

John Dryden

FROM THE PREFACE TO OVID'S EPISTLES

IT REMAINS THAT I SHOULD say somewhat of Poetical Translations in general, and give my opinion (with submission to better Judgments) which way of Version seems to me most proper.

All Translation I suppose may be reduced to these three heads.

First, that of Metaphrase, or turning an Authour word by word, and Line by Line, from one Language into another. Thus, or near this manner, was *Horace* his Art of Poetry translated by *Ben. Johnson*.¹ The second way is that of Paraphrase, or Translation with Latitude, where the Authour it kept in view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not alter'd. Such is Mr. *Waller's* Translation of *Virgil's* Fourth *Aeneid*.² The Third way is that of Imitation, where the Translator (if now he has not lost that Name) assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sence, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking only some general hints from the Original, to run division on the ground-work, as he pleases. Such is Mr. *Cowley's* practice in turning two odes of *Pindar*, and one of *Horace* into *English*.³

Concerning the first of these Methods, our Master *Horace* has given us this Caution,

Nec verbum verbo curabis reddere, fidus

Interpres—

Nor word for word too faithfully translate. As the *Earl of Roscommon* has excellently render'd it.⁴ Too faithfully is indeed pedantically: 'tis a faith like that which proceeds

from Superstition, blind and zealous: Take it in the Expression of Sir John Denham, to Sir Rich. Fanshaw, on his Version of the *Pastor Fido*.⁵

That servile path, thou nobly do'st decline,
Of tracing word by word and Line by Line;
A new and nobler way thou do'st pursue,
To make Translations, and Translators too:
They but preserve the Ashes, thou the Flame,
True to his Sence, but truer to his Fame.

'Tis almost impossible to ^(Succinct, concise etc.) Translate verbally, and well, at the same time; For the *Latin*, (a most severe and Compendious Language) often expresses that in one word, which either the Barbarity, or the narrowness of modern Tongues cannot supply in more. 'Tis frequent also that the Conceit is couch'd in some Expression, which will be lost in *English*.

atque idem venti vela fidemque ferent⁶

What Poet of our Nation is so happy as to express this thought Literally in *English*, and to strike Wit or almost Sense out of it?

In short the Verbal Copyer is incurber'd with so many difficulties at once, that he can never disentangle himself from all. He is to consider at the same time the thought of his Authour, and his words, and to find out the Counterpart to each in another Language: and besides this he is to confine himself to the compass of Numbers, and the Slavery of Rhime. 'Tis much like dancing on Ropes with fetter'd Leggs: A man may shun a fall by using Caution, but the gracefulness of Motion is not to be expected: and when we have said the best of it, 'tis but a foolish Task; for no sober man would put himself into a danger for the Applause of scaping without breaking his Neck. We see *Ben. Johnson* could not avoid obscurity in his literal Translation of *Horace*, attempted in the same compass of Lines: nay *Horace* himself could scarce have done it to a *Greek* Poet.

Brevis esse laboro, obscurus fio.⁷

Either perspicuity or gracefulness will frequently be wanting. *Horace* has indeed avoided both these Rocks in his Translation of the three first Lines of *Homers Odyssees*, which he has Contracted into two.

Dic mihi Musa Virum captæ post tempora Trojæ
Qui mores hominum multorum vidit & urbes.
Muse, speak the man, who since the Siege of Troy,
So many Towns, such Change of Manners saw. } *Earl of Rosc.*

But then the sufferings of *Ulysses*, which are a Considerable part of that Sentence are omitted.

