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The Language of Horace's Odes: Translation Aims

Horace has seen several translations in recent years, the majority turning the Odes into something more present-day and authentic and less like traditional rhymed verse. Beyond a wish to reach out to a wider range of students, the translations also reflect contemporary concerns in poetry, and a more democratic tone in cultural affairs, most obviously seen in films and the theatre. Yet throughout their range, from public statements in the grand manner to songs and pleasing trifles, the excellence of Horace's Odes lies essentially in their manner of exposition, and it's this charm and lapidary brilliance that has kept them being admired and read down the centuries. I shall try to show how the modern note can be captured with an idiomatic diction in free-running English speech patterns, but that tightly shaped stanzas are still needed to echo the lapidary nature of the Latin.

The first book of Horace's Odes starts with a dedication to Maecenas, which is relatively straightforward. The first eight lines run:

Maecenas atauis edite regibus,
o et praesidium et dulce decus meum,
sunt quos curriculo puluerem Olympicum
collegisse iuuat metaque feruidis
euitata rotis palmaque nobilis

terrarum dominos euehit ad deos;
hunc, si mobilium turba Quiritium
certat tergeminis tollere honoribus;

A nearly word-for-word rendering is:

Maecenas of great-great-grandfather high king,
O and protector and sweet and my sweet glory
are who of the race Olympic dust
collect delight glowing cone
avoid wheel and palm noble
of earth owner carries up to god;
thus if the fickle commotion of citizens
vie with threefold will raise to honours

We see at once how terse and unadorned is the original Latin when simply rendered word for word into English. That is all the plain words say (if we neglect declension) , and the translator's task is clearly one of creating something that appeals to English poetry readers from only the barest hints of meaning — which in many Odes is more deviously arranged and fragmentary than here. A great deal of extra information, about Horace and Latin in general, is needed to create something like:

Maecenas, of true regal stock the heir:
a friend I glory in, a strength I trust.
While some in charioting make play of dust
Olympus showers on them as they fare

on red-hot axles, skimming post, to rise
in palm-held acclamations gods endorse,
the ones for triple honours trim their course
and from their wavering factions win the prize, {1}

Ocaso Press's 'Odes of Horace' can be downloaded here as a free pdf ebook.

Specific Needs

The translator should be able to read the Latin, of course, and to respond to the finer points, in particular noting how the terseness and sonorous nature of the language give such dignity and power to its verse. No doubt, in an age of retrenchment and closely-defended academic turf, the translator must often seem an interloper, without the professional standing that is looked for in commissioning work. But Horace is hardly a closed book. He has been studied for centuries, and a large critical literature exists in all European languages. Over one hundred complete translations of the Odes in English were in existence seventy years ago, and there have been many since. Equally accessible are student manuals that explain the Latin grammar and suggest interpretations or readings of difficult passages. Many Internet sites also provide their home-grown translations and helpful commentary.

But none of these aids, vital though they are, will permit a literary rendering if the translator lacks the skills and sensibilities to make poetry out of poetry. Whatever the style he adopts, and there are many possibilities today, the

translator requires a working understanding of what's been done in the past, and a practical expertise in what is considered acceptable today. That expertise is an inborn gift honed by arduous practice, and, however offensive to radical theory, assumes a further responsibility in translation. The translator does not so much deploy his skills as immerse himself in the outlook and personality of his author, when matters become self-fulfilling in the way that skilled actors instinctively give life to their characters when fully committed to their parts.

Many modern translations are therefore associations between poet and language specialist, if not always declared so. The approach has obvious advantages, but can still produce something neither quite fish nor fowl. More than a close working partnership is called for; there needs to be a wide overlap of skills, with the poet understanding why the specialist insists on a particular interpretation rather than another, and the specialist himself possessing the informed and sensitive ear capable of judging between subtle verse alternatives — a skill increasing rare today, even in MFA courses, which generally have other priorities.

That partnership between poet and language specialist is probably less observed in Latin translation, however, as there exists a long tradition of solo performance. Earlier translators could usually count on having learned the classical languages at school, and later translators could suppose the prose-like nature of contemporary verse would

serve their purposes well enough.

