

## PARAGRAPHOI

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### Violets in Crucibles: Translating, Traducing, Transmuting<sup>\*</sup>

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THE *THEORY* OF TRANSLATION, on the one hand, balances precariously upon the high wire stretched tautly between two linguistic axioms, both of them unassailable, both of them evident upon reflection, and the two of them in appearance mutually exclusive: the absolute unattainability of exact synonymy, and the absolute certainty of universal translatability. However broadly or narrowly we understand the activity of translation—whether more universally (as the various meanings of the Greek term ἐρμηνεύω suggest and as most linguists have come to accept since Roman Jakobson's seminal article of 1959<sup>1</sup>), as any transference of meaning whatsoever between one semiotic system and another, be it within one language ("intralingual"), between two languages ("interlingual"), or between two different symbolic codes ("intersemiotic"), or only as the everyday miracle of the communicative intercession performed by mediators operating between two different natural languages for the benefit of their linguistically less proficient fellows—it is both a datum of experience, and a postulate of theory, not only that there is not and cannot be any single term in one language for which a single precise equivalent, in any other language or for that matter in its own one, can ever

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<sup>1</sup> "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in R. Brower ed., *On Translation*, Cambridge, Mass., 232–39.

be found, but also that there is not and cannot be any single term in one language for which no periphrastic equivalent at all, in its own language or for that matter in any other one, can ever be found. For on the one hand, the full significance of a word is not exhausted by its referent in the real world but also includes such other factors as the range of cultural associations connected with that word, with other related words, and with that referent, the connotations suggested by the way that word has been used in literary and in ordinary contexts within living cultural memory, and its particular phonic and metrical shape; so that for a single other term B to be exactly equivalent to some word A, B would have not only to designate the same referent as A but also to convey to readers or listeners precisely the same associations and connotations and to display the same material form as A—in other words, B would have to be A, and the relation between them would be one not of synonymy but of identity, or at least of indiscernibility. On the other hand, a linguistic term for which no periphrastic equivalent could ever be found would amount to that philosophical chimera, a private language: for the essential sociality of all semiotic systems means that there is no nuance of any utterance, however minute and evanescent, that cannot in the end be rendered precisely by some periphrasis, however lengthy, however detailed, however circumstantial: so that for some word A to be absolutely untranslatable into any form of discourse, it would have to be located entirely outside of the system of signification of its own language as of any other language, and would thus have to be equivalent to 0. There is no single English term precisely equivalent to the Latin word *pietas* in every dimension of its meaning, yet it is entirely possible to explain in English exactly what *pietas* means in all its dimensions (whole books have been devoted to this very purpose) and thereby to translate *pietas* into an exact if admittedly rather lengthier English equivalent. Between one certainty, that of the impossibility of an exact single translation (“nothing can be translated”), and another certainty, that of the attainability of an exact circumlocutory rendering (“everything can be translated”), an eerie space of theoretical paradox opens up.

Well, so much for the theory. In the *practice* of translation, on the other hand, both professional and amateur translators spend their lives tottering within this acrobatic space, heroically, more or less gracefully, and, extraordinarily often, quite successfully—like pedagogy, love, and stair-climbing, translation is incapable of being theorized satisfactorily, but is constantly being performed as a practice, in front of our astonished eyes, more or less well, all the time. The amateur translators, taking translation now in the broadest possible sense, include all of us attempting in our quotidian engagements to understand ourselves and one another, not only between different natural

languages but also within the same one—most conspicuously, perhaps, especially around holiday time, family members bickering acrimoniously about just what it was that each one really meant by some thoroughly forgettable utterance, but, in the end, usually understanding one another (if not psychologically, then at least linguistically, and if not perfectly, then at least well enough for practical purposes); the professional translators, taking the term now in the more conventional, narrow, interlinguistic sense, include not only the technical interpreters who multiply scholarly discourses at world congresses, and legal and economic documents for international organizations, but also, and most interestingly, writers, and above all poets. The translating achievements of the amateurs usually leave no scars except upon our own very nervous systems; but the consequences of the professionals' acrobatics are apt to transform our world.

