

TRANSLATING THE *ILLIAD* FOR A WIDER PUBLIC

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper considers key principles and strategies in producing a translation of Homer's Iliad that succeeds for a wide audience both as poetic text and in performance. The author's translation of the last c. 100 lines of Iliad 19 is analyzed in terms of tonal variation and authorial voice, foregrounding performance as the telos of Homeric translation.*

A few months before my translation of Homer's *Iliad*<sup>1</sup> went to press, Brian Rak, my editor at Hackett Publishing, paid me a visit with the twofold purpose of choosing a cover and reviewing the manuscript with an eye towards, as he put it, "removing words and phrases that a hostile reviewer might seize upon and use as a basis upon which to dismiss the entire translation." The two initiatives were closely related. We wanted a cover that would announce not only the theme of the *Iliad* but also the tone of the translation: specifically, the urgency, dire spirit, and dignity of Homer's poem as well as the immediacy and believability we were striving for in the translation. Our requisites for the cover led us rather quickly to the historic photograph taken on June 6, 1944, by Robert F. Sargent depicting U.S. soldiers disembarking from a landing craft at Omaha Beach in Normandy during World War II. The photograph, titled *Into the Jaws of Death* (a line from the refrain in Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade"), took up most of the front page of the New York Times D-Day edition. I have found that even today's high-school students recognize the photograph and understand its presence on the cover not as a bid for "relevance" but as a symbol of the universality of war. I think the same can be said of audience response to the Aquila Theatre Company's adoption, based on this cover photograph, of World War II costume and setting for their stage performance. Mission accomplished.

The other item on our agenda concerned a dozen or so expressions I had put in the mouths of Greek and Trojan warriors as part of the effort to bring these characters alive as soldiers in the heat of battle and other tense situations. Vituperative language, and abusive epithets in particular, tend to be idiomatic, and a literal translation usually falls flat, so a translator interested in holding a wider than academic audience has to have a built-in demotic lexicon. One example, the first we came to in the text, must suffice here. Early in book 1 (149–151) Achilles, his rage mounting, is berating Agamemnon. The published translation reads:

You sorry, profiteering excuse for a commander!  
How are you going to get any Greek warrior  
To follow you into battle again?

The first line has some punch, and "sorry . . . excuse" does capture something of the sense of what is literally in the Greek "clothed in shamelessness" (*anaideien epieimene*), but I thought we could do better all around by having the third line read: "To follow your ragged ass into battle again?"

In the end, though, we decided that "ragged ass" was just beneath the lower limit of diction for our translation, and that the passage had enough energy without the possibly offensive phrase. We may have been wrong in this particular instance (some people have told me we were too cautious and could have been more colloquial) but the general principle is valid: establish a range of diction within a poetics of sufficient power and vitality to create a recognizable authorial voice, and stay with it. I have found that plain words

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<sup>1</sup> S. Lombardo, tr., *Homer: Iliad* (Indianapolis 1997).

are effective across the entire range, from the scenes of great dignity and pathos such as Priam's meeting with Achilles down to the abuse Thersites dishes out to Agamemnon.

Diction, word choice, is important but not everything. Rhythms are at least as important, and crafting verse lines and sequences based on natural speech rhythms occupies more of my attention than any other aspect of translation. On a local level cadences can suggest character, shape action, establish mood and tone; on a macro, cumulative level they help create the world of the poem and a believable sense of the author behind it.

The project of course begins and is deeply embedded in a printed text, the Oxford Classical Text of the *Iliad* in this case, the text established by David Monro and Thomas Allen over a century ago,<sup>2</sup> every word of which is holy and sacred and sweet, and beautiful on the page in its calligraphic Porson font, a text made possible by preceding centuries of textual criticism that lie behind it and to which we should pay sincere homage, for textual criticism really is the heart of the humanities. The Greek text is a world in itself, but we philologists need to be reminded periodically of what lies behind and under and somehow within a text such as this, which is of course a human voice.