In fact, of course, English and Latin poetry were always different entities, and are even more so now. They are appreciated by different rules and expectations, what we call the 'tradition' for want of a better term. In place of rhyme and the loose metres that govern English traditional verse, the quantitative Latin employs exact patterns of long and short syllables in metres that are complex and often built on Greek models. There are rules governing elision, etc., but in general those exact patterns cannot be manipulated in the way possible with English verse where the stress falling on syllables of words depends to some extent on the placing of words in the line. The nature of Latin syllables making up a word, whether they be long or short, is fixed. {2}

By way of easing the poet's task, however, the word order in Latin is freer than is possible in English, a feature Latin poets often exploited by widely separating words from their qualifiers. Horace's is a highly finished and compact Latin, moreover, when that inflected nature of the language allows apt phrases to be made in a manner impossible in English, either to be constructed in that way, or to be understood were they so constructed. Translation therefore requires the original to be 'construed', i.e. particles and prepositions added, and the words rearranged into English sentence patterns.

English also has much the larger vocabulary, it is worth

noting, where one Latin word commonly has several equivalents in English, each with different shades of meaning, social usage and literary association. The Romans distinguished between levels of expression more sharply than we do in literary work, and many words in common speech were not admitted to verse or oratory. Finally, in an incomplete list of difficulties, Horace's poetry is dense with matters important to his contemporaries, and these references to Roman politics, mythology and current events, however remote from our everyday concerns, are integral to a meaning that has to be faithfully conveyed and 'made to work', i.e. given emotive shaping. In short, all translation of Latin verse is a creation of some sort: it has to be.

Ocaso Press's free Horace Odes are in pdf ebook format.

Audience

What purpose or purposes is the translation to serve? Many audiences simply require the literal meaning, when the plainer the better. I 33 {3}

Tibullus, don't grieve too much, when you remember
your cruel Glycera, and don't keep on singing
those wretched elegies, or ask why, trust broken,
you're outshone by a younger man.

Others expect some of the literary qualities of the original to be reflected in the translation, which opens the door to many difficulties: what qualities exactly, and how are these to conveyed, given that English verse today has few unifying

styles, theories or rules? That may allow versions that are neither contemporary nor exactly traditional: {1}

Why all this grief, Tibullus? Must we groan
at yet more miseries in verse to know
how faithlessly has cruel Glycera thrown
    you over for some younger beau?

A few readers, chafing at the restrictions any reasonably faithful translation must labour under, will favour a complete re-creation: they want sterling English poetry, the best possible in Horace's manner, even if the sense deviates markedly from the plain meaning of the original. {4}

Tibullus, pull yourself together!
You mustn't make such heavy weather
When women throw you over.
All day you melt in songs of woe,
Merely because a younger beau
Is now Nearera's lover.

Fashions change, and one approach is not necessarily superior to another. All can be found in the several hundred years of Horace translations, and still have their advocates. Different poems may well call for different translation approaches, of course, but translators do need to know what ends they are serving if readers are not to be misled or short-changed in their expectations.

The largest audience is doubtless students, those studying the language, Latin history or associated matters. Latin specialists may also add plain renderings in their papers as a courtesy to non-specialists, though most readers will not need them. In both groups it's accuracy that's wanted. Aesthetic matters take second place, and the translations aim to be as transparent, faithful, complete and helpful as is reasonably possible.

For plain translations today, however, the reader is largely spoilt for choice, {3-7} and there is no real need to produce another. Horace, moreover, has not been read for two thousand years for his literal meaning, which is anything but subtle, but for his manner of expression. Textural problems exist, but the matter of the Odes is glitteringly on the surface, so to speak, which may explain his appeal to the practical Romans and the generations later that sought not the further reaches of thought but eloquent and memorable expression of the obvious commonplaces of life. A literary translation has therefore to convey the qualities of those commonplaces to a public that expects poetry to be rendered in a manner they still recognize as poetry, however contentious that term may be today.