Of course, translation as ordinarily conceived is not at all the same thing as the *explication de texte* with which I am correlating it here: the latter exfoliates the multiple layers of a source text luxuriantly, leisurely, in a concerted attempt to recast as many dimensions of its semantic riches as possible into the form of a more soberly neutral and usually far lengthier discourse, while the former aims to replicate in some other natural language at least some of the more striking effects of the source text upon the reader, in a version whose compass is not markedly greater than that source and whose components can to some degree be mapped one-to-one upon its own. But using periphrastic explication, in the same language or a different one, as a limiting case of transference of meaning, can help us to understand better the ambitions and constraints of interlinguistic translation. Now there are many reasons why people of various kinds do translations. They may want to make (usually not very much) money, or to lengthen their bibliographies, or to help their friends, or to attach their own forgettable names to other more illustrious names, or to make available to their fellow native-speakers the works of some foreign author of whose importance they are convinced, or any one of a number of other things. Usually what is involved is the transference of meaning in as close an equivalence as possible from one language to another. But creative writers, and above all poets, seem also to be animated by a further motivation. For the conscious aim of most poets in translating some text that they have read and been moved by is only in the rarest of cases that of reproducing in their own language the meaning of that text, but is instead most often an attempt to produce a text in their language that will have something of the same effect upon their own readers as the source text had upon themselves: since poetic translators, unlike professional interpreters, are dealing with literary texts, not with business directives or international treaties, the meanings they

are dealing with have very little to do with referents and denotations, which are, in a certain sense, for them little more than pretexts for effects upon readers, and it is upon these latter that they tend to concentrate in their work of reading and of translating. So their translations are an attempt to objectify and to explain, for themselves and for others, just why and precisely how they were moved by some text: as translators, they must be simultaneously canny readers and creative poets. Were they composing a periphrastic exegesis, they would no doubt be able to go on at great length about all the dimensions of the source text that affected them in different ways. But the activity of translation has as its sole, sufficient, and brutally simple rule the requirement that the translator's exegesis, however refined and subtle, must take the form of a new text that is not obviously longer than the source and whose components can be mapped onto the source's. This is a daunting challenge, and translators come to it armed with nothing more than their reading, their language, and their wit. Remarkably, that is, quite often, enough.

Usually, translation is seen from the point of view of the linguistically handicapped reader who needs to have versions of foreign texts in his own language if he is to enter into any kind of exchange with them at all. This is, to be sure, an important point of view, and not only for anxious publishers and harassed school-teachers. But for the translators themselves, insofar as they are not just breadwinners but also poets, the question of public utility and its economic correlates, marketability and profitability, tend to be far less important than another, more private and self-directed aspect: namely, that meeting this daunting challenge requires them to hone their linguistic and spiritual tools more finely than perhaps any other task can demand of them. For the poems they write entirely within the confines of their own language can always be fudged: backed into a compositional corner in which they cannot easily find a word to express precisely the meaning they seek, they are always free to substitute for that meaning some other one that can more readily be conveyed by the words they happen to have to hand, confident that only rarely will their readers, their consciences, or their Muses notice the switch and complain. Translating removes this safety net by establishing a very narrow range of meanings from the beginning, within which the poet's linguistic inventiveness will have to be disciplined—and thereby expanded. Thus poets translate, as poets, to become better poets: to enlarge the resources of their own language, to establish unfamiliar genealogies of their preferred precursors, to open up new horizons for their own literary traditions, to experiment with and refine their own expressive capacities, and to keep themselves honest. But since poets write not only for themselves, but also, at least secondarily, for other readers too, such a self-discipline can only attain its

fullest meaning if it ends up helping to enhance the sensibilities of the audiences of poetry as well: the poetic translator's effort of self-improvement is usually, consciously or unconsciously, part of a program directed towards the refinement of the communicative capacities of a literary culture as a whole, and the fit readers for whom he or she is writing ought to be able to appreciate the translation he or she produces not only as a more or less accurate rendering of some foreign text in their own language, but also, and above all, as a valid poetic composition in its own terms.

