, astrology, omens, time as a devourer, and beauty are all concepts which lent themselves easily to Maori, with one exception that overturns a Renaissance ideal and returns it to a Greek

[51] Jackson, "Translating Shakespeare's Sonnets into Māori," 494.
[52] Jackson, "Translating Shakespeare's Sonnets into Māori," 495.

one: in the Maori culture, beauty relates exclusively to "form," and "dark" or "black" (i.e., as opposed to "fair", "blonde", etc) is not considered negative or unbeautiful. So the "dark" lady loses her noir-quality to be defined "specifically on Maori concepts of value and prestige." Whereas the 1946 *Merchant* opted to use "classical Maori," an oratorical dialect now mostly used exclusively by men in ceremonial contexts, Penfold decided to use modern Maori, spoken by both men and women, as she felt there was already quite enough "distance" between her source-text and her own versions, and sonnets in particular have often been written to create an intimacy between reader and writer. As most Maori words already rhyme naturally, she did not consider basing word-choices on rhyme; nor did she use pentameter, a form too alien to sound like poetry to the Maori ear.

Walter Benjamin, in *The Task of the Translator*, states the "sense" of the original must begin to exist in the new language, which is its "afterlife"; the original decreases, while the translation increases, so to speak. "So translation has to do with survival, with 'living on.'"[53] To take something from another time and bring it into the present, moving it not only in place but in time, is precisely the work of the poet, as poetry itself is a tradition of "making," which exists within the continuum of the parameters which define it for the poet. The translator of poetry must find their place on this continuum, which begins long before the 'original' was composed and continues into the future. Shakespeare 'translated' from Ovid and others; in turn he is translated

[53] *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 341.

from English into other times, places and languages, traditions, and literatures. The reason Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are translated is because they *translate*.

Translation must be as much of a creative act as composition; "the idea that there can be a translation — a coincidence of two languages — is a form of madness."[54] As Derrida has stated, Babel is simultaneously the "untranslatable" and the place where translation begins to exist. Because the Sonnets have a further distance to travel from English to Maori, the road by which they are "carried over" must be allowed to make detours, to climb the mountain by a circuitous route: however, if the final destination is kept clearly in sight, the journey will be achieved according to the skill of the driver. For just anyone to undertake such a difficult task would be a complete waste of time; the translator needs deep background for such an undertaking: an understanding of the Sonnets themselves, an understanding of translation technique, and of course familiarity with the languages and culture on both sides. Though I am not a Maori speaker myself, it seems to me that Penfold more than adequately fulfills these criteria.

**Conclusion**

So far, I have delineated some of the main practical concerns that lie at the centre of the type of practice which produces an ethical, which is to say, successful, translation. In both cases, the

[54] Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation,* trans. Joseph H. Graham (Cornell UP, 1985), 167.

translating subject plays an essential role. It's what the translator is able to deploy, both in terms of poetics and contextual knowledge, which determines the quality of the translation. As Antoine Berman states, "all translation is, and must be, the restitution of meaning."[55] And of course, by meaning, he means all the various branches or avenues of meaning I have explored in this chapter. It can only be "restituted," not because the meaning was somehow lost in transit from one language to the next, but because translation, like the act of reading itself, is always a process of meaning-making, albeit one, if a text is read closely enough, that involves informed choices. The recourse to cribs and "literals" are just one part of the toolkit the translator has at her disposal, but in the end, they remain simply tools, instruments that help to build and shape the final product; needless to say, they are tools which would remain utterly useless without skilled hands to manipulate them. And as we've seen, even the distance of language, culture, and historical periods can be overcome when this spectrum of skills is used wisely. There is always a way to work with the grain of the text – any good translation inserts itself in the text's continuum – if attention is trained on what the text is doing rather than focusing too narrowly on what a text "says."

[55] Françcoise Massardier-Kerney, "Antoine Berman's way-making to translation as a creative and critical act," *Translation Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2010): 260.

## Chapter 2: Greek to English Translation

> The writings that have come to us from ancient Greek civilization embody ideas different enough from those expressed in the framework of our own intellectual universe to make us feel that we are in foreign territory, to give us not only a sense of a historical distance, but also an awareness of a change in man. At the same time, these ideas are not as alien to us as are some others. **They have come down to us through an uninterrupted process of transmission. They live on in cultural traditions to which we constantly refer**… We can understand the language used in their writings and reach beyond their literary and other documents to their mental processes, their forms of thought and sensibility, their modes of organizing will and action — in sum, to the structure of the Greek mind.[56]

Jean-Pierre Vernant's claim is a bold one… and yet, for those who have spent years becoming familiar with the voices of ancient Greece, a plausible one. Seamus Heaney wrote, "An English-speaker new to *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* or *The Aeneid* will probably at least have heard of Troy and Helen (…) These epics may be in Greek and Latin, yet the classical heritage has entered the cultural memory enshrined in English so thoroughly that their worlds are more familiar than that of the first native epic, even though it was composed centuries after them."[57] Milton declared Greek tragic drama "the timeless model, 'unequalled yet by any.'"[58] And yet the lifespan from the birth of tragedy to its last breaths as a vital form in Athens, was brief. After Euripides, the third and last in a succession that began with Aeschylus and reached its zenith in Sophocles, tragedy ceased to be produced, supplanted by the socio-political, authority-mocking comedies of Aristophanes and the "comedy of manners" portrayed by Menander. Socrates in the Agora of

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[56] Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (Zone Books, 2006), 14 (emphasis mine).
[57] Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 3.
[58] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford UP, 1992), 487.

Pericles' Athens and, after his death Plato's Academy, gave way to Isocrates' Sophists and Aristotle's Lyceum. The free citizens of democracy and law established by Solon became the subjects of Philip of Macedon, having already been demoralized by the Spartan victory after a protracted period of degradation and decline. The historian Edith Hamilton suggests that it was the humiliation of the loss of their own freedom that caused Athenians to turn from tragedy's higher questions of philosophy, self-determination, law, and politics to the scathing but inward looking social commentaries of the comedies.[59]

Greek tragedy was a product of a very specific time and place in the long history of the City, a time when the supremacy of gods and myth were being challenged by questions about will and destiny. Is our fate written before our birth? Can we intervene to disrupt the prophecy of oracles and determine our own course in life? Even more than through philosophy, which mostly sought to understand how best to live, Greek drama addressed questions about why things happen and how human beings can and should respond. The "change in man" Vernant describes is precisely that moment when Greek civilization began to embrace a doctrine of the rule of reason and human will rather than submit to and uphold the traditions of theodicy. The function of tragedy then, was to literally 'play out' for audiences these dilemmas in the real-time of the theatre, with characters, chorus and audience participating in the spectacle as well as the inner drama taking place within the mind of the citizen and the developing thought of the *polis*. Sophocles was born in the earliest years of the 5th century BC and died just before its conclusion, a contemporary of Pericles who witnessed the glorious victory over the Persians and the nadir

[59] Edith Hamilton, *The Echo of Greece* (WW Norton, 1957), 145-6.

of Athens after the Peloponnesian War. But from the very beginning of his career, which he began at a young age and which would see him advance to become the greatest prize-winning dramatist of his time, his concern was to explore themes of destiny and will. In the so-called Theban Plays, *Oedipus the Tyrant*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, (performed in that order but not a trilogy *per se*, and written many years apart, *Antigone* having been written first), Sophocles tells the story of a king who could not outrun his destiny, and his daughter who claimed her own. Religion and politics are set up to vie with one another, and the future of the government of Athens would be determined by the outcome. As we know, democracy became gradually weakened by corrupt forces prefigured in the hubris of kings who began to see their own power as a possession rather than a responsibility of their function as captain of the ship of state. Though it had been the basis of all worship since the songs of Homer reigned, the cult of gods and heroes was disparaged by Solon as producing tyranny. The rise of tragedy as the dominant form filled the place ceded by epic poetry, and the notion that those in power should be philosophers concerned with justice and truth supplanted the *king* as the embodiment of all state power. Rather than be subject to the heredity of "royal blood," leaders should be elected for their excellence in service to the polis. This aristocracy must prove its fitness to govern by upholding incorruptible standards of honour and public works (liturgy), accepting the law as a legitimate and beneficial limit on its power. It is against this backdrop that tragedy, unique to 5th century Athens, comes into full flower as the city's defining art, an art that has survived, and influenced, generations of scholars, philosophers, and poets.

The way in which Greek texts have not only survived but thrived despite such an immense span of different periods and societies is the focus of this chapter. First, I will map a

brief history of the translation of Classical Greek texts into English, outlining some of the translational practices employed by English translators throughout the ages. Then, I will discuss the way women translators have breathed new life into their translations by challenging the hegemony built up around traditional interpretations of these texts, demonstrating how their marginal position has allowed women translators to influence the ongoing reception and understanding of these ancient works, offering clear-eyed and authoritative translations that, less encumbered by patriarchal patterns of language and interpretation, manage to coax new life out of seemingly exhausted texts. I will take into account both the mediating role of the translator and the historically determined factors of a work's reception, entangled as they are in an ongoing, deeply symbiotic relationship.

**Classical Greek-to-English translation, up to the Victorians**

The importance of Greek thought and Greek literature was recognized not only by contemporaries from Homer to Plato, but by every culture that encountered it; first the Romans and eventually by English-speakers of the 16th century, and onward through the present day. Works were translated and incorporated into a core literary canon and taught in institutions of higher learning. However important Latin was to the foundations of Western culture, its underpinning of Greek thinking and art never disappeared. From the rediscovery of Aristotle in the early 13th century, to the translation of the Ptolemaic Greek Septuagint and Hellenistic Greek New Testament in the Authorized Version commissioned by James I (1604-1611), knowledge of Greek became an emblem of higher education in the West whereas before then Latin had

sufficed. Even before Chapman first looked in, with varying degrees of success, attempts at translating Homer had been made, and after Chapman they represent a chartable history of what we would now call translation theory.

From the beginning of translation's history, Cicero decreed and poets agreed: "Nec verbo verbum curabit reddere / fidus interpretes," that is, do not attempt to give a word-for-word translation, like a pedant. Completed in 1616, George Chapman's *The Whole Works of Homer* relied on a dynamic, if somewhat unreliable, imaginative interpretation:

> What Chapman ultimately envisioned was spiritual commerce between the translator and the original author, an empathetic art in which the translator goes both beyond and before the text. "Beyond," in that there is an attempt to reproduce the poetic state and expenditure of creative energy which made the original, and "before" because the translator attempts to inhabit the consciousness capable of this particular work.[60]

He must become a perfect imitator of the ancient author, performing an uncanny *mimesis* of his style but in the new language. Chapman imagines he is visited by Homer's ghost, a "Secret Sharer" whom he "didst English" by allowing himself to become a conduit for Homer's spirit. "Nature," in the sense of the native language, "is indissolubly connected to a poem's essential grandeur," so by trying to "capture the native 'full soule' of the original"[61] in a pedantic translation, the result is the loss of the beauty of both languages.

> Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
> That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
> Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
> Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

[60] T.R. Steiner, *English Translation Theory*, *1650-1800* (Van Goreum & Comp, 1975), 11.
[61] Steiner, *English Translation Theory*, 10.

When a new planet swims into his ken…

There is a charming paradox in John Keats finding 'pure serene' in something 'loud and bold,' and of all poets it is unmistakably their kinship in valuing imagination as the *élan vital* of poetry that makes it work in those lines. After the translations of Dryden and Pope, Keats, who himself lacked university training, transformed the university-educated Chapman into a fellow-traveller of poetic exploration, and he quickly approved the interpretive method. The famous story is that in 1816, he and his friend C.C. Clarke stayed up all night reading a c.1614 edition loaned to them by a friend of Leigh Hunt, "Keats shouting with delight as some passage of especial energy struck his imagination."[62] "For Keats (…) the issue is not so much the Homeric style, which he couldn't access in its original Greek, but the recovery of an Elizabethan vigour ("loud and bold") before the more familiarly civilized sound of Augustan heroic couplets."[63] Later, the Romantics, but especially the Pre-Raphaelites, would seize upon this and create translations based on "sympathy":

> 18th century criticism did not go nearly as far with these concepts as the Romantics would: 'It is one of the common tenets of English Romantic criticism that the imagination is capable, through an effort of sympathetic intuition, of identifying itself with its object; and by means of this identification, the sympathetic imagination grasps, **through a kind of direct experience and feeling** the distinctive nature, identity, or 'truth' of the object of its contemplation.[64] (emphasis mine)

This was also the practice of Abraham Cowley (d. 1667) whose translations of Pindar's *Odes*

[62] Andrew Motion, *Keats* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1996), 34.
[63] Peter Robinson, *Poetry & Translation: the art of the impossible* (Liverpool UP, 2010), 2.
[64] Walter Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic* (1961); qtd. in R.T. Steiner, 59.

became notorious for their non-resemblance to any Greek text of Pindar's, critically observed after the reformation in translation produced by John Dryden, and later, Alexander Pope. Cowley's "doctrine of imitation" influenced his successors, most notably Henry Denham, until English versions of Greek reflected their authors' gifts almost entirely at the expense of the original texts, like Chapman freely adding lines of verse nowhere to be found in the original. However, Denham at least allowed that there should be "an equivalence between 'sensus,' 'figurs,' or even more widely, in éloquence'…" but still asserted "that the translator's 'business is to make poetry of poetry.'"[65]

This notion has perhaps survived to our time in the sense of being "visited by the Muse"; the spirit of inspiration indwells and possesses us while we create, and after she has spent herself, retreats and leaves the artist solicitous of her return; but the translator must locate the golden mean between giving over to an ecstatic inspiration and adhering to the sense of the original. Hölderin's translations of Sophocles are, in this regard, the extreme example, since they're often mentioned in the same breath as his descent into madness.[66] Chapman theorized almost a metempsychosis between the poet and himself, but after the ascendance of Dryden's lawgiving, no poet would ever be so 'loud and bold' as to assert these fancies again until Coleridge's opium dreams of visitation in writing "Kubla Khan."

What had changed? Put simply, as more people busied themselves with translations, comparisons were more easily made. To achieve poetry rather than pedantry, one had also to give attention to the matter of the original or be found wanting. Dryden, who wrote more on the subject

[65] Steiner, *English Translation Theory*, 22.
[66] Antoine Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique* (Gallimard, 1984), 45.

of translation than any of his contemporaries, advocated for "maintaining the character of an author, which distinguishes him from all others, and makes him appear the individual poet whom you would interpret."[67] Pope falls in with this, insisting that the poet must "enter into the original" in order for the spirit of the poet to manifest poetically in the translation. And yet, however much they and others claimed to regard authorial intent as preeminent, they still interpreted freely when the demands of form (metre and rhyme) pressed them. Dryden is credited with distinguishing clearly three types of translation: *metaphrase*, or word-for-word substitution, considered pedantic and entirely unsuitable for poetry; *paraphrase*, or 'sense for sense' substitution which was Dryden's ideal; and *imitation* or *mimesis*, most akin to Chapman's idea of identifying the 'essence' of the original poet, and substituting one's own interpretation to suit the demands of poetry in the native language, whatever the text itself might actually say. In any event, a good translation still requires a combination of all three.

**English translation of the Classics: the Victorian paradigm**

Commenting on the overwhelming interest the British have found in Homer from the medieval period until today, George Steiner observes a direct link between the world depicted in Homer and "the British association of masculinity with warfare, as well as their inclination towards male-only institutions such as boys schools and men's clubs."[68] In the 18th and 19th centuries, when the study of Greek became systematized and required of every schoolboy in the English

[67] Steiner, *English Translation Theory*, 27.
[68] Cited in Young, Philip H. *The Printed Homer* (McFarland, 2003), 157.

'public' and grammar school systems, it gradually solidified as a marker of status within an exclusively male-dominated order, culminating in the Victorian era's deployment of classical learning as an instrument of status and power. I would like to dwell for a moment on this period of Classical Greek translation in England, not for the literary merits of the translations it produced, but as a paradigm that reveals the role reification plays in the process of cultural transmission, and more specifically, how the rise of women translators challenged the calcified facade built up around the reception of these texts.

If I have chosen the Victorian period as a particularly illustrative example of the intersection between translation history and the challenge women translators posed to it, it's not an arbitrary choice, since the second half of the 19th century constituted "a high point for Homeric scholarship and for famous and infamous translations of the Homeric text," producing "1,374 Homeric printings, an average of 25.5 per year, the highest for any period in history."[69] Entangled with that remarkable output was the fact that "Greek, noticeably foreign and difficult because of the different alphabet which [made] it seem like a secret language to the uninitiated, [was] central to the narrative of women's exclusion from classical study," thus making classical texts "part of the battlefield of social change."[70] Part of the picture of women's exclusion from the Classics in England has to do with power and status, no doubt, and more specifically, the maintenance and upholding of patriarchal power, which viewed (and utilized) classical learning as a sort of last bastion of Anglo-Saxon values and "civilization," a set of ideals which had increasingly less to do with the classical texts themselves, but rather as justifications for

[69] Young, *The Printed Homer,* 128.
[70] Lorna Hardwick, "Women, Translation, and Empowerment," *Women, Scholarship, and Criticism: Gender and Knowledge c. 1790-1900*, ed. Joan Bellamy, Anne Laurence, et al. (Manchester UP, 2000), 180.

continued imperial expansion. The challenges women translators brought to this illusion was twofold: it shook the assumptions of centuries of exclusively male exegesis and hermeneutics, as well as offering a more nuanced and complete portrait of ancient Greek texts, a portrait which had become increasingly distorted in order to serve as grist for the mill of empire.

As women were gradually allowed to study and participate in academia, their translations began to reveal other possibilities for classical texts, mainly in the different emphasis the source texts placed on war and brutality, accounts which had been either tamed or glorified or simply finessed away by male translators, in a prolonged and ongoing attempt to make these texts palatable to Victorian sensibilities. The translations of Anna Swanwick (1812-1899), for instance, "convey the extent to which Homeric epic is also concerned with brutality, exploitation, and greed,"[71] and show "less tendency than some other Victorians, such as [W.E.] Gladstone, to sanitize the political and moral ethos of the [texts]."[72] Overall, as women began to translate the Greek sources, at first on their own, independently from academic institutions, they tended to emphasize, either through their choice of text, or else by making different translation choices from their male predecessors, material that sanctioned democracy, political debate, and social reform.[73] In other words, as a result of their historical exclusion, women were able to recast ideas

[71] In this respect, Alice Oswald's *Memorial* can be viewed as a continuation of this project. The first pages of Oswald's book are devoted to lists of names, like a war memorial in stone, of those men who died in the poem *The Iliad*. Like the Skopads who would have remained nameless and forgotten had Simonides not recalled them from their doomed places at the dinner table, the names of those fallen in Troy are recalled from obscurity by Oswald, brought to light in order of appearance, equalized in death — the famous Hektor and Achilles alongside the almost unsung — and given a renewed immortality. While Oswald does not give us *the* Iliad, she gives us *an* Iliad; it is recognizable as a version of the story of Troy. While it has the same object as the original, to describe the war, it does not have the same focus as the original. The slab-like roll call of the first pages of *Memorial* could not fail to bring to mind the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, and therefore became *all* war memorials, stripped of their triumphant angels and platitudinous Greek epithets. Like Swanwick before her, Oswald was able to challenge the war-glorifying tendencies of past male translators.

[72] Hardwick, "Women, Translation, and Empowerment," 190.

[73] Hardwick, "Women, Translation, and Empowerment," 181.

that had been either ignored or underemphasized in previous translations, championing instead what they perceived to be potentially inspiring for their own social battles.

It's easy to overlook exactly to what extent British notions of masculinity and manhood had become entangled with representations of the classical past; in fact, these texts had been instrumental in shaping those notions, notions which were then projected onto subsequent translations, and so on down the line. In the interests of brevity, I'll let one famous Victorian, Willam Ewart Gladstone, stand in as a sample of the whole. Writing in *The Times* on October 11, 1859, Gladstone writes: "The great broad-shouldered English gentleman is not more indebted for his stalwart frame and high courage to the cricket and football of his boyhood than he is to his early familiarity with the noble thoughts and lucid language of the great classics of antiquity."[74] Apart from shaping British boys into men – placing the Classics on an equal footing with other typically revered British things such as cricket – knowledge of "the great classics of antiquity" served real practical ends in Victorian Britain, playing an important role in the selection process for the prestigious Indian Civil Service, for instance.[75] Classical knowledge became so synonymous with (male) success that it was termed 'the silver key,' by which enterprising young men might gain access to every kind of opportunity reserved for their sex.[76] It goes without saying that war also played a major part in the construction of this masculinity, and when the Crimean War broke out in 1853, it comes as no surprise that classical learning was deployed in order to drum up participation in the endeavour.[77] "The Crimean War was a war

[74] Cited in Edmund Richardson, *Classical Victorians: Scholars, Scoundrels, and Generals in Pursuit of Antiquity* (Cambridge UP, 2013), 14.
[75] Richardson, *Classical Victorians,* 19.
[76] Richardson, *Classical Victorians,* 19.
[77] Richardson, *Classical Victorians,* 75.

haunted by the ancient world. Generals compared one another to Homeric heroes. Officers conducted excavations. Letters and diaries and memoirs became saturated with classical parallels, with a conviction that Britain, in its campaign, was engaged in both reliving the ancient past and bringing it once again to life."[78] It may be too simple to reduce any of this to 'male translators: *bad*,' and 'women translators: *good*' – but for the sake of simplicity, I think it's safe to say that women translators were up against both *content* and *context* when it came to translation. "Content" in the sense of the reified content of the translations themselves, and "context" in the sense of how those contents were then used to further the goals of a patriarchal society. In general, and again, at the risk of oversimplification, women translators in the Victorian period not only didn't flinch at representing warfare, violence, power, and greed as they were found in the original texts, but their translations often served a democratizing function, since they tended to be, for the most part, geared towards a more general audience, rather than specialized academic readers, something Emily Wilson, a century later, would also make central to her translation project. It may or may not be a coincidence that the gradual integration of women in the field of Classics also led to it being, by the start of WWI, pretty much obsolete as a discipline, imbuing Virginia Woolf's facetiously titled essay "On Not Knowing Greek" (1925) with a double edge, at once marking the end of women's public exclusion in the study and translation of ancient Greek, as well as the subsequent lamenting occasioned by its irreversible decline.

**Emily Wilson's Homer**

[78] Richardson, *Classical Victorians,* 77.

As time went on, women have gradually shaped the way these texts are read and received, despite the fact that Classical Studies still remains an overwhelmingly male-dominated discipline. Although its importance in wider society began to wane, translation from Greek to English continued to hold a prominent role for aspiring poets. At Vassar College in 1934, Elizabeth Bishop chose to do a translation of Aristophanes' *The Birds* to fulfill a requirement of her course of study. After studying four years of Greek (as well as Latin), she understood this as:

> a rite of passage into classical academia and a milestone for an aspiring poet. As an Ivy League scholar she was given latitude in her methodology of translation and instinctively brought her nascent hallmarks to bear: droll interpretation, precision of expression, attention to metre. [However she reports] that there was a great contrast between her female tutor and another male tutor in the classics department, whose method of Greek translation she did not rate; though not as challenging on one level, she nonetheless chose to have the woman oversee her independent study (the translation of the play) in her senior year, as she was given more creative freedom over the work.[79]

While it was not impossible for women to study in university departments, it was almost impossible to achieve full professorships or even to participate in major conferences or have their work accepted into prestigious publications. As women increasingly moved into academic positions in the generations after Bishop, they began to take a different approach to their work, which changed the focus from seeing classical texts as 'historical' to reading them in order to challenge the orthodoxies that had been built up around them, to interrogate the authority that had hardened into mere classism. "Shifting paradigms in Classical Studies enabled a reassessment (...) At first resistant to trends in postmodern thought, Classical Studies became permeable, admitting the influence of Women's Studies, postcolonial theory, and anthropology."[80] As translators, then,

[79] Mariana Machová, *Elizabeth Bishop and Translation* (Lexington, 2017), 12.
[80] Cited in James Bradley Wells, review of "Piecing together the fragments" by Josephine Balmer, *Hermathena*, no. 193, (winter 2012), 114.

and especially as translators of the classics, women were able to "pose questions about the link between social stereotypes and linguistic forms, about the politics of language and cultural difference, about the ethics of translation, and about reviving inaccessible works for contemporary readers,"[81] thus highlighting the role cultural context, especially one experienced through a gendered lens, plays in translation. Most recently, Emily Wilson's *Odyssey*, the first complete translation by a woman, has achieved a near universal regard, enchanting the verse like a siren with lightly worn but deeply woven scholarship combined with a poetic deftness able to tune lines and stanzas for the contemporary ear while foregrounding notes previously unheard by the ears of her male predecessors.

As an example of what she was up against, Wilson cites the 19th century Oxford Professor of Poetry Mathew Arnold's unambiguous statement:

> The translator of Homer should above all be penetrated by a sense of four qualities (...) that he is eminently rapid; that he is eminently plain and direct both in the evolution of his thought and in the expression of it, that is, both in his syntax and in his words; that he is eminently plain and direct in the substance of his thought, that is, in his matter and ideas; and, finally, that he is eminently noble.[82]

Wilson disagrees. "These are not good criteria (…) I think he was a terrible reader of poetry. It's not like he ever translated Homer. I think he had a good 'classics major' undergraduate kind of Greek, but I think it's all to do with a particular notion of aesthetics and class, the whole 'plainness and nobility.'"[83] Wilson's now-famous first line gives us a good idea of her own, very different project. "Her fifth word is also her solution to the Greek poem's fifth word — to *polytropos*: 'Tell

[81] Luise Von Flotow, *Translation and Gender: Translating in the 'Era of Feminism.'* (U of Ottawa Press, 1997), 14.
[82] From "On Translating Homer," his 1860 series of lectures as Oxford professor of poetry.
[83] Wyatt Mason, "The First Woman to Translate the *Odyssey* Into English," *New York Times*, November 2, 2017, np.: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/magazine/the-first-woman-to-translate-the-odyssey-into-english.html

me about a *complicated* man.'"[84] She has created a version that surprises without provoking unhelpful controversy:

> If I was really going to be radical (…) I would've said, *polytropos* means "straying," and '*andra*' — "man," the poem's first word — means "husband," because in fact *andra* does also mean "husband," and I could've said, "Tell me about a straying husband." And that's a viable translation. That's one of the things it says. But it would give an entirely different perspective and an entirely different setup for the poem.[85]

Before Wilson, the Odyssey's πολύτροπος has been translated into English over 60 times, but not once as 'complicated'; from the Latin verb *complicare*, meaning 'fold together,' connoting something multi-layered, or played close-to-the-chest. The modern sense of saying someone is 'complicated' is idiomatic, and encloses the multiplicity of possible meanings within its syllables, as does the original Greek word. It complicates the whole rest of the poem.

In Wilson's version, Odysseus is no longer the sole protagonist in his own story, no longer what he has been in translations up to this point. Now, he is presented very much in relation to the female characters of the epic, and there are many: Athena, Circe, Kalypso, Nausicaa, the slave girls, and of course his wife Penelope. Another translator of Greek classics and contemporary of Wilson's, Josephine Balmer, writes:

> (…) her "Translator's Note" reveals how translation is not a craft of certainty but an art of choice. Here she reveals the subtle workings – and reworkings – of her woman's version. For example, as Penelope fetches the bow with which Odysseus will kill her suitors, Homer describes her hand as *pachus* or "thick," an epithet, Wilson reveals, usually reserved for those of male warriors. After much consideration, Wilson settles on "muscular," to underline Penelope's "physical competence" and "crucial part in the action." Such small, yet significant, strategies allow Wilson to pervert the showy tropes of previous male

[84] Mason, "The First Woman to Translate the *Odyssey* Into English," np.
[85] Mason, "The First Woman to Translate the *Odyssey* Into English," np.

versions while staying true to Homer's original.[86]

Wilson's poetry ought to be compared, not with Homer, but with other translators of Homer who in recent times undertook the work with the ambition of becoming the English translation for their generation (as Wilson's has now become): Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fagles, Stanley Lombardo. What we can see is while the men have continued to build endless buttresses onto the schoolmaster's edifice begun more than two hundred years before Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fitzgerald's works came to preside over Heaney's generation, Wilson has created a new foundation for her epic interpretation, full of newness.[87]

Wilson has been vocal about the feminist underpinnings of her translation, a project which explicitly aims to *undo* the inherited, warped interpretations of her male predecessors: "If we present non-specialists with *Odyssey*s that normalize the linguistic and physical abuse of women (...) we are failing to tell the truth about the original text, and we may also be doing real ethical damage."[88] There are two important points to observe here: first, that Wilson envisions her audience as one of "non-specialists" places her in the tradition of women translators I briefly discussed in the Victorian section, viewing her efforts as a democratization of Classical texts, rather than a rehashing meant for a specialized readership; second, letting instances of gendered

[86] Josephine Balmer, "Emily Wilson sensitively considers the *Odyssey*'s original poetic purpose and resonance," *The New Statesman,* January 21, 2018, np.: https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/01/emily-wilson-sensitively-considers-odyssey-s-original-poetic-purpose

[87] However, Josephine Balmer specifically compares her to Lattimore: "Wilson's fluid and immensely readable versification harks back to Lattimore's close rendition of Homer's original." She also quotes Wilson in a way that contradicts Wilson's so-called distaste for Arnold's "plainness": 'Modestly, she argues in favour of employing "fairly ordinary, straightforward, and readable English". She is anxious to avoid "bright, noisy linguistic fireworks" yet at the same time she sensitively considers the poem's original poetic purpose and resonance, and states that her "quiet ambition provides an immediacy and clarity, blowing away the cobwebs of pseudo-archaisms or epic pomposity." (New Statesman, 2017)

[88] Emily Wilson, "Epilogue," *Homer's Daughters: Women's Responses to Homer in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. Fiona Cox and Elena Theodorakopoulos (Oxford UP, 2019), 282.

violence in Homer go unchallenged actually amounts to "failing to tell the truth about the original text," since many of the passages that have since proved to be problematic were never in the source text to begin with. In essence, what Wilson sought to do was return to the text, 'resetting' what had been allowed to go unquestioned for centuries. One particular revision in Wilson's *Odyssey* can serve as a particularly glaring example of this.