My primary aim in the Ocaso Translation was to make respectable poems that convey as much as possible of Horace’s beauty, style and content. Doubtless there are dangers in employing strict verse styles for such purposes, as they tend to prioritize aesthetic aspects over content.

The rendering may even become a betrayal of the original, where the poems are less Horace's and more the translator's. Horace's words and images are carefully chosen, moreover, and their juxtaposition is critical to the meaning, and, while this is something which no translation into English can fully carry over, strict verse styles are certainly less flexible in this regard: tradition imposes constraints. If straight-jacketed by the formal properties of the verse, furthermore, the translation can also miss inflections of meaning in the original, and fail to express the varying tone Horace adopts towards his audience. And, finally, there are practical difficulties. Many younger readers do not appreciate verse, especially not the chiselled and very uncontemporary verse here, which may seem to them unnecessarily difficult, almost a foreign language.

But all approaches to translation have their problems. Even contemporary practices, leaning towards the literal, adopting a everyday tone and downplaying rhetoric, may produce only the correct and humdrum. In some passages, all prose-based styles will fail because prose is not designed for the higher flights of imagination where verse comes into its own. Entirely sensible renderings can strike a jarring note because the prose equivalents do not exist; poeticisms and mundane usage become mixed; the everyday words evoke unfortunate connotations; the tone falls short of elevated classical standards, or descends to bathos by attempting too much.

Used carefully, formal verse gives some protection from these failures because its language is never exactly everyday, but requires words and meanings to operate within the confined space of the poem, where special conventions apply. Some of those conventions also apply to Latin verse, of course, which naturally reflected the Roman world-view. Where in his first Ode, for example, Horace uses ‘miscent superis’ it seems unwise to translate this as ‘mixes with the gods’ because our understanding of divinity is quite different. We see the gods as mythological entities, or as an aspect of a transcendental God, where to the classical word they appeared more as inspiration, as a divine indwelling. Again in the same Ode, the ‘feriam sidera’ does indeed mean ‘strike the stars’, but the literal rendering is faintly absurd. Stars to us are physical objects impossibly remote, and we have the unfortunate overtone of ‘seeing stars’, i.e. being momentarily dazed. An academic translation must be faithful to the prose sense, but a literary one has greater license and responsibilities.

Stanza Shaping: One

Of formal styles, the Augustan is probably the closest of English poetry schools to Horace's manner, but the lapse of two and a half centuries, not to mention the tight rhyming, word inversions and artificial diction make the result look rather constrained and stilted, probably finding a readership, if at all, in English Literature departments rather than in literary magazines or with the general public. {8} And is rhymed verse the appropriate medium for translation anyway? S. A. Courtauld, {9} writing in what may still be

the best selection of translations from the Odes, wrote: 'It is difficult to believe that metrical translations of Horace apart from the Latin originals can really be interesting to many readers.' In introducing his own (metrical) version, {4} Sir Edward Marsh added: 'On the contrary: unless the version can give the illatinate reader some notion of Horace's quality as a poet, it is a superfluity, a game which scholars play to amuse themselves and annoy one another. In that game the player's object is to render every shade of the author's meaning, and as much as possible of his expression, with the minimum of alteration for metre and rhyme; and the result is usually full of cracks and bulges, like a jigsaw puzzle in which most of the pieces have been coaxed or squeezed into the wrong place, so that the reader can never forget that what he is reading is not an original work.'

But L.P. Wilkinson doubted whether Marsh's renderings, enjoyable reading though they made, were really translation. {10} Content transpositions and rhyme schemes often imposed a structure foreign to the original, and perverted the rhythmic movement of Horace's lines. A similar point was made by Steven Willet {11} when reviewing a collection of Horace translations by Stuart Lyons. He began: 'Toward the end of his introduction to Horace in English, D. S. Carne-Ross tried to summarize the long history of Horatian translations in English. He observed that there had been an unexpected degree of poetic success in the last four centuries, but it was a success purchased at the price of making Horace sound far too much like an

