Reconsiderations December 2020

An impression of the poet Horace by Anton von Werner, 1884.

More lasting than bronze

by Jonathan Gaisman

On the many translations of a famous ode by Horace.

What is the most translated poem in history? Or, rather, which poem can boast the most distinguished roll of translators? One answer to these questions is the fifth poem in Book One of Horace's *Odes*, published in 23 B.C., in the early years of the Augustan era. The *Odes* are the best productions of ancient Rome's most endearing and most balanced poet, who built—as he himself forecast—"a monument more lasting than bronze."

Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa
perfusus liquidis urget odoribus
grato, Pyrrha, sub antro?
cui flavam religas comam,
simplex munditiis? heu quotiens fidem
mutatosque deos flebit et aspera
nigris aequora ventis
emirabitur insolens,
qui nunc te fruitur credulus aurea,

qui semper vacuam, semper amabilem
sperat, nescius aurae
fallacis! miseri, quibus
intemptata nites. me tabula sacer
votiva paries indicat uvida
suspendisse potenti
vestimenta maris deo.

It is impossible to translate poetry perfectly. As Boswell said, "In a different language it may be the same tune, but it has not the same tone. Homer plays it on a bassoon; Pope on a flageolet." Here, though, is a decent "straight" translation, by A. D. Godley, a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford.

Pyrrha! what slender youth in perfumes steeped courts thee mid circling roses in thy pleasant bower? For whom dost bind thy yellow locks with simple grace? Alas, how often shall he weep his outraged troth, his fortune changed, and stand amazed at the waves that rise before the blackening squall—poor credulous novice, who dreams thou wilt ever be his alone and meet for love, all ignorant of thy favour's fickle breeze! Hapless they who see thy beauty and know thee

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not! But I, as yon temple wall's votive tablet declares, have hung up my dripping raiment as a thank-offering to the god who rules the main.

Harry Eyres, the author of *Horace and Me* (2013, Farrar, Straus and Giroux), has written that even if Pyrrha was a purely fictional character, as she may have been, she seems to us as real as Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary; the poem "simultaneously holds and burnishes the image of this treacherous golden girl" who moves from glamorous exclusivity to serial deception, and finally evokes the metaphor of the retired fisherman hanging up his nets in a favorite temple—or the survivor of shipwreck the clothes in which he was washed ashore.

This is not Horace's most profound poem. In Book One alone there are finer pieces: the ninth poem, for one—lines from which we are to believe that Patrick Leigh-Fermor swapped with his German captive, General Kreipe, on Crete in 1944. ("Vides ut alta stet nive candidum/ Soracte . . .": "See Soracte's mighty peak stands deep in virgin snow.") Pyrrha does not make us shiver with the sense of Horace's shade reaching across the millennia in the same way as his prediction in III.xxx: "Non omnis moriar": "I shall not wholly die." And she is positively dwarfed by the greatest Ode of all, "Diffugere nives" (IV.vii), translated with such feeling by A. E. Housman, who said that the poem, which he thought the finest literary production of classical antiquity, went through him "like a spear."

The Pyrrha Ode is nonetheless a perfect miniature—multi-perspectival, of characteristically Epicurean phlegmaticism, and so finely finished that it is impossible to imagine moving or replacing a word. To attempt a translation is to wrestle with a poetic Rubik's Cube. Nietzsche might have had it in mind when praising the *Odes* for "the minimum in compass and number of syllables, the maximum achieved in the effectiveness of these symbols." Its sheer economy poses multiple problems of rendition ("simplex munditiis" or "intemptata nites") and has thus set an irresistible challenge to those generations of classically educated Englishmen (though not just English and not just men) for whom Latin and Greek were a lifelong recreation from graver responsibilities. These were often public servants who read Milton and Shelley without the need for explanatory footnotes, who knew the names not just of the three Graces or the nine Muses, but also no doubt of the fifty hounds of Actaeon (inexplicably no longer listed in modern editions of *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*), or who (at least according to *Punch* magazine) captured Indian provinces and reported their success with Latin puns.

In the churchyard of the Essex village of Pebmarsh there lies buried an official of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office who was just such a person. Sir Ronald Storrs's headstone recites that he was governor successively of Jerusalem (1917–21—he claimed to be the city's first military governor since Pontius Pilate), Cyprus (1926–32), and Northern Rhodesia (1932–34). T. E. Lawrence wrote in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that Storrs was "always first, the great man among us . . . subtly

He reported "trouble" with Lawrence over the latter's insistence on translating the word ξανθός (yellow) in the *Odyssey*, which occurs eight times,

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efficient, despite his diversion of energy in love of music and letters, of sculpture, painting, of whatever was beautiful in the world's fruit." Storrs's estimation of his friend was less enthusiastic: he reported "trouble" with Lawrence over the latter's insistence on translating the word ξανθός (yellow) in the *Odyssey*, which occurs eight times, with seven different words. Storrs had similar difficulty with another friend, the writer Maurice Baring, who at a time when a new orange drink was just coming into vogue sent him a forthcoming book in which a translation of the Pyrrha Ode referred to her "flavam comam" as "sun-kist hair": Storrs made him stand at Hyde Park Corner and incredulously watch the buses go by, which even in those days bore advertisements on their sides. Baring recanted, and sent a telegram which read "Printing yellow Maurice," but as Storrs sighed, "Really these great men should be above elegant variation!"

with seven different words.

