

A Note on Translation

Well, at least we know what it is we don't want.

What we don't want is a snail's pace transcription, deaf and blind to idiom and usage, of the sort that Housman parodied in his *Fragment of a Greek Tragedy*:

Chorus: O suitably attired in leather boots
Head of a traveller, wherefore seeking whom
Whence by what way how purposed art thou come
To this well-nightingaled vicinity?
My object in inquiring is to know.
But if you happen to be deaf and dumb
And do not understand a word I say,
Nod with your hand to signify as much.

Housman's target is a witless, if in one clinical sense 'accurate', movement from one language to another. This is the kind of literalism which, were it faced with French, would presumably feel obliged to translate 'Qu'est-ce que c'est?' by writing 'What is it that it is?' Language functions through idiom and metaphor. Frequently there is no exact translation possible for such an idiom or metaphor, though one can usually find a parallel of some sort.

Many modern writers have discovered a type of writing somewhere between imitation and translation. Thus we have Pound's Propertius, Lowell's Baudelaire and Arthur Waley's versions of the Chinese. We also have Christopher Logue's ongoing Homer. Such poems never transliterate; the poems must work as poems in the host language, which often means treating the visiting language cavalierly, or finding idiom to match idiom, rather than phrase to transcribe phrase.

Myth, Metaphor and Science

Distinguished translators such as Christopher Middleton and Michael Hamburger, it should be said, have steered a course between the two extremes, remaining as faithful as possible to the original, while injecting all the native vigour which accuracy permitted into the translation.

When Pound, in the persona of Propertius, speaks of 'devirginated young ladies' who will come to enjoy his work, or points out that his cellar is not 'equipped with a frigidaire patent' the effect is, to use Pound's own recommendation, to 'make it new'. The last thing we want here is pastiche.