English poet, and argued for a new kind of poetic speech in translation: "A speech that, we must hope, translators in the days to come will learn to write, in the process giving us, sometimes (the word should be stressed), not an English Horace but difficult, foreign, Latin Horace through whose intricate stanzas we make our careful way as we do with the originals."' Contemporary translation, in its attempt to make itself new and distinctive, {12} might well push for a radical change in direction. Verse today has largely given up rhyme and prefers a living language, something that could conceivably be spoken by everyday people in everyday situations. Or in some ways it has. In fact, much of such immediately accessible poetry is amateur, in conception and technique. What attracts attention in literary magazines and the serious press is much more coterie bound. It exploits certain aspects of the language, is mediated by complex and sometime abstruse critical theory, and appeals chiefly to its practitioners. The result is the familiar scene of the contemporary arts, a fascinating mosaic of contending schools where the individual readership is small, where outlets depend on government or institutional funding, and where even the faithful occasionally break ranks to doubt the literary achievement of contending schools, or sometimes of their own. {13}

Indeed that 'difficult, foreign, Latin Horace' is something of an impossibility. The characteristic nature of Horace's verse is unavailable to translators because English is neither an inflected language that allows free word order nor a

quantitative one that allows any reasonable approximation to Latin verse metres. Latinists who consult prestigious literary magazines, or colleagues in English departments, before undertaking translations of their own can expect therefore to be thoroughly baffled. The 'free verse' of contemporary poetry is not what it seems, but — to put the matter charitably — a prose aiming to be a self-referencing language that addresses concerns remote from Horace and Latin poetry generally. Indeed, what is most characteristic and attractive about Horace, that jewelled phrasing, is exactly what contemporary verse is not equipped to give. Modernist Latin translation that began with Ezra Pound's Homage to Sextus Propertius — still rightly prized by English departments for its adroit phrasing and as rightly denigrated by Classics departments for its flagrant idiosyncrasies {14} — has over the course of Modernism evolved into expressing an everyday meaning in prosaic everyday words, though those words may be unusually deployed if the translator is more a contemporary poet than classicist. Expressing sententious and/or lofty sentiments in memorable phrases is certainly far from the aims of contemporary 'free verse', and attempts to make the style achieve something it was never designed to do have generally been unpersuasive. {15}

But rhyme continues to feature in Horace translations, and with good reason: it gives lines shape and authority, and is therefore one way of achieving the highly polished surface that can reflect Horace's own lapidary style. We shall return to the matter, but could posit four requirements for any

rhymed stanza shaping today: it should be:

1. Appropriate: if the original is song-like or whatever, then the translation should also appear that way — in metre, diction, rhetoric, rhyme scheme, tone and verse devices.

2. Consistent: the different Latin measures should each have their own distinctive forms in English.

3. Supportive: the stanza shaping should not deform more than necessary the nature of Horace's verse, which is essentially a mosaic of carefully chosen words embedded in onward-moving quantitative measures.

4. Contemporary: no hand-me-down poeticisms but verse created afresh from the plain prose meaning wherever possible.

Horace's Style

Horace at his best — and he is never far from his best in the Odes - suggests a balanced, sensible and happy personality, sometimes quietly humorous in a mock solemn or wryly ambiguous way. So self-effacing and conventional is the expression that it's often difficult to know what their author really felt or thought: he has none of the brooding melancholy of Virgil, or the fierce passion of Catullus. Studied perfection, economy, restraint and urbanity are the adjectives commonly applied to Horace, as is the 'mosaic of words', where each word is vitally dependent on its neighbours for meaning, association, sound patterning and

rhythmic properties. The result is a 'jewelled phrasing' or a pleasing, seeming inevitability of words that at times produces phrases that 'stand out by themselves like golden tesserae in a mosaic, each distinct in a glittering atmosphere.' {16} Some examples:

I 4, 4:
nec prata canis albicant pruinis.
and frost is gone from meadow lands.

II 15, 15-16:
opacam porticus excipiebat Arcton,
a portico in tens of measures, shading north.