It is still the case, even after nearly a century of scholarly work on oral composition and performance and ever-increasing awareness of the importance of nonverbal forms of communication, that we have a deeply interiorized alphabetic literacy, a kind of unreflective typographic mentality, as Walter Ong puts it.<sup>3</sup> The text is not only a *thing*, the text is for scholars *the* thing, even when we are convinced that a particular text is ultimately a transcript of a performance conceived and executed without the aid of writing and delivered to an equally preliterate audience. This is in some ways inevitable. The transcript, the text, is all we have from antiquity. And so we must approve of all efforts to bring the voice of any classical author back to life, for, literary or oral, all literature throughout Graeco-Roman antiquity was to some great degree performative. The practitioners of applied historical phonology, people such as Stephen Daitz and Robert Sonkowsky and younger performers such as Mark Miner, have rendered great service to the profession with their recordings of Greek and Latin literature in the original tongues. I only wish that the incomparable Gareth Morgan, whose voice left a profound impression upon me, had left us recordings. Such recitations are an ancient art and a sacred practice, as these lines from the Taittiriya Upanishad (seventh century B.C.E.) remind us:

Let us learn the art of recitation,  
Which calls for knowledge of letters, accent,  
Measure, emphasis, sequence and rhythm.  
May the light of wisdom illumine us.<sup>4</sup>

My own work as a translator begins with a recitation of the Greek (or Latin) as the first step in finding the voice of the original author—I wouldn't know how else to begin—and culminates in a voiced performance of an English text, the translation, that I work out while imagining that I am performing it to an audience. (An example of the sort of recitation I do in Greek can be heard at [wiredforbooks.org/iliad/](http://wiredforbooks.org/iliad/)). M. T. Clanchy tells us in his book on memory and writing that this was a common way of composing poetry in medieval

<sup>2</sup> T. W. Allen and D. B. Monro, eds., *Homeri Opera*, vols. 1 and 2 (Oxford 1902).

<sup>3</sup> W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London 2002) 24.

<sup>4</sup> E. Easwaran and M. N. Nagler, *The Upanishads* (Tomales, Calif., 2007) 245.

England—imagining that you’re delivering the lines to an audience, and then when you’re happy with that, writing them down.<sup>5</sup> The overall movement in my practice is from the Greek text as a transcript of an original performance to an English text as a script for a new performance. At the center of this process is finding the voice of the original author, both through his characters and as narrator, not that the two are fundamentally different.

The speech of Achilles’ horse Xanthus in this passage is a paradigm for my sense of how Homer gives voice to his character:

And from beneath the yoke Xanthus spoke back,  
Hooves shimmering, his head bowed so low  
That his mane swept the ground, as Hera,  
The white-armed goddess, gave him a voice:

“This time we will save you, mighty Achilles,  
This time, but your hour is near. We  
Are not to blame, but a great god and strong Fate.  
Nor was it slowness or slackness on our part  
That allowed the Trojans to despoil Patroclus.  
No, the best of the gods, fair-haired Leto’s son,  
Killed him in the front lines and gave Hector the glory.  
As for us, we could outrun the West Wind,  
Which men say is the swiftest, but it is your destiny  
To be overpowered by a mortal and a god.”

Xanthus said this; then the Furies stopped his voice.  
(19.433–447)

In his commentary on this passage Mark Edwards speculates whether or not a rhapsode would have given Xanthus an equine intonation.<sup>6</sup> He thinks presumably not; I’m not sure I agree, but I do think that we are to hear the voice of Hera, who enables Xanthus to speak, beneath the voice of the horse. And in the same way we are to hear, or let me say, I do hear, beneath the voice of each of Homer’s characters, the voice of Homer as narrator. His voice occupies his characters.

As for finding the voice of the narrator, it’s really finding the mind. To see how this might work in understanding Homer’s mind, consider this passage from *Iliad* 19:

And every motion he made in putting on the armor  
Forged for him in heaven was an act of passion  
Directed against the Trojans: clasping on his shins  
The greaves trimmed in silver at the ankles,  
Strapping the corselet onto his chest, slinging  
The silver-studded bronze sword around a shoulder,  
And then lifting the massive, heavy shield  
That spilled light around it as if it were the moon.

*Or a fire that has flared up in a lonely settlement  
High in the hills of an island, reflecting light  
On the faces of men who have put out to sea  
And must watch helplessly as rising winds  
Bear them away from their dear ones.*

<sup>5</sup> M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307* (Oxford 1993) 271.

<sup>6</sup> M. W. Edwards, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, Vol. 5 (Cambridge 1991) 283.

So too the terrible beauty of Achilles' shield,  
A fire in the sky.