These general and admittedly very sketchy considerations, which are intended to shift the emphasis in considering literary translations from the mere transference of meaning to the development of poetic skills and the refinement of the possibilities of poetic communication, may serve to put into a slightly less familiar light one of the most remarkable differences between the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome. For the diminutive, indeed almost negligible role played by translations from other languages within ancient Greek literature is no less astonishing than the enormous, indeed virtually constitutive role they play in ancient Latin literature. Most literatures seem to find a healthy balance between a lot of translation and a little bit, and to regenerate their own resources by occasional, tactical translations; there must be few indeed that can compare with ancient Greek for the relative absence of translations, or with ancient Latin for their relative ubiquity. In terms of literary translation, ancient Greek and Latin are not twin sisters: they are Jack Sprat and his wife.

Ancient Greek literature may well have begun as merely one local variant of a wide-spread Near Eastern cultural *koinê*, as scholars have often suspected and recent comparative studies seem to confirm; but for the most part the ancient Greeks themselves displayed a blithe and self-complacent indifference to the literatures of the cultures that surrounded them around that frog-pond, the Mediterranean, and further to the east. The similarities between the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh*, and between the *Theogony*, the Babylonian *Enûma Elis*, and the Hittite-Hurrian myth of Kumarbi, are evident, and fascinating, for us: they were quite unknown, and of no interest whatsoever, to the Greeks. As obsessed as the Greeks often were with the question of the degree to which they owed their first knowledge in matters scientific and philosophical to such barbarians as Indian Brahmins, Chaldaean Magi, Egyptian priests, Celtic Druids, gymnosophists, Persians, Scythians, Gauls, or Spaniards, the cheerful scorn with which they looked down upon *hoi barbaroi* in all other matters extended even to those literary genres and texts from which we can now tell that they ultimately derived much of what they considered most Greek.

As a general rule, all that most ancient Greeks knew about foreign cultures was what their own historians, starting with Hecataeus and Herodotus, told

them, or what foreigners writing in Greek (and therefore, in a certain sense, themselves Greeks, at least in cultural terms) chose to let them know, about what they claimed were their historical and religious traditions, in texts they wrote for Greek readers who were interested enough in them to read them in Greek (but not so interested as to think for a moment of going to the trouble of actually learning the foreign languages themselves). The question is highly controversial among modern historians, and will no doubt never be resolved once and for all, to what extent we should take seriously the occasional claims, made by such more or less shadowy figures as the Carthaginian Hanno, the Lydian Xanthus, the Babylonian Berossus, the Egyptian Manetho, and the Roman Fabius Pictor (to say nothing of Philon of Byblos, who asserts that he is translating the account of a Phoenician named Sanchuniaton who lived before the Trojan War), that their works contain in greater or lesser measure translations into Greek of documents from the original languages; but at least the very existence of such claims shows that, especially in the Hellenistic period, some authors could plausibly assume that some Greek readers were interested in having access to these kinds of foreign texts, historical, geographical, and religious ones. But even for that period, it is only scant, unreliable, and late evidence that provides any support at all for the view of Fraser and others, that the Ptolemies took care to include numerous translations from foreign works in the Library at Alexandria or that Greeks in Egypt were strongly interested in reading translations of Demotic literary texts. That is to say, even those Greeks who had some interest in knowing, or in thinking that they knew, something about the customs, institutions, and beliefs of other peoples, were interested only in the *contents* of such foreign modes of thought or behavior and not at all in the actual *forms* of concrete expression in which those foreigners had chosen to formulate those contents. As a matter of course, the verbal detritus of governmental administration—treaties, decrees, ordinances, all kinds of documents—were routinely translated into Greek as into other languages: in Egypt, the Rosetta stone; in India, the inscriptions of King Asoka; under the Roman Empire, numerous *senatus consulta*, the *Res gestae divi Augusti*, and portions of the *Corpus iuris civilis*. But of genuine translations of foreign *literary* works into ancient Greek, there is hardly a trace before the Imperial period. Even the Septuagint is no exception: for whether or not we may fairly consider this a literary work, it was certainly not translated as such nor for the sake of non-Jewish Greek readers, and such readers as these completely ignored it for centuries (and when they did discover it, it was not for literary reasons that they did so). Even during the centuries of Roman rule, when we might well expect there to have been compelling political and cultural reasons for Greeks to familiarize themselves with Latin literature in trans-

