

ΑΔΑΜ Π. ΑΔΑΜ.

Βοηθὸν Τμήματος Ἀγγλικῶν Σπουδῶν

CHAPMAN. POPE AND COWPER AS TRANSLATORS OF HOMER

The reputations of Chapman (1539-1634), Pope (1688-1744) and Cowper (1731-1800) do not of course depend upon their translations of Homer, which are a comparatively insignificant part of their respective *oeuvre*. This section of the dissertation is concerned only to evaluate them as translators, and does not consider them under any other aspect.

If we may imagine the possible forms of translation as points on a continuum between the poles of fidelity on the one hand and freedom or licence on the other, Cowper can be placed at the first extreme, Pope at the second, while Chapman falls in the middle, compromising continually between them. Yet different as they are, they are united by a number of identical preoccupations, which help to place their differences in perspective. Each did his best to present the Homeric heroes to his contemporaries in intelligible but also memorable terms, Chapman by dramatizing, Pope by intensifying and Cowper by means of a curiously abstract faithfulness to the original. Of course this actually involved the 'disguising' of the Homeric heroes for the English taste; they tried to domesticate Greeks into an English context. They also tended to select and magnify those Homeric qualities which appealed to their own taste and to what they took to be the taste of their intended audience; and to minimize or omit those which they felt made the original tedious or even ludicrous. Their approach was severely unhistorical: Homer's significance had to be direct and ethical or it was nothing. But within these limits, each translator saw himself in reaction to the work of his predecessors: each new translation had to be justified technically but also ethically as an advance. This feature is particularly noticeable in the case of these three 'classic' English versions of Homer.

Chapman produced his versions of Homer¹ in the last years of sixteenth

1. Seven books of the *Iliades* of Homere, prince of poets,

and the early part of the seventeenth century. During the sixteenth century fidelity to the original was the dominant fashion in translation, but the two following centuries saw a reaction in the opposite direction. Chapman can properly be seen as a transition point between these two styles in that he attacked both extremes:

*Since thither th' others full soule cannot make
The ample transmigration to be showne
In Nature-loving Poesie: so the Brake
That those translators stick in, that affect
Their word-for-word traductions (whre they lose
The free grace of their natural Dialect
And shame their authors, with a forced Glose)
I laugh to see; and yet as much abhorre
More licence from the words, then may express
Their full compression, and make cleare the Author¹.*

He was outspokenly hostile to literal translation, was always conscious (how pedantical and absurd an affectation it is in the interpretation of any author (much more of Homer) to turn him word for word). He urged rather that a middle way could be found, had indeed been found by Horace 'and other best lawgivers to translators'. This middle way involved analysis of the operation of translation and its separation into different aspects: «it is part of every knowing and judicial interpreter not to follow the number and order of words, but the material things themselves, and sentences to weigh diligently, and to clothe and adorn them with words, and such a style and form of oration, as are most apt for the language in which they are converted»².

*His own translation is offered tentatively
to reading judgements, since so gen' rally*

London, 1598. *The Iliad: Achilles' shield*, London, 1598. *Homer, prince of poets*, London, 1610. *The whole works of Homer, prince of poets, in his Iliads and Odysseys*, London, 1612.

1. To the Reader, in *Poems to the Iliads and Odysseys*, ed. Bartlett p. 391.

2. Chapman's *Homer's Iliads*, vol I p. xx

*Custom hath made ev' n th' ablest agents err
In these translations . . .*¹

Yet this hesitation was polite rather than anxious: the dismissal of literalism was accompanied by a contempt for the unlearned. His intended audience consisted of learned people already familiar with Homer, in sharp contrast with the practice of other sixteenth-century translators². As he remarks at the beginning of his preface to *The Seven Books of the Iliades of Homer*, «I suppose you to be no mere reader, since you intend to read Homer»³. Chapman's use of the fourteenner, a relatively rare English metre, may indeed almost be seen as a defiance of the reader's attention. He defended its use on the grounds that

*This long poem asks this length of verse,
which I my self ingeniously maintaine
Too long our shorter Authors to rehearse*⁴.

Yet his technical ability as a translator is characteristically revealed by his avoidance of monotony in this difficult medium.

Chronologically of course Pope's translation antedates Cowper's. But it is helpful to deal with the latter first. By contrast with both Chapman and Pope, Cowper favoured the principle of fidelity. He went so far as to claim that all the matter to be found in him could also be found in Homer. He rejected the idea that the translator should try to imagine the style which his author would have used had he been writing in English. «For suppose six persons, equally qualified for the task, employed to translate the same Ancient author into their own language, with this rule to guide them. In the event it would be found that each had fallen on a manner different from that of all the rest, and by probable inference it would follow that none had fallen on the right»⁵.

1. *Homer's Iliads, To the Reader*, ed Nichol, vol. I, p. 9.

2. For example, A. Barkley, preface to *The Ship of Fools*.

3. Vol. II, p. 293.

4. *Poems to the Iliads and Odysses, To the Reader*, p. 395, lines 78-80.