The passage in question occurs after Odysseus has decimated the suitors, when he instructs Telemachus to execute the slave girls for having lain with them.[89] Wilson explains, "Telemachus shows an uncharacteristic amount of initiative, and insists that they must instead be murdered by hanging, because they are too metaphorically dirty for him to touch with his sword."[90] In this particular episode, where previous male translators have allowed Telemachus' motivations to go unquestioned, Wilson, sticking closely to the text, allows for the possibility that Telemachus may be motivated by a sense of sexual inadequacy – he is, let's not forget, an inexperienced young man that grew up in the shadow of his absent father. He may have something to prove. "In my translation," writes Wilson, "I have tried to create some distance from Telemachus, allowing the reader to see him not as an instrument of 'moral' justice, but as an immature young man indulging in a creepy impulse towards sexualized violence."[91] Wilson compares her passage with previous translations by Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fagles, and Stanley Lombardo, respectively.

> Lattimore's Telemachus explains his motives by saying, 'I would not take away the lives of these creatures by any / clean death.' The word 'creatures' has no parallel in the Greek. In Fagles, Telemachus is directly abusive, saying, 'No clean death for the likes of them, by god!,' and going on to exclaim, 'You sluts – the suitors' whores!' The Greek says that the women spent the nights beside the suitors, but does not pass linguistic judgment on the

[89] In Wilson's translation, the slave girls are accurately translated as "slave girls," rather than the habitual "maidens" or "servants" of previous translations, thus keeping intact the social relations of ancient Greece *inscribed in the text itself.* "Maiden" or "servant" totally eclipses that power dynamic.
[90] Wilson, "Epilogue," 288.
[91] Wilson, "Epilogue," 289.

> behavior. Lombardo's Telemachus is a little more restrained, but similarly abusive, declaring, 'I won't allow a clean death for these women / – the suitors' sluts.' Both Fagles and Lombardo clearly assume that to state that the women were habitually sleeping with the suitors is equivalent to accusing them of being 'sluts' – despite the fact that the original simply makes a statement about behavior, without any judgment attached.[92]

Wilson's rendering corrects the inherited prejudice *by simply sticking closer to the source text*: "Telemachus thought, then took initiative, / insisting, / 'I refuse to grant these girls / a clean death, since they poured down shame on me / and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors." The capital 'M' in 'Mother' is meant to convey Telemachus' "failed attempt to use adult language,"[93] underscoring his immaturity. So as we can see, Wilson is also making interpretative choices (this is inevitable when translating), but the choices she makes derive from the authority of the text, rather than the entrenched interpretation handed down by male scholars and translators over centuries. In this case, even though Wilson is offering us her own interpretation, it could be argued that, 'objectively,' her translation is more successful, since it interferes less with the source text, by virtue of simply omitting the gratuitous slurs levelled at the slave girls.

Capturing the correct *register* of language, meaning a type of language used for a particular situation or to suggest the tone of some communication, is a related concern. For example, when we speak of 'epic' poetry, we do not expect the language used to be a casual vernacular; and yet, this was one of the most important recent breakthroughs in translating Classic texts, namely that by changing the register of how gods and heroes speak, we may actually be coming closer to how they sounded to and were experienced by their original audiences. By exalting Homer to the status of epic poet par excellence, translators in the past ascribed to Athena and Odysseus the register of

[92] Wilson, "Epilogue," 289.
[93] Wilson, "Epilogue," 289.

gods and kings; but what of the rest? Let's look at a scene where Odysseus is in the cave of Polyphemus, posted on Wilson's Twitter thread (which I reproduce here, edited). She compares several translations by venerable Oxbridge men, and then offers her own in a very revealing and concise demonstration of how things have changed in classical translation.

> In book 9, after the gang have blinded the Cyclops Polyphemus and snuck out, clinging to the bellies of the shepherd's rams, Odysseus and crew are rowing away at top speed. But Odysseus can't resist taunting his blind victim.
>
> σχέτλιε, τίπτ' ἐθέλεις ἐρεθιζέμεν ἄγριον ἄνδρα; (9. 494).
> Notice here that the Cyclops is explicitly defined as a human being, a man: aner/ andra, same word used of Odysseus himself in line 1 of the poem.
>
> Loeb translation: "Stubborn man, why will you provoke to anger a savage?" Lattimore: "Hard one, why are you trying once more to stir up this savage/man?" Fitzgerald: "Godsake, Captain! / Why bait the beast again?" Wilson: "Calm down! Why are you being so insistent/ on taunting this wild man?"[94]

Wilson's point is to show how James Loeb (1867 – 1933, honoured by Hitler for his anti- Semitic and eugenicist views) branded Polyphemus a "savage", even though the Greek calls him an ἄνδρα, a man, and following in his tradition, Richmond Lattimore (1906 – 1984), Robert Fitzgerald (1910 – 1985), as well as several others (Lombardo, Fagles, et al) call him a "savage" or "beast". Whereas Wilson, conscious of racist and colonial tropes and language, decided on a more literal, and frankly, more interesting approach:

> I used 'wild', which I felt captured something of the way *agrios* hovers between neutral description (wild animals aren't worse than tame ones) and judgment (...) Translations are informed by, and inform, scholarly discourse. Cf. Heubeck on book 9 (Oxford

[94] https://twitter.com/emilyrcwilson/status/962787160347893760

commentary): 'this race [sic], the embodiment of inhumanity, is endowed with non-human characteristics and is capable of acts of extreme barbarity.'[95]

A standard, highly debatable view — especially as she has clearly shown the word used in the Greek to mean "man"; Polyphemus is a cannibal, but so have some humans been throughout history. To call him a "beast" is therefore to miss the point: Odysseus too commits acts of great barbarism; Polyphemus is but another facet of humankind, not an "other". She introduces a very needed commentary on the racism of previous translators into her translation: "What I find particularly interesting is when multiple translations move in a particular debatable direction and make it seem like Truth -- as here, in the consistent erasure of the Cyclops' humanity."

But this example can offer us even more than that piquant discussion. It's a perfect example of a skilled translator experiencing poetic felicity; because there is, of course, a whole literary tradition of the "wild man" as an outsider, one who has for whatever reason, rejected or been forced to live outside of civilization and its norms. "The wild man, a purely mythic creature, was a literary and artistic invention of the medieval imagination...the wild man myth thrived throughout western and central Europe...In these forests, the wild man was said to make his home in caves, rocky crags...and other rude places", etc.[96]

By evoking, whether consciously or not, the medieval wild man tradition, a dimension is added to Polyphemus: from the malevolent Grendel, to the benevolent symbol of rebirth, the Green Man of Druidic myth, a link is forged between ancient cultures and the 'wild men' of our own time: the legendary yeti of Tibet... or Saskatchewan. The word "wild" retains its meaning as both

[95] Wilson, https://twitter.com/emilyrcwilson/status/962787160347893760.
[96] Timothy Husband, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism*, (Metropolitan Museum of Art NY, 1980), 1-2.

angry and innocent, a fierce creature of nature, which conveys more about Polyphemus and his difference from Odysseus than the crude "savage" or "beast" could ever do. And finally, lest we forget: Polyphemus is the son of the god Poseidon. He is beyond human, and therefore while Odysseus and his men condemn him for violently tearing apart and eating their comrades, he cannot be *morally* judged, as it is his nature to do so. Wilson has indeed made a breakthrough with her translation, opening up with a single different word-choice a fascinating commentary on what it means to see an ancient text with fresh eyes, and how that can galvanize new readers to explore its significance for people today.

Wilson's strategy as a translator, then, is not one of reworking or eliding ethically difficult or compromising passages, but having a clearer understanding of what was actually hiding in plain sight all along, obscured only by the 'drift' of pervious translations, a 'drift' that tended very often to lean heavily towards instituted sexism and racism. But respecting the source text does not necessarily mean the translator has an obligation of putting it on a pedestal. Wilson is quite clear on this point: "I do not believe that I have an ethical obligation to be welcoming or submissive to the elements of Homeric ideology that I find ethically abhorrent."[97] Instead, Wilson makes a new ingress into the more 'open' passages of the text, passages that seem to undermine the text's own "scheme of values."[98] But, as we have seen in the example of Telemachus and the slaves, this translation strategy is still very much invested in sound scholarship and keen observation. Her project differs from other feminist writers such as Margret Atwood and Alice Oswald, whose *Penelopiad* and *Memorial* constitute adaptations of Classical Greek texts, adaptations which adopt a deliberate (and in the case of Atwood, heavy-handed) strategy meant to disrupt and comment

[97] Wilson, "Epilogue," 281.
[98] Wilson, "Epilogue," 282.

upon the androcentric values of the original. As Wilson puts it, "I felt a responsibility to provide Greekless readers with a reliable, authoritative substitute for the Greek text that would take its complex representation of social inequality, including gender inequality, more seriously than I felt had been done before."[99] The key word here is "authoritative," meaning a translation that does not play fast and loose with the original, but that, through closer scrutiny of what was always in the text, makes the work come *even more* alive, unleashing the dormant energies that were overlooked, through a mix of complacency and perceived orthodoxy, by male predecessors.

**Anne Carson's Sappho**

Anne Carson's *If not, Winter* shares a similar approach to Wilson's translation. Carson has translated one of the most difficult texts we have from the ancient world, the scroll containing the fragments of Sappho's poems. It is a text I never would have dared to take on, not only because of what is there but because what is missing even beyond the text: the element of mystery that has made Sappho into a sphinx with a secret; a secret male translators have attempted to disclose, badly, for at least two centuries. They 'completed' her lines, intruding with their unwanted penetration into the text, made her into a 'lesbian,' creating and naming a 'deviant' sexuality for her home island, and there was little cultural value given to Sappho in the Christian period. A woman who wrote of love, songs to be sung with a lyre, whom Plato called the 'tenth Muse' — was coopted for male derision and turned into an icon for sexual 'deviance.'

Throughout history, Sappho has been characterized in three broad ways, which roughly succeed each other chronologically: she was alternately depicted as an excellent poet, an emblem

[99] Wilson, "Epilogue," 282.

of perverted sexuality, and later, as an abject suicide. Today, some aspects of all three of these characterizations coexist simultaneously. But already in Ovid's time, around the turn of the Common Era, "Sappho's presumed erotic connections with women were implicated in [Ovid's] representation of her as driven and destroyed by an unrequited passion," and she was subsequently punished "for her aberrant erotic tastes as well as for the threatening and dangerous (to men) power of her art."[100] This caricature of Sappho was carried forward from the late 17th century well into the 19th century by the numerous reprintings of Dryden's 1680 collection of Ovid's fictitious epistles, the *Heroïdes.* A number of changes were made in Dryden's translation of Ovid's text, most prominent of which was the choice to reorder the epistles, placing the 15th epistle, which is mostly concerned with Sappho and her tragic end, at the beginning of the book. "By moving the Sapphic epistle from its traditional position (...) the Dryden edition foregrounded for the entire volume the figure of a humiliated older woman made abject by her delirious self-abandonment to an overwhelming and passionate infatuation."[101] Although her characterization as an "emblem of perverted sexuality" was downplayed in Dryden's translation, it was nonetheless understood as a catalyst for her downfall, which took centre stage in Ovid's text, overshadowing all of her achievements as a poet and lover of wisdom. "It is almost certainly the very fragmented nature of what remains to us of Sappho's life and work, rather than any enterprise of accurate historical reconstruction, that has enabled the invention of elaborate and contradictory Sapphic fictions that serve the purposes of their creators."[102] The accumulated and stubborn staying-power of these fictions – of which Ovid's, via Dryden, constitutes only one example – is what Anne Carson was up against in her translations of Sappho.

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[100] Hariette Andreadis, "The Sappho Tradition," *Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, (Cambridge UP, 2014), 25.
[101] Andreadis, "The Sappho Tradition," 25.
[102] Andreadis, "The Sappho Tradition," 28.

The task of returning Sappho's dignified womanhood, her graceful lines broken and hollowed to wholeness and meaning, would be insurmountable; except that what *is* there is so weighty that it has endured even in its fragmented state. When I first read *If Not, Winter*, I was not expecting to feel transported or as though I were hearing the poet revered by Simonides. But Carson has a method of bringing the text closer to the reader, in its visual presentation. The book is sparsely printed, lines held apart from each other to give space and mark the places only the mind's ear can fill. This device made me slow down the reading of the fragments that *were* there. Moreover, the corresponding Greek is printed on the facing page, as though the very scroll with its mysterious channel separating the text like a river bifurcation dividing into two distributaries, which yet flow in parallel and at the same speed, each lending the other a visual balance, allows even the reader with no Greek to fall under her spell. In Carson's expert hands, the absences that have been handed down to us become part of the text, rather than a place of wild speculation that past translators have so eagerly filled with their own projections and agendas. "By grounding her translation within the historicity of loss, preservation, quotation, and repetition, Carson reframes a gendered epistemology in the interpretative and mediating work that simultaneously recorded and destroyed Sappho's legacy."[103] Similarly to Wilson, Carson is interested in surveying what is always already there in the text. Here, Carson allows the silences inscribed in the original text to be silences, rather than assigning them a meaning that is impossible to recover.

What becomes evident is that for her to translate is to enter into the work at the deepest level of meaning. The intimate knowledge of a language like Classical Greek — an unused language, a language only penetrable from scholarship rather than any common use or living experience — is essential, but even greater is to enter into the mind of the writer. And, as she

[103] John Melillo, "Sappho and the 'Papyrological Event,'" *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 192.

points out, this Greek is *written*; the language is literate, written down to be reflected upon at leisure, unlike an oral performance heard in a moment, treasured in memory perhaps, but not a possession without the faculty of retention. The very words themselves lack 'edges' until they are written, being theretofore only sounds and combinations of sounds which give meaning, all flowing together like music, flowing into the English and echoing the original text in a way that makes it seem like the two halves form a complete whole; but also it's like an unrolled scroll with a missing column down the centre. It is a remarkably successful translation, one which restores Sappho to the present, in a way that gives a sense of connection to the woman herself. Indeed, "this Sappho is not a nostalgic projection but rather (...) a layering of strata, of unending and alternative histories, of new associations and distances."[104] Like Wilson, Carson restores the text for modern readers who unfortunately, through no fault of their own, were presented with versions of what was never really there to begin with.

**Beyond Antiquity**

In this final section, I would like to turn my attention to the prize-winning Greek poet Kiki Dimoula (1931-2020), and an illuminating observation by scholar, poet, and translator Alicia E. Stallings. Although Dimoula is a modern poet, the way she deploys different kinds of Greek poses a specific challenge for translators, who end up having to juggle different registers and ages of language while attempting to produce similar effects in the target text: with Dimoula, *all of Greek* exists simultaneously in a single poem. Although her sources aren't exclusively classical, I consider

[104] Melillo, "Sappho and the 'Papyrological Event,'" 193.

Stallings to be on a par with Wilson and Carson, since a fair amount of fine-tuning and attention is needed to convey the sedimented layers of Greek – and the connotations they evoke – that make up Dimoula's work.

The Greek language, from written Homer to today, spans about 5000 years. While I have not much trouble reading texts from the time of Pericles through to the New Testament, I can falter at the 'purifying language,' *katharevousa*, used after Greek independence was achieved, from about the late 18th century to the early-mid 20th. The polytonic accents and ancient vowels and diphthongs present no problem; it is the return to the difficult Attic syntax, the resistance to demotic usage, the formal, official quality of its phrasing that challenges my semiliteracy. Byzantine (medieval) texts I have encountered during my theological studies, such as those by the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, though composed hundreds of years later, prove much more difficult than the demotic Hellenistic Greek of the Gospel of Luke. My very first book-length translation was of the complete poetry and essays of Greek national poet G. Verites, who sometimes used katharevousa, as was common for religious writers (most Church matter to this day is written in katharevousa); at the time (25 years ago), I had been immersed in the language and with only some help completed a sympathetic English translation. But were I to have to do it again today, I doubt I would still have the fluency. But Kiki Dimoula had no such trouble. She freely called on her knowledge of Greek from the Homeric period to the slang of her youth. For this reason, translators have struggled to bring the lightly-worn erudition of her verse to the English language without having to employ a liberal use of endnotes. But how crucial they are.

In the latest translation of her Selected Works, *The Brazen Plagiarist*, a formidable tome, endnotes have enabled the reader to make sense of the more difficult references. But when a note

has been omitted or obscured, its absence is more noticeable than its presence blotting the bottom of the page. Stallings has identified one such incident in the last two lines of Dimoula's poem 'The Rare Gift,'that will serve to convey the problem inherent in translating Dimoula.[105] But first, let's take a look at the poem as it was translated by Cecile Inglesses Margellos and Rika Lesser in *The Brazen Plagiarist.* The poem begins:

> New theories.
> Don't leave babies alone to cry.
> Immediately take them into your
> arms.

It ends:

> the ancient ways still prevail.
> Never into your arms. Let them cry
> their hearts out…

In the original, the last line runs "*molòn labè moró mou, molòn labè na apantáte.*" This is dark and wickedly funny. If you should happen to check the notes at the back of *The Brazen Plagiarist*, you would find the following:

> ***Come and get them***: In Greek, μολὼν λαβὲ (*molòn labè*). According to Plutarch, these are the words that Leonidas, King of Sparta, addressed to the Persians who ordered him to surrender at the Battle of Thermopylae.

By "in Greek," the translators mean ancient Greek, or perhaps Dorian. Yet *molòn labè* is such a common tag in modern Greek as to be no more obscure than, say, 'Et tu, Brute?' in English… At the end of the previous line, however, Margellos and Lesser just miss the mark. In the original,

[105] Kiki Dimoula, *The Brazen Plagiarist: Selected Poems of Kiki Dimoula*, trans. Cecile Inglessis Margellos and Rika Lesser (Yale UP, 2012), 155.

Dimoula uses the noun '*angkaliá*' or 'arms' (a child who wants to be picked up or hugged asks for *angkaliái*). With 'Never into your arms. Let them cry / their hearts out,' Margellos and Lesser manage to bury the pun in the course of elaborating it. Compare that to Stallings' more literal intervention, which is simpler and closer to the original: "When they ask you for your arms / Reply 'Come and take them,' baby, 'Come and take them.'" Stallings' solution is brilliant, but without the note connecting the passage to the Plutarch reference, the English reader *still* might not get it.

Auden often decried the losses Greek poetry suffers when brought into barbarous English, and so declared that the only reason to translate it at all was as an exercise that might help schoolboys to become poets themselves one day. For him, all the endnotes in the world couldn't rescue *Helen* from the crude arms of England's embrace, let alone that of Paris.[106] Anne Carson doesn't just use endnotes; she writes a whole book explaining her methodology as a way of giving the reader an idea of exactly what they're missing:

> τὸν δ᾽ἤτοι θνητοὶ μὲν Ἔρωτα καλοῦσι ποτηνόν,
> ἀθάνατοι δὲ Πτέρωτα, διὰ πτεροφύτορ᾽ἀνάγκην.
>
> Now mortals call him winged Eros
> but immortals call him Pteros, because of the wing-growing necessity[107]
> (Phaedrus, 252c)

Pteros, then, represents a net gain on the semantic level: the pun of Pteros (wing) with eros (love). But as poetry it blunders. Socrates, in *Phaedrus*, warns us that his quotation is unmetrical; he leaves it to us to perceive that Pteros itself is the word responsible for dislocating the rhythm of the second line. Here is the problem: the verse is a dactylic hexameter and scans fine except for

[106] You see, I've done it myself. While you may get the joke about Πάρις/Paris, unless you connect the name Helen to Ἑλληνικά, Hellenika, or Greek, my phrase will remain unturned.
[107] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton UP, 1986), 162.

the word *de*, which precedes the divine name Pteros. *De* is by nature a single short syllable and stands at a position in the line that requires a short syllable; the rules of Greek prosody, however, regularly call for a short syllable, when it is followed by two consonants, to become a long syllable. Thus the *pt-* with which the gods enlarge *erōs* forces this verse into a metrical dilemma.

Perhaps it is to be dismissed out of hand that an English translator would have some possible way of recreating this subtlety. Most English translators of Greek verse do not even attempt hexameter (as it is considered incompatible with the structure of poetic flow, pentameter being most often substituted), let alone attempt a syllabic equivalence based on doubled consonants. However, Carson's purpose in translating here is not just to show us a metrical problem, but to explain the nature of Eros, and so by explaining the passage at length, she can give us to appreciate both her subject and Plato's way of making it understood through an act of literary wordplay.

As someone who understands Greek, I caught the pun easily enough. However, I was completely unaware of the rules governing short syllables and double consonants in Greek prosody. Arguably, therefore, not only my understanding of what Plato wants us to know about eros, but also the enjoyment of Socrates' pun, was curtailed by my ignorance of this trope. But with the benefit of Carson's exegesis, this knowledge is restored to me. Since it is all but impossible for a translation alone to have given me this additional information, it is clear that some form of endnote would be desirable; and yet, has anyone read a translated poem in which the necessity of endnotes enhanced the experience of reading it for pleasure? Still, it is done all the time, and has become accepted practice. Only the degree of competence on the part of the reader is at stake: when too much ignorance is assumed, notes become excessively tedious. When too much knowledge is assumed, even the fact that a note may have been helpful is beyond the reader's

ken. Achieving a balance, then, is an admirable skill in a translator: the role of the reader must be considered in conceiving the translator's notes, in order for satisfaction to be attained.

My favourite method of rendering meaning from language to language is thorough evocative referencing. As when Stallings translated Dimoula's use of μολὼν λαβὲ as "Come and take them," she wasn't just referencing Sparta. She was, whether she intended it or not, echoing the menacing slogan of the National Rifle Association, 'Come And Take It,' 'it' meaning their gun, or in the plural, their arms. And the word 'baby' in this context is clearly dual, the infant being spoken of but also the slang meaning, as in Schwarzenegger's Terminator: "Hasta la vista, *baby*." By letting these violent Americanisms loom over the phrase, over the baby, she succeeds in conveying another layer of meaning to the poem even the poet may not have seen coming. The poem itself describes the fierceness of love's call to duty and the need for stoic resistance (which, it is implied, always fails) in order not to become weak, or teach others weakness. This strength is the 'rare gift,' a gift because it seems it cannot really be learned; instinct thwarts it. So with her "Come and take them, baby, Come and take them," the woman teaches not only the child but herself to resist giving up the 'arms,' both in the sense that she knows she cannot always be there to protect either the child (or her elderly self); and the arms of the 'resistance fighter,' the background figure in this very Greek poem. That is Dimoula's 'reference'; it's hidden to the English, but somehow Stallings has brought an equivalent that stuns in its success at giving the poem back what the unconnected English might have stripped out. Much like Wilson and Carson's efforts, it is further proof that translations need to be *retranslated*, in order to uncover omissions, misapprehensions, and in Wilson's case, unnecessary additions.

## Conclusion

> A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever-new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence.[108]

Translation plays a major part in the ongoing process of cultural transmission, but it's not its sole determinant. The historical reception of canonical works, in this case Greek texts, and the consensus that calcifies around them over time, also plays an important part, creating a text's "horizon of expectation," to use Hans Robert Jauss' terminology,[109] which is simply another way of saying that the reputation of a canonical text always precedes it, shaping the way future translators approach it *in ovo.* As much as a translation is of its time, it will inevitably age, showing traces of the socio-historical and cultural contexts which informed the translation. It would be mad to expect a translation to be eternal; it amounts to the billionaire's egregious fantasy of cryogenically conserving himself for the future. Rather, it's how our perceptions of a given text come to be shaped and overdetermined by stale interpretations and frozen translations that needs to be questioned. For a translation to have a truly contemporary existence, it must continue to be an open text, in Umberto Eco's sense of the term; it must partake in that open-ended and continual process, a process which today, new voices can have a say in molding.

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[108] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception,* trans. Timothy Bahti (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 21.
[109] Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception,* 19.

Reclaiming classical texts that were once the exclusive domain of male scholars and translators, women such as Emily Wilson and Anne Carson offer a belated but much needed redress of the trajectory these classical texts are undergoing and continue to undergo, steering them not in an abrupt U-Turn that deviates utterly from the original meaning, but rather guiding them towards new horizons of meaning, interpretation, and cultural value.

> Over the past decade a number of women translators have assumed the right to query their source texts from a feminist perspective, to intervene and make changes when the texts depart from their perspective. Drawing attention to the political clout they personally assign to language and to the impact of a translator's politics, they openly intervene in their texts.[110]

The feminist act for me does not reside in the open interference or warping of a text to fit the translator's politics, but rather the fact that women, excluded for so long in a male-dominated field, can today shape the course of these texts for the future, intervening in the text's continued life. Perhaps due to the very medium of translation – the fact that it deals with written texts – it's so easy (and tempting) to literally *rewrite* the preconceptions, mistakes, and harms of the past; but ultimately, that might constitute a disservice to the present, since it's the confrontation with the past, manifested in now-foreign ways of thinking and reasoning, that allows us to properly evaluate past injustices and follies. The challenge consists in actualizing a text by using informed interventions and studied choices, bolstered by a knowledge of core texts – of *what has come before* – rather than a wholesale revision that projects current mores onto the original, like some sort of future anachronism.

[110] Von Flotow, *Translation and Gender,* 24.

## Chapter 3: Sacred Texts

Of the many challenges involved in the translation of sacred texts, none surpasses the problem of dogma. If it is the contention of the Church that sacred texts cannot be *changed*, then not only is poetry near impossible but even translation is so fraught that only those with not only academic but ecclesiastical qualifications should attempt it, because anyone else wastes their time: success will be elusive at best.

The problem, for Christians, comes in part from the saying of Jesus, "verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Mt 5:18) — and this is an utterly rabbinic idea ("jots" and "tittles" being Hebrew notations) which lodged itself in the minds of early monastics, along with such 'formulas' as "Take, eat…This is my body…This is my blood…" which became the central rubric by which bread and wine become Holy Communion. In more than one sense, the Word is all-powerful. Blasphemy is the other side of this coin: curses, slanders against God, 'taking His name in vain' et al., were considered actions that had real consequences, and as we all know were in many cases punishable by death. Words themselves take on mystical proportions, as though they were spells or incantations capable of transforming earthly matter into divine essence. In this chapter we will explore the differences between the success of the Anglican tradition of sacred poetry, to the relative failure of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and why translation is at the heart of the matter.

### Some Necessary History

To fully understand the reasons behind the controversy around translation in the Orthodox tradition versus the Anglican, some history needs to be foregrounded; the need for the Church (which at first meant the whole Church, both Eastern and Western) to control doctrine, was, and in some ways still is, its defining feature. Convoked by the Roman Emperor Constantine I in 325, the First Nicaean Council sought to establish orthodoxy and, after the Schism in 1050, its authority in the West steadily ebbed. The advent of translations into lay-languages is one of the most important reasons for this, and to understand the abhorrence for any change that dominates in the Eastern Orthodox Churches to this day, we should take a brief look at the origins of the controversy, the translation from Hebrew Scripture into Greek, and the subsequent permutations that have morphed over time to become the adaptations in use today.