Having discovered the sheer number of translations of *Odes* I.v, Storrs conceived the idea of making a collection. He sought what he called "first aid and artificial respiration" in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Classical Review*, bombarded foreign universities, and himself visited libraries in several European cities, including the Vatican. He discovered versions in all the major European languages—and others—including seventeenth century Polish, Maltese, Hebrew, Guatemalan—and (with what he called "matchless effrontery") in Latin. (The last of these was a curious alteration of the sense of the original into a hymn to married, rather than irregular love, by a seventeenth century German pedant called Sagittarius.) By the time he died in 1955, Storrs had assembled no fewer than 451 versions and had written the introduction for an anthology, which was completed by friends and published as *Ad Pyrrham* by the Oxford University Press in 1959. The book includes nearly 150 translations, including one to which Storrs awarded "first prize for vulgarity," albeit that "readers are invited to identify this version for themselves." There are sixty-three versions in English, twenty in French, fifteen in Italian, thirteen in German, twelve in Spanish, two in Welsh, and one each in nineteen other languages.

The collection, which can still be found on-line, is a source of endless pleasure. Of the foreign-language renditions, French generally fares well, especially where the translator can be persuaded away from the too-frequent "svelte" for "gracilis" or (in one case) the eccentrically biblical "tout parfumé de nard." Here, for example, is M. Goupy (1857):

> Dis-nous, Pyrrha, quel est l'adolescent
> Qui, fou d'amour et de parfums luisant,
> Dans un réduit tout parsémés de roses,
> Foule avec toi le lit où tu reposes?

German, in general such a poetic language, is here as unappetizing as on a restaurant menu. The anonymous 1872 Swedish version verges on unconscious parody, asking Pyrrha "För hvem smyckas din blonda lock?" For some reason it is not a surprise that the Turkish translation (beginning "Vücüdü sulu kokularla") is uniquely in prose. We must be grateful to Storrs, however, for not including van Vloudel's translation into Dutch (undeservedly immortalized by Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*), in which "liquidis perfusus odoribus" becomes "van civet et moschata [musk] gestinken."

For English readers, it is the translation history of the ode in their own tongue that especially fascinates. The earliest known attempt on the ruthless concision of the original was by William Browne (1590–1643), the author of *Britannia's Pastorales*. It has its infelicities: "Tell me, Pyrrha, what fine youth . . . To thy chamber thee pursu'th?" Milton essayed a deliberately literal translation, which though well known has since been generally excoriated. Aphra Behn, the seventeenth-century dramatist, is anything but literal: "Defend thy Coral Lips, thy Amber Breath;/ To taste these Sweets lets in a Certain Death." Christopher Smart wins the booby prize for rendering "simplex munditiis" as "So seeming in your cleanly vest,/ Whose plainness is the pink of taste." Other poets represented here include Cowley, Chatterton, and Hood. That great classical scholar (also prime minister), W. E. Gladstone, translated all four books of the *Odes*, but here he is clumsy:"Who hopes thee ever kind and ever void." An elder brother of the actor John Gielgud signals his satirical intent by daring to address the poet's former lover as "Prue." A sometime judge of the Egyptian Mixed Courts offers us the neologism "upbind." Two members of the 1940–45 government, John Simon and Duff Cooper, are represented; so is Leo Amery, whose electrifying House of Commons speech in May 1940 contributed to its formation

American authors are included too. Franklin P. Adams in *The New Yorker* unusually compresses Horace's sixteen lines into twelve: much is lost, but one would not want to be without his final couplet: "As far as I'm concerned I'm through/ With polyandrous girls like you." Robert Green from Boston begins:

> Who's the sleek kid, Pyrrha, with perfume there,
> Rushing you at the rose-grown rendezvous,
> For whom you've bobbed up your peroxide hair
> To play the ingénue?

The British D. B. Wyndham Lewis unaccountably adopts a mock-American idiom which is rarely less than appalling: "Gee, how many times is that poor cake-eater gointa [*sic*] get a sock in the eye?"

And so to the present day. Horace's appeal is too subtle for most children—it certainly was for this one, taught by a headmaster for whom bleak austerity seemed to constitute an entire educational method. But maybe the fault was mine: returning to the school thirty years later—better informed if not wiser—I had a magazine of adolescent intellectual offerings pressed into my hand and, having been relieved of five pounds, opened it as I walked along familiar paths. Within was a translation of the Pyrrha Ode by the sixteen-year-old Minoo Dinshaw, subsequently the author of a highly praised biography of Steven Runciman. It was immediately and movingly clear that a mere schoolboy had in 2006 succeeded, far better than most of his distinguished predecessors over the previous four centuries, in capturing the essence of this eternal poem. More lasting than bronze indeed:

> Who's that lithe lad, submerged in sultry scent,
> Who's in your garden grotto on a rose-couch, bent . . .

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