“Ὅς μάλα πλὴν πλάγχθη⁸

The Consideration of these difficulties, in a servile, literal Translation, not long since made two of our famous Wits, Sir *John Denham*, and Mr. *Cowley*, to contrive another way of turning Authours into our Tongue, call'd by the latter of them, Imitation. As they were Friends, I suppose they Communicated their thoughts on this Subject to each other, and therefore their reasons for it are little different: though the practice of one is much more moderate. I take Imitation of an Authour in their sense to be an Endeavour of a later Poet to write like one who has written before him on the same Subject: that is, not to Translate his words, or to be Confin'd to his Sense, but only to set him as a Patern, and to write, as he supposes, that Authour would have done, had he liv'd in our Age, and in our Country. Yet I dare not say that either of them have carried thir libertine way of rendring Authours (as Mr. *Cowley* calls it) so far as my Definition reaches. For in the *Pindarick Odes*, the Customs and Ceremonies of Ancient *Greece* are still preserv'd: but I know not what mischief may arise hereafter from the Example of such an Innovation, when writers of unequal parts to him, shall imitate so bold an undertaking; to add and to diminish what we please, which is the way avow'd by him, ought only to be granted to Mr. *Cowley*, and that too only in his Translation of *Pindar*, because he alone was able to make him amends, by giving him better of his own, when ever he refus'd his Authours thoughts. *Pindar* is generally known to be a dark writer, to want Connexion, (I mean as to our understanding) to soar out of sight, and leave his Reader at a Gaze: So wild and ungovernable a Poet cannot be Translated literally, his Genius is too strong to bear a Chain, and *Sampson* like he shakes it off: A Genius so Elevated and unconfin'd as Mr. *Cowley's*, was but necessary to make *Pindar* speak *English*, and that was to be perform'd by no other way than Imitation. But if *Virgil* or *Ovid*, or any regular intelligible Authours be thus us'd, 'tis no longer to be call'd their work, when neither the thoughts nor words are drawn from the Original: but instead of them there is something new produc'd, which is almost the creation of another hand. By this way 'tis true, somewhat that is Excellent may be invented perhaps more Excellent than the first design, though *Virgil* must be still excepted, when that perhaps takes place: Yet he who is inquisitive to know an Authours thoughts will be disapointed in his expectation. And 'tis not always that a man will be contented to have a Present made him, when he expects the payment of a Debt. To state it fairly, Imitation of an Authour is the most advantagious way for a Translator to shew himself, but the greatest wrong which can be done to the Memory and Reputation of the dead. Sir *John Denham* (who advis'd more Liberty than he took himself,) gives this Reason for his Innovation, in his admirable Preface before the Translation of the second *Aeneid*: "Poetry is of so subtil a Spirit, that in pouring out of one Language into another, it will all Evaporate; and if a new Spirit be not added in the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a *Caput Mortuum*." I confess this Argument holds good against a literal Translation, but who defends it? Imitation and verbal Version are in my Opinion the two Extreems, which ought to be avoided: and therefore when I have propos'd the mean betwixt them, it will be seen how far his Argument will reach.

No man is capable of Translating Poetry, who besides a Genius to that Art, is not a Master both of his Authours Language, and of his own: Nor must we understand the Language only of the Poet, but his particular turn of Thoughts, and of Expression, which are the Characters that distinguish, and as it were individuate

him from all other writers. When we are come thus far, 'tis time to look into our selves, to conform our Genius to his, to give his thought either the same turn if our tongue will bear it, or if not, to vary but the dress, not to alter or destroy the substance. The like Care must be taken of the more outward Ornaments, the Words: when they appear (which is but seldom) litterally graceful, it were an injury to the Authour that they should be chang'd; But since every Language is so full of its own proprieties, that what is Beautiful in one, is often Barbarous, nay sometimes Nonsense in another, it would be unreasonable to limit a Translator to the narrow compass of his Authours words: 'tis enough if he choose out some Expression which does not vitiate the Sense. I suppose he may stretch his Chain to such a Latitude, but by innovation of thoughts, methinks he breaks it. By this means the Spirit of an Authour may be transfus'd, and yet not lost: and thus 'tis plain that the reason alledg'd by Sir *John Denham*, has no farther force than to Expression: for thought, if it be Translated truly, cannot be lost in another Language, but the words that convey it to our apprehension (which are the Image and Ornament of that thought) may be so ill chosen as to make it appear in an unhandsome dress, and rob it of its native Lustre. There is therefore a Liberty to be allow'd for the Expression, neither is it necessary that Words and Lines should be confin'd to the measure of their Original. The sence of an Authour, generally speaking, is to be Sacred and inviolable. If the Fancy of *Ovid* be luxuriant, 'tis his Character to be so, and if I retrench it, he is no longer *Ovid*. It will be replyed that he receives advantage by this lopping of his superfluous branches, but I rejoynt that a Translator has no such Right: when a *Painter* Copies from the life, I suppose he has no priviledge to alter Features, and Lineaments, under pretence that his Picture will look better: perhaps the Face which he has drawn would be more Exact, if the Eyes, or Nose were alter'd, but 'tis his business to make it resemble the Original. In two Cases only there may a seeming difficulty arise, that is, if the thought be notoriously trivial or dishonest; But the same Answer will serve for both, that then they ought not to be Translated.