lation, it is hard to find evidence for Greek translations of any Latin authors at all other than Virgil, Cicero, Sallust, and Eutropius (and also of such eminently useful technical treatises as Dositheus' grammar).<sup>2</sup>

Of course there must have been many people in ancient Greece who acted as interpreters and translators in a variety of pragmatic situations: the Greeks were far too involved in commerce, diplomacy, travel, and warfare in the Mediterranean and Near East to be able to dispense with interlingual translation altogether. But such activity seems to have been limited to practical purposes like these and not at all to have included literary translation. The thorough lack of interest among ancient Greeks for translations of foreign literary texts becomes all the stranger once we recall that the norm in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East was one of fervid translation of literary and religious works between one culture and language and another. The Hittites, the Sumerians, the Egyptians were all busy translating: the Jews alone seem not to have been doing so very conspicuously, but, given their book religion, their intransigent monotheism, and their theological conception of their language, this is scarcely surprising. Hence the absence of Greek literary translation cannot be dismissed as an effect of ignorance, but must be considered instead as a systematic act of cultural suppression. Evidently, foreign literary texts as texts were simply not considered good enough by the Greeks to be worth translating into Greek; domestic literary forms and works were all they thought they needed. Why on earth did they think this? The question, why weren't the Greeks spending their time doing translations, admits of no easy answer. There is something deeply unsatisfactory about trying to explain this anomalous state of affairs with reference to some reified concept of the innate Greek character, for example to take refuge in a mere reference to that extraordinarily guiltless sense of self-admiration that has seemed to so many observers, then and now, to have been so typical of ancient Greek culture in all matters linguistic and literary. What we need instead is a historically specific, thoroughly contingent explanation in terms of the pragmatic circumstances accompanying and influencing the development of the culture of ancient Greece in its interrelation with the other cultures with which the Greeks came into contact during the first millennium before Christ. Unfortunately, I do not yet know of a satisfactory one.

Thus, for whatever reason, if Zeno of Citium or Chrysippus of Soli or Lucian of Samosata wanted to influence Greek culture, they were welcome to try: but first they had to learn how to do it in Greek. In Rome, on the other

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., V. Reichmann, 1943, *Römische Literatur in griechischer Übersetzung*, Philologus Supplementband 34.3, Leipzig.

hand, matters could not have been more different: in this regard the Romans followed the ancient norm as conspicuously as the Greeks violated it. The Romans recognized themselves from the beginning as latecomers in the highly competitive cultural market-place of the Hellenistic Mediterranean, and seem to have decided early that a program of intensive translation was the best strategy for catching up; given that it was the Greeks who dominated that market-place, it was inevitable that it was to Greek literature that the Romans should from the very beginning have primarily oriented their translating activity. In the absence of a Ministry of Culture, the decisions involved were individual, unsystematic, and largely the work of poets. The first line of Greek literature is the opening of Homer's *Iliad*; the first line of Latin literature is the opening of Livius Andronicus' translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. For centuries afterwards, Latin poets like Ennius and Virgil, Catullus and Horace, Ovid and Seneca, and even some prose authors like Cicero and Boethius, continued to enrich the resources of the Latin language, to broaden their readers' experience, to refine their own techniques, and to establish a cultural identity for Rome, by translating into Latin whole works, portions, or even just famous quotations from the Greek authors they read in school. That Aratus' intermittently interesting but always laborious didactic poem, the *Phaenomena*, was translated into Latin at least five different times—by Cicero, Varro Atacinus, Ovid, Germanicus, and Avienus—is a testimony not only to the importance of astronomy in the ancient world, but above all to the necessity Latin poets felt to sharpen their instruments on the most intractable of materials (and, along the way, to display their virtuosity in competition with their predecessors).