Perhaps the most foundational translation of Christian Scripture in history is that of the Septuagint, which according to tradition was the work of seventy-two scholars selected by the Jewish high priest of the time (early 3rd century BC) to render the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek at the behest of the Hellenic emperor in Alexandria, Ptolemy II. The Septuagint has been the main version of Old Testament Scripture for the Orthodox Church, and indeed, the pre-schism liturgical Church as a whole. After being approved (in the West) at the Council of Trent (1545) as being an 'authentic' language, St Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible was declared the only authentic text and became the Bible for the Roman Catholic Church (completed 405 CE). St Jerome is credited with most of the work on the Latin translation, expanding on the Greek Septuagint and existing Latin translations, as well as consulting Hebrew texts. The point of the translation, as with Ptolemy's, was to facilitate use by a greater number of people, Latin having superseded demotic Greek in the West. Eventually, as Seamus Heaney explains, "St Jerome's translation of the Bible

was enshrined for centuries not as an authorized version, but as the pristine word itself."[111] Latin, Greek, and Hebrew were considered 'holy languages,' making them the only legitimate prototypes from which subsequent translations could be gained despite the Aramaic, Syriac, Armenian and other ancient manuscripts which give texts for the New Testament Scriptures; they were considered unreliable as primary sources once the codification and authorization of translations into new local languages became widespread. Until the 16th century (with the exception of the Orthodox Church using the Slavonic language, specifically conceived on the guidelines of the grammatical and linguistic style of Hellenistic Greek of the 9th century, in order to perfectly facilitate its liturgical use), no other languages were considered legitimate sources from which to make translations, as "(…) the original and holy language of Scripture was the only one capable of expressing its sacred truth."[112] Control over the text became an absolute imperative.

Then, in the 16th century, the energy of the Reformation made the idea of *translation* imperative and brought to crisis the whole matter of 'local language'; this crisis reaches into the present, namely translating the Bible into a 'modern' dialect. Forgetting that the Scriptures had been translated into many languages throughout history, the Church of Rome sought to suppress translations of the Bible into the modern European vernaculars. There were many reasons for this, but especially important was the maintenance of a uniformity of worship and a central language by which the Papal church would maintain a universality amongst its members. "Protestants refused to accept the claim of the Catholic Church to be the sole mediator and interpreter"[113] of Scripture. Though it also constituted a visible symbol of England's independence from Rome, King James defiantly authorized a version purportedly for the sake of "maintaining the truth of Christ

[111] Seamus Heaney, "Fretwork: On Translating Beowulf," *In Other Words: the journal for literary translators*, autumn/winter, no. 13 (1999/00): 23.
[112] Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Fontana Press, 1995), 75.
[113] Eco, *Perfect Language*, 75.

and propagating it far and near…" as was written in the *Epistle Dedicatory* to the original edition of 1611. This further declares that because of the King's great Christian zeal, "…out of the Original Sacred Tongues, together with comparing of the labours, both in our own and other foreign Languages, of many worthy men who went before us, there should be one more exact Translation of the holy Scriptures in the *English Tongue*…"

Roman Catholic scholars in Douai had published the Old Testament in English in 1609, but it was not intended for use in liturgical worship; the Authorized Version however, was revolutionary in that it was intended to replace Latin as the language of the Church of England. Over time, the A.V. began to be used by English-speaking Christians all over Europe and eventually, globally; other translations were produced, as well as translations in European languages, all for use in church services as well as for purposes of scholarship (notably, German). But despite infidelities to the Greek text and the political agendas associated with the writing of it, the A.V. yet remains the 'classic' English translation, in great part because of the poetic quality of its language.[114]

But having become familiar, as most pre-Vatical II Catholics were with the Latin Mass, Heaney confesses that "The English translation ended up having less immediately persuasive power than what I took to be the original (…) Venerable as the [King James] version sounded, it came across as secondary (…) for whatever reasons — maybe because of the numinous force which Latin then possessed as the medium of the liturgy and the Church's magisterium (…) the Gospel heard in my own tongue sounded smaller."[115] If the language of King James, somewhat archaic already even at the time of its writing, failed to please the ear of those accustomed to Latin,

[114] The 'classic' status of the A.V. has prompted Henri Meschonnic to claim, somewhat provokingly, that the Bible has never been translated into French, since nothing resembling the cultural and poetic clout of the A.V or Luther's German translation exists in the francophone world (*Ethics and Politics of Translating*, 73).
[115] Heaney, "Fretwork," 23.

how much more so would modern English fail to please the ear of those raised on the A.V. In his introduction to a "modern" translation of the Epistles, C. S. Lewis, an Ulster Protestant, gets to the heart of the matter of why Protestantism must continually allow new translations:

> It is possible that the reader who opens this volume (…) may ask himself why we need a new translation of any part of the Bible (…) 'Do we not already possess (…) in the A.V. the most beautiful rendering which any language can boast?' (…) There are several answers to such people. In the first place, the kind of objection which they feel to a new translation is very like the objection which was once felt to any English translation at all. Dozens of sincerely pious people in the 16th century shuddered at the idea of turning the time-honoured Latin of the Vulgate into our common and (as they thought) 'barbarous' English (…) The answer then was the same as the answer now. The only kind of sanctity which Scripture can lose (…) by being modernized, is an accidental kind which it never had for its writers or its earliest readers.[116]

Perhaps, if by "earliest readers" we understand it to mean only those who heard the Gospels in pre-Nicaean home-churches, the catacombs or in churches where heresy was still a matter of debate. As we have heard, the ‘holy languages’ were three — Hebrew, Greek, and eventually Latin — and the reason for this was because of the notice Pilate ordered placed on the cross on which Christ was crucified, which said in those three languages “the king of the Jews”. Other languages were understood to be merely translations of the “inspired” languages, and this doctrine was canonical by the mid-6th century. To worship in a vernacular language could lead to heresy; so while each Patriarch approved the translation that would be used for *liturgical* worship (i.e. Coptic, Classical Armenian, Ancient Syriac) they could only be translated from Greek or Latin. The reason King James called his version ‘authorized’ is because — as head of the newly created Church of England — he had the power to bring forward ‘one more’ official version, (though William Tyndale, who

[116] C.S. Lewis, "Modern Translations of the Bible," *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 229.

had done much of the translation James' men later adapted, was burnt at the stake in 1536 for his original attempt).[117] But after Martin Luther's German translations, the Protestant movement held it as a priority to make translations into vernacular languages, as stated in the Articles of 1571, "It is a thing plainly repugnant to the word of God and the custom of the primitive Church, to have public prayer in the Church, or to minister the sacraments in a tongue not understanded of the people."[118] As found in an important Ordinal of the Anglican Church, the candidate for the priesthood is enjoined to "profess the faith uniquely revealed in Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds… [and] affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith *as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation*…"[119] (italics mine) — tradition combined with an acknowledgment of the need for mutability.

**Anglican vs. Orthodox Hymnody**

That need for mutability is at the heart of the Anglican hymnody. If the Reformation was, in a sense, sparked by translation, the history of English hymnody was marked by both translation in its most immediate sense (Hebrew, Greek, and Latin sources translated into English), but also translation in a cultural sense, in its capacity to make old and static ideas relevant to new social and historical contexts. In this sense, Anglican hymns should be understood as "hermeneutical acts that reinterpret scripture in accordance with the needs of their time,"[120] which explains in part how

[117] In the 9th century, St Cyril would provide 'Holy Rus' with what is now known as Church Slavonic written in the "Cyrillic" alphabet, based on Greek; further translations by Russian hieromonk missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries used it to create scriptural texts in Aleutian, Tlingit, and many others.
[118] Article XXIV, as given in English: *"De precibus publicis dicendis in lingua vulgari: Lingua populo non intellecta publicas in Ecclesia precis peragere aut sacramenta administrare, verbo Dei et primativae Ecclesiae consuetudine plane repugnat."*
[119] Diocese of Ely, *Order for the Licencing of Clergy*, 2001.
[120] J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford UP, 1999), 19.

they came to occupy such a popular and prized place in Anglican liturgy; they were able to accommodate, and indeed forge, new forms of religious expression and worship, both in their content and their formal features.

*The Whole Booke of Psalmes*, collected by Thomas Sternhold in 1549 – a collection of strict metrical psalms translated into English from Hebrew, Greek, and Latin sources – laid down the foundation for what was to be, in the following centuries, an outburst of creative hymn-writing that would go on to shape English culture, and the English language, more broadly. The metrical psalms, mostly translated by exiled Calvinists, put three things into motion: "In the first place, it began the tradition of congregational singing; secondly, it versified the Bible and was didactic; and thirdly, it expressed spiritual problems, hopes, fears, and individual emotions."[121] The psalms were written in strict 'fourteeners,' a metrical line of fourteen syllables, often seven iambic feet, which the Calvinist translators exiled in Geneva preferred over the "freer movement of Lutheran hymnody."[122]

> In all these translations, and in all the employment of metrical psalms in worship, the great theoretical justification was found in the Bible as both source-book and supreme authority. The Bible's authority was contrasted with the accumulated traditions of Rome, which in the eyes of the Reformers had become impure through centuries of human fallibility (...) By sticking to metrical psalms, the Calvinists not only satisfied their need for a poetry of individual spiritual experience, but also found that experience stabilized on the rock of Holy Scripture.[123]

The metrical psalms kicked off the process of cultural translation, in which individual poets and hymn-writers would begin to influence and shape religious habits more broadly. Eventually, over successive generations, metrical psalms gave way to hymns, and as any genre growing out of

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121 Watson, *The English Hymn,* 53.
122 Watson, *The English Hymn,* 46.
123 Watson, *The English Hymn* 46.

previously established conventions, it took formal and aesthetic risks along the way. Hymn-writers such as George Wither, Henry Vaughan, and Isaac Watts all managed to breathe new fire into the worn equations of the psalms, managing to balance personal religious experience with Christian dogma. Watts is paradigmatic of what Anglican hymns were able let in: in terms of content, apart from an increasingly individualistic experience of religion and worship, Anglican hymns accommodated contemporary developments in natural science and philosophy (Watts himself had read Newton as well as Locke, although it must be noted that they were deployed very much along the grain of the Gospels, as a supplementary mode of understanding its message); in aesthetic terms, the hymns were innovative in their deployment of metaphor, rhetoric, and imagery, as well as rhythm, eventually abandoning the strict constraints of the metrical psalms for the four-stressed line that still haunts English poetry today. "The marked deviations from normal speech are partly responsible for the memorable qualities of the verse: the material is twisted about to suit the metre, and in that twisting the material itself is changed through language, so that it becomes unfamiliar, and yet rhythmical in the regular line."[124] As time went by, Anglican hymns began to be more porous, entering a symbiotic relationship with secular poetry that left both traditions inextricably entwined; many images and lines from Watts' hymns can be found in Blake, Wordsworth, and Christina Rossetti,[125] to name only a few 19th century examples, who then went on to influence and transmit this religious imagery, rhetoric, and diction to future generations. Inversely, the religious poetry of Herbert and Donne offered hymn-writers a trove of poetic techniques that were put to good use. Isaac Watts, perhaps the most influential post-Reformation hymn-writer, was unambiguous when it came to the role of poetry in hymn-writing: "he wished to argue and to

[124] Watson, *The English Hymn,* 67.
[125] Watson, *The English Hymn,* 210.

demonstrate that poetry, 'whose Original is Divine,' was supremely fitted to celebrate the truths of the Christian religion."[126] In other words, the line that divided secular poetry from officially sanctioned liturgical texts was, by the middle of the 19th century in England, increasingly blurred. By 1870, "hymns (had) found their place in the Established Church," having gained widespread acceptance a decade after the publication of *Hymns Ancient and Modern for Use in the Services of the Church,* a hymnal compiled by ordained churchmen. [127]

To say from its inception the Church of England has played fast and loose with canon law would probably be an understatement; but in terms of beautiful worship it may have lost a few battles, but it has certainly won the war. Anglican hymns, especially those created from their long list of masterful poets, are both beautiful in craft as well as being theologically acceptable. One way this has been accomplished is to embrace the traditional use of mystical theology expressed by *paradox* found in the Orthodox and Catholic texts (ie, the Virgin Mother or Christ being at once both human and divine), but another key was to loose the bonds of word-for-word translations so that meter, rhyme, alliteration and other poetic devices can be employed to shape the raw material into poetic form. These aesthetic developments occurred as the result of the political and cultural project of Protestantism itself. The poet and hymn-writer George Wither, responding to those who condemned his efforts to expand the English liturgical repertoire in the early 17th century, came armed with this reply: "No holy scripture, or canon of our Church, hath commaunded the keeping of this, or that part of Gods Booke, from publike use: and therefore, why should any disallow free passage to those Hymnes in their proper kinde?"[128] Needless to say, this was certainly not available as an option, let alone a line of reasoning, in the Orthodox tradition.

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[126] Watson, *The English Hymn,* 144.
[127] Karen Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries* (Ohio UP, 2012), 130.
[128] qtd in J.R. Watson, 145.

The central challenge to maintaining the traditional forms of Orthodox worship is the fact that liturgical texts must be exclusively based on the 'primary source' texts in Scripture, i.e. the Greek Septuagint and the Greek New Testament,[129] and their counterparts in Slavonic used by the entire Slavic-Orthodox world; therefore to 'modernize' the liturgical text will distance it from the Scriptural texts they are based on, obliterating Biblical allusion, obscuring theological dogma, and destroying the poetry so long in place, in favour of texts which are merely 'comprehensible' and have no other claim, such as the weight of tradition or the authority of originality, to credit them. In the 1920s, the Brotherhood of Theologians called ZOH[130] were commissioned by the Church of Greece to create a modern Greek version of the Bible (perhaps to combat post-war missionary Protestant groups — whose efforts at proselytizing were soon made illegal — from making inroads by criticizing the Orthodox Church, claiming it denied the Scriptures to the laity who only spoke and understood a modern Greek vernacular) with oversight by theologians in the Holy Synod; but they are *never* used in official Church worship. Meanwhile, all translations into other languages use the modern form of the language, which for many originalists "desacrilizes" the texts; as someone who understands Hellenistic Greek as well as modern, I understand this problem well: hearing the texts in modern Greek or English brings them down to the level of plain speech. But short of transposing them into an artificial register such as 17th century English (as some still persist in doing) seems also to be an unsatisfactory solution. What is certain is that any notion of

[129] *Ἡ Ἁγία Γραφή*, Athens, Ἀδελφότης Θεολόγων ἡ <<ZOH>> Publishing, 1994. (Standard Text Version for the Old and New Testaments authorized by the IV Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, 1928).

[130] Founded by Fr. Eusebios Matthopoulos in 1907, the *ZOE* theologians, embodying the Christian *LIFE*, (clergy and laymen, but also including some women) took a form of 'vows' similar to those of monastics, however they did not live cenobitically and were not recognized as a "lay-order" of the Church, as is common within Roman Catholicism. The brotherhood split in the 50s (creating SOTIR), but both are largely disbanded now, existing more informally as organizers of children's summer camps and after-school groups, and in their capacity as publishers of Orthodox catechism and other such materials.

*poetry* or the additional layers of meaning poetry can provide, is sacrificed on the altar of dogmatic purity, and utterly lost when word-for-word translation is required.

An even greater problem for hymns based on Biblical allusion, is not only do phrases go unrecognized, but the "basic plots of some sections of Scripture — not to mention the exotic minutiae — are no longer part of common literary background."[131] While it may be true that the words of the central hymn used in the services of Christmas Day come not from Scripture but directly from a theological sermon by St Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen), it was at the time meant to be heard as rhetoric — a kind of poetry — and ought to be heard as such now. However, the text, having come into significance as a sort of manifesto on the theology of the Incarnation, has been taken to a level where it is now considered to have an authority of its own which is intrinsic to a sense of tradition in Orthodox worship, to the point where it is thought a betrayal to diverge from the text (in a word-by-word sense), in order to preserve the rhetorical power which the *Nativity Oration*, and subsequently the hymn which was derived from it, would require in order to be a successful vehicle for worship.

Thus, the argument against modern translation is not only rational, it is aesthetic, and perhaps this argument is stronger than all the others put together — but this is purely because in the past, translations have not been concerned with entering the poetic idiom of the new language but have been content simply to render a "text" as correct and faithful to the original as possible. Again, as Heaney puts it, "[In] my Catholic education…the primal rightness of the Church's language had been established as a fact of the aural life. '*Adeste fideles*' would henceforth win out over 'O come all ye faithful' (...) I left St. Columba's College (...) a perfect construct of that pre-

[131] R.J. Schork, *Sacred Song from the Byzantine Pulpit* (UP of Florida, 1995), 35.

Vatican II culture, and I remain reluctant totally to deconstruct myself."[132] Another Catholic writer states that "'All human beings are created equal' just does not have the rhetorical weight of 'all men are created equal'"[133] — which is nothing more than a subjective opinion with no grounding but the male hearer's own prejudices; yet it's one that is difficult to overcome in patriarchal traditions such as Eastern Orthodoxy. The effect of this unwillingness to abandon traditional — though in many cases incomprehensible languages — for modern ones, is therefore linked with an inability to conceive worship outside the context of ritual and rubric.

Clinging to archaic, incomprehensible languages may seem an absurdity to non-Orthodox traditions, so why is it taken as inalterable by the Church today? There are underlying causes which relate to the very nature of language itself. The notion of 'perfect' or 'divine' language undermines the usage of 'normal' language; the function of language is subjugated to its form. It is essential to understand how 'imagination' got such a bad reputation with the Church Fathers who instituted the canon of texts and hymns, and for this a discussion of where sacred language gets its power will be essential.

The ancients of pre-Christian civilization did not consider involvement with religious dogma appropriate to the masses, but thought "the cosmic drama could only be understood by an aristocracy of wisdom, able to decipher the hieroglyphs of the universe; the main characteristic of truth was ineffability: it could not be expressed in simple words, was ambiguous by nature, was to be found through the coincidence of opposites, and could be expressed only by initiatic revelations."[134] The similarities to early Christian gnosticism and neo-Platonic influence on some of the early Fathers (such as Dionysios Areopagos), which nevertheless established themselves in

[132] Heaney, "Fretwork," 23.
[133] Rev. Paul Schmidt, "Keeping Sanity — and a Sense of Humour — in Liturgical Translations," *Catholic Herald,* March/April 2003 (2003): 14.
[134] Eco, *Perfect Language,* 191.

the ‘folk-theology’ of the Orthodox Church are impossible to root out. Christian-kabbalist movements of the Middle Ages show the continuity of such ideas into the West, and English-language history is riddled with examples of ‘magic’ languages and *abracadabra* of all sorts. The Scriptures themselves were reputed to be the result of some kind of inspired ‘automatic writing,’ as if the entire Bible were given, like the Revelation to St John, in a unified divine vision. Invoking angels and Saints, not to mention demonic presences, by the use of magic words or phrases – abraxas – is common to the histories of every religion, however the notion that modern languages have ‘lost’ the power to influence the spiritual world is just as common a principle. Therefore, it is not merely aesthetic considerations, as concerned Heaney and others, which appeal to traditionalists, but something which ultimately derives from the question of from whom, and how, divine power may be channeled. In the Orthodox Church, only a canonically ordained priest can recite the rubric for transforming the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Holy Communion; if anyone else says it, nothing ‘happens.’

Another difficulty for the modern Orthodox Church is the other edge of the sword: intellectualism and a conceit by which texts are considered ‘inferior’ if they are not exact and literal, because these texts must not only be taken ‘on faith’ but actually ‘understood.’ The tragedy of this is that no amount of imaginative translation will convince such people that they are not getting an inaccurate and so, unusable, text. Worst of all it fosters the attitude that new languages are so inferior as to be incapable of containing the ‘real’ text. If in French there are not several words for ‘love,’ as in the Greek, the French cannot then ‘know’ as much about the text as they can't discern the subtle shifts conveyed by the alternatives. (But if the French lack *filia* (φιλία) in the sense of "friend-love", Greek has no exact equivalent for *fraternité* as used in its original revolutionary sense; each culture creates its own vocabularies to express a full range of human

feelings and ideas, which native speakers understand.) The issue of power also arises: male hymnographers, protecting a male-run hierarchy, with male choirs, celebrating predominantly male Saints — the glorification of patriarchy has become a self-serving cause. New translations (in the vein of "all human beings are created equal") seem to undermine the male-domination of the Church by including women, and more than that they will empower groups that have traditionally had to consider themselves minorities with less right to contribute to the day-to-day life of the Church, namely those in the diaspora.

Imaginative and new translations have never been a priority even though the diaspora Church began to need them about 120 years ago. New generations do not even understand, say, modern Greek or Russian, let alone Hellenistic Greek or Church Slavonic; even in Greece and Russia native speakers don't understand them either. There is nothing comparable to this phenomenon in the English churches, where the continual focus has been to keep worship-texts fresh and relevant; it is as if someone were to revive the Anglican Litany of 1544, including such petitions as "From the tyranny of the bisshop of Rome and all his detestable enormyties, Good Lorde delyver us…"[135]

So the use of poetry, especially of modern poetic techniques, is perceived as having an intolerable impact on sacred texts. "Hymnody is an extreme case of literature as an applied art. Its products can be judged only when we have heard them used for their proper purpose."[136] But what poetry does by nature, is to give scope to the imagination; coupled with music, it can give a similar imaginative experience to everyone who participates. Or in the words of one Orthodox theologian, "Whichever the epoch under review, there is a maxim that remains constant, namely that neither

[135] J. Robert Wright, "The First Prayer Book of 1549", *The Anglican Society,* vol. 25, no. 1 (1999): 34.
[136] C.S. Lewis, "Transposition," *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and other Pieces* (Collins Press, 1965), 81.

the poetry nor the music can be judged independent of each other — voice and verse are immediately linked together."[137] The specialized chanting heard in European and Arab Orthodox churches, which takes many years to learn, is utterly inaccessible to most of the congregation in an Orthodox church; it is performed by a sub-clergy of chanters, almost exclusively men (the exception being women's monasteries).[138] In the diaspora, however, choirs of mixed singers perform standardized versions of some of the hymns, which — having lost the dimension of interpretation by an individual chanter — sound stale and rigid week after week. The price to pay for this democratization, then, is an aesthetic one.[139]

So early hymnographers were required to restrict the imagination in order to preserve doctrinal purity in their poetry, the most sublime expression of which was paradox: theological ineffabilities expressed apophatically. "(…) The restriction on the free play of imagination induced the hymn writers to pay special attention to elevated diction, metrical variety, and elaborate structure."[140] "Combining a colourful style, rich in images and bold similes, they succeeded in producing poems which reflect to a remarkable degree the spirit of Byzantine worship."[141] Translators today have been almost entirely unable to dare any sort of style whatsoever, except the imitation of the ancients; and as to producing poems, they are restricted to translations of the ancient works, or to using formulas which echo at best the various and elevated forms of their predecessors. Umberto Eco, speaking on poetic and artistic forms that have long been in use, has

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[137] Dimitri E. Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography and Byzantine Chant* (Hellenic College Press, 1984), 9.

[138] So-called 'Byzantine music'. Eight different modal scales and their variants, which must be sight-read from ancient books, scored in a linear notation representing tonal intervals, tempos, and intensities. The Slavonic 'kliros' has only one scale to learn, singing mostly in polyphonic unison.

[139] In canonical Orthodox Churches, use of instruments has traditionally been forbidden, but in the Western diaspora, the use of organs to accompany the choir has become somewhat common, changing the sound of worship from monotonic chanting to a single (major) scale-based polyphonic which sounds ‘inauthentic’ to older generations and is, admittedly, bland at best in comparison.

[140] Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography,* 9.

[141] Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography,* 9.

said that, though familiar forms can be aesthetically pleasing if left running long enough for a new culture to experience them on their own terms, "time may not be enough to reawaken pleasure and surprise and to resurrect a particular form for us, which means that either our intellectual development has atrophied or that the work, as organization of stimuli, was addressed to an ideal addressee who does not correspond to what we have become. This might in turn mean that that particular form, aimed at a particular cultural context, is no longer effective for us."[142] "The most compelling and challenging question which emerges (…) is whether we today can use the same centuries-old criteria for the English Orthodox liturgical hymnody."[143] It was this challenge I took up in my translation of St Kassiani's hymn, on which I can now focus in detail.

**Hymn of St Kassiani**

St Kassiani was a nun of the 9th century, who legend has it was once considered a possible wife for the future Emperor Theophilos. He came to view the group of prospective maidens, asking each a question to test them in humility and feminine grace. He said provocatively to Kassiani, "From women come evils," to which she immediately replied, "And from women spring many blessings." Needless to say, she was not chosen, but consequently joined a convent and became the abbess, leaving behind her hymn which is sung at the matins of Holy Wednesday, when the sinful woman who anointed the feet of the Lord is commemorated. Because it is one of only six hymns composed by women which are sung during the entire Church year, and the only one sung on a major feast day, this hymn has been treasured for the uniqueness of the feminine poetic voice,

[142] Eco, *The Open Work,* trans. Anna Cancogni (Harvard UP, 1989), 38.
[143] Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography,* 47.

the depth of understanding given to all the redeemed women mentioned, and the majesty of its language and style. The hymn has inspired one of Greece's most well-known modern poets, Kostis Palamas, as well as Boris Pasternak, who both have famous poems based on it.[144] The original Greek text is as follows:

1 Κύριε, ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἁμαρτίαις περιπεσοῦσα γυνή,
2 τὴν σὴν αἰσθομένη θεότητα, μυροφόρου ἀναλαβοῦσα τάξιν,
3 ὀδυρομένη, μύρα σοι, πρὸ τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ κομίζει.
4 Οἴμοι! λέγουσα, ὅτι νύξ μοι ὑπάρχει, οἶστρος ἀκολασίας,
5 ζοφώδης τε καὶ ἀσέληνος ἔρως τῆς ἁμαρτίας.
6 Δέξαι μου τὰς πηγὰς τῶν δακρύων,
7 ὁ νεφέλαις διεξάγων τῆς θαλάσσης τὸ ὕδωρ
8 κάμφθητί μοι πρὸς τοὺς στεναγμοὺς τῆς καρδίας,
9 ὁ κλίνας τοὺς οὐρανοὺς τῇ ἀφάτῳ σου κενώσει.
10 Καταφιλήσω τοὺς ἀχράντους σου πόδας,
11 ἀποσμήξω τούτους δὲ πάλιν τοῖς τῆς κεφαλῆς μου βοστρύχοις
12 ὧν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ Εὔα τὸ δειλινόν,
13 κρότον τοῖς ὠσὶν ἠχηθεῖσα, τῷ φόβῳ ἐκρύβη.
14 Ἁμαρτιῶν μου τὰ πλήθη καὶ κριμάτων σου ἀβύσσους
15 τίς ἐξιχνιάσει, ψυχοσῶστα Σωτήρ μου;
16 Μή με τὴν σὴν δούλην παρίδῃς, ὁ ἀμέτρητον ἔχων τὸ ἔλεος.

The following are three very typical examples of how hymns are translated today, since the advent of the early 20th century of an English-speaking diaspora; they are done by scholars, the first by an established poet (first language, Greek); the second a British Archbishop of the Orthodox Church and Spaulding Lecturer at Oxford, the late Rev Dr Kallistos (Timothy) Ware: and the third an English Greek scholar and Orthodox monk, a full-time translator commissioned to translate the Divine Liturgy for the present Archdiocese of Great Britain, the late Archimandrite Fr Ephrem

[144] Eva Catafigiotou Topping, *Sacred Songs: Studies in Byzantine Hymnography* (Light & Life Publishing, 1997), 50.

Lash.[145] These translations are variously used in Churches in England, the USA, and Australia, usually chanted in a monotone but more often merely read, though in some cases diaspora chanters attempt to recreate the melodies of the Byzantine originals to very mixed results.

> Lord, she who fell into many sins has recognized your Godhead and has joined the myrrh-bearing women; weeping she brings myrrh for you before your entombment. "Alas," she cries, "what night is upon me, what a dark and moonless madness of unrestraint, a lust for sin. Accept my willing tears, you who procure the water of the sea through the clouds; incline to the grievings of my heart, you who made the sky bow down by the unutterable abasement [of your incarnation]. Many times will I kiss your undefiled feet, and then dry them with the hair of my head; those feet whose footfalls Eve heard at dusk in Paradise and hid in terror. Who will trace out the multitude of my transgressions, or the abysses [unpredictability] of your judgments, Saviour of souls? Do not overlook me, your servant, in your boundless compassion."[146]
>
> — *Penguin Book of Greek Verse*

> The woman who had fallen into many sins, perceiving Thy divinity, O Lord, fulfilled the part of a myrrh-bearer; and with lamentations she brought sweet-smelling oil of myrrh to Thee before Thy burial. "Woe is me," she said, "for night surrounds me, dark and moonless, and stings my lustful passion with the love of sin. Accept the fountains of my tears, O Thou who drawest down from the clouds the waters of the sea. Incline to the groanings of my heart, O Thou who in Thine ineffable self-emptying hadst bowed down the heavens. I shall kiss Thy most pure feet and wipe them with the hairs of my head, those feet whose sound Eve heard at dusk in Paradise, and hid herself for fear. Who can search out the multitude of my sins, and the abyss of Thy judgments, O Saviour of my soul? Despise me not, Thine handmaiden, for Thou has mercy without measure."[147]
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> — Kallistos Ware & Mother Mary[148]

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[145] I had met him on several occasions. He died in 2016. https://orthochristian.com/91931.html

[146] *Penguin Book of Greek Verse*, ed. Constantine A. Trypannis (Penguin, 1971), 435.