(19.394–409)

The poet has just compared Achilles' shield to the moon. Why does he immediately begin an extended simile comparing it to a fire that has flared up in a lonely settlement seen by men who are being swept out to sea? Gradually, sometimes suddenly (I have compared the experience to the practice of Zen meditation), a mind comes into view, in the case of Homer, in my experience of this simile and throughout his poems, a mind of great clarity that moves instinctively towards compassion for the actuality of human suffering without losing its own fundamental clarity. Matthew Arnold's "Homer saw life steadily and saw it whole" is not too far off. Closer is W. R. Johnson, who writes of Homer in *Darkness Visible*:

It is the pathos itself that disappears, dissolved into a clarity that has no time for prolonged grief that may grow to unappeasable melancholy. . . . The gaze is steady but not dispassionate. The eyes pity but do not succumb to despair or terror.<sup>7</sup>

We will hear the same note of pathos in Achilles' voice when he answers his horse:

And Achilles, greatly troubled, answered him:  
"I don't need you to prophesy my death,  
Xanthus. I know in my bones I will die here  
Far from my father and mother."

(19.448–451)

And there is a similar dissolution into clarity, clarity of purpose, as he continues:

"Still, I won't stop  
Until I have made the Trojans sick of war."  
And with a cry he drove his horses to the front.

(19.451–453)

We were left with the terrible beauty of Achilles' shield, a fire in the sky. Between that image and the speech of Xanthus, a space of twenty or so lines, we have this:

He lifted the helmet  
And placed it on his head, and it shone like a star,  
With the golden horsehair Hephaestus had set  
Thickly on the crest rippling in waves.  
He tested the fit and flex of the armor,  
Sprinting on the sand, and found that the metal  
Lifted him like wings. He pulled from its case  
His father's spear, the massive, heavy spear  
That no other Greek but Achilles could handle,  
Made of Pelian ash, which the centaur Chiron  
Had brought down from Mount Pelion and given  
To Achilles' father to be the death of heroes.  
Automedon and Alcimus harnessed the horses,  
Cinched the leather straps, fit the bits in their jaws

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<sup>7</sup> W. R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's Aeneid* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1976) 65.

And drew the reins back to the jointed chariot.  
 Automedon picked up the bright lash  
 And jumped into the car, and behind him,  
 Achilles stepped in, shining in his war gear  
 Like an amber Sun, and in a cold voice  
 He cried to his father's horses:

“Xanthus and Balius, Podarge's famous colts,  
 See that you bring your charioteer back  
 Safe this time when we have had enough of war  
 And not leave him for dead, as you left Patroclus.”  
 (19.409–432)

Cinematic sequences such as we see in this passage as well as other techniques familiar to us from film are everywhere in the *Iliad*—montage (in the sense of rapidly shifting images), alternation of viewing angle, distance shots, close-ups, panning, fades, flashbacks. I see these as characteristic of a poet who wants to help the listener to see clearly and from multiple perspectives, a mind that is always in and presenting the experienced moment. I have done what I could in my translation to highlight these qualities by way of line breaks, formatting, typography, going modestly in the direction of the presentation of a text as a script for performance. The entire text of the *Iliad* could easily be marked up as a shooting script in the way that Fred Mench marked up passages from the *Aeneid* (Vergil having learned this too from Homer) in a 1969 *Arion* article now conveniently available in Martin Winkler's anthology on classics and the cinema.<sup>8</sup> A movie of the *Iliad* that takes the poem itself as the film script, or at least takes the poem itself seriously, is one of the great unrealized uses of the past. Perhaps it will come. There is no turning back the trend, the huge flood tide, that is taking all of us ever deeper into a secondary orality—again Walter Ong's phrase, who observed this in the late 1970s, the reading of books giving way to television and movies, a long-established reading culture reorienting itself to audio and audiovisual experience. Only mass media could accomplish this. What would Ong make of iTunes and YouTube, not to mention the more ephemeral media technologies?

There are of course real possibilities for us here, but we are still a long way from making full use of even traditional modes of presentation when it comes to ancient epic. The Aquila Theatre Company has shown us great wonders in staging the *Iliad* across the country; I have produced audio books of my translations of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and I do my best to get around to campuses to do solo performances. There is certainly more to be done to give voice to Homeric epic on an ongoing and public basis. It may be that the poems will continue their life primarily as texts. It has always been my aim that my translations be recognized as part of the corpus of American poetry, or at least as having incorporated something of the Anglo-American poetic tradition in making Homer new, but the old poet's real life has always been in the spoken word.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> M. M. Winkler, ed., *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford 2001) 219–32.

<sup>9</sup> Parts of this paper are drawn from a paper I delivered at the January 2008 meeting of the American Philological Association.