III 3, 48:
qua tumidus rigat arua Nilus;
to where the Nile in irrigation pours its riches out,

The so-called golden and silver lines (abVerbAB and abVerbBA respectively, where a and b are adjectives and B and A are substantives) are used with tact, but still widely: over forty examples can be found in the Odes, and there are many variations. {17}

The trend today in poetry is for everyday language, but that was not the case in Horace's time. And even if we relax the rules, there are still things we cannot write because English verse is full of echoes, not all of them suitable. We cannot write 'little boys and girls' in translating Ode III 1 (uirginibus

puerisque canto) because the phrase has a Sunday School ring about it or, worse, ribald verses. Likewise 'sweet talking' can be a faithful rendering of the Latin in I 22 (dulce loquentem), but the everyday sense of deceit will destroy the tone and overall sense of the piece.

As did all Latin poets of the period, Horace's poetry draws on the resources of oratory, which was closely studied by those engaged in public affairs, and employs rhetorical devices, balanced construction and often a separation of noun from its epithet. An example of that separation: I 9, 20-3:

nunc et latentis proditor intumo
gratus puellae risus ab angulo
pignusque dereptum lacertis
aut digito male pertinaci.

Now and secret produce from inmost
pleasing girl laughing from corner
pledge remove from arm
or bad finger obstinate

That order has to be thoroughly recast in English:

There, with her merriment now adding charm,
you'll find her in the shaded corner tryst.
She'll take the lover's token from her arm,
or with a finger will resist. {1}

But anaphora (repetition) can stay, and indeed should stay. An example: II 16, 1-8:

Otium diuos rogat in patenti
prensus Aegaeo, simul atra nubes
condidit lunam neque certa fulgent
sidera nautis;

otium bello furiosa Thrace,
otium Medi pharetra decori,
Grosphe, non gemmis neque purpura
uenale neque auro.

It's calm the sailor asks for, caught
in foreign seas, the moon as yet
obscured by clouds, and stars report
no path to set.

Peace Thracians seek, hard battles fought,
and Parthians will not condemn
a peace that, Grosphus, is not bought
with rank or gem. {1}

The grouping into four line stanzas follows Meineke's Law, named after the German scholar who first printed the Odes in quatrains, though the feature was not examined properly until Karl Büchner's 1939 work. The matter is a little complicated, {17} but a great many of the Odes are indeed divisible by four, and most translators print them so. But not

all poems are neatly packaged in this way, and there is often enjambment between stanzas, particularly in the stichic strophes. Parts of Odes I 1 and I 18 seem not to fit too well: the middle section of I 18:

Who in his cups complains of war and poverty,
but will of father Bacchus and sweet Venus think.
And, lest with Liber's gifts we flout propriety,
the Centaur-Lapith quarrel over unmixed drink

should warn us of Sithonian rage. Euhius hates
the fatal niceties our being drunk conceives.
Nor would I, fair Bassareus, assign you fates
against your will, or pillage fruit beneath the leaves. {1}

Nor perhaps do sections of I 7, II 18, II 15 and IV 11. There is little trace of a quatrain structure at all in III 25:

Where, Bacchus, are you taking me,
who, so full of you, must hear again
that long, divine, deep melody,
as through the forest grove or rocky den

I'm sounding Caesar's praises till
they're heard by Jove, his councils, those among
the starlight in its glory. Still
a new accomplishment remains unsung.

The wondering Maenad does not sleep,

but from the mountain top in snowy Thrace,
or at the Hebrus' tumbling leap,
continues viewing Rhodope, a place

of barbarous footfalls, though I too admire
wild river banks and echoing forest stand.
Naiads's master, you inspire
the Maenads pulling ash trees up by hand.

So nothing trivial shall be mine,
Lenaeus, passing, born of self-conceit,
yet, wreathed with fresh leaves of the vine,
to follow such a dangerous god is sweet. {1}

Stanza Shaping: Two

Translators have to make their own choices here, but shaping of some sort is part of the English tradition, and the translation being presented here adopts a compromise: the quatrains are kept but enjambment is extended to allow the content to properly flow on when necessary. Horace's measures are represented by these stanza shapes (where 6 is a hexameter, 5 a pentameter, etc.)