[147] *The Lenten Triodion*, translated by Kallistos Ware & Mother Mary (Faber & Faber, 1978), 539.

[148] In the case of Mother Mary, who assisted Rt. Rev'd Kallistos Ware, it should be noted that she was not so much influencing the form of translation, but had a greater involvement in the assembly and editing of the translated texts. However, she went on to independently complete several important liturgical translations since then (published in Bussy, France).

> Lord, the woman who had fallen into many sins, perceiving your divinity, took up the role of myrrh-bearer, and with lamentation brings sweet myrrh to you before your burial. “Alas!,” she says, “for night is for me a frenzy of lust, a dark and moonless love of sin. Accept the fountains of my tears, you who from the clouds draw out the water of the sea; bow yourself down to the groanings of my heart, you who bowed the heavens by your ineffable self-emptying. I shall kiss your immaculate feet, and wipe them again with the locks of my hair, those feet whose sound Eve heard at dusk in Paradise, and hid herself in fear. Who can search out the multitude of my sins and the depths of your judgments, my Saviour, saviour of souls? Do not despise me, your servant, for you have mercy without measure.”[149]
>
> — Fr Ephrem Lash

What does even the most cursory analysis of these translations tell us? Leaving aside the ineffectual renderings of "Alas!" and "Woe is me!," most obvious to the Greek language speaker is that they are the work of men, insensitive to the tone set by the repetition of feminine verb-endings, so that the genderless "servant" (though more often than not connoting a male) is allowed to pass for δούλην. Even in the case where "handmaiden" is used, this archaism does nothing to convey the nun-poet's sense of willing, even joyful slave-hood (communicated by the use of the modifier σὺν), nor does it succeed in intimating the role of the Theotokos as co-agent of salvation, (i.e.by recalling the Nativity event through the words ὁ κλίνας τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, in the allusion to Christ's kenosis (κένωσις) as a translation sensitive to these issues would be expected to do. The late Eva Catafigiotou-Topping, one of the few Orthodox woman theologians who has published extensively on the subject, observes:

> Together with the Publican and the Prodigal Son the Sinful Woman became a principal *paradeigma* or 'example' of Lenten *metanoia* or 'repentance. Her story was elaborated by theologians, preachers and hymnographers…Most of these, including Kassiane's hymn, were entitled [i.e. by those men] : Εἰς τήν Πόρνην, for it had early been decided that the woman whom Luke had simply designated ἁμαρτολός[150], was a harlot. Consequently, the harsh condemnatory word, πόρνη, appears predominantly in Lenten sermons and hymns. Kassiane's hymn is a conspicuous

[149] Ephrem Lash, *An Orthodox Prayer Book* (Oxford UP, 1999), 78.
[150] sinner

> exception. More delicate and less cruel than the hymnographers who insisted on calling the sinner a πόρνη, Kassiane nevertheless vividly describes the woman's utter degradation.[151]

I could not choose the literal and flat method of the Penguin version, the 'King James' language of the Oxford don, or the plain English of the monk; my own translation had to reflect the unique perspective of a woman speaking about the redemption of humankind through a woman (Mary), infused with the stories of other women (the sinful woman, Eve, myrrh-bearers) throughout. My translation is as follows:

1 Lord, that woman fallen into many sins
2 Her senses disclosing to her Your own divinity
3 Emerges to become the first of the myrrh-bearers
4 Bringing her bitter tears, sweet myrrh,
5 To Your feet, before they could seal Your body in the tomb.
6 'What terror," she whispered, "Night is now for me
7 a dire haunting; the missing moon leaves me
8 in sickly darkness, the erotic-love of sin.
9 Accept, I beg, these wells of tears
10 As You receive the seas into the clouds.
11 Bow near to hear my sighs, my heart's pain,
12 God, Who entered a womb in Your self-emptying.
13 I kiss with urgent tears Your purest feet
14 Drying them again with my own loosed hair,
15 Your feet…which at evening in the garden of Eden
16 Eve heard step — and hid in fear.
17 Who can discern my own many sins
18 In the abysses of Your judgments, my soul-cherishing Saviour?
19 Do not neglect her, who is Your willing slave,
20 My master and lord of tender and infinite mercy."

I'd first like to draw attention to lines 12 and 19, which correspond to lines 9 and 16 in the original Greek, in which I think with defensible success I have solved some of the gender-related problems

[151] Topping, *Sacred Songs,* 200-02.

discussed above. In line 12, I have disregarded the words, "[You] who have bowed the heavens," choosing rather to describe the Incarnation by introducing the word "womb," in order to recall the Theotokos, (the counterpart and redeemer of Eve in this hymn), into whose womb Christ descended and took flesh to become human, illustrating (rather than merely translating the word) how, theologically speaking, His *entering* and *filling* in order to be *emptied* is what Christ's *kenosis* achieved. Also, in order to preserve the feminine sense of the word δούλην, I have chosen to make the narrator speak of herself in the third person so as to include the pronoun 'her,' which however, could also mean 'the soul' (ἡ ψυχή), another feminine gendered word which is common to both sexes.

But what happens when a word is so recalcitrant that even an endnote will hardly suffice? I ran into this problem again and again; I had to get it right, but in the end, while it may have been a good translation, it made for a terrible *hymn*. One problematic line was the above-mentioned, regarding the Theotokos ("Mother of God") metaphorically, as a way of denoting the mystery of Christ's *kenosis*, usually rendered as 'self-emptying.' The Greek has, "τὴ ἀφάτῳ σου κενώσει", which I had as "God, Who entered a womb in *Your ineffable self-emptying*" — only the last three words are technically *there*, but I had wanted it made clear that this was a hymn written by a *woman*, and that She — the Theotokos — was the one God was being emptied *into* — all of which is implied, of course; but male translators had always (and only) emphasized the idea of Christ emptying Himself into *our world*, from the right hand of the Father down to earth. The mysterious Holy Spirit conduiting Him to the Ground Zero of a virgin's womb, even for 21st century Orthodoxy being taught in Cambridge, England, counted as radical feminism. It wouldn't do.

This word has largely defied translation into almost *all* modern languages: (΄Η) Θεοτόκος, (the) Theotokos. The etymology is simple: theos = God, + tokos = ... *er, no*. It's not simple at all,

because -tokos derives from the word τέξω (I conceive) and implies a τόκον (child). So it can be rendered, "she who conceived the God-child (in her womb)." Sometimes it is translated as "God-bearer" and sometimes as "Mother of God," but obviously those terms are unsatisfactory because the whole point of the conception of Christ in Mary's womb is that it happened by means of a *mystery*. Just as the ancients were unaware of the action taking place in the uterus, a microscopic egg lying in wait to be visited by a sperm to form a *zygote*, (from the Greek zygó, a coupling; a word they could therefore never have conceived *at the time*) the mystery of the Holy Spirit as the 'quickening energy' that visits the womb and creates Jesus cannot be preserved by those names. And again, note the grammar of the word: the feminine article Ἡ (Eta) with harsh breath mark ̔ (phonically represented as "h"), but the masculine noun-ending -os. It's a combination reserved for only a small handful of Greek words. At this point, our neutral 'the' is almost an insult.

So, what to do? In such cases, I believe translation has hit a brick wall. The word should remain Theotokos in the text, and either a generous note be attached or else leave it to the reader to pursue the meaning of the name further, as any theology student must do to come to some understanding. Even the invaluable *Dictionary of Untranslatables* is of no use in this case; there is nothing suitable this side of heaven. The fanatical theologian, the pious-but-inflexible believer, simply will not accept that a poetic metaphor might convey a better sense of the mystery than literal yet unfulfilling verbosity.[152] Although my translation was intended for possible use in diaspora Orthodox churches in the English-speaking world, by the time I'd finished, I realized it

[152] One language which has a closer fidelity to Greek is Slavonic; hardly surprising because it was a language created for Holy Rus by Cyril of Alexandria, who gave his name to the alphabet. Богородица, from Бог meaning God, and родица meaning 'she who is the conceiver'. German, that language which can turn anything into a compound word, doesn't do too badly with Gottesgebärerin. But the fact remains that without understanding the theological underpinning no word, even Θεοτόκος itself, is completely intelligible, though for Greeks and Russians, Orthodox tradition supplies the theology a dictionary lacks.

could be no more than a scholarly exercise and could never supplant those by Ware or Lash, which carried the imprimatur of ordination to give them authority.

It was then that I began to realize the true scale of difficulty in choosing words, as well as the scope of questions that need to be answered before one can even begin. Beyond simply 'who is my audience,' I had to think about things such as register and voice. How could the poetry of a 9th century Byzantine nun manifest in 21st century English unless I could find that phantom island where theological language could meaningfully inhabit the vernacular? My best fell far short, not for want of effort or lack of communion with Polyhymnia, but because it was impossible to establish a locus through which enough lines of concurrency could pass.

This brings us to the difficulty inherent in translating religious concepts. Take, for instance, the concept of 'Essence':

> GREEK: ousia [οὐσία], hupostasis [ὑπόστασις], ousiôsis [οὐσίωσις], huparxis [ὕπαρξις]
>
> LATIN: essentia, substantia, subsistentia, existentia; esse essentiae, esse existentiae[153]

The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* devotes many pages of fine print to this word (289-311), making it one of the longer entries in the book. To give another example of how notorious this word is to explain, I must relate the story of the time in 2002 when I was invited by administrators of the Bard Prison Initiative to teach a class in Eastern Orthodox theology to some inmates of Green County Correctional Facility, a high-security prison in Upstate New York. I had very recently finished a Master's degree in theology, not to mention twelve years as an Orthodox nun;

[153] *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. Emily Apter et al. (Princeton UP, 2014),
289.

I had taught catechumens for years, and thought myself entirely prepared to expound on the subject of the Holy Trinity — a topic I chose, quite mistakenly, as being theologically interesting to a spectrum of students.

Only after passing through steel door after steel door, through one locked gate after another, did I begin to realize what I had agreed to, but it was when I arrived at the cell in which the lesson was to take place, with only one guard accompanying me, that I fully understood the extent of my misapprehension: all but two of the twenty or so student-inmates were followers of Islam, and the two Christians were evangelical protestants, who recognized no fixed Trinitarian doctrine. It wasn't long before I found myself floundering, unable to explain the basic dogma I had known all my life: "three Persons (Προσόπων), one Essence (Οὐσία)." They simply could not accept the explanations of the Cappadocian Fathers, as they seemed to contradict the teaching of Muhammed head-on. I was playing to a cold room, and I felt the chill. (John Donne had no such troubles. "Batter my heart, three-person'd God," he says, confident that his readers will understand he is no polytheist but speaks directly to the Trinity as one.)

In any case, though it was one of the most *mauvais quarts d'heure* I have ever spent, (I had the sense to quickly change the topic to how faith can confer understanding where reason does not suffice), it was a profound learning experience for me, if not for them. Because ultimately, there is no way to explain who the Persons of the Trinity are, let alone what their one, divine Essence is — you first have to believe there can *be* such things as Persons and Essence; the gap between reason and understanding must be bridged by faith in what is unknowable, in other words, apophatic theology, or as the diabolical Mr Rumsfeld expressed it, "known unknowns."

The issues I faced trying to translate the theological concept of Theotokos into English has larger ramifications for translation more generally, since it touches on matters of equivalence on

the level of culturally and historically conditioned concepts which, when torn from the soil of their native context, may not survive the transfer. Another example from my own experience as an Orthodox nun in Korea: to translate the word "orthodox" from Chinese into Korean works to a point, but to do that in a language that does not consider any form of worship to be more ‘right’ than any other, is an uphill battle — it’s going to be an approximation that leads too far away, because the two languages don't share the concepts in the first place. Take, for instance, the Greek word ὀρθόδοξο: in Chinese it's 正統 (Zhèngtǒng), and in Korean 정통 (jeongtong). The Korean is simply the alphabetized version of the Chinese character — it was translated 正 (zhèng) as the 정 (jeong) in the official naming of the church in Korea, which literally means "Korea Orthodox Church Highest Office." But what does 正 or 정 really mean? The reason the Church is called Orthodox — and no longer part of the ‘katholikon’ or ‘universal’ Church — is because of theological differences with the Roman Catholics; in other words, the Eastern Church preserved the ‘orthodox’ doctrines while the Western Church adopted different doctrines in order to secure the power of the Roman Pope (think ‘infallibility’ and ‘immaculate conception’). But in Chinese, it simply means about the same as it does in English, without any specific theological connotations. So for sure, the Orthodox of Korea cannot understand 정 (正) to mean more than simply ‘correct’ unless they are taught, whereas in Greece, when you see ‘ὀρθόδοξο’ it literally means ‘correct *worship.*’ The Chinese of course have a concept for ‘upright,’ but it lacks the connotation of being related to religious worship. So while there are somewhat parallel concepts, the word is ‘less than’ without the explanation. On top of this, there are at least 10 (probably more) meanings of 정 in

Korean, so you have to include the Chinese character in order to let people know you're talking about the one that means 'ortho' or 'correct' and not some other homophone.

Henri Meschonnic came across a similar problem when translating the Psalms from Hebrew into French. Although he is unambiguous about the secular nature of his project (in other words, translating the Bible as a text rather than the Word of God), he still faced the same challenge of rendering Hebrew concepts into something intelligible to the average French reader:

> Where in Psalms I translate "ne me refuse pas les tendresses de ton ventre" (do not withhold the tenderness of your womb from me), because we have the abstract *ra'hamim*, traditionally converted into "miséricorde" (mercy) or "compassion," that is the plural form of *re'hem*, which designates the matrix, the uterus, and this is often how abstracts are formed in Hebrew, and the meaning here is of the feeling a mother has for what has come out of her womb, André Chouraqui [another translator of the Hebrew text into French] translates: "ne boucle pas tes matrices" (do not lock your matrix).[154]

From the same Hebrew source, we get "do not withhold the tenderness of your womb from me" and "do not lock your matrix," and although Meschonnic is translating from a point of view of language rather than religious doctrine, it's his understanding of how Hebrew forms abstracts that allows him to bring something of the texture and subtly of the original into French, bringing it closer to poetry than the distorted "do not lock your matrix." Although French lacks the formal ability to create abstracts in the way Hebrew does, a solution approximating the feeling of the original was possible, without veering into literalisms like the locked matrix or heavy-handed cultural equivalences, such as Eugene Nida's now infamous rendering of "the lamb of God" into "the seal of God" for Inuit readers of the Bible who were oblivious to the connotations attached to the animal.

[154] Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, 72.

**Anglican Poetry Today**

Rev. Dr. Malcolm Guite, lately Chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge, was my professor and then Master's thesis advisor from 2000-2001. He is the author of many books, from tomes like his 2017 biography, *Mariner: A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge,*[155] to a critical re-evaluation of the poetry of C.S. Lewis. Like Christina Rossetti, who published her *Annus Domini: A Prayer for Each Day of the Year, Founded on a Text of Holy Scripture* in 1874 (followed by *Called to Be Saints* et al.), Dr Guite has renewed the practice of daily meditations in several of his books, with poems that speak directly to the relevant feast/fast day or Gospel reading.

Dr Guite was commissioned to write an antiphon[156] for a mass at Wells Cathedral, a translation from the Latin 8th Antiphon *O Virgo Virginum*, which was set to music and had its debut at Cathedral Advent Carol service on 27th November 2016.[157] But rather than simply translate the Latin lines, *O Virgo virginum, quomodo fiet istud?/ Quia nec primam similem visa es nec habere sequentem./ Filiae Jerusalem, quid me admiramini?/ Divinum est mysterium hoc quod cernitis*, he created a sonnet to follow and develop the translation:

> *O Virgin of virgins, how shall this be?*
> *For neither before thee was any like thee, nor shall there be after.*
> *Daughters of Jerusalem, why marvel ye at me?*
> *The thing which ye behold is a divine mystery*.
>
> Who are the daughters of Jerusalem,
> Who glimpse you still as you transform their seeing?
> Whom have you called to this mysterium,

[155] Nick Rennison, "Books: *Mariner A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* by Malcolm Guite," *The Sunday Times*, London, UK, Feb. 26, 2017. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/books-mariner-a-voyage-with-samuel-taylor-coleridge

[156] See Appendix A for the full text of all the antiphon/sonnets from the Latin titles, and the corresponding Orthodox verses of the Christmas Canon by Kosmas the Melodist.

[157] Listen to it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgIt5700EpY

And bathed in the blithe fountain of your being?
Daughters of sorrow, daughters of despair,
The cast-aside, the overlooked, the spurned
The broken girls who scarcely breathe a prayer
The ones whose love has never been returned.
O Maid amongst the maidens, turn your face,
For when we glimpse you we are not alone,
O look us out of grief and into grace,
Lift us in love made stronger than our own,
Summon the spring in our worst wilderness,
And make us fruitful in your fruitfulness.

The poem serves a pastoral function as well as teaching the mystery of the Incarnation. "I thought of all those 'maidens,' young girls and women of our own times, who, like Mary, have become refugees, vulnerable like Mary, scorned, or falsely accused as she was, and I wanted to remember them in my sonnet and to think of Mary as especially the carer and advocate for exploited and vulnerable women," he wrote on his website in December 2021.[158] We see in this poem an example of compassionate inclusion; though "*neither before thee was any like thee, nor shall there be after,*" the Virgin was a woman maligned in her time, who had been a refugee of sorts.[159]

While Guite acknowledges the Incarnation of Christ by the Holy Spirit in the body of Mary, which can only be understood with the eyes of faith, ("*The thing which ye behold is a divine mystery*"), he is more interested in the beholders of the mystery, the human women who can potentially encounter the divine, but who are also marginalized in an uncaring world, who may be in need of succour and might see in Mary a comforting sister/mother.

[158] https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/advent-antiphons/

[159] According to the Gospel of Matthew, Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus had to flee from Bethlehem and take refuge in Egypt, as King Herod of Judea had ordered the slaughter of all male infants under the age of two, and stay away until the king's death, when they returned to settle in Nazareth, Galilee (Mt 2:12-23).

Whereas in my translation, I tried to show the essential role of women in the 'plan of salvation' — the fallen Eve/sinful woman, redeemed by the myrrh-bearers[160] and Christ's mother Mary — Guite's poem identifies all women in need of comfort ("Daughters of sorrow, daughters of despair, /The cast-aside, the overlooked, the spurned/ The broken girls who scarcely breathe a prayer/ The ones whose love has never been returned"), raising the potential impact of the hymn from lofty theological dogma to a human level, and so mirroring the *kenosis* effected by Christ when he descended to the human level by entering the womb of a human woman. Again, let's look at the third of his eight antiphon-inspired sonnets, *O Radix*:

*O radix Jesse,*
*qui stas in signum populorum*
*super quem continebunt reges os suum*
*quem Gentes deprecabuntur:*
*veni ad liberandum nos, jam noli tardare*

All of us sprung from one deep-hidden seed,
Rose from a root invisible to all.
We knew the virtues once of every weed,
But, severed from the roots of ritual,
We surf the surface of a wide-screen world
And find no virtue in the virtual.
We shrivel on the edges of a wood
Whose heart we once inhabited in love,
Now we have need of you, forgotten Root
The stock and stem of every living thing
Whom once we worshiped in the sacred grove,
For now is winter, now is withering
Unless we let you root us deep within,
Under the ground of being, graft us in.

[160] In the Orthodox tradition, the myrrh-bearing women include Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Joses, Mary, the wife of Cleopas, Martha of Bethany, Sister of Lazarus, Mary of Bethany, Sister of Lazarus, Joanna the wife of Chuza, the steward of Herod Antipas, Salome, the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and Susanna; these were "the women who followed Jesus." *Third Sunday of Pasxa* (i.e. the second Sunday after Easter) is called the 'Sunday of the Myrrhbearers.' In the Western tradition, the "three Marys" are the myrrh-bearers and include Mary wife of Cleopas, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Salome.

The hymn ("O radix Jesse,/ qui stas in signum populorum"; "O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples…") is very similar to the corresponding third ode in the Greek Christmas Canon which starts, "Ῥάβδος ἐκ τῆς ῥίζης Ἰεσσαί, καὶ ἄνθος ἐξ αὐτῆς Χριστέ" — "Jesse's root produced a branch, O Christ, and You its flower blossomed forth/ from the symbol of Christ's birth."[161] However, while the Greek and Latin verses stay close to the words of the scriptural prophecy ("And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of *Jesse*, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" etc, Isaiah 11:1), Guite roots the meaning in the experience of our daily lives through the use of contemporary allusions ("surf," "wide-screen," "virtual"). He seeks to "graft us in" to the mystery by bringing it to ground level where we're "severed from the roots of ritual." It's possible that — for reasons I stated above, an aversion to 'lowered' language or an over-zealous dogmatism that cannot endure interpretive translation of any kind — an Orthodox listener would reject the language of the sonnet as outside the sacred, as too quotidian for use in a nativity hymn. On the other hand, if one is ignorant of the prophecy of Isaiah regarding the root of Jesse, how will the hymn contain meaning? We are centuries away from a time when adult catechumens were strictly vetted for heresy and instructed in the faith; in the liturgical churches baptism takes place in infancy, and one may or may not attend Sunday School lessons. But Guite's poem develops the metaphor in a way that neither betrays the theology of the original verse, nor excludes the uninitiated from participating in the prayer, much as a priest might develop a Biblical theme for a sermon. Indeed, Guite's doctoral thesis (Durham University '93) focused on the work of Anglican clergymen Launcelot Andrewes and John Donne, both famous for their eloquence in expounding on doctrine in their Sunday sermons and Donne of course, for his poetry in its own right.

[161] https://dcs.goarch.org/goa/dcs/p/s/2022/12/25/ma3/en/se.m12.d25.ma3.pdf

Any amount of modern Greek religious verse exists, of course; while still a nun, I translated an entire book of it, *To The Country of That Spirit..." - Selected Poems & Essays of G. Verites (1915-1948)*, in 1998, with a Forward by the winner of the 1991 Yale Series for Younger Poets, Fr Nicholas Samaras. There are hundreds of pages of 'devotional verse,' most of it sentimental doggerel, like so much of what can be found in the *Oxford Book of Christian Verse,* 1940 edition, which sits on my bookshelf. But that is not what we are after in exploring this comparison. The connection between the use of poetic license in liturgical worship in the Anglican tradition does not have a counterpart in Orthodoxy.

Before we finish, let's take a look at Pasternak's poem about the sinful woman (whom he identifies as Mary Magdalene in the title ("Магдалина,"[162] though this is a Western rather than an Orthodox designation as in the Greek/Russian Orthodox tradition she is not named). The designation of the Magdalene therefore, affiliates this poem with the tradition that includes Donne, among others[163].

As soon as night descends, we meet.
Remorse my memories releases.
The demons of the past compete,
And draw and tear my heart to pieces,
Sin, vice and madness and deceit,
When I was slave of men's caprices
And when my dwelling was the street…

But what can sin now mean to me,
And death, and hell, and sulphur burning,
When, like a graft onto a tree,
I have-for everyone to see-
Grown into being part of Thee
In my immeasurable yearning?

[162] See Appendix B for complete Russian text and Pasternak-Slater's English translation.
[163] For example, in his Sonnet Cycle for Lady Magdalen.

When pressed against my knees I place
Thy precious feet, and weep, despairing…

Towards Thee, Thy burial preparing…

For the tears that well up with my sighs.
My impatient tresses, breaking loose,
Like a pall hang thick before my eyes
I take up Thy feet onto my lap,
Wash them clean with hot tears from my eyes,
In my hair Thy precious feet I wrap… etc.

The poem is long and this translation is not skillful (though it is known, as it was translated by his sister Lydia Pasternak Slater), but the elements of the original hymn are present. However, what Pasternak has done is to present us with a flesh-and-blood woman, who might be living in Russia at this very moment. It is worth hearing the hymn chanted in Greek to get a real idea of the pathos coded into the music, but ultimately it is an irony that it is, with the exception of women's monasteries, always chanted by a man. Pasternak's version gives an unmistakable female character who speaks as a woman in the way none of the three translations I related had done.

Is it so important that the voice be a woman's? Theologically, perhaps not. But so much of Kassiani's original poetry, allusion and emotional power is missed when it is not. Dr Guite's recognition of the direct association between the Virgin-refugee and real, living women refugees and other vulnerable women has the kind of power that elevates the poetry beyond hymnographic service into the realm of prayer. In Donne's poetry, we can hear an echo of the passionate prayer of the sinful woman, "Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain, /But am betroth'd unto your enemy; /Divorce me, untie or break that knot again, /Take me to you, imprison me, for I, /Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me." — A willing slave, longing to be mastered by the merciful Christ. Since Pasternak's poem remains just that – a poem

that lies outside of any official church service – these liberties can fully come to bloom in his version, liberties theolgian-poets like Donne could practice freely.

**Conclusion**

Without doubt, were the rules that govern translation in the Orthodox Church to allow for a quasi-secular tradition to arise, and a similar situation as Dr Guite finds himself in — commissioned to produce new hymnography from canonical texts — much would have to change that is not now considered mutable. To make an analogy, Orthodox iconography has never relaxed its rules on what icons must look like; there are no Renaissance mistresses in the faces of our Madonnas, nor Eros-like cherubs circling the distracted Christ-child in her lap. Even the famous icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Roubliev is considered non-canonical, in that its mystery — the nature of the trinity of angel-like figures — does not correspond to the idea of an ineffable Trinity of Persons sharing a mystical Essence. And yet the icon has entered the tradition through the back door, as it were, beloved of many in Greece and Russia alike.

Something verging on adaptation is at play in the Anglican tradition, which tends to 'update' the language and cultural references of religious texts without straying too far from their intended meaning – and this applies as much to Isaac Watts' hymns in the 18th century to contemporary practitioners such as Guite. As a result, new forms and creative energies are unleashed, as byproducts, in a sense, of this process of revivifying religious texts for new cultural and historical settings. In fact, perhaps the term 'versions' is more accurate for this process than 'adaptation,' although there is significant overlap between the two concepts; 'versions' may be more accurate because the link of intertextuality that often defines adaptation is not necessarily at play

here. One isn't meant to refer back to the original hymn or religious text to compare the two – they are simply meant to be *used* in worship. In other words, the new version is meant to stand-in for the original; it's more like a source text. In any case, it remains an interesting case in the discussion of how translation operates in different fields, and how criteria that work in some contexts are invalid and unhelpful in others. The translator must fully understand the purpose of the translation in order to find felicities that will make it strong; in attempting sacred texts, they confront the true 'untranslatables.'

## Chapter 4: Seamus Heaney's Translations

I have chosen to focus on Seamus Heaney in this dissertation because of the way in which his own career as a poet and translator exemplifies so many of the issues discussed so far. After many celebrated books and the awarding of every poetry prize and position of excellence, Heaney began more and more to turn his attention to translation. His first important work was a translation from the *Buile Shulbhne,*[164] a medieval Irish poem that grew in importance as Heaney began increasingly to identify poetically with the protagonist Sweeney, a king who is turned into a bird and forced to sing his bitter and hard-earned wisdom in exile. Heaney followed that translation with a version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, renamed *The Cure at Troy*, for the Field Day Theatre Company in 1990, a theatre company which, much like Yeats' Abbey Theatre before it, "was deeply informed by the ancient Athenian notion that the dramatic arts perform a vital civic function."[165] The publication of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* in 2000 won him many fresh accolades not only for its achievement of creating real poetry in modern English, but because of his unique purpose in undertaking the work of 'reclaiming' for Irish English-speakers their 'right' to the language, English being on the one hand "a means and symbol of Irish subjugation," and on the other, "his own means of expressive liberation."[166] Another version of a Sophocles play, *Antigone*, renamed *The Burial at Thebes,* was completed in 2004. Underlying all of these translations is the inspiration Eastern European poets afforded Heaney throughout the 1980's, which I briefly touched upon in Chapter 2. Indeed, "the sustained, selfless commitment to truth and justice" these writers displayed – a commitment which played no small part in bringing down

[164] Seamus Heaney, Sweeney *Astray* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983).
[165] Nathan Wallace, *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland from Yeats to Field Day* (Cork UP, 2014), 111.
[166] David-Antoine Williams, *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford UP, 2010), 111.

the regimes forced upon them – "deeply influenced Heaney's thinking on art's ethical, spiritual, and restorative potential."[167] As Heaney puts it himself, what poetry and translation strive for is "the way consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality and still find a way of negotiating between them."[168] Negotiation, as we will see in this chapter, plays a central role not only in Heaney's translations, but in his poetry more broadly. In fact, Heaney's larger poetic project can be viewed as a sustained attempt at negotiating a habitable alternative to the strict sectarian dichotomies represented by the Troubles. Poetry, and more specifically translation, are there to help dissolve those entrenched ways of thinking; they represent, for Heaney, a way of sounding out a third term that is more elemental and communal in nature, a way in which people can live together as citizens under what he so aptly calls "The Republic of Conscience."