5. *The Iliad of Homer*, vol. I, p. xviii.

The demand for fidelity also affected Cowper's choice of heroic blank verse against the use of the couplet, an 'enemy to fidelity'. In the preface to *The Iliad of Homer*¹, he says «(whatever may be the extent of my own individual failure) if justice is ever to be done to the easy flow and majestic simplicity of the grand old Poet, it can only be in the Heroic blank verse»; He thought it impossible for Chapman to close every couplet with homotonous sounds and at the same time to express the sense of the original. But perhaps the best way to enlarge upon Cowper's view of the principles of translation is to discuss his thoroughgoing attack upon Pope.

The following passage is perhaps typical. By arguing for a particular view of Homer and the Homeric style, he allows his hostility to Pope appear as the necessary corollary of a just appreciation of the original. «Except the Bible, there never was in the world a book so remarkable for that species of the sublime that owes its very existence to simplicity, as the work of Homer. He is always nervous, plain, natural—Homer is, on occasions that call for such a style, the easiest and most familiar of writers . . . his accuracy of description, and his exquisite judgement never, never failed him. He never, I believe, in a single instance sacrificed beauty to embellishment. He does not deal in hyperbole . . . accordingly, when he describes nature, whether in man or in animal, or whether nature inanimate, you may always trust him for the most consummate fidelity»². Again and again we notice the manner in which 'obvious' aspects of Homer's style, his simplicity, accuracy of description, the absence of hyperbole, are used to suggest that any translation in which these features are not conspicuous must necessarily be wanting and thus inferior. Not only is Pope's translation covertly sneered at for falsely confusing embellishment with (true) beauty, but Cowper's own work is legitimated by linking its fidelity to Homer's matter with Homer's own fidelity to nature: Cowper is merely an apt pupil. In the same letter to Lady Hesketh he says: «Pope has written a great deal of very musical and sweet verse in his translation of Homer, but his verse is not universally such; on the contrary it is often lame, feeble and flat, and Pope's felicity is purely modern, and has nothing to do with Homer» (i b i d.). And later, «there is hardly anything in the world so unlike another, as Pope's version to the original . . . Pope never entered into the spirit of Homer . . . he never translated him» (i b i d.). 'Translation' is made to bear an enor-

1. Ibid.

2. Letters to Lady Hesketh, December 1785: Vol. I p. 402 (ed. Fraser).

mous responsibility here: mere linguistic fidelity was shown by Chapman to be inadequate, but Cowper is trying to show that Pope's alternative, an excessively subjective mode, is no less damaging than literalism to the reader's ability to experience the authentic flavour of the original, something as elusive as 'naturalness'.

Cowper's attack was undoubtedly partly personal: he was irritated by the contemporary popularity of Pope's translation¹ and feared that his own could not compete. His fears were not ill-founded. Pope wrote explicitly to be read, and in this sense at least was successful: his translation was immediately and lastingly popular. Yet it is difficult to explain that success. In the preface to *Homer's Iliad* he argues that the translator must render his author 'entire' and 'unmaim'd', but must use his own diction and versification². Yet several factors caused this admirable sentiment to fall inconsequently by the wayside. There is first the technical problem of the heroic couplet, with its endless rhymes and monotonous rhythms. Secondly, Pope's moral preoccupations: his many odd omissions of Homer's ideas and phrases are inspired by a consistent, if narrow, view of what was acceptable or valuable. The rest was dispensable. He disapproved of the heroes' warlike spirit and cruelty. He was more interested in bringing out their humane qualities than their heroic ones. By contrast with Chapman, for instance, who tried to develop Odysseus's character (which he considered 'perfect') and dramatize his adventures, Pope was primarily concerned to stress his feelings and to present him as a soul above mere adventuring.

Matthew Arnold's characterisation of Homer is admirably brief and lucid: Homer is «eminently rapid in his movement, plain and direct in the evolution of his thought and in the expression of it», that is, in syntax, vocabulary and substance. This characterisation permits him to comment sharply on our three translators. Cowper is inadequate because of his «slow movement, elaborate style and the interposed mist of Cooper's imitation of the Miltonic manner», which is alien to the flowing rapidity of Homer. Pope is artificial both in style and vocabulary, and therefore false to Homer's naturalness. Chapman likewise bestows the 'mist of fancifulness' of

1. See For example Samuel Johnson's comment: he cultivated our language with so much diligence and art that he has left in his Homer a treasure of poetical elegances to posterity. (*Lives of the English Poets*, vol II p. 319.

2. Preface, p 17 (ed. Maynard Mack).

the Elizabethan age upon his author¹. Perhaps we no longer need to condemn the self-consciously literary translations of the past, because they have lost even such authority as they possessed for Arnold. Yet it would be wrong to treat them merely as isolated monuments to individual perversity.

1. On translating Homer, pp. 66 ff.