Alcaic 5 5 5 4
Sapphic 4 4 4 2,
Greater Sapphic 4 6 4 6
Greater Asclepiadean 6 6 6 6
First Asclepiadean 5 5 5 5
Second Asclepiadean 4 5 4 5
Third Asclepiadean 5 5 5 4

Fourth Asclepiadean 5 5 3 4
First Archilochean 6 5 6 5
Second Archilochean 5 3 5 3
Third Archilochean 5 4 5 4
Hipponactean 4 5 4 5
Ionic 5 5 4

The amount of enjambment or follow-on between stanzas naturally varies. The Sapphic poems tend to be rather end-stopped, and this is reflected in the translation, as here in I 2:

Such snow and hail has Jove hurled down
upon our sacred hills, defied
with his fierce hand, that this vast town
lies terrified.

And people too, lest Pyrrha's time
should come again with monstrous sights
when Proteus had his sea herds climb
the mountain heights. {1}

The Asclepiadean measures are generally more flowing, as here in IV 1:

I beg and beg you, back again
from battles interrupted, Venus, make
me not of good Cinara's reign,
but, savage mother of such loves, forsake

this one of fifty years who's grown
more cautious of your sweet commands,
and mind the younger players who have sown
their fond entreaties you return and find {1}

But what of the Alcaic? We can only faintly echo the important third line by lengthening the vowels. E.g. from

commit those arrant ravings to the flames in I, 16,

to:

commit those wild, strange ravings to the flames

And
but set out cups beneath the welcome shade in I.17

to:

but pour out cups beneath the cooling shade

And so on. But the lines do not really capture the Latin strophe because the English is an iambic pentameter (u — u — u — u — u —) whereas the original has three long syllables (x — u — - — u — x). It's possible to shorten the line to a tetrameter, as Conington does, but the line is often too short to capture the content. E.g. from this (I.16)

is left. Restrain the tempest, let me tell
how once, when youthful feelings swelled my breast,
that driving passion maddened me as well
and turned that fire to bitter jest.

To this in Conington, where the line also has an inappropriate 'sing song' quality:

Then calm your spirit: I can tell
How once, when youth in all my veins
Was glowing, blind with rage, I fell
On friend and foe in ribald strains.

As might be expected when Latin poetry was so close to oratory, the content of the Odes is often presented in well-defined arguments. Sometimes simply, as in I 21:

Diana's gifts the tender virgins tell,
of Cynthion's unshorn god the young men sing.
Latona too, that well
beloved of Jove in everything.

So sing you those who love the leaves and streams,
and Algidus of icy parenthoods,
the Erymanthus themes
and Gragus with its verdant woods.

And sing of Tempë too, you youths, the Isle

of Delos where Apollo rose in fire,
a quivered shoulder, while
had Mercury his famous lyre.

And so will Caesar now convey those prayers
who, having banished abject famine, wars
and plague, still onward fares
to Persia and the British shores. {1}

Or with a tripartite structure, as here in III 28: {1}

What's best on Neptune's holiday
but, Lyde, broach our treasured old reserve
of Caecuban without delay,
extracting wisdom from its own preserve? ||

See, the midday hour is past
and yet you're slow to make the cellar trip,
to bring the winejar that was last
laid down in Bibulus's consulship. ||

And so we'll sing in turn to him:
Neptune with the green-haired Nereids,
while you on curving lyre can hymn
Latona and the moon-beam's arrowed threads. |

We'll sing to one whom Paphos sees
with swan-drawn trains, to whom belong
Cnidus and the Cyclades:

and round the night off with a well-earned song. ||

Horace's control over the audience is continued into the fabric of the lines. Assonance and alliteration are applied with taste to an appropriate diction, that is slightly elevated, neither stilted nor street slang:

I 11, 5-6: quae nunc oppositis debilitat pumicibus mare Tyrrhenum,
Forever Tyrrhenian Seas oppose the pumice shore:

I 24, 5-6: Ergo Quintilium perpetuus sopor urget?
So on Quintilius is endless