I'd like to propose, then, in this chapter, to read Heaney's translations as part of that larger project. Although his turn to translation is certainly connected to the Troubles and the long legacy of English oppression – his translation of Cantos XXXII and XXXIII from *Inferno* acting as a response to the dirty protests at Long Kesh[169] – Heaney's interest in translation also coincides with a need to express the particularities of that legacy in more 'universal' terms, thus initiating a turn away from the mythic (Sweeney, for instance), to the canonical, "from allusion to translation."[170] We'll explore how Heaney's translations of two Sophocles plays inscribes itself in his attempt to reclaim and deploy ancient texts in order to speak to the confusion and fragmentation of the present. The historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot claims that philosophy emerged in ancient

[167] Michael Parker, "Back in the Republic of Conscience," *Textual Practice*, vol. 31, issue 4 (2017): 747.
[168] Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (Faber and Faber, 1995), xiii.
[169] Williams, *Defending Poetry,* 120.
[170] Williams, *Defending Poetry,* 120.

Athens during a period of great upheaval, when "citizens and fellow countrymen were no longer able to agree on the meaning of elementary words."[171] It is tempting to view Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes* in this light: as attempts to restore some clarity and sanity to the political moment, albeit in a way that speaks beyond the national borders of Ireland, to include *any* instance of injustice, brutality, oppression, and impasse. It's difficult to express what exactly is at stake, but I think Heaney says it best when he states that "government and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of *their* imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers' sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable."[172] What's at stake, in a nutshell, is a future that is "imaginable," something that people living together as a community can imagine as an alternative to the degradation and indignity of a certain vision of reality which is sadly akin to George Orwell's "boot stamping on a human face forever." For Heaney, that boot was best represented by the Troubles, itself part of the long and brutal legacy of British imperialism, but I don't think we need to limit the scope of his translations to that particular lens. After all, it was through translation that he was best able to 'universalize,' for lack of a better term, the hard-earned lessons of his native land.

**Heaney's Poetic Project**

Before we get to the translations, perhaps a brief trajectory of Heaney's entire oeuvre is warranted. From the very beginning, two important themes or motifs can be discerned in Heaney's poetry:

[171] Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Harvard UP, 2002), 17.
[172] Heaney, *Redress*, 1.

the theme of "digging," of being grounded, and interrogating that ground; as well as the prevalence and consistent use of legal language, as much in his poetry as in his translations and prose. For brevity's sake, we can simply gloss a few titles of his works in order to see this opposition in action: from the first poem of his first collection, "Digging," to the excavational lens of the bog poems in *North*, to individual poems called "Guttural Muse" and "Field Work," not to mention the title of his Selected Poems*, Opened Ground*; on the other side of the coin, two non-fiction works are called *The Redress of Poetry* and *Government of the Tongue* ("redress" having several layers of legal meaning), as well as individual poems with titles such as "From the Republic of Conscience," and so on. The theme of digging aligns with his interest in Ireland's past, which includes uncovering common ground between the Irish and English languages and cultures, while his use of legal language aligns with a Catholic and Latin heritage, one which is more pan-European and "universal."

A second layer can be added onto this dichotomy as well: on the "digging" side, there is a certain rugged concreteness, both in the language and the imagery he employs. A good example of this is the opening of the second poem from "Squarings," a suite of poems composed after the deaths of his mother and father:

Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in.
Drink out of tin. Know the scullery cold.
A latch, a door-bar, forged tongs and a grate.[173]

Apart from literally describing his parents' home and the renovations it necessitated, the language is very much inflected with Anglo-Saxon weight. The proliferation of one-syllable words,

[173] Seamus Heaney, "Squarings," from *Seeing Things*, in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 333.

something English does better than any Romance language, creates a feeling of 'thingness,' as if you can almost feel the heft of the latch, the coldness of the tin. Home, then, is at once a place and a language. They are inextricable. On the legal side of things, there is often the presence of abstraction in some of Heaney's word choices, a striving to encapsulate in language ideals that don't necessarily exist materially, but which it is our human responsibility to bring about (justice and citizenship, for instance). In another poem from "Squarings," the tenth of this excellent series, a young speaker remembers afternoons spent dreaming in the nearby quarry:

(...) ultimate
Stony up-againstness: could you reconcile
What was diaphanous there with what was massive?[174]

Here, the juxtaposition of "stony up-againstness" with latinate words such as "ultimate," "reconcile," and "diaphanous," embodies, in the very language of the poem, his double heritage, with the more concrete "up-againstness" serving as the foundation from which he can "reconcile," and ultimately understand, what is airy and not visible to the eye. This poem is, after all, taken from the aptly titled *Seeing Things.* In a certain sense, the young poet can spend his days dreaming in the quarry, but only from his position on the hard, "massive" bedrock of his local surroundings. It boils down to his work being informed by "the dialectic between rootedness and openness."[175] So we may be able to frame all of this very roughly as follows:

| **Rootedness** | **Openness** |
|---|---|

[174] Heaney, "Squarings," *Selected Poems,* 340.
[175] Eugene O'Brien, "The Reluctant Transatlanticist," *The Soul Exceeds its Circumstances* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 175.

| | |
|---|---|
| Theme of “digging” | Use of legal language |
| The Irish and English languages | Catholic and Latin heritage |
| Concrete imagery (local landscapes, etc) | Abstract ideals |

It’s important to stress that this dichotomy is not necessarily ‘either/or’; in other words, Heaney never championed a Joycean flight from his homeland in order to better understand it from afar. It was rather the case that his openness informed his rootedness, and his rootedness informed his openness. Heaney never championed choosing one side over the other, but rather how to transcend that choice altogether, by trusting the truth and the kind of knowledge poetry and art can bring about, if only we learned how to *see things differently.* In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney expresses this in clear, beautiful, and uncompromising terms:

> Either we have hope within us or we don’t; it is a dimension of the soul, and it’s not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. It is an orientation of the spirit, and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizon. I don’t think you can explain it as a mere derivative of something here, of some movement, or some favourable signs in the world. I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are.[176]

When Heaney invokes “transcendence,” as much in his poetry as in his non-fiction, he’s not drawing on some Emersonian use of the word, but rather a very real need, as a poet, to not be limited or reduced to the political and historical circumstances of his birth. Indeed, “Heaney’s

[176] Heaney, *Redress,* 4-5.

poetry is a record of the dilemmas faced by a poet who, at various times in his career, had to negotiate the rival demands of existing administrations, militant republicanism, and his own conscience and sense of justice."[177] What we encounter again and again in Heaney's poetry is a dramatization of the conflict between wanting to be a poet who is free to marvel at creation and sing its praises, and a poet who was summoned to rise to his historical occasion. That blend of competing impulses constitutes Heaney's poetry. As readers, we are privy to an intimate struggle that demands of the poet that he be witness to the brutality of the world, while still managing to lead us towards something remotely resembling hope.

But back to the rootedness/openness opposition I set up earlier. My point, if it isn't clear already, is that Heaney's rootedness in the mud and the blood of Northern Ireland's conflict is what allowed him to dream a possible way out of it, into a more open space where human dignity could thrive. It's precisely his situatedness in the tumult of his historical context that pushes him to reflect, upon the 60th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on the importance of the declaration's first article: "In the boldness and buoyancy of these words, there are echoes of many of the great foundational texts of Western civilization, from Sophocles' 'wonders of man' chorus, through Christ's Sermon on the Mount, on up to the American Declaration of Independence."[178] Again, the legal register employed in the Declaration of Human Rights points Heaney towards an imagined ideal that can only be accessed through language, and the importance and seriousness we accord to that language. In his Nobel lecture, Heaney recounts how, as a young boy, listening to the radio allowed him to glimpse a world much larger than his immediate rural surroundings:

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[177] Adam Hanna, *Poetry, Politics, and the Law in Modern Ireland* (Syracuse UP, 2022), 105.

[178] Seamus Heaney, "Human Rights, poetic redress," *The Irish Times*, March 15 2008, no pg. The first article reads: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

> I got used to hearing short bursts of foreign languages as the dial hand swept round from BBC to Radio Eireann, from the intonations of London to those of Dublin, and even though I did not understand what was being said in those first encounters with the gutturals and sibilants of European speech, I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world beyond. This in turn became a journey into the wideness of language (…)[179]

Although his "journey into the wideness of language" began with his poetry, it was his translations which offered him a new openness, one that exceeds the historical determinants that conspired against it. Translation, then, is for Heaney a kind of transcendence that allows him to play out his drive for rootedness and openness simultaneously, without having to choose between the two. *Beowulf*, especially, is a prime example of this, since it allows Heaney to deploy his 'Irishness' within a foundational English text, shot through as it is with sword-bright flecks of the gold mined from the seam of a seemingly lost Irish language. Words like 'thole' and 'lachtar,' which could be found in his aunt's Irish-English dictionary, still in use back in the rural Northern Ireland of Heaney's childhood, made him see a way forward using the shared cultural experience of a common language tradition as a bridge to a deeper mutual understanding.

> What happened was that I found in the glossary to C. L. Wrenn's edition of the poem the Old English word meaning 'to suffer', the word *þolian*; and although at first it looked completely strange with its *thorn* symbol instead of the familiar *th*, I gradually realized that it was not strange at all, for it was the word that older and less educated people would have used in the country where I grew up. 'They'll just have to learn to thole,' my aunt would say about some family who had suffered through an unforeseen bereavement. And now suddenly here was 'thole' in the official textual world, mediated through the apparatus of a scholarly edition, a little bleeper to remind me that my aunt's language was not just a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage, one that involved the journey þolian had made

[179] Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," *Selected Poems,* 414.

> north into Scotland and then across unto Ulster with the planters, and then across from the planters to the locals who had originally spoken Irish.[180]

A lot of the brilliance of Heaney's translation hinges on his ability to excavate, or re-discover, linguistic commonalities between Irish and English, creating a new space between the two opposing poles, a place in which "home is beyond the tribe."[181] Heaney relies on linguistic unearthing "at the bottom of accumulated philological strata" in order to expose common roots to the light of the present, in the wider aim of renewing "a future speech"[182] that would include healing and mutual understanding as possible ways forward. Heaney's tactic, then, is deeply invested in

> [t]he cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delight not just the ear but the whole backward and abysm of mind and body; thinking of the energies beating in and between words that the poet begins into half-deliberate play, thinking of the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory, and attachments.[183]

Needless to say, these are strategies that also serve good translators. Beyond what a word simply 'represents,' there is an entire network of meanings, currencies, histories, and pathways which 'say' much much more than what the word is meant to denote, and as I have stated in previous chapters, recognizing these hidden kinships and exploiting their latent potential are part of the task of the translator. Let's take one example: the English word 'rival.' Imported from French, which

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[180] Quoted in O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, (Faber & Faber, 2008), 34.
[181] Quoted in O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 56.
[182] Williams, *Defending Poetry,* 110.
[183] Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978,* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), 150.

adapted it from the Latin ‘rivus’ (river, stream), ‘rival’ contains within itself the French word ‘rive,’ (shore); the original French ‘rivale,’ then, has a concrete connection with the idea of competition for access to rivers, ports, and the resources they harboured. Of course, this connection is completely lost in the English ‘rival,’ because the word ‘rive’ doesn’t exist in English. But a good translator would keep these layerings in mind when translating, since they can guide her in the appropriate choice of words. Although European languages tend to be more abstract than, say, Mandarin, whose character for “snow,” 雪, is composed of the characters of “rain” and “hand” (the implication being that snow is rain you can brush off with your hands), these concrete links between language and the objects they are meant to represent are not completely absent in English, only obscured by time and distance, and in the case of “rival” more specifically, transposition into a new soil that occludes its originary meaning.

In a poem from *North*, “Bone Dreams,” the poet’s excavation-work on language serves as the content of the poem:

Bone-house:
a skeleton
in the tongue’s
old dungeons.

I push back
through dictionaries,
Elizabethan canopies,
Norman devices,

the erotic mayflowers
of Provence
and the ivied Latins
of churchmen

to the scop’s
twang, the iron

flash of consonants
cleaving the line.

A 'scop' is an Old English bard, so in this poem, we see Heaney descend the sedimented layers of history and language in reverse chronological order: the "Elizabethan canopies," which grew out of the "Norman devices," which themselves rest on the foundation of "ivied Latins," all with the aim to find a larger commonality in the bedrock of Anglo-Saxon, which, as we saw in his discussion about the translation of *Beowulf*, allows Heaney to claim and absorb a tradition that reaches far beyond his contemporary situation. Speaking about the use of the word "prog" in one of John Clare's poems, Heaney articulates once again the tension between rootedness and openness, but applies it to the use of specific local words, words which a metropolitan readers (in Clare's case) and global readers (in Heaney's) might not immediately grasp, but which remain stubbornly "untranslated" into global or cosmopolitan English, so that they can be preserved into the future:

> (...) once you think twice about a local usage you have been displaced from it, and your right to it has been contested by the official linguistic censor with whom another part of you is secretly in league. You have been translated from the land of unselfconsciousness to the suburbs of the *mot juste.* This is, of course, a very distinguished neighbourhood and contains important citizens like Mr Joyce, persons who sound equally at home in their hearth speech and their acquired language (...), persons who seem to have obliterated altogether the line between self-conscious and unselfconscious usage, and to have established uncensored access to every coffer of the word-hoard.[184]

Implicitly, what Heaney is talking about here is the internalized voice that makes you question your own situatedness in the face of some norm – in Heaney's case, the internalized censor is the

[184] Heaney, *Redress*, 63.

'official' English of the colonizer – and the feeling of self-consciousness is bound up with not wanting to be found wanting in its gaze.

Throughout his translations, we encounter the poet's own chosen word-hoard from his country past: "scaresome", "plash", "slub/slabby", "heartsome/heartsore", "bawn", and not forgetting old words like "nifty" and "swank." There are also hyphenated combinations acquired from his experience with *Beowulf* and Gaelic: "mane-flow", "fire-spores", "Stropped-beak Fortune." There are words he must simply pounce on, like "a-brangle" and "rickle," and neologisms like "brat-pack" that lose their newness when slotted into an old adage by "anonymous." He parses all flora and fauna, "greensward", "rowan" and "vetch", discerns mosses, knows "hen-blackbird" from "Lagan blackbird," recalls the names of every plant and bird. He knows the parts of ships, from triremes to coracles and fishing boats with all their "trawl-nets" and various accoutrements; and all farming equipment and machineries, from peat-cutting spades to "headrigs." He has the vocabulary of the Church and of forts, from apse to nave to "mullioned rampart," to that of pagan ruins, the "lintel in the earthwork" and "stone cairn." He can name the priest's vestments, "alb, chausible and stole," and the cycle of monastic prayers in Latin and King James. Can describe the array of ancient warriors to the armour of medieval knights, "cuirass", "hauberk" and their various shields and weapons, to the brutal arms of modern soldiers. He knows the names of small towns and battlegrounds of Attica and Ireland and how to rhyme them, showing the alert reader how to pronounce them in the process.

And this is what makes his *Beowulf* such an astonishing feat, since it can give pride of place to these seemingly inadequate, rustic words that have a deep significance to all the generations who had kept those small words alive in their everyday speech. For them to figure in a seminal English text is not only the work of a skilled translator, but one of an executor of a

historically mandated redress. It's in this sense that I want to turn to Heaney's Greek translations; as something more than just well-handled translations, but as tributaries of a larger whole that deploys translation for ethical and civic ends, as possible entry points into a further language, a tongue in which we all understand each other a bit more precisely. In fact, I would like to propose a fourth layer to my rootedness/openness binary, one in which translation figures as a 'way out' of the difficult demands the Troubles imposed on the poet, while still addressing the horrors and abuses of such a trial. My schema would now look something like this:

| **Rootedness** | **Openness** |
|---|---|
| Theme of "digging" | Use of legal language |
| The Irish and English languages | Catholic and Latin heritage |
| Concrete imagery (local landscapes, etc) | Abstract ideals |
| Poetry | Translation |

**The Greek Translations and the Troubles**

> Question: "When you wrote the final lines of 'Punishment' and made reference in 'Kinship' to 'how we slaughter / for the common good', were you not proceeding more carefully, more cautiously than usual — to avoid being misunderstood and to avoid seeming to propagandize?"
>
> Answer: "Is it too sophisticated to suggest that there's a difference between being alert to the situation and addressing it or addressing the reader about it?"[185]

[185] O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 159.

Dennis O'Driscoll, the interviewer, was talking about the "bog poems," which centered around the then recently discovered bodies of violently-killed Iron Age victims, ritually sacrificed and impeccably preserved in the peat bogs of Jutland, Denmark, and Heaney's question in answer to the query is indeed sophisticated, almost sophistic, with good reason. "Admittedly I addressed the situation [in Northern Ireland] when I introduced different bog poems at readings and so on, although I now realize that it would have been better for the poems and for me and for everybody else if I had left them without that sort of commentary."[186] Stirred, as anyone experiencing the violence of the Troubles must be, and also inclined to turn away from perpetrating or supporting it, Heaney found himself in the unenviable situation, if only for the sheer difficulty of the task, of needing to write poetry that didn't take sides while also maintaining its moral integrity in the moment. This feat was achieved with such clear arduousness and success, it became an emblem for peace through steadfast resolve, and was embraced by both those in the southern Republic of Ireland and also in his native Northern provinces. Heaney's poetry itself became part of the history of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, when lines from his version of Sophocles' play *Philoctetes* were quoted by then US President Bill Clinton: "History says, don't hope / On this side of the grave. / But then, once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up, / And hope and history rhyme."[187]

In one of his early poems, "Requiem for the Croppies," Heaney waded in up to his knees with a poem that recalled the June 1798 Battle of Vinegar Hill, when Irish rebels fought British soldiers, ending in a wholesale slaughter that recalled vividly "the ruthlessness of the British Army

[186] Quoted in O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 159.
[187] Heaney, *The Cure At Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), 44.

on occasions like Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972 (...) and the strong-arm tactics of the Ulster loyalist workers after the Sunningdale Conference in 1974,"[188] as well as the resistance of the hunger strikers and others imprisoned, along with the grim bombers of the IRA: "Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon. / The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave. / They buried us without shroud or coffin / And in August the barley grew up out of the grave."[189] Until the publication of the bog poems Heaney would not again speak so directly to the sectarian nature of the violence; even then he insisted his poem did not mean "up the IRA," but only that it was necessary for him to break his silence. By the time he had written the bog poems, his thinking had deepened and found space for nuance; however, he first had to put "me and everybody else" on the back burner, in order to prioritize poetry above all:

> for years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture. Blowing up sparks for meagre heat. Forgetting faith, straining towards good works. Attending insufficiently to the diamond absolutes, among which must be counted the sufficiency of that which is absolutely imagined. Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in despite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous.[190]

Theodor Adorno's 1949 dictum, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," seemed to be the very thing Heaney's poetry addressed when he began to "make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous." In his Nobel speech, Heaney insisted

[188] Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," *Selected Poems,* 422.
[189] Heaney, *Selected Poems,* 267.
[190] Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," 423.

that lyric poetry was an answer to barbarism:

> The form of the poem, in other words, is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit, the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.[191]

Further, he appealed to Zbigniew Herbert, who said that "the task of the poet now was 'to salvage out of the catastrophe of history at least two words, without which all poetry is an empty play of meanings and appearances, namely: justice and truth.'"[192] So when in 1990, the Field Day Theatre Company, founded by Brien Friel, author of the play *Translations*, and the actor Stephen Rea, invited Heaney to translate a Greek tragedy for their Northern Irish audience, he was prepared for the undertaking, not least for having been one of those very schoolboys who spent years reading, translating, and internalizing the traditions of classical literature.

By the time of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney was becoming as known as a translator of poetry as he was for poetry itself. He became focused on the work of East European poets, concerning himself with their translation and publication, introducing them to English-speaking audiences through his lectures and critical essays – collections such as *Preoccupations* (1980) and *The Government of the Tongue* (1989). Exile had been a recurring theme since the 1970s when Heaney left Belfast to move south to Dublin, *translating* his family from ground zero of the Troubles to a place of relative safety, bearing and then shedding the guilt for that move throughout the course of his poetic practice. He both took encouragement from and received solace in reading the

[191] Heaney, *Redress,* 34.
[192] Quoted in Heaney, *Redress,* 76.

experiences of suffering and exile in the sophisticated poetry of the self-exiled East Europeans he encountered both personally and through collaborating with them.

Heaney began to become fascinated with using translation of a classical work as a means of telling a contemporary truth during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the Republic. It was at this time that he began to look into Dante and found there his inspiration for one of his most powerful book-long poems, *Station Island*. In a 1999 public discussion with Robert Hass (translator of five books by Miłosz, his longtime colleague at UC Berkeley), Heaney was asked about his poem "Ugolino" from *Station Island*, and he related that at the time, the situation in Ireland seemed to him a form of "cannibalism." He had been reading *Inferno,* and the story of Archbishop Roger and Ugolino struck him as containing an essential image, useful to express this feeling: "I raided the section (…) I interfered with it a bit. I did a Lowell-esque translation."[193] So Heaney distinguished between poems the translator "inhabits" and those that are "raided," the former being characterized by a long association with the poem, a deep familiarity that enables a translation that prioritizes fidelity to the original, especially to the spirit of the language (like his *Buile Suibhne* and *Beowulf*), the latter being likened to a Viking raid — go in, plunder what you need for your own poem, and display the spoils for your own purpose, naming it for Robert Lowell as an infamous practitioner of this freewheeling method which foregrounded the poet doing the translating and the poem that resulted, rather than the poem being translated and its original author's form, meaning, and style.[194] But what's important to keep in mind here, despite the fact that Heaney may have warped the original material for his own ends, is that his work as a translator always seems to act as an intervention, or a commentary, on the difficult situation he found himself

[193] Seamus Heaney and Robert Hass, *Sounding Lives, the Art of Translating Poetry* (UC Berkeley, 1999), 2.

[194] Though he was hardly the only one; though some of his translations were very brilliant according to conventional criteria, Ezra Pound also did quite a bit of pirating, stealing into port everywhere from China to Egypt to India, and others like WS Merwin, who like Pound, translated Provençal with varying degrees of success.

in as a public representative of Northern Ireland during the Troubles, as well as a possible way to transcend his very status as a representative. As David-Antoine Williams argues, "Heaney has as much as any artist been pushed and pulled in opposing directions (...) However, what remains constant in Heaney's poetry, across the shifting points of view and the various apportioning of loss and blame, is a resistance to the 'harnassing' of poetry (...) to the instrumentalism that requests of poetry that it be an 'applied art.'"[195] This is true of the Greek translations as well; as we will see, although they were undertaken with a certain civic intervention in mind, they do so obliquely, by presenting ethical dilemmas that could provoke thought with enough distance as to not moralize. In other words, his translations don't simply critique the present moment; they *stage* a way of perceiving it that is much more universal, seeking for a way in which, to quote TS Eliot, "[people] of various races and lands could think together."[196]

*The Cure at Troy* was performed to acclaim and some controversy. It can be no coincidence, considering the role Heaney attributes to poetry, that the first blast of the Chorus that opens Act I announces that "Poetry / Allowed the god to speak. / It was the voice / of reality and justice."[197] Although Heaney took liberties with the Chorus, it was a way for him to "secularize" the play and make it a bit more palpable to modern audiences. A direct appeal to a certain deity might not resonate in the same way that concepts such as "reality" and "justice" – as ideals represented and, indeed, brought forth by poetry itself – could. In fact, the play appears to overtly portray the impasse posed by the violence of the Troubles, but was intended to speak against the apartheid regime in South Africa, the character of Philoctetes as a type of Nelson Mandela rebounding from 27 years of imprisonment, and in his triumphant return to Soweto, showing "the

[195] Williams, *Defending Poetry,* 115.
[196] TS Eliot, *Dante* (Cambridge UP Online, 2010 [1929]), no pg.
[197] Heaney, *Cure at Troy*, 2.

generosity of his (...) helping the polis to get together again,"[198] Cape Town becoming the new Troy to be healed by the healing of the exile. In fact, Heaney gifted Mandela a copy of the play upon his release from detention.[199]

As I mentioned, Heaney did take some liberties with the original, serving to contemporize and place the events in the time of their writing. An example of this comes at the very end of *The Cure at Troy*, where the Chorus sings, "The innocent in gaols/ Beat on their bars together./ A hunger-striker's father/ Stands in the graveyard dumb./ The police widow in veils/ Faints at the funeral home." These, as I mentioned elsewhere, he later considered a mistake, and they do have the ironic effect of turning a play that is "classic" for precisely the reason that it speaks to all times and places, into a reflection on the Troubles in Northern Ireland, specifically recalling Bobby Sands and the Maze Prison protests, dating his efforts somewhat. However, putting such a partisan slant on the verse, while perhaps regrettable, does not manage to overshadow the tone of the play. Heaney relates that, being most comfortable writing for the character of the Chorus, eventually he dared even to stray from the original text of *Philoctetes* entirely; the very next stanza after those problematic lines are the very lines for which he is now most famous: "once in a lifetime/ The longed-for tidal wave/ Of justice can rise up,/ And hope and history rhyme." He later said that he was "grateful to see the lines enter the language of the peace process," but was very aware that they belonged "in the realm of pious aspiration."[200] I don't want to spend too much time comparing the differences between Heaney's version and the original; in the end, Sophocles' play is about "what justifies war, what is necessary to win a war, and the duty of the individual to the state,

[198] Brendan Corcoran, "'Stalled in the Pre-articulate': Heaney, Poetry, and War," *Oxford Handbooks Online*, ed. Tim Kendall, (September 2012): np.
[199] Premesh Lalu and Homi Bhabha, "Temporalities of race and translational memory," *South African Journal of Science*, vol. 118 (October 2022): 11.
[200] Quoted in O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones,* 43.

including those with a special gift, such as artists," and Heaney does justice to that interpretation.[201] With that in mind, I'd like to point out that the most important – and in my opinion, justified – tweaking of the source text concerns the role poetry plays in the process of reconciliation: indeed, the now-famous "hope and history" line explicitly evokes poetry, in the possibility of them "rhyming." But more importantly, these lines appear in place of Sophocles' original *deus ex machina*, which allows the play to resolve itself squarely within the human realm of ethics and politics, rather than through some semi-divine intervention, embodied by Herakles in Sophocles' original. Although Heaney's changes are not small ones, they are justified in his need to make the play resonate beyond any fixed ideological camps, while also proposing a possible way out: poetry, and its ability to speak to the heart of things.

But beyond these choices, there is that of register: in *The Burial at Thebes*, his version of *Antigone,* the language of the sisters when they speak to each other, the language of Kreon, and the language of the Chorus all operate on different levels, which is not so much the case in Greek, where the levels of sonorousness in the speech varies much less. In Heaney's version, the sisters are two Northern Irish lasses who grew up in the same house together, and their dialogue is colloquial and plain. In Greek, however, the play begins with the long, vocative Omega, in a solemnly accented pentameter:

ὦ κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον Ἰσμήνης κάρα,
ἆρ' οἶσθ' ὅ τι Ζεὺς τῶν ἀπ' Οἰδίπου κακῶν
ὁποῖον οὐχὶ νῷν ἔτι ζώσαιν τελεῖ;
οὐδὲν γὰρ οὔτ' ἀλγεινὸν οὔτ' ἄτης ἄτερ
οὔτ' αἰσχρὸν οὔτ' ἄτιμόν ἐσθ', ὁποῖον οὐ
τῶν σῶν τε κἀμῶν οὐκ ὄπωπ' ἐγὼ κακῶν.
καὶ νῦν τί τοῦτ' αὖ φασι πανδήμῳ πόλει

[201] Iain Twiddy, "Visions of Reconciliation: Longley, Heaney, and the Greeks," *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 21, no. 4, (2013): 434.

κήρυγμα θεῖναι τὸν στρατηγὸν ἀρτίως;
ἔχεις τι κεἰσήκουσας; ἤ σε λανθάνει
πρὸς τοὺς φίλους στείχοντα τῶν ἐχθρῶν κακά;

It's ὦ, ῶ, ὠ, ω, and o, (*o - o - o - o*), the sound of woe, heavily alliterated to give voice to consonants that hack and spit out her misery, k and p. And here is Heaney's version:

Ismene, quick, come here!
What's to become of us?
Why are we always the ones?
There's nothing, sister, nothing
Zeus hasn't put us through
Just because we are who we are —
The daughters of Oedipus.
And because we are his daughters
We took what came, Ismene,
In public and in private,
Hurt and humiliation —
But this I cannot take.