—Et quae

Desperes tractata nitescere posse, relinquas.⁹

Thus I have ventur'd to give my opinion on this Subject against the Authority of two great men, but I hope without offence to either of their Memories, for I both lov'd them living, and reverence them now they are dead. But if after what I have urg'd, it be thought by better Judges that the praise of a Translation Consists in adding new Beauties to the piece, thereby to recompence the loss which it sustains by change of Language, I shall be willing to be taught better, and to recant. In the mean time it seems to me, that the true reason why we have so few Versions which are tolerable, is not from the too close persuing of the Authours Sence: but because there are so few who have all the Talents which are requisite for Translation: and that there is so little praise and so small Encouragement for so considerable a part of Learning.]

To apply in short, what has been said, to this present work, the Reader will here find most of the Translations, with some little Latitude or variation from the Authours Sence: That of *Oenone to Paris*, is in Mr. *Cowleys* way of Imitation only. I was desir'd to say that the Authour who is of the Fair Sex,¹⁰ understood not *Latine*.

But if she does not, I am afraid she has given us occasion to be ashamed who do.

For my own part I am ready to acknowledge that I have transgress'd the Rules which I have given; and taken more liberty than a just Translation will allow. But so many Gentlemen whose Wit and Learning are well known, being Joyn'd in it, I doubt not but that their Excellencies will make you ample Satisfaction for my Errors.

Editor's notes

- 1 The poet and dramatist Ben Jonson (1572–1637) translated Horace's "Art of Poetrie" around 1605 and then revised his version after 1610 when a new edition of the Latin text appeared.
- 2 In 1658 Edmund Waller (1606–1687) completed the version of the fourth *Aeneid* begun by Sidney Godolphin (1610–1643), who died in the Civil War. Both poets were associated with the court of Charles I. Waller's smooth prosody was much admired in his lifetime and during the eighteenth century.
- 3 The poet Abraham Cowley (1618–1667) first published his *Pindarique Odes* in 1656.
- 4 Wentworth Dillon (1633–1685), the fourth Earl of Roscommon, translated Horace's *Ars Poetica* into blank verse (1680) and wrote a treatise in couplets, *Essay on Translated Verse* (1684).
- 5 The poet Sir John Denham (1615–1669) wrote an influential translation of the second *Aeneid*, entitled *The Destruction of Troy* (1656). In 1648 Sir Richard Fanshawe (1608–1666) produced an English version of Battista Guarini's pastoral drama, *Il pastor fido* (*The Faithful Shepherd*), to which Denham contributed a commendatory poem.
- 6 This line, taken from Ovid's *Heroides* ("Dido Aeneae," 7.8), may be rendered closely as follows: "And will the same winds carry away your sails and your fidelity?"
- 7 Jonson's version of this line from Horace's *Ars Poetica* (l.25) reads: "My selfe for shortnesse labour, and am stil'd/Obscure."
- 8 Dryden is quoting a portion of *Odyssey* 1.1–2. Robert Fagles's 1996 version renders the phrase as "driven time and again off course." Here are Fagles's opening lines:

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
 driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
 the hallowed heights of Troy.
 Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
 many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea.
- 9 Jonson's version of these lines from Horace (ll.149–150) reads: "letting goe/What he despaires, being handled might not show."
- 10 Dryden is referring to the novelist and dramatist Aphra Behn (1640–1689), who also translated La Rochefoucauld's maxims (1685) and Bernard de Fontenelle's *A Discovery of New Worlds* (1688).