Obviously, what counted as translation at Rome often allowed considerable leeway for adaptation and variation—think only of Plautus and Terence in their fluid relations to their New Comedy models. For Roman translation was only the most technically demanding and hence poetically instructive version of the much wider practice of imitation of Greek models that characterizes so much of Roman literature, and the precise point at which translation stops and imitation begins is often very hard indeed to discern. It is within the broader context of Roman imitation that Roman translation has to be understood, just as the occasional conspicuous verbatim translation of short Greek passages in certain poems of Horace or Virgil has to be seen as part of the larger strategy of self-positioning vis-à-vis particular Greek models and vis-à-vis Greek models in general that organizes those poems as wholes. For Roman *imitatio* was very different in at least one way from Greek *mimêsis*: the Roman version included translation of works from a foreign language and culture, the Greek, while the Greek was always restricted to domestic models.



The result was that Latin literature as a whole managed to establish itself as a national literature of universal aspirations precisely by imitating Greek literature—so much so that when Quintilian passed in review all the genres of Roman literature, he was only able to identify one, satire, as being a purely Roman contribution without any Greek precedent. Ennius claimed with pride that he had *tria corda* because he was trilingual in Latin, Greek, and Oscan: can we even imagine a Classical Greek author daring publicly to admit as much?

Thus, Greek literature, written by and for people largely uninterested in translations from other languages, was able to become an ideal source of texts for translations into other languages—but only by the mediation and upon the model of Latin literature, written by and for people obsessed with translations from other languages, especially Greek. The Classical tradition needed two roots, distinct and complementary, one Greek, one Roman, if it was to flourish and grow. Adapting their own very Roman sense of *virtus* as the imitation of past models of excellence in action to the very Greek notion of *mimêsis* as the imitation of past models of excellence in discourse, the Romans bequeathed to the Western cultural tradition a Greco-Roman notion of moral perfection and stylistic refinement as attained by the study of the ancient authors, the imitation of their style, and the translation of their works. That is perhaps the most basic underpinning for the practice of written, mediated translation out of and above all into the ancient languages that has been so characteristic a mode of the pedagogy of Classics starting with the Renaissance and that, in the form of prose (and sometimes even verse) composition, still survives today in a few isolated pockets of resistance to the vast legions of modernity. Something of value will be lost forever once this practice, too, in what seems likely to be the not too distant future, is finally abandoned.

Once upon a time, when the earth had one language and few words, the men who wanted to make a name for themselves decided to come together and build a tower at Babel so that they would not be scattered abroad. Yahweh, the God whose name cannot be uttered in any language of men, perceived the threat, intervened as they toiled, confused their language, and scattered them after all. This may have been a setback for the building industry, but it has been a boon for professional translators ever since. And not only for them: in the very next chapter of *Genesis*, Yahweh's command to Abram, to go out from his country and his kindred and his father's house to another land, only makes sense if we presuppose the very same division of languages and multiplication of cultures that was instituted by the fall of the tower of Babel. If there were no foreign land for Abram to go out into, Yahweh would at this

point in the Biblical narrative have no way to test Abram's faith and Abram would have no way to prove it to him: there can be no fidelity without at least the possibility of traducement.

But by the same token there can be no meaning without at least the possibility of translation. In his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley wrote,

The vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible, that you might destroy the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower.

But a translation too can be the creation of a poet, and can be no less complex and beautiful a plant than its original was. So far from demonstrating the vanity of translations, Shelley's beautiful image suggests their indispensability. After all, it is only in the crucible of the perfumer's laboratory that the violet's scent can be transmuted into another form and thereby be rescued from its own mortality. So too, great translations have always aimed through the original's effects at the core of its meaning, through the plant's flower at its seed; and as a result, like the originals, they too have gone on to flower, over and over again, for countless readers.