No, wait.
Here's what has happened.
There's a general order issued
And again it hits the hardest.
The ones we love, it says,
Are enemies of the state.
To be considered traitors —

The sisters are their names, Antigone "in place of parents," Ismene "to linger or hang back." But in Heaney's version, Antigone is more than an embodiment of the old religious tradition that Kreon would force her to violate; she's quick to answer, hot-headed, frantic, putting the ire in Ireland. The phrases "put us through," "enemies of the state," are 20th century. The message is clear immediately: just being "who you are" is enough to brand you a kind of enemy or traitor, whether

your identity is Catholic or Protestant you will be hated by the other side, and the one in power decides who will be hurt and humiliated and who will be a "hero." In both plays, it becomes clear that the individual's competing relation to the state and to others is a recurring concern.

I'd like now to propose another way of reading Heaney's two translations of Sophocles, one that involves reading *around* the text, that is, to consider how the act of translation itself, rather than the content represented in the translations, contribute to Heaney's larger project, in which translation is much more than an artistic undertaking, but rather becomes "metonymic of the ethical imperative," that is, a search for "a new poetic language which, though rooted in the distant past, nonetheless bodes a renewal of future speech."[202] It goes without saying that for Heaney, this "future speech" is the bearer of human hope and possibility, especially in the face of brutality and violence. In order to do this, I will draw on Homi Bhabha's idea of "translational memory," as a way of situating Heaney's *urge* to translate in a larger picture that is dependent on translation's Janus-like ability to stare into the past while also peering into the future, positing a horizon out of what came before.

**Poetry as prophecy**

In a 2022 interview, Homi Bhabha outlines his notion of "translational memory" and what it means to posit the past as some sort of map for future political organization.

> Memory is (...) not simply an individual rethinking of the past. Memory is caught at the crossroads of the past that refuses to die, the mythic content that will be reproduced, and

[202] Williams, *Defending Poetry,* 109.

> the future that keeps pointing its finger at us from elsewhere and saying, "You are our memory." It's called the memory of the future.[203]

Bhabha imagines the relation between the past and the present as glimpsed "elliptically from the future," as if we were watching from a future shore, an imagined position that would allow us to adopt an ethical stance in the present: "we say, how would I be able to live if I didn't do this now, if I didn't align with this now? That *now* is not simply the now that is present in the moment. It's a prophetic now, it is a now that we project into the present by placing ourselves virtually in the future."[204] It should be clear by now that Bhabha is not talking about literary translation; he's rather using translation as a metaphor for how we "translate" the past into a possible – and hopefully more humane – future. But isn't that what translating the Classics is all about too? Does it not utilize the past, not to venerate it or enlist it to crooked ends, but rather to give us perspective, acting as a plateau or a clearing along the long path forward, a place where we can catch our breaths and reassess. In the Brian Friel play I mentioned in passing, *Translations* – the first play to be produced for Field Day, the company that commissioned Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* – the character of Hugh, a hedge-school master in a rural Irish town, cautions his students that when studying the past, it's not necessarily "the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language."[205] If we are to take this assertion seriously, then we can see how translation – literary translation – can play a major role in the shaping of these images.

This brings us to a fundamental question: why bother to translate the Classics at all? As we have seen, Heaney needed to "update" *Philoctetes* in order not only to speak to the political moment, but also to rid the play of divine intervention, since waiting for any kind of "justice" from

[203] Bhabha, "Temporalities of race and translational memory," np.
[204] Bhabha, "Temporalities of race and translational memory," np.
[205] Brian Friel, *Translations* (Faber and Faber, 1981), 66.

above is akin to waiting for Godot. But perhaps we can resort to Zbigniew Herbert here, as Heaney so often did, for elucidation. In his poem, "Why the Classics," Hebert writes:

if art for its subject
will have a broken jar
a small broken soul
with a great self-pity

what will remain after us
will be like lovers' weeping
in a small dirty hotel
when wallpaper dawns.[206]

Here, Herbert invokes a certain notion of courage often depicted in works of Classical Antiquity, and not necessarily some two-dimensional courage as depicted in simple, physical bravery, but one which can admit Antigone, for instance, and Philoctetes, both of whom must bear their exile from the tribe – that is to say, accept their fates – with a certain amount of philosophy and grace. Heaney was certainly interested in this aspect of Greek drama, since they were able to serve as models for his own inner battles, as well as the inner battles of his fellow citizens. But beyond the content – beyond the ethical dramas being represented to an audience – his *need* to translate, his *impulse* to do so, as well as his wisdom in choosing his source material, are his way of enacting Bhabha's "translational memory," with the explicit aim, in Heaney's own words, of "recover[ing] a past to prefigure a future."[207] The past includes these models provided by Greek tragedies, especially for Heaney, the courage to face adversity, and not simply from some foreign enemy, but from within one's own country. But it also includes language's unique ability to forge "images of the past" that the present direly needs. From the very beginning, in his urge to "dig" through

[206] Zbigniew Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, trans. Alissa Valles (HarperCollins, 2007), 266-67.
[207] Heaney, *Redress*, 8.

sedimented layers of the English language in order to tap into a common source that had once fed both Ireland and England, to his later translations that enlisted the help of foreign languages, values, and conceptions of justice and ethics to help him bring an outside gaze on the absurdities of present political conflicts, Heaney was committed to deploying the past for the benefit of the future. He was never interested in throwing the baby out with the bathwater – that would merely be forgetting. Rather, he *remembered* in order to find a way to live *now*, and he lead, ethically, with that remembering. The figure of the Irish *fili* (plural *filidh*) is appropriate to invoke here: a fili was a caste of poets in early Ireland who were often credited with the gift of prophecy. "These poets, who were the successors of the druids and could practice divination, were magicians and lawgivers."[208] Again, as I have mentioned earlier, Heaney's use of legal terminology in his poems and essays was not only a simple appeal to existing laws and rights, but a call to a higher law that exists not in any beyond, but here, in the space of ethics that is created in real human community. For Heaney, translation was a way of stressing those unwritten laws without appealing to the laws of his country, laws which, by the time he turned to translating the Greeks, had become mere words tainted by their sectarian use:

> Heaney did not mean to be taken as a witness for a particular settlement or policy [regarding the Troubles] in the way that, say, the ancient Athenians invoked Homer. In his decision to adapt Sophocles in *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney signalled that he was moving beyond the bardic territorialism of the Homeric tradition, and emulating the newer concerns with ethics, psychology, and citizenship that were essential to Athens' philosophy and the drama of Sophocles. This Hellenism does not mean a renunciation of the Irish tradition, however, because in the 'hope and history' chorus Heaney combines poetry with prophecy. While [poetry and prophecy] are both forms of authority in *Rhetoric*, Aristotle distinguishes between them as reliable witnesses for the past and future respectively. In medieval Ireland, however, the *filidh* also delivered prophecies as well as poems. In the 'hope and history'

[208] Glossary of Poetic Terms, *Poets.org*, np.

> chorus, therefore, Heaney brings the old Irish association between poetry and prophecy together with the ancient Athenian notion of drama as a civic art.[209]

Through translation, Heaney was able to remain rooted in his domestic language, history, and politics, but also orient himself to a wider sky that allowed him to propose an alternative that cut through the camped, partisan clutter. Translation, and art more generally, was a place that afforded him an 'outside' to time, but never history, a place full of forgotten voices always speaking but rarely heard. And a canny expression is just what one senses from most of Heaney's chosen translations: he knows whereof he speaks. The voices have been internalized long ago: the Irish, the Latin, the Greek, the Anglo-Saxon, the European. Beyond those: the rebel, the peace-maker, the teacher, the orator, the husband and father, the Christian, the doubter, the victim and the victor. They were all present in him simultaneously, much like the past dwells incessantly in the present. Even where the source is most foreign (and these are very few), he does the original poet the favour of apprehending in the work that which he can body forth from his imagination so that the poetry can live, create a spark, cast light. In this way, he used translation in order to keep something very important and precious alive.

**Conclusion**

> Poetry need not engage directly with the troubles of the time. It need not enter into the logic of those troubles, nor need it address their root causes, nor even propose a way around them. It does not propose, precisely because all propositions are eventually gainsaid by counter-propositions, just as all offences are eventually avenged by counter-offences.

[209] Nathan Wallace, *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland from Yeats to Field Day* (Cork UP, 2014), 12.

> Instead (...) poetry comes at the minds of its readers from an unexpected angle, and for a moment dislocates the cycle of offence and retribution.[210]

As much as Heaney's poetry attempted to "dislocate" the fixed ideologies of Northern Ireland, it is his translations, especially of Sophocles, that provided him with a longer view, a longer lens from which to reckon the present impasse. While his translations of the Greek plays took liberties, they nonetheless were true to the civic spirit and ethical querying these plays were originally meant to spark. Both of his versions of Sophocles "hold out hope that individuals and, by implication cultures, can advance in ethical consciousness, while implicitly acknowledging the difficulties of halting war's seemingly intractable, bloody momentum."[211] I highlighted in this chapter Heaney's ability to work through layers of history and language in order to bring things to a more common ground, a more human ground, and although this work on language is not explicitly reflected in the content of his Sophocles translations, the simple fact that he chose to translate Sophocles in the particular social context of the Troubles testifies to a similar impulse, albeit one operating on a more contextual plane, rather than a purely textual one. By uncovering the past, by choosing these texts to translate, Heaney was able to free himself from his difficult position of being at once a "spokesperson" for Northern Ireland and a poet more generally. In this sense, *who* a poet chooses to translate and *when* she or he chooses to do the translation also play a significant role in the meaning that will be ascribed to the translated text. From Dante to the bird-king Sweeney, Heaney was especially adept at choosing translations that spoke a truth he was struggling towards in his own poetry, but which could not be "staged" in those terms. By bringing in other voices, he was able to dramatize an ethical problem that spoke both to the immediate moment as well as any future

[210] Williams, *Defending Poetry,*102.
[211] Parker, "Back in the Republic of Conscience," 778.

moment that might remotely resemble it. “In crisis situations, (...) there is little room for the tender conscience. If your side wants to win politically, you all have to bond together. And that bonding can strangle truth-to-self.”[212] Not only did his translations of Sophocles portray, in their content, this difficult tug-of-war between the “bonding together” of a political faction and the “tender conscience” of the individual caught up in the turmoil, trying to make ethical sense of the demands placed upon her or him; it was also his *drive* to translate, and to translate these particular tragedies in that particular moment, that capture and embody, extra-textually, the negotiation Heaney so longed for in his poetic works. As the short story writer Jhumpa Lahiri once said, “I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a non-existent one.”[213] For Heaney, translation was that voice on a future shore beckoning to him: what kind of person do you want to be? Will you pass the test?[214] Will you be found wanting, or will the necessary courage be elicited?

[212] Seamus Heaney, quoted in Emanuela Zirzotti, “Translating Tragedy: Seamus Heaney’s Sophoclean Plays,” *Studi Irlandesi,* issue 4, (2014): 131.
[213] Jhumpa Lahiri, “Intimate alienation:Immigrant fiction and translation,” *Translation, Text and Theory*, ed. R. Bhaya Nair (Sage, 2002), 120.
[214] In fact, a working title for *The Cure at Troy* was “The Test” (Ian Twiddy, 434).

## Chapter 5: Giving voice to my translation of *Seven Against Thebes*

### Voice and the Translator's Burden

> "(…) what constitutes poetry, at least in the individual case, is exactly what survives in translation: that which is so essentially poetic in a given poet's voice that it can be heard in any translation, for example, what Auden calls Cavafy's 'unique tone of voice' unmistakable in English, he believes, whoever the translator may be."[215]

I have often argued to any of my colleagues willing to listen, that exactly the opposite is true — that Cavafy is in fact the most malleable of voices; whoever translates him gives him the tone they choose, as in the original he is himself indistinct except for his weary nostalgia and ennui resulting from his loss of youthful ardour. And just when I could dismiss him from the canon as being the creature of the enthusiastic and similarly nostalgic men who translated and extolled him beyond his poetic gift (and, perhaps, made him what we might call a poetic 'gay icon'), he is suddenly saved by a champion: Czeslaw Miłosz, who, in *The Witness of Poetry* (his T.S. Eliot lectures for Harvard 1981-1982), writes:

> (…) one poet, at least a few of whose poems belong to the canon of twentieth-century art and who deserves the name of forerunner, even though his work as a whole is uneven. A Greek from Alexandria, Constantin Cavafy was born in 1863. After many attempts at writing in the spirit of fin-de-siècle, he dared to embrace an idea alien to the highly subjectivist literary fashion of his contemporaries. He identified himself with the entire Hellenic world, from Homeric times up through the dynasty of the Seleucids and Byzantium, incarnating himself in them, so that his journey through time and space was also a journey into his own interior realm, his history as a Hellene (…) Cavafy's best poems are meditations on the past, which

[215] Edmund Keeley, *Modern Greek Writers* (Princeton UP, 1972), 55.

> is brought closer so that characters and situations from many centuries back are perceived by the reader as kindred. Cavafy seems to belong in the second half of this century, but this is an illusion resulting from his late arrival in world poetry, through translations. In fact, nearly unknown in his lifetime (though TS Eliot published him in his *Criterion*) and only gradually discovered after his death in 1933, he wrote his most famous poems before World War I. "Waiting for the Barbarians" dates from 1898; "Ithaka" in the first version from 1894 (…)[216]

The trick of suspending himself in time, performed by his translators, is one that has been performed on all the classical canon, raising them on to a podium to speak to our time from their position in time, an ancient voice speaking a contemporary dialect, commenting on the issue of the moment from the pages of texts written thousands of years ago.

**Translating Cavafy**

As with so many Greek poets of the 20th century, translations by Edmund Keeley in collaboration with Philip Sherrard were among the first to appear, as was the case for George Seferis, Odysseus Elytes, and Yiannis Ritsos, to name a few of the others. Keeley and Sherrard translated Cavafy as a team over several years, though each had his own separate speciality. Keeley translated much contemporary work, while Sherrard was more interested in older forms of Greek, especially Hellenistic, and Sherrard was considered a poet as well as a scholar (though he was hardly known as a poet in his own right).[217]

[216] Czeslaw Milsoz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Harvard UP, 1983), 67.
[217] https://deniseharveypublisher.gr/people/philip-sherrard

What is astonishing in their collaboration translating Seferis and Cavafy, however, is the candour with which they admit to 'creating' a voice for them, rather than giving their own words and style their head:

> We would (…) read the draft translations aloud to each other and work on them intensely until they sounded right. We did not discuss what "right" meant, except to agree that any idioms too specifically British or American should be avoided, along with all archaisms, inversions, personal idiosyncrasies, and rhetorical flourishes that might make Serferis sound less frugal, less demotic and contemporary, than he sounded in Greek. In short, we worked mostly from whatever our training and instinct gave us as writers in English (…) Our knowledge of Greek proved to balance out, Sherrard having a stronger traditional base through his specialization in classical and medieval Greek, I a stronger grasp of the range of contemporary idiom as a result of my several childhood and postadolescent years in Greece (…) It seemed to me that our voice for Seferis in English was there. **What was not quite there to the degree it might have been even in translation was Seferis' Greek voice, though we didn't get around to admitting this to ourselves for more than another decade…**"[218] (emphasis mine)

> Our impulse was to bring Cavafy into the post-sixties by creating a voice for him that we hoped would sound as contemporary as the best Anglo-American poetry of the day. As we put it in the Foreword to that volume, we were motivated by 'a growing sense that Cavafy should be rendered in a style that is neither too stilted nor artificial'(…) This perhaps too self-conscious effort to update Cavafy can be illustrated by a few lines from our different versions of two of his best-known poems, 'Waiting for the Barbarians' and 'The City'. The opening lines of the first read as follows in our early *Six Poets* version:[219]

> What are we waiting for, gathered in the market-place?
> The barbarians are to arrive today.
> Why so little activity in the Senate?
> Why do the Senators sit there without legislating?
> Because the barbarians will arrive today.
> Why should the Senators bother with laws now?
> The barbarians, when they come, will do the law-making.

[218] Keeley, *Modern Greek Writers,* 59.
[219] Keeley, *Modern Greek Writers,* 64.

In the *Selected Cavafy* of a decade later, this has become:

> What are we waiting for, packed in the forum?
> The barbarians are due here today.
> Why isn't anything going on in the senate?
> Why have the senators given up legislating?
> Because the barbarians are coming today.
> What's the point of senators and their laws now?
> When the barbarians get here, they'll do the legislating."[220]

My own version:

> — What is the crowded marketplace waiting for?
> It's the barbarians will get here today.
> — Why in the Senate is there such an inaction?
> Why sit the Senators and don't make laws?
> Because the barbarians will get here today.
> What laws now can the Senators pass?
> The barbarians once here will make the laws.

The original:

> — Τι περιμένουμε στην αγορά συναθροισμένοι;
> Είναι οι βάρβαροι να φθάσουν σήμερα.
> — Γιατί μέσα στην Σύγκλητο μια τέτοια απραξία;
> Τι κάθοντ' οι Συγκλητικοί και δεν νομοθετούνε;
> Γιατί οι βάρβαροι θα φθάσουν σήμερα.
> Τι νόμους πια θα κάμουν οι Συγκλητικοί;
> Οι βάρβαροι σαν έλθουν θα νομοθετήσουν.

What, to my mind, Keeley and Sherrard get so wrong in their revision is the word "forum" to replace "market-place"; could a less Greek word be found (whereas αγορά literally means "marketplace" understood as a central square, which never left the Greek sense of the word unlike the Latin "forum," which has lost its original association with the open air of the market), and

[220] Constantine Cavafy, *Selected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard (Princeton UP, 1972), 60.

likewise for ‘legislate’? Besides the Roman/Latinisms, they don’t see the force of μια **τέτοια** απραξία; Keeley and Sherrard write ‘so little activity’ and ‘isn’t anything going on’, when clearly in the Greek, in the form απραξία, the α- corresponds directly to in- as in, ‘inaction’, literally “*such a kind* of inaction” — the kind where the fact that no one acts is noticed. The paraphrases look weak without considering the qualifier μια τέτοια**.** The barbarians are not “due”, but are “will arrive” or “get here.”

And when a Greek adds the word πια meaning “any more” (‘now’), in this context it connotes a kind of frustration at their powerlessness. Again, “The barbarians, when they come, will do the law-making” and “When the barbarians get here, they’ll do the legislating” with their wordy colloquial tones subvert the inexorable rhythm of the original, Oi BAR-baroi san ELthoun tha nomotheTIsoun — ironically, *by the sound of it* the law is laid down.

Now let’s look at the particle “σαν.” In modern Greek it means “as” or “like”, “as if”. This complicates the last line for a contemporary Greek reader (though it is understood), because in the Alexandrian Greek of Cavafy’s time, σαν can be recognized as a shortened version of ήσαν, or “they were” έλθουν coming, so most correctly, “The barbarians, [once] they’ve got here, will make the laws” — while my version follows the rhythm of the Greek almost exactly (both 13 syllables). When the Senate “sits”, they sit as a body (the “sitting” of a court or other official body) not as individuals in chairs. So they ‘sit’, κάθοντ[ε], they don’t “sit there”, they haven’t “given up”; the question is why are they assembled if they don’t intend to make laws.

Someone will say, “It’s the barbarians will get here today” isn’t correct English, but of course it is; Είναι οι βάρβαροι literally means, “it is [that] the barbarians will get here today”; and while the syntax is not common in North America, it is common in British English and perfectly correct. Why use it? Because in line 5 Cavafy has Γιατί οι βάρβαροι, whereas Keeley and Sherrard

use “The barbarians” and “Because the barbarians,” without including the sense of immediate urgency conveyed by the “It is” in Cavafy’s; just to say “The barbarians” is as though they are not foreigners who come with their strange ways but a group that is known and come before — and this is precisely not the case. They wait for the barbarians because they are a useful threat that looms, not because they ever come.

Also, without the dashes, one might not suspect there is more than one speaker. Why leave them out, especially when their absence fails to suggest that whoever is answering is not the same as the one asking. Without them to connote questions spoken aloud, it makes it seem as if the whole poem, both questions and answers, are just rhetorical; whereas with them, there is the suggestion that while the questions are asked, the answers are not audible to the questioner but only to the reader. This adds a whole other dimension to the poem as well as a metrical fidelity to Cavafy’s original that is not apparent in Keeley and Sherrard’s prosaic version.

| **Keeley & Sherrard, 2nd edition** | **NL** |
|---|---|
| What are we waiting for, packed in the forum?<br>The barbarians are due here today.<br>Why isn’t anything going on in the senate?<br>Why have the senators given up legislating?<br>Because the barbarians are coming today.<br>What’s the point of senators and their laws now?<br>When the barbarians get here, they’ll do the legislating. | —What is the crowded marketplace waiting for?<br>It’s the barbarians will get here today.<br>— Why in the Senate is there such an inaction?<br>Why sit the Senators and don’t make laws?<br>Because the barbarians will get here today.<br>What laws now can the Senators pass?<br>The barbarians once here will make the laws. |

The word Γιατί means both "why" and "because". Looking at the first words of each line in the Greek, Τι …Είναι …Γιατί …Τι …Γιατί …Τι …Οι" we hear "ee-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee", and each subsequent stanza begins with Γιατί and continually reprises the ee sound. This suggests a kind of lament, and it's not really possible to replicate it in the English; however by concentrating on the metre, "—place waiting for" "get here today" "such an inaction" "don't make laws" "Senators pass" "make the laws", we establish a kind of drumbeat which gives a chant-like quality to the stanza as a whole, and that is suggestive of a ritualized intonation, which is of course what the poem is saying: the stylized yet nihilistic rituals of waiting for the barbarians takes the place of doing what is expedient and necessary. As the final stanzas reveal:

| **Cavafy** | **NL** |
|---|---|
| — Γιατί ν' αρχίσει μονομιάς αυτή η ανησυχία<br>κ' η σύγχυσις. (Τα πρόσωπα τι σοβαρά που εγίναν).<br>Γιατί αδειάζουν γρήγορα οι δρόμοι κ' η πλατέες,<br>κι όλοι γυρνούν στα σπίτια τους πολύ συλλογισμένοι;<br><br>Γιατί ενύχτωσε κ' οι βάρβαροι δεν ήλθαν.<br>Και μερικοί έφθασαν απ' τα σύνορα,<br>και είπανε πως βάρβαροι πια δεν υπάρχουν.<br><br>Και τώρα τι θα γένουμε χωρίς βαρβάρους.<br>Οι άνθρωποι αυτοί ήσαν μια κάποια λύσις. | — Why all at once this anxiety<br>and confusion. (Faces, how serious they became).<br>Why are the streets and squares quickly emptying,<br>and everyone turns back to their homes all pensive?<br><br>Because night fell and the barbarians didn't come.<br>And some have got here from the borders,<br>and said barbarians don't exist anymore.<br><br>And now what will we become without barbarians.<br>Those people were some sort of an answer. |

Here we see both πια and ήσαν used in the way I've previously explained; the word "and" begins a line five times. The word "λύσις" can mean "solution", but considering all the questions, I used the alternative definition, "answer". But here is the Keeley and Sherrard version, they seem to miss this point:

> Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
> (How serious people's faces have become.)
> Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
> everyone going home lost in thought?
>
> Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
> And some of our men just in from the border say
> there are no barbarians any longer.
> Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> Those people were a kind of solution.

The amazon.com blurb for Daniel Mendelsohn's 2009 translation, *C. P. Cavafy's Collected Poems*, tells us that he "is uniquely positioned to give readers full access to Cavafy's genius. And we hear for the first time the remarkable music of his poetry: the sensuous rhymes, rich assonances, and strong rhythms of the original Greek that have eluded previous translators".[221] In fact, he is guilty, perhaps more skillfully, of the same projection his predecessors Keeley and Sherrard were. Namely, the "voice" he gives to Cavafy is his own creation ("—Why is there such great idleness inside Senate house?") To find, in English, a translation which is similar to Cavafy's unadorned voice in Greek, we must look to a Greek Oxford man Evangelos Sachperoglou (b. 1941 in Pireaus). And we must remember that Milowz said it best: Cavafy wrote those poems at the turn of the century, before World War I, in Alexandria. He was barely known in his own lifetime (by Greeks), but after being "discovered" by some British male poets and academics who – let us say – had

[221] Mendelsohn, Daniel, *C. P. Cavafy's Collected Poems* (Knopf, 2009). His 2021 collection of 24 essays is entitled *Waiting for the Barbarians* (New York Review of Books).

gone to Alexandria or the Greek islands to enjoy a little freedom, his poems took on an anthemic air. He was translated, I could even say, *fashioned*, because it became fashionable to know your Cavafy, your Seferis, your Ritsos, your Elytis – all in English of course – as a kind of renewal of Byronic Hellenophilia. It was a way of making the connection to their pretensions as public school Greek scholars with the culture of modern Greece post-liberation, recognizing their culture had survived the horrors of the wars and remained as steadfast as the Parthenon. There can be no question of Cavafy's being genuinely "urbane" or sophisticated, and certainly not a "genius"; that is a projection. What he had was the classical voice behind him, the seductively nostalgic voice of one who looks back to see what was lost -- he definitely is not forward-looking, nor does he advocate for modernity. Let's take one more look at this poem, in Sachperoglou's translation (in British English, clearly composed for the Oxford World Classics series):

— What are we waiting for, assembled in the Forum?

The barbarians are to arrive today

— Why then such inactivity in the Senate?
Why do the Senators sit back and do not legislate?

Because the barbarians will arrive today.
What sort of laws now can Senators enact?
When the barbarians come, they'll do the legislating.

…

— Why has there suddenly begun all this commotion,
and this confusion? (How solemn people's faces have become).
Why are the streets and the squares emptying so swiftly,
and everyone is returning home deep in preoccupation?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some people have arrived from the frontiers
and said there are no barbarians anymore.[222]

[222] Sachperoglou, Evangelos, *C.P. Cavafy The Collected Poems* (Oxford University Press: UK, 2007), 17.

The edition includes the Greek original on the facing page, and it indeed follows the text closely. My own effort had the intention of transforming some of the characteristics of Cavafy's Greek into English counterparts; this translation (the use of “Forum” notwithstanding) gives us the thing in itself, the unpoeticised translation in all its quotidian expression. And yet, I think this version allows us to get to the heart of who the barbarians are -- of course, the true barbarians are ourselves, if we let them come. So long as the senate still sits idle, so long as people are still in the market place looking scared, civilization stands, but we know it's under threat. If they didn't come again today, that means we cannot look for the threat from without, we have to see that it comes from within ourselves, and that is the problem -- there's no one else to blame. On the “frontiers”, they have already admitted this to themselves. There is more than one way to look at them, of course; in any case, my translation is meant to illustrate how the English translations of Cavafy have distorted his pre-modern voice.

**Creating the Poet’s Voice**

Here is a briefer example from the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca, the first 12 lines of his poem “Navidad en el Hudson”:

¡Esa esponja gris!
Ese marinero recién degollado.
Ese río grande.
Esa brisa de limites oscuros.
Ese filo, amor, ese filo.

Estaban los cuatro marineros luchando con el mundo.
Con el mundo que no se puede recorrer sin caballos.
Estaban uno, cien, mil marineros
luchando con el mundo de las agudas velocidades,
sin enterarse de que el mundo
estaba solo por el cielo.

**Christmas On the Hudson**[223]

This gray sponge:
this sea-farer, lately beheaded!
This mighty river.
This wind from the shadowy zenith.
And this cutting-edge, love, this cutting edge!
Four sailors wrestled a planet,
a world of discernible angles,
an uncrossable world, save by horses.
One sailor, one hundred, one thousand,
wrestling the critical speeds of a planet,
and unaware, all of them,
that the world was alone in the sky.

That gray sponge!
That sailor whose throat was just cut.
That great river.
Those dark boundaries of the breeze.
That keen blade, my love, that keen blade.
The four sailors wrestled with the world.
With that sharp-edged world that all eyes see.
With the world no one can know without horses.
One, a hundred, a thousand sailors
wrestling with the world of keen-edged velocities,
unaware that the world
was alone in the sky.
(translated by Greg Simon and Steven E. White, 1988)

The 1955 translation by poet Ben Belitt (left) came out 20 years after Lorca was killed by Falangists near his home in Granada. It is easily observed that Belitt has chosen to give Lorca's phrases a rhythmic *drama* very differently expressed by the Spanish. The sailor was not "recently beheaded!" but *recién degollado* — throat just slit. "Sea-farer" takes our mind off the fact that Lorca is eying up sailors. To extricate a "shadowy zenith" from "limites oscuros" is surely to do

[223] Frederico Garcia Lorca, *Poet in New York,* trans. Ben Belitt (Grove Press, 1955), 34.

too much work. When an English-speaker hears “cutting edge”, hyphenated or not, it is overlaid with the phrasal meaning of being something extremely new rather than signifying a blade. And this poem is all about edges: the water’s as well as the razor’s. Why lard on all this synthetic flavour? It does nothing but obscure Garcia-Lorca’s own voice while not giving him a coherent one in English. In any case, though it produces some nonsense, Google translate shows us that Simon/White translation is far closer to the original:

That gray sponge!
That freshly slit sailor.
That big river.
That breeze of dark limits.
That edge, love, that edge.
There were the four sailors fighting with the world.
With the world that cannot be traversed without horses.
There were one, a hundred, a thousand sailors
fighting with the world of sharp speeds,
unaware that the world
I was lonely for heaven.

**How I Create Voice**

Looking at Heaney’s translation of Ozef Kalda’s “Diary of One Who Vanished,” I saw a kinship with my own translation of G. Verites’ poem, “The Contender”, and it is no coincidence that the translation was commissioned for an opera to be based on Kalda’s work.

> As Stuart Young emphasizes, the language SH uses in *Diary of One Who Vanished* ‘ensures not only that the work sounds, as Heaney aspires for his translations, very “like a Heaney poem” but it also serves to capture the country-hearth speech and the once upon a time quality of the original’ (Sonzogni 2021, 36). ‘Inevitably, you want to be true to whatever makes you sound like yourself,’ SH tells Keller, and ‘You have to sound to yourself as if you had written it.’ And SH’s translation, says Keller, ‘does have Mr

Heaney's fingerprints all over it, in its straightforward depiction of the physical world and its delight in a local vocabulary and an enriched lexicon' (Keller 2001, 19).

| **Kalda/Heaney** | **Verites/Lambros** |
|---|---|
| Now the moon is setting | Unfortunate I wandered |
| Country shadows darken: | lost amidst thick darkness, |
| Someone stands stock still | and the haunting winds passed by |
| Beyond there, past the gable. | moaning through thick branches, |
| Two eyes like hot coals | …Only a pair of burning eyes |
| Are glowing in the night. | which stared at me maniacal! |
| God Almighty, O dear | how dare you peer at me, evil eyes |
| God Almighty, help me! | with rapture diabolical! |
| Send me your light! | …I'll turn to Your embrace! |

Where drama is called for, sometimes a poet-translator can 'borrow' a voice from genre, in this case a kind of country-gothic: someone frightened in the dark thinks they see glowing eyes! and prays inwardly for God's protection. The poems of G. Verites were meant to speak to the believer

in a world increasingly turning away from religion, and so he invents characters to narrate inner monologues and leading stories, through which faith could be explored. These poems were written in service of a movement in the Greek Orthodox Church of the post-WWII generation: young men (and also some women) were recruited by various "brotherhoods" of theologians, both clergy and laity, to "make friends" with children and students, teaching them through summer camps and other kinds of group-activities that the traditions of Orthodox Christianity were a relevant way of life. They emphasized that it was not necessary — contrary to what the "Elders" from Mt Athos had been preaching and teaching — to become a monk or nun in order to be fulfilled in a spiritual and sacramental life. The brotherhood to which G. Verites, or Alexandros Gialas as he was born on the island of Chios in 1915, belonged was called Zoe, or Life. The Zoe Brotherhood was a prolific publisher of catechisms and religiously-themed books, and published three volumes of Gialas' poetry and essays until his early death at the Christlike age of 33. The virgin-poet was lionized somewhat, and one of his poems, Πασχαλινό, or Paschal Hymn in my translation, became a kind of anthem sung in schools until the mid -1970s when the Brotherhoods began to lose their followings to the same things energizing youth everywhere: rock n roll, the "neo kima" ("new wave").

The rhythm used in the example above, three-beats per short line, has that stalking quality of someone stealthily walking behind and seemingly gaining on you. It's very effective for producing the effect of being too frightened to do anything but utter the prayer of the foxhole: Lord, help! It is recognizable and familiar, and so an effective way of bringing over the emotion of the original poem into the newly translated one. The lurid descriptions of demons and hell that would haunt those who went astray can appear almost comic to us now, and so to rescue them — to restore the "voice" to something that might be read in a literary way rather than simply sneered

at by modern readers, I reached in the direction of Coleridge's "Christobel" — something English readers might recognize as Gothic horror meant to speak to us on a "spiritual" level in the sense that while we may not take 'demons' to be fact, yet they function as spectres for the imagination, stand-ins for unknown fears and dread. The poem, "Three Voices" is particularly bloody in this way, and yet while making little sense except as his somewhat phantasmagoric "vision of the post-apocalyptic", it is still one of my favourite poems in the book for the over-the-top dialogue between the three voices.

And so, as a dutiful nun, I lent the aesthetically blockheaded but well-intentioned Verites a sympathetic voice. Some of his poems like "Sweetest Mother" are unbearably saccharine, and yet in Greek it is not yet uncommon to hear the phrase "μάνα μου γλυκήτατε" used as a vocative for one's mother. There wasn't much hope of salvaging this poem for English ears, but streamlining the syntax to make it sound less like utter doggerel: 13 bouncing syllables became 6 plain trochees. It didn't improve the poem much, but it was the best I could do.

Decisions like this must not be so arbitrarily and confidently made in work of substance. As I have said earlier, the tone given to Seferis and Cavafy by his urbane mid-century admirers is not what they actually sound like in Greek. When a decision like that is taken by translators of literary standing or ambition, it can affect our reading of the poet for a long time to come.

**Translating Ancient Works**

In my opinion, this is where the most freedom and lyrical play can be practiced without much worry: the texts literally *are* the test of time, thousands of years and dozens of languages later, they remain classical pillars as eternal as those on the Akropolis. But I wanted to translate a version of

*Seven Against Thebes* which had never been brought into English before. And because I do not have adequate knowledge of the Greek of 467 BC, instead of trying to catch up from behind with cribs and dictionaries, I felt it would be more interesting to make the lateral move from modern Greek to modern English, languages which I have *settled*, rather than needing to *raid* as I would have had to do with the ancient text. The first time I saw the film directed by Giannis Tsarouxis, I found it compelling first of all because the language was so accessible to me (at the time I didn't know that he himself had translated it).[224] I scoured the internet to see if it had been published, and despaired of ever getting hold of it until I finally found a rare bookseller in a small shop in Athens who sold me a signed copy of an extremely limited one-and-only print run from 1983.

But of all the Greek dramas I might have chosen for this dissertation, why *Seven Against Thebes*? For the simple reason that it contained a *modern* feature that made me think it most appropriate: it's a sort of "prequel" to the play Seamus Heaney translated as *The Burial At Thebes*. The original ending of Aeschylus' play is not known, because no sooner did he die than the ending was rewritten to become the lead-in to Sophocles' *Antigone*, the final play in the so-called Oedipus cycle, though in fact it was written first: perhaps in order to fulfil the trajectory of Aeschylus' play. The main characters of *Antigone* are all introduced in the last act: Antigone and her sister Ismene, her brothers Polynikes and Eteokles, King Kreon; and the cause of the fratricides is played out, the character of Tiresius foreshadowed in the Sixth warrior, the seer Amphiaros. It is the missing piece in the saga of the cursed life of Oedipos and his doomed children.

The action depicts a hideous civil war: it was bad enough that Greeks had fought off foreign enemies for 50 years; now the two sides are of one blood, an incestuous form of war to double their incestuous birth. The theme of civil war would clearly have struck a chord with Heaney, and

[224] Recorded at the Theatre Mosxopodio of Thebes, 1982. Translated and directed by Giannis Tsarouxis. https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=vNQawNmm0Fw

it's also why he was commissioned to translate *Antigone* in the first place, it being a better-known play than *Seven Against Thebes*. But in terms of anti-war drama, it can compete with Aeschylus' *The Persians* in the canon of tragedies.

But now for the real question: why choose the introduction of the warriors and their shields? For one thing, the first part, where the women voice their fears through 100 lines, has been done again and again. They have been translated and interpreted so many ways; I've read some as puerile and naive as "women! what good are they, always frightening the troops with their shrieking!",[225] to over-interpretations which assign each one a historical context to represent, that I don't think anyone could ever prove well enough to matter. In my view, Etiocles' patronising rant against the women's fear is not meant to degrade *them*, but to show him to be a dupe, another blind victim of his father's curse (since it will be his fearless sister Antigone who restores what honour is left to that family). What we are seeing in the descriptions of the shields of the Seven however, is the story of those for whom war's consequences will end with the battle. They will either be victorious or else Hades awaits. In denigrating the women's fears, as he also does with the Chorus when they echo these fears in their prayers, he reveals himself to be a pawn in the game of the gods. Because for what other reason should a civil war ever be fought, except to insure the security of one's own blood? And is there a more terrible irony, when brother murders brother?

Aeschylus focuses the beginning (and the later writer, the ending) of the play on the women: the message driven home is that when all the warriors are killed, the women made slaves, bearing only the offspring of their captors' rapes, and all the boys are castrated, that is the end of you as a people, your immortality. If any old men are left to lament, they die off and are forgotten. The song of the losers, as with another of Aeschylus' plays, *The Persians*, the long laments of the

[225] George Theodoridis, 2010, https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/SevenAgainstThebes.php

Queen Atossa, the ghost of King Darius, and their wretched son Xerxes, tell the Greeks the story of the terrible fate that could have been theirs, but in a way that did not invite *hybris*.[226]

Another consideration was the issue of register. Heaney's translations transport the Greeks from Troy, to Belfast, to Derry, and back. There is a contemporary ring to his "versions" that is meant to set off alarm bells that resound in our own time. I did not feel this was as possible in the other sections of the play, unless I were to set up the scene with the terrified women as 21st century Syrians in Aleppo, Yazidis in Iraq, Houthis of Yemen, or the women of Afghanistan being abandoned to the Taliban.

Commenting on the play in the forward to Giannis Tsarouxis' landmark translation, Alexis Diamondopoulos likens the description of the bells attached to the shield of the first warrior to similar farcical elements of Aristophenian comedy.[227] The vulgar talk, boasting of the enemy which invites Nemesis at every turn (reflected in Eteocles' own blind rhetoric), translates well into the sort of damning strut Heaney's rhythms took on in *The Cure at Troy*. Though not intended as pastiche, the scene lends itself well to translation in both word and feeling to the contemporary genre of pro-wrestling and also maintains its seriousness as an exploration and critique of civil war. The protest of war has ever been my theme, and the tragedy lies in the fact that it is always timely. In a quote variously attributed to Plato, George Santayana, and the war-mongering General Douglas MacArthur, "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

Antigone and Ismene are left to bear the consequences of their brothers' actions; in the end, how the women fare tells the story of whether or not the line of generation will continue. In the case of Oedipos, it is to be hoped that the lone survivor, his youngest daughter Ismene, will never

[226] *The* Persians was the second and only surviving part of a trilogy that won first prize at the Athenian *Dionysia* (drama festival) in 472 BCE.
[227] *Επτά έπι Θήβας*, 12.

marry and carry it further. The obvious thing is that the women are meant to tell the story of what losing really meant. So also here, the constant repetition of that story by the Chorus, echoing the fears of the common people, stands in opposition to the bravery — or the boasting — of the warriors, for whom it's glory or death.

That is why I did not choose the opening, but why not choose the ending, as the lead-in to Heaney's version? I wanted to avoid the issues concerning the women's fears, and the story of Oedipos, and focus on the poetry Aeschylus uses to lambaste the folly of war. For this, nothing would serve better than the 2700 or so words from the scene when the Scout or Herald, as I have called him, appears to Eteocles to inform him of the enemy warriors who are posted at the seven gates that protect the city of Thebes, describing their shields while Eteocles reveals whom he has chosen as their counterparts and why.

Now I'd like to explain the methodology behind my translation of the shield scene from *Seven Against Thebes.* As is my custom, I first translated the lines as literally as possible, word-for-word, phrase-for-phrase. Then I refine it just a bit:

> I think that to us a messenger come from the troops, friends. Comes running, news he will bring us. See how comes out the son of Oedipos to hear what will say the messenger to him. Hurrying him also to learn.
>
> I think a messenger from the troops is coming, friends. He comes running, to bring us news. See who's coming out, the son of Oedipos to hear what the messenger will say. He also hurries to learn it.

Where I came upon a word I wasn't familiar with, I left it in the Greek until the first draft was complete. Then I got out a dictionary and selected from a range of synonyms what I liked best.

> I know well to tell you what your enemy will do and who can be found at every gate his lot has fallen to (που του ἔλαχε). Tydeus already threatens the gate of the Proitou. The seer however hasn't allowed him to pass the Ismeno. He's examining the sacrifices and they forbid him. Tydeus, he's boiling in his own evil, and thirsting

> for battle. In the λυοπύρι he hisses like the snake and blasphemes the wise seer, the son of Oekleidi. He calls him a coward δειλό and a death-worker. Swearing and blaspheming also with his helmet with three feathers that shake in the wind and shade him. And underneath the shield he has bronze bells that frighten you to hear. And on his shield he has an ὑπεροπτικό σῆμα, it has carved on it the heavens with the stars and in between them there a bright full moon, the eye of Night, the first of the stars. On the κομπασμένη shield of disk there are the words of everyone shouting the oath to the river asking with the war. It looks something like the horse that champs its bit fiercely waiting for the trumpet. Who can be matched against him? As soon as the blockage falls who will protect the gate of the Proitou? Who can be loosed to it?

From there, I could begin to shape the verse, having brought the actual text under control.

TROOP LEADER:

Friends, there's a herald come from the troops,
he's running to bring us some news!
And look who's on the double to meet him —
the son of Oedipos will be first to know it.

HERALD:

I'm here to tell you exactly
what your enemy plans to do,
how the lots have fallen out
deciding where each is posted.
Tydeus already threatens the Proitos Gate,
but the seer won't let him pass the Ismenus.
He's examining the sacrifices and he says *No.*
But Tydeus is boiling in his own rage
to slake his bloodlust. Spits and hisses like a snake,
blasphemes the wise seer, son of Oekles,
calling him a coward and a death-worker,
effing and blinding under his three-feathered helmet
which he shakes like a stallion's mane.
Beneath his shield he's attached bronze bells,
an eerie sound to put the wind up you.
The front shows an arrant symbol:
heavens blazing stars, full moon betwixt,
the eye of Night and queen of stars centre-shining.
He shouts his arrogant oaths by the river, baying for war

like his war-horse champing the bit for the trumpet.
Who can be matched against him?
Who will stand at the Proteid Gate and prevail
when the bars are loosed?

Until I had gotten to this stage, I did not allow myself to consult any cribs. However, anxious to avoid any egregious mistakes, I did then read the Perseus Digital Library version by Weir Smyth, even though it did not correspond much to the modern Greek translation I was using.[228] However the idea is the same: I didn't want to be influenced before I had set out my own ideas, but also wanted to avoid misunderstanding. Despite the modern vernacular, many of the words such as 'whinnying' and '[horse's] bit', were unfamiliar. Fortunately, the Greek used by Giannis Tsarouxis corresponds to the decade and a half I spent speaking Greek with Athenians and others in the 80s-90s, who typically used this very type of language: not katharevousa (as was common when speaking with monastics and hierarchs in the Church), but an educated, contemporary speech without slang or unfamiliar idiom. This enabled me to translate freely for the most part, and also to take liberties in the final version and, let me say, to put the salt back in the bland, literal first draft, to give it the savour of living English.

Here then, is the translated selection in full:[229]

TROOP LEADER:

Friends, there's a herald come from the troops,
he's running to bring us some news!
And look who's on the double to meet him —
the son of Oedipos will be first to know it.

HERALD:

[228] Aeschylus, *Seven against* Thebes, trans. Weir Smyth, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0013%3Acard%3D1
[229] Aeschylos, *Επτά έπι Θήβας*, translated by Giannis Tsarouxi, (Kedros, 1983), 32-41.

I'm here to tell you exactly
what your enemy plans to do,
how the lots have fallen out
deciding where each is posted.
Tydeus already threatens the Proitos Gate,
but the seer won't let him pass the Ismenus.
He's examining the sacrifices and he says *No.*
But Tydeus is boiling in his own rage
to slake his bloodlust. Spits and hisses like a snake,
blasphemes the wise seer, son of Oekles,
calling him a coward and a death-worker,
effing and blinding under his three-feathered helmet
which he shakes like a stallion's mane.
Beneath his shield he's attached bronze bells,
an eerie sound to put the wind up you.
The front shows an arrant symbol:
heavens blazing stars, full moon betwixt,
the eye of Night and queen of stars centre-shining.
He shouts his arrogant oaths by the river, baying for war
like his war-horse champing the bit for the trumpet.
Who can be matched against him?
Who will stand at the Proteid Gate and prevail
when the bars are loosed?

ETEOKLES:

Baubles worn by a warrior I don't even rate.
The symbols that would wound me can't.
Bells and spells! should they triple
they're nothing without the spear's bite.
As for the sign of night on his shield,
the heavens with the stars that shine,
that will show itself a fitting prophesy.
The black night will find eyes when he dies,
and his arrogance will shine bright out.
It will be known that against himself
he's prophesied these violent outrages.
Anti Tydeus I will oppose the son of Astakos,
He will protect the gate!
A noble and modest young warrior
who respects the throne of Honour while fat boasts disgust him.
Modest I say, but no scaredy cat,
he's from those sown of dragon's teeth whom Ares spared.
His root is from Thebes, he's a local, that Melanippos.
It's in his blood to throw the enemy spear
out from the motherland that bore him.

As to what happens in the event, Ares will throw the dice.

CHORUS:

Good luck may he have to thrash our opponent
with the help of the gods, the cause of the city is righteous.
But I shudder to see the blood of our dead
who fight and are killed for our homeland.

HERALD:

Good luck may the gods give him.
Kapaneus with his cohort are at the gates of Elektra.
Another giant worse than the first and even more so.
His pompous bombast is something uncanny.
He threatens the towers with curses
which I hope won't inflame Lady Luck.
He crows how god willing or not willing
he will pillage our city, and neither fears Dia
but says that lightening and thunderbolts are to him
like sweet sunshine. He has as his symbol
a naked man who holds fire, a lit torch in his hands,
and voiced with gold letters it thunders:
***I will burn the city.***
Opposite that kind of man…who can you send?
Against such haughtiness, who will stick it?

ETEOKLES:

Oh very good, from success to success we go.
When one man blabs out such conceited arrogance,
his very tongue becomes his accuser.
Kapaneus threatens us that he's ready
to flaunt his contempt before the gods
and his mouth vaunts its vainglory.
He — a dead man! — sends to Dia
flummery blustering like the swell of waves.
It's only right his own head should draw the lightening bolt
which he'll find nothing like mid-day sunshine.
I have determined an excellent man for that jabberer.
I've chosen Polyfonta,
strong guard and worthy, full of desire and flame,
whom the grace of Artemis and the other gods will protect.
Now tell me who else have they put at the other gates.

CHORUS:

Better not to see the one making those threats,
whom the bolt will strike to blast him off the ground
before he can get into our houses and chase us
from defending the rooms of our virgin daughters.

HERALD:

Now I will tell you the rest who fell by lot to the other gates.
Etioklos came out third from the upturned helmet,
to lodge his cohort in the Neites gates. He dances circles with his horses
which snort, as long as he twists their bridles, ready to fall on the gates,
their shrieking whinnies through flared nostrils
sounding more wild each time.
His shield has a design that's none too humble:
a soldier climbs up the wall of his enemy
on a ladder made of the winds, lusting for the sack,
and he roars, in letters which thunder forth
as I read, that not even Ares can throw him off the towers.
To him be careful to send a worthy man,
who'll throw him from our city lest we fall
into the yoke of slavery.

ETEOKLES:

I would have done what you say, if I hadn't by good luck
already selected one who only brags with his arms.
I send Megarios, the son of Kreon. And he is of the sown.
He's not likely to piss himself
watching the bullshit they're doing with those horses,
that swanking clown show of snorting and bucking.
And he will protect the gates or else he'll die
giving back his own flesh to the earth he sprang from,
or if he captures the rogues who are really scheming
to climb the city walls, he'll take them fully laden
to decorate the house of his father with their loot.
Tell me which others gasconade, and don't mince words.

CHORUS:

I wish good luck to you and your war for our houses,
and to our enemies misery, because of their outrages
and for maddening us with their threats.
Just Dia, show us your anger.

HERALD:

And now for the fourth, he has the neighbourhood gate of Onka Athena,
and howls out his salvo loudly.
He is Ippomedontas, a giant hulk of a man.
As soon as you see him lift the enormous circle of his shield,
fear possesses you. Well, what can I say?
The artisan who fashioned the symbol of his shield
was not some slapdash craftsman.
He's put there Tyfon, spewing plumes of fire from his mouth,
and bellowing black smoke, the brother of flames,
and the surrounding circle is roped with snakes.
I heard him rant like a raving maniac,
fiercely, with insane, wild eyes.
You'd better protect well from a such a man
whose bombast harrows us from outside our gates.

ETEOKLES:

First of all, Onka Athena is the neighbour of Theba,
right next to the gate. She is disgusted with that rodomontade,
and will toss him out of the ring like a hateful snake.
For him an opponent has already been selected:
I chose Iperbio, the worthy son of Oenopos.
He's the right man to title the bout!
When the going get's tough, he'll show what he's made of.
No one can speak a credible word against him.
He has a body, heart, and outstanding warskills.
Hermes the Undertaker has done well to set up this match.
Two men, two rivals, together they'll battle royally,
and the shield of the enemy of the gods will be pierced.
Tyfon may shoot flames from his mouth
but the other has Dia for a captain,
who lords over it all with a flaming arrow in his hand.
It never happened that Dia didn't come out on top.
Those who have the gods for protectors,
and of course I mean us, we are the victorious,
and they are the conquered.
If then, it is true that Dia is stronger than Tyfon in the battle,
it follows that the shields reveal their destinies,
and Zeus will save Iperbio for his divine mascot.

HERALD:

That's how it'll happen. I'll tell you now the fifth,
he whom they sent to go to the North gate

next to the tomb of Amfionos the son of Dia.
He swore, by his faith in his spear
that he reveres more than god
and which he holds dearer than his own sight,
that he will sack Thebes, in spite of Zeus.
That, says the son whose mother was mountain-bred,
a babyfaced teenager who just now
started getting some hair on his jaw.
They call him Parthenopaio, and he is from Arkadia.
Despite his name, he's hardcore,
there is nothing girly about him,
and he goes around with a killer's scowl.
He's not an Argotis, he's a foreigner, an emigre.
He followed that gang to pay back the vig
he'd run up on his debt to Argos.
He didn't travel so far to be made a chump,
or to end up looking like some wimp.
But he's full of braggadocio standing before the gate.
And the dread emblem he has on his bronze shield
is that shame to Theba, the Sphinx,
which protects his body,
the Sphinx who ate raw flesh —
he has her bolted on and etched in metal
so it packs the heat of a lightning flash.
Below her lies a Theban, purposely drawn
so all the arrows will stab him.

ETEOKLES:

If only these lunatics would get what's coming to them,
the gods would insure such depraved boasts
would secure their certain destruction.
I found for him an Arkadian that you'd surely call
a man who isn't conceited and has eyes in his hands:
this is Aktor, brother to the previous face.
He won't allow one of these blowhards
to get inside the city and do evil,
neither will he allow that heel
with the disgusting shield-monster,
the enemy with the vile snakes, to get by our gates.
He will beat him down, and the Sphinx
will moan and howl distraught
from the many bodyslams he'll suffer.
With the help of the gods I believe that will truly happen.

CHORUS:

I heard their words and the hairs stood up from fear.
Big words these boast-barking men say, men without faith.
May god grant we may see them pinned prone on the ground.

HERALD:

I will tell you the sixth now.
He's a man wise and brave, the dynamic seer Amfiaraos.
They have ordered him to the Omoloida gate
and he swears with the most brazen chutzpah
against the all-powerful Tydeus,
and calls him a murderer, shit-stirrer, great teacher of evil to Argos,
summoner of the Curse, servant of slaughter,
and adviser of all these evil decisions to Adrasto.
And then he turns to your brother, the high Polynikes,
he stinkeyes him and shouts at him
purposely splitting into two his name, "Hey, Much-strife,
nice work you've got there, and pleasing to the gods!
Don't you care how posterity will slate you?
You came to sack your homeland
and the gods of your fathers with a foreign army…
how do you dare to drain the maternal, life-giving fountain?
Your fatherland, your earth, that world which you will make yours
if you can subdue it with your weapons? I will feel sorry for that soil,
I'm a seer who'll be enshrouded in the soil of a foreign earth.
Yet I will make war. My death will not be dishonourable."
That is what the seer said
holding up his shield of pure bronze,
and it didn't have any symbol on it. Just an empty circle.
He doesn't want to seem, but to *be* the most honourable.
His deep desire is that from his garden of wisdom
will bloom the flower of highborn thoughts.
Against him you must arrange for an opponent wise and virtuous.
That you must. Tremble before one who fears god.

ETEOKLES:

Oh hell! See how fortune causes someone
to seem like a virtuous person
just by being among those who are more sacrilegious!
No matter what the work there is nothing worse
than an evil partnership. An evil crop it will get you every time.
If a righteous person takes ship with sailors who lust for crime,
he'll sink along with them because they're cursed.
If a righteous person gets mixed up with wretches

who don’t believe in god and are without hospitality,
the net that catches the wicked will net them too,
the whip of god will lash the man who lacks judgement.
That’s how it’ll be for that seer, I mean Amfiaraos, the son of Oekles,
a wise man, righteous, pure, reverend:
a great prophet who got mixed up with unholy loudmouths against his will,
yet goes on, insensate, with them who are on the road to nowhere,
though we’ll see if he’ll be turned back…
from the hand of Dia, he can also be sunk alongside them.
I think of course that he won’t even crash our gates,
not because he’s a liar or wants strength, but because he knows
that it’s written for him to fall during the battle, if Apollo doesn’t lie,
because that god prefers silence, rather than not to speak truth.
In any case, and this is the thing,
I’ll still put a gatekeeper to oppose him,
one who hates foreigners, the violent Lastheni,
who has an elder’s brain and flesh in its prime.
His eye finds its target and his hand will manage to hit
the flesh of the enemy if even a little will show under the shield.
But what can you say? Success is in the will of god.

CHORUS:

Hear our supplications, gods,
and give the victory to our homeland of Thebes,
the evil which they’re preparing for us throw it back on to them.
Throw your bolt, Dia, outside the walls, into their midst.

HERALD:

The seventh now. He who took the lot for the seventh gate is your brother.
I will tell you what wishes and curses he says in order to triumph.
He wants, as soon as he gets in the gate and is declared the winner
and while they sing the peons of the capture,
to fight with you, one on one, and to kill you
and fall together dead next to you,
who has taken away his rights,
or at least to send you into banishment — far away! —
outside of Thebes to pay you back for his exile.
Such words does he say and calls as witness
the gods of your mutual forefathers
to hear his prayers that mighty Polynikes should win.
He holds a new shield, a perfect circle,
and on it he has the symbol of two figures.

He has one warrior etched in gold
who guides a serious woman. She is Justice,
as explain the letters on the shield. It says,
“I will guide this canny warrior to take back his homeland and his houses”.
Those words are scratched there.
I don’t believe you will blame me
if I didn’t report them so nicely.
You’re at the helm, judge what you will do.

ETEOKLES:

Despicable are those whom the gods find obscene,
the family of Oedipos, worthy of lamentation,
but annihilated to make good on a father’s curse.
No weeping though, nor should I start the keening,
lest we fall into an even worse hell-pit.
About Polynikes I say, seriously,
what an apt name that he has.
Quickly we will learn if his signs
will come out true or if they stay within the gold letters
full of vanity on his shield and with his insanity.
If the virgin Justice, the daughter of Dia,
is in his soul and in his works
those things he wants will succeed.
But from the time he came out of the darkness of his mother’s womb
and also when he grew and became a man,
that is, when he sprouted the hairs of his beard,
Justice didn’t ever seduce him
or welcome him in.
Nor will she now, when he wants to do evil to his homeland
unless she is Justice in name only;
only then will she go to the side
of a person who will stop at nothing.
It’s not right to stand otherwise
than archon to archon, brother to brother —
but enemy to enemy is how I’ll stand to him.
Bring me my greaves, now, immediately!
Those protect against sticks and stones.[230]

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[230] These lines were selected by Tsarouxis from 372-676 in the original Greek, as can be found on the Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University. https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0013

As I hope will be obvious, I elected to pursue a rhythmic and alliterative approach to the blank verse poetry here, as I think it most fit to serve the subject matter. The selection is of course meant to be read out loud at the very least, and ultimately performed on the stage. For this reason I have given attention to stretches of vowels and streams of consonants, opportunities for dramatic interpretation and echoes of traditional Greek dramatic staging that I hope survive the rough ride of my metaphors and word/ phrase choices.

I also opted to use British/Irishisms ("put the wind up him" for "frighten", "effing and blinding" for "swears and blasphemes", et al), and included some crude language which may be held to distort the warrior's speech, but which is too common in our own time to be considered really offensive. Overall, I judge the translation to be successful in that it represents fidelity to the source text while also maintaining a sonic integrity as dramatic poetry. Euterpe might not love it but I don't believe Calliope will mind. As for my translation strategy overall, it was clearly "settlement" rather than "raiding."

When we look at my English and Tsarouxis' Greek side-by-side, we can see the movement of the lines and some of the corresponding words fairly easily:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Baubles** worn by a warrior I don't even rate.<br><br>The **symbols** that would wound me can't.<br>Bells and spells! should they **triple**<br>they're nothing without the spear's bite.<br>As for the sign of **night** on his shield,<br>the heavens with the stars that shine,<br>that will show itself a fitting **prophesy**.<br>The **black night** will find eyes when he dies,<br><br>and his arrogance will shine bright out.<br>It will be known that against himself<br>he's prophesied these violent outrages.<br><br>**Anti** Tydeus I will oppose the son of Astakos,<br><br>He will **protect** the gate!<br>A noble and modest young warrior<br>who respects the **throne** of Honour while fat<br>boasts disgust him.<br>Modest I say, but no scaredy cat,<br>he's from those **sown** of dragon's teeth whom<br>Ares spared.<br>His **root** is from Thebes, he's a local, that<br>Melanippos.<br>It's in his **blood** to throw the enemy spear<br>out from the **motherland** that bore him.<br><br>As to what happens in the event, Ares will<br>throw the dice. | Τά **μπιχλιμπίδια** πού ἕνας πολεμιστής ἐγώ<br>δέν τά λογαριάζω.<br><br>Τά **σήματα** νά μέ πληγώσουν δέν μποροῦνε.<br>Καί τά λοφία καί τά κουδούνια ἀδύνατο νά μέ<br>**τρυπήσουν** δίχως κοντάρι.<br>Ὅσο γιά τή **νύχτα**, πού μοῦ λές,<br>ἐπάνω στήν ἀσπίδα του πώς τήν κρατᾶ κακή<br>᾽ναι **προφητεία**.<br>Ἡ **μαύρη νύχτα** θά πέσει στά μάτια του καί<br>θά πεθάνει,<br>κι ὁ κομπασμός του δέ θά βγεῖ ἀληθινός καί<br>δίκαιος<br>κι ἔτσι θά ξεδιαλύνει τί σημαίνει ἡ ὑπεροψία<br>του.<br><br>Ἐγώ στόν Τυδέα θ᾽ **ἀντι**τάξω τό γιό τοῦ<br>Ἀστακοῦ,<br><br>αὐτός θά **προστατέψει** τίς πύλες.<br>Εὐγενικό καί σεμνό παλικάρι<br>πού σέβεται τό **θρόνο** τῆς Αἰσχύλης καί τά<br>παχιά λόγια τά σιχαίνεται.<br>Σεμνός ἀλλ᾽ὄχι φοβιτσιάρης,<br>εἶναι ἀπό κείνους τούς **σπαρτούς** ἄντρες πού ὁ<br>Ἄρης δέν ἐπείραξε.<br>Ἡ **ρίζα** του εἶναι ἀπ᾽τή Θήβα, εἶναι ντόπιος ὁ<br>Μελάνιππος.<br>Τοῦ **αἵματος** τό δίκιο τόν στέλνει γιά νά<br>διώξει ἀπ᾽τή **μητέρα** πού τόν γέννησε τοῦ<br>ἐχθροῦ τό στρατό.<br>Τό τί θά γίνει ὅμως, στά ζάρια θά τό παίξει ὁ<br>Ἄρης. |

I decided that I would leave the names in their Greek form, without latinizing them (i.e. where Weir Smyth has Hyperbius, I use Iperbios, Ἠπέρβιος), as unless I had translated all the names (i.e., Melanippos = Black horse). I don't think the spelling matters too much either way, and it's just as easy to read Iperbios as Hyperbius, and looks more properly Greek. Dia and Zeus are interchangeable, as in the Greek.

"Bells and spells" is actually "plumes and bells" (λοφία καί τά κουδούνια), but I opted to invoke the dismissive "bells and smells", a low-church term deriding the 'superstitious' Catholic and High Anglican practice of using altar bell and incense during the mass. In Eteokles' third speech, I have, "He's not likely to piss himself", which in the Greek is "Δέν εἶναι ἀπ᾽αὐτοὺς πού θά φοβηθεί", meaning simply, "He's not one of those who'll be afraid". So also the "bullshit" with the horses, and the "swanking clown show of snorting and bucking" are respectively φασαρία, fuss/ nonsense, and ἀλογίσια χλιμιντρίσματα, whinnying horses. I added this layer of crudeness and grand guignol/rodeo in order to dress the scene in sneering, tough-guy language, to form a character for Eteokles, in contrast to the pious Chorus and dutiful Herald. He is the commander of a force of soldiers, and though he is the son of a king, that king is Oedipos the Theban; he has been roughly handled all his life, and now battles to keep his uncle Kreon in power, lest they be overthrown by his brother Polynikes leading a force from Argos against them. While Tsarouxis makes him simply plainspoken (but using overly-long diminutive suffixes that mock the words they are added to, indicating sarcasm and scorn), he had many other ways of giving Eteokles a distinct character; namely because he created this translation specifically for a 1982 production that would eventually be performed all over Greece, including at the amphitheatre where Aeschylus himself staged it in 467 BC, to win the Dionysos Prize, the Theatre of Dionysos on the

slope of the Akropolis in Athens.[231] It was also filmed in 1983, and subsequently a limited edition of the Tsarouxis' translation was published; it was from this edition that I worked.

The scene takes place about halfway through the play, the first half being mostly devoted to the women going about the city in despair and fright at the prospect of being sold into slavery if Eteokles fails to hold the gates against the enemy, for which they are much berated by him. At this juncture in the play, the battle presses in: a herald from the field runs to give Eteokles the news about which seven warriors the enemy have chosen to storm each gate, and Eteokles introduces us by name and description to each hero he has chosen to defend the city of Thebes. The Seven are characterized by their blasphemous bragging, and Eteokles counters their trashtalk with some of his own; this reminded me of nothing so much as professional wrestling, where before the match, the parameters of the wrestler's character are defined by a loud performance of kayfabe, where costumes and symbols are put on display with outrageous pomposity and vigour.

While the original play, in the context of Tsarouxis' vision, was surely not to mock those ancient warriors, yet the city of Thebes was cursed, even as it emerged victorious from this battle. This foreknowledge (of Sophocles' play *Antigone*, which continues to document the curse of Oedipos' children and the city of Thebes) possessed by the audience serves to underline the futility of war, the glory of victory and miserable loss of life as simply events in a cycle that repeats itself in the folly of man. And this doomed folly I felt, provided a licence to see the overbearing assertions of the warriors as ludicrous, risible. With the announcement of each new warrior, from the first gate to the fifth, the descriptions become more and more outlandish, the language more raucous; until the sixth, the tragic figure of the seer, and the seventh, Eteokles' own brother

[231] https://www.culturenow.gr/epta-epi-thivas-deite-olokliri-tin-parastasi-poy-anevase-o-tsaroyxis-sti-thiva-to-1982/

Polynikes, sober him again, whereupon the language becomes more staid in preparation for the battle to be fought not with descriptions of weapons but actual arms.

So you're meant to see Hulk Hogan at the fourth gate, and a "babyface" (or "face" i.e. a handsome wrestler who usually is allowed to win, as opposed to a "heel", a baddie), at the fifth. Eteokles describes Iperbios as "the right man to title the bout!", but the Greek has simply, "εἶναι ὁ ἄντρας πού πρέπει", *he is the man who should*. But πρέπει also has the meaning not only of should but also of the "rightness", and as "to do the job" is implied in the Greek, I call it a "bout" in keeping with my metaphor. "Battle royal", "bodyslam" ("τσαλακομένη" or "buffet/blows") and "mascot" also come from pro-wrestling. In the Greek, Hermes is called "the undertaker" (ὁ νεκροπομπός), because of his function as the god who leads the shades of the dead to Hades, but The Undertaker is also the name of a famous pro-wrestler, so that was simply felicitous, and helped to confirm my intuition that it would be effective to parallel the warriors with the pro-wrestlers. I write that the seer Amfiaraos "stinkeyes" Polynikes; the Greek has ἄγριο βλέμμα, *angry/wild look*; again, this was a matter of bringing the language of the wrestling ring to the space inside the seven gates, because for a Seer to throw a "stinkeye" is both theatrical and tantamount to a curse. Translating exclamations are always difficult because they of all things change most with the times. The word "Ἀλοίμονο!" in Greek was traditionally rendered as "Woe is me!" or "Alas!" — which of course, would not do. So I went with "Oh, hell!", and I find it expresses both regret and anger very well in this context. Finally in the last line of this selection, the Greek is actually, "stones and arrows", but I have "sticks and stones", as I wanted the old rhyme which ends, "but names will never hurt me" to be the last words silently hovering in the air after that litany of absurd bragging.

The whole project of translating this section was intended as a continuation of my anti-war book of original poetry written for my MA thesis in Creative Writing and published by Guernica Editions in 2019 as *Extraordinary Renditions*. The disgust I felt at the revelations of torture, rendition, and other atrocities committed by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, and later in various black sites, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, combined with the fact that none of the authors of these war crimes were ever adequately prosecuted, led me to renounce my US citizenship and concentrate on writing a book of witness, as a μαρτυρία, to what I felt was the undermining of any future claim the US Justice System had to arbitrate and enforce measures against the violation of international human rights; the consequences of this betrayal are still being felt in seismic waves echoing out from the centre of the impact it created. Translating epic poetry or writing poetry may seem small in the face of the egregious wrong that has been done to humankind, but it is and has always achieved the one thing possible to be done after such catastrophes — to leave a testimony, a witness statement to say "I was there, and it was wrong", and convict the guilty even in absentia, leaving a judgment future courts of history must inexorably affirm.

## Conclusion

Roland Barthes, in *The Grain of the Voice*, distinguishes between, on one hand, the technical perfection of a singing voice – a level of craft and virtuosity that anyone can theoretically achieve through endless work and practice – and on the other, what he terms "the grain" of a voice, meaning its irreducible texture, its inimitable style, what makes it 'it'.[232] You can have the skill, precision, and talent of Céline Dion, but *no one* can sound like Billie Holiday. There's something similar to this at work in the translation of poetry. A poet's voice is, depending from which end you look at it, either the sum of her aesthetic choices, ranging from syntax, diction, rhythm, and word choice – not to mention formal elements such as rhyme and metre – or else the prism from which all of these choices are made in the first. However it may be, the voice is the interface through which we encounter and mediate all of the subsequent content. It's meant, when read out loud especially, to capture a living orality, a joy and exuberance that exceeds the words and meanings being evoked. "The voice," according to Mladen Dolar, "is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning"; if signifiers form a chain, Dolar continues, "then the voice may well be what fastens them into a signifying chain."[233] The signifiers, then, are the beads that conceal the thread on which they are threaded. A good translator, I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, can sing the whole thing, not just the meaning of the words. Henri Meschonnic has a radical definition of poetry: "A poem is what a body does to language."[234] What Meschonnic means here is that there is a living, breathing element to literature that often gets ignored at the expense of semantics and

[232] Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Northwestern UP, 2009).
[233] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 15.
[234] Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translating,* 44.

exegesis. A good translator is able to give us a glimpse of that living-force, albeit channeled through a new language, a new pair of lungs, to embody the source poem, capturing "the grain of the voice" of the poet. Indeed, any good translation is a further entry into a language that was never its own, but which sounds as if it had always-already been a part of that language.

Beyond the realm of aesthetics, the notion of voice in translation can be applied to translation's role in *giving voice* to texts that need one. This was part of my plan with *Extraordinary Renditions*, and it's why I chose to translate *Seven Against Thebes*. As we have seen, it also constituted an integral part of Heaney's output as well, first in his championing of the Eastern European poets, and then in his own translations of Sophocles. It also applies to the translations of Emily Wilson and Anne Carson, albeit more in the sense of redressing a voice that had been allowed to drone on for too long: that of generations of male translators of the Classics. In the case of sacred texts, especially in the Anglican tradition, new voices were let in that modified and recontextualized religious doctrine in order to remain more relevant to contemporary practitioners. In all of these cases, translation was the voice of change, offering an alternative to staid patterns of thought, language, and dogma.

There are many affinities between poetry and translation, evidenced no doubt by the seemingly greater number of poets who translate, as opposed to prose writers. Perhaps this has to do with the intense spell poetry casts on us, the vehicle of which is the voice, and the challenge of replicating that intoxication with local sounds. In many ways, poetry is translation's degree zero: it has to serve the music, which is the sum of the poem's parts. It has to do with immediacy, and ironically, that is very difficult to put into words. Of course, prose has a pulse and music all its own, but the communicative element in prose tends to relegate, or tame, the dance of language which poetry makes its primary matter. Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted, through

five different perspectives, represented by the five chapters, to grasp what makes the translation of poetry successful. We went from the practical to the historical to the increasingly abstract, including the role of translation in theological and political questions, only to come full circle, returning to the practical again in my own translation of *Seven Against Thebes.* I trust the criteria I have laid out in this dissertation were made evident in that attempt. I also hope that I was able to do justice to translation's power and potential, as a practice that goes way beyond the translation of words, a practice in which the stakes are high, since it touches on meaning and meaning-making, and, more importantly, how meaning can be properly preserved, and eventually exercised.

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**APPENDIX A: Latin texts with English translations, Greek texts with English translations**

Latin Translations and Sonnets by Malcolm Guite

**O Sapientia**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O Sapientia,* quae ex ore Altissimi prodiisti attingens a fine usque ad finem, fortiter suaviterque disponens omnia veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae. | *O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High reaching from one end to the other, mightily and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence* |

I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.

**O Adonia**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti et ei in Sina legem dedisti: veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento* | *O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush, and gave him the law on Sinai: Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.* |

Unsayable, you chose to speak one tongue,
Unseeable, you gave yourself away,
The Adonai, the Tetragramaton
Grew by a wayside in the light of day.
O you who dared to be a tribal God,
To own a language, people and a place,
Who chose to be exploited and betrayed,
If so you might be met with face to face,
Come to us here, who would not find you there,
Who chose to know the skin and not the pith,
Who heard no more than thunder in the air,
Who marked the mere events and not the myth.
Touch the bare branches of our unbelief
And blaze again like fire in every leaf.

**O Radix**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O radix Jesse, qui stas in signum populorum super quem continebunt reges os suum quem Gentes deprecabuntur: veni ad liberandum nos, jam noli tardare* | *O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples; before you kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make their prayer: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer* |

All of us sprung from one deep-hidden seed,
Rose from a root invisible to all.
We knew the virtues once of every weed,
But, severed from the roots of ritual,
We surf the surface of a wide-screen world
And find no virtue in the virtual.
We shrivel on the edges of a wood
Whose heart we once inhabited in love,
Now we have need of you, forgotten Root
The stock and stem of every living thing
Whom once we worshiped in the sacred grove,
For now is winter, now is withering
Unless we let you root us deep within,
Under the ground of being, graft us in.

**O Clavis**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel; qui aperis, et nemo claudit; claudis, et nemo aperit: veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris sedentem in tenebris et umbra mortis* | *O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel; you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death* |

Even in the darkness where I sit
And huddle in the midst of misery
I can remember freedom, but forget
That every lock must answer to a key,
That each dark clasp, sharp and intricate,
Must find a counter-clasp to meet its guard,
Particular, exact and intimate,
The clutch and catch that meshes with its ward.
I cry out for the key I threw away
That turned and over turned with certain touch
And with the lovely lifting of a latch
Opened my darkness to the light of day.
O come again, come quickly, set me free
Cut to the quick to fit, the master key.

**O Oriens**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae: veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis* | *O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness: Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death* |

First light and then first lines along the east
To touch and brush a sheen of light on water
As though behind the sky itself they traced
The shift and shimmer of another river
Flowing unbidden from its hidden source;
The Day-Spring, the eternal Prima Vera.
Blake saw it too. Dante and Beatrice
Are bathing in it now, away upstream…
So every trace of light begins a grace
In me, a beckoning. The smallest gleam
Is somehow a beginning and a calling;
"Sleeper awake, the darkness was a dream
For you will see the Dayspring at your waking,
Beyond your long last line the dawn is breaking".

**O Rex Gentium**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O Rex Gentium, et desideratus earum, lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum: veni, et salva hominem, quem de limo formasti* | *O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one: Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay* |

O King of our desire whom we despise,
King of the nations never on the throne,
Unfound foundation, cast-off cornerstone,
Rejected joiner, making many one,
You have no form or beauty for our eyes,
A King who comes to give away his crown,
A King within our rags of flesh and bone.
We pierce the flesh that pierces our disguise,
For we ourselves are found in you alone.
Come to us now and find in us your throne,
O King within the child within the clay,
O hidden King who shapes us in the play
Of all creation. Shape us for the day
Your coming Kingdom comes into its own.

**O Emmanuel**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster, exspectatio Gentium, et Salvator earum: veni ad salvandum nos, Domine, Deus noster* | *O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver, the hope of the nations and their Saviour: Come and save us, O Lord our God.* |

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

**O Virgo Virginum**

| | |
|---|---|
| *O Virgo virginum, quomodo fiet istud? Quia nec primam similem visa es nec habere sequentem. Filiae Jerusalem, quid me admiramini? Divinum est mysterium hoc quod cernitis* | O Virgin of virgins, how shall this be? For neither before thee was any like thee, nor shall there be after. Daughters of Jerusalem, why marvel ye at me? The thing which ye behold is a divine mystery |

Who are the daughters of Jerusalem,
Who glimpse you still as you transform their seeing?
Whom have you called to this mysterium,
And bathed in the blithe fountain of your being?
Daughters of sorrow, daughters of despair,
The cast-aside, the overlooked, the spurned
The broken girls who scarcely breathe a prayer
The ones whose love has never been returned.
O Maid amongst the maidens, turn your face,
For when we glimpse you we are not alone,
O look us out of grief and into grace,
Lift us in love made stronger than our own,
Summon the spring in our worst wilderness,
And make us fruitful in your fruitfulness.

**GREEK ORTHODOX — CHRISTMAS CANON (First stanzas of the 8 Odes — Katavasia)**

Χριστὸς γεννᾶται· δοξάσατε. Χριστὸς ἐξ οὐρανῶν· ἀπαντήσατε. Χριστὸς ἐπὶ γῆς· ὑψώθητε. Ἄσατε τῷ Κυρίῳ πᾶσα ἡ γῆ, καὶ ἐν εὐφροσύνῃ, ἀνυμνήσατε λαοί· ὅτι δεδόξασται.

Christ is born; glorify Him! Christ is come from heaven; go and meet Him. Christ is on earth; arise to Him. Sing to the Lord, all you who dwell on the earth; and in merry spirits, O you peoples, praise His birth. For He is glorified.

Τῷ πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων, ἐκ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντι ἀῤῥεύστως Υἱῷ, καὶ ἐπ᾽ ἐσχάτων ἐκ Παρθένου, σαρκωθέντι ἀσπόρως, Χριστῷ τῷ Θεῷ βοήσωμεν· Ὁ ἀνυψώσας τὸ κέρας ἡμῶν, ἅγιος εἶ Κύριε.

To the Son, begotten without flux, of the Father, before the ages, and who was lately made incarnate of the Virgin without seed; to Christ God now let us cry aloud: You have exalted the horn of our strength. Only You are holy, O Lord.

Ῥάβδος ἐκ τῆς ῥίζης Ἰεσσαί, καὶ ἄνθος ἐξ αὐτῆς Χριστέ, ἐκ τῆς Παρθένου ἀνεβλάστησας, ἐξ ὄρους ὁ αἰνετός, κατασκίου δασέος, ἦλθες σαρκωθεὶς ἐξ ἀπειράνδρου, ὁ ἄυλος καὶ Θεός. Δόξα τῇ δυνάμει σου Κύριε.

Jesse's root produced a branch, O Christ, and You its flower blossomed forth, from the symbol of Christ's birth, and he foretold in song the renewal of mankind. For a young Babe, even the Word, has now come forth from the mountain that is the Virgin, for the renewal of the peoples.

Θεὸς ὢν εἰρήνης, Πατὴρ οἰκτιρμῶν, τῆς μεγάλης Βουλῆς σου τὸν Ἄγγελον, εἰρήνην παρεχόμενον, ἀπέστειλας ἡμῖν· ὅθεν θεογνωσίας, πρὸς φῶς ὁδηγηθέντες, ἐκ νυκτὸς ὀρθρίζοντες, δοξολογοῦμέν σε Φιλάνθρωπε.

God of peace and Father of mercies,Your Son You have sent unto us as Your messenger, the Angel of great counsel who is granting peace. Therefore having been guided to the light of godly knowledge, waking from the night to dawn, we sing Your glory, O Lover of man.

Σπλάγχνων Ἰωνᾶν, ἔμβρυον ἀπήμεσεν, ἐνάλιος θήρ, οἷον ἐδέξατο· τῇ Παρθένῳ δέ, ἐνοικήσας ὁ Λόγος καὶ σάρκα λαβών, διελήλυθε, φυλάξας ἀδιάφθορον· ἧς γάρ, οὐχ ὑπέστη ῥεύσεως, τὴν τεκοῦσαν κατέσχεν ἀπήμαντον.

Such as it received Jonah as an embryo, the sea beast disgorged him from its bowels intact. With the Virgin, though, when the Logos had dwelt in her taking on flesh, He came forth from her preserving her yet incorrupt. * For from her no fluxion suffered He, and He kept her unaltered in childbirth.

Οἱ Παῖδες εὐσεβείᾳ συντραφέντες, δυσσεβοῦς προστάγματος καταφρονήσαντες, πυρὸς ἀπειλὴν οὐκ ἐπτοήθησαν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν μέσῳ τῆς φλογὸς ἑστῶτες ἔψαλλον· Ὁ τῶν Πατέρων Θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἶ.

The Servants nurtured piously together, with contempt regarding the impious king's decree, intrepidly faced the threat of holocaust, and while standing in the midst of flames they chanted thus, saying: O God of the fathers, You are blessed.

Θαύματος ὑπερφυοῦς ἡ δροσοβόλος, ἐξεικόνισε κάμινος τύπον· οὐ γὰρ οὗς ἐδέξατο φλέγει νέους, ὡς οὐδὲ πῦρ τῆς Θεότητος, Παρθένου ἦν ὑπέδυ νηδύν· διὸ ἀνυμνοῦντες ἀναμέλψωμεν· Εὐλογείτω ἡ κτίσις πᾶσα τὸν Κύριον, καὶ ὑπερυψούτω, εἰς πάντας τοὺς αἰῶνας.

Standing in fire without burning, the young men did of old portray thus the womb of the Maiden. Remaining sealed, supernaturally it gave birth. Grace with a single miracle-working power did both, and rouses all the peoples to sing praise.

Μυστήριον ξένον, ὁρῶ καὶ παράδοξον! οὐρανὸν τὸ σπήλαιον· θρόνον Χερουβικόν, τὴν Παρθένον· τὴν φάτνην χωρίον· ἐν ᾧ ἀνεκλίθη ὁ ἀχώρητος, Χριστὸς ὁ Θεός· ὃν ἀνυμνοῦντες μεγαλύνομεν.

I see here a strange and paradoxical mystery! For, behold, the grotto is heaven; cherubic throne is the Virgin; the manger a grand space in which Christ our God the uncontainable reclined as a babe; Whom in extolling do we magnify.

**APPENDIX B — Complete Text of Boris Pasternak's, "Magdalena"**

**Магдалина**

1

Чуть ночь, мой демон тут как тут,
За прошлое моя расплата.
Придут и сердце мне сосут
Воспоминания разврата,
Когда, раба мужских причуд,
Была я дурой бесноватой
И улицей был мой приют.
Осталось несколько минут,
И тишь наступит гробовая.
Но, раньше чем они пройдут,
Я жизнь свою, дойдя до края,
Как алавастровый сосуд,
Перед тобою разбиваю.
О, где бы я теперь была,
Учитель мой и мой Спаситель,
Когда б ночами у стола
Меня бы вечность не ждала,
Как новый, в сети ремесла
Мной завлеченный посетитель.
Но объясни, что значит грех,
И смерть, и ад, и пламень серный,

Когда я на глазах у всех

С тобой, как с деревом побег,

Срослась в своей тоске безмерной.

Когда твои стопы, Исус,

Оперши о свои колени,

Я, может, обнимать учусь

Креста четырехгранный брус

И, чувств лишаясь, к телу рвусь,

Тебя готовя к погребенью.

2

У людей пред праздником уборка.

В стороне от этой толчеи

Обмываю миром из ведерка

Я стопы пречистые твои.

Шарю и не нахожу сандалий.

Ничего не вижу из-за слез.

На глаза мне пеленой упали

Пряди распустившихся волос.

Ноги я твои в подол уперла,

Их слезами облила, Исус,

Ниткой бус их обмотала с горла,

В волосы зарыла, как в бурнус.

Будущее вижу так подробно,

Словно ты его остановил.

Я сейчас предсказывать способна

Вещим ясновиденьем сивилл.

Завтра упадет завеса в храме,

Мы в кружок собьемся в стороне,

И земля качнется под ногами,

Может быть, из жалости ко мне.

Перестроятся ряды конвоя,

И начнется всадников разъезд.

Словно в бурю смерч, над головою

Будет к небу рваться этот крест.

Брошусь на землю у ног распятья,

Обомру и закушу уста.

Слишком многим руки для объятья

Ты раскинешь по концам креста.

Для кого на свете столько шири,

Столько муки и такая мощь?

Есть ли столько душ и жизней в мире?

Столько поселений, рек и рощ?

Но пройдут такие трое суток

И столкнут в такую пустоту,

Что за этот страшный промежуток

Я до воскресенья дорасту.

***Mary Magdalen* by Boris Pasternak (translation by his sister Lydia Pasternak Slater)**

I

As soon as night descends, we meet.
Remorse my memories releases.
The demons of the past compete,
And draw and tear my heart to pieces,
Sin, vice and madness and deceit,
When I was slave of men's caprices
And when my dwelling was the street.
The deathly silence is not far;
A few more moments only matter,
Which the Inevitable bar.
But at the edge, before they scatter,
In front of Thee my life I shatter,
As though an alabaster jar.
O what might not have been my fate
By now, my Teacher and my Savior,
Did not eternity await
Me at the table, as a late
New victim of my past behavior!
But what can sin now mean to me,
And death, and hell, and sulphur burning,
When, like a graft onto a tree,
I have-for everyone to see-
Grown into being part of Thee

In my immeasurable yearning?
When pressed against my knees I place
Thy precious feet, and weep, despairing,
Perhaps I'm learning to embrace
The cross's rough four-sided face;
And, fainting, all my being sways
Towards Thee, Thy burial preparing.

II

People clean their homes before the feast.
Stepping from the bustle of the street
I go down before Thee on my knees
And anoint with myrrh Thy holy feet.
Groping round, I cannot find the shoes
For the tears that well up with my sighs.
My impatient tresses, breaking loose,
Like a pall hang thick before my eyes.
I take up Thy feet onto my lap,
Wash them clean with hot tears from my eyes,
In my hair Thy precious feet I wrap,
And my string of pearls around them tie.
I now see the future in detail,
As if it were stopped in flight by Thee.
Like a raving sibyl, I could tell
What will happen, how it will all be.
In the temple, veils will fall tomorrow,

We shall form a frightened group apart,
And the earth will shake-perhaps from sorrow
And from pity for my tortured heart.
Troops will then reform and march away
To the thud of hoofs and heavy tread,
And the cross will reach towards the sky
Like a water-spout above our heads.
By the cross, I'll fall down on the ground,
I shall bite my lips till I draw blood.
On the cross, your arms will be spread out–
Wide enough to hug the whole wide world.
Who's this for, this glory and this strife?
Who's this for, this torment and this might?
Are there enough souls on earth, and lives?
Are there enough cities, dales and heights?
But three days–such days and nights will pass–
They will fill me with such crushing dread
That I'll see the joyous truth, at last:
I shall know Christ will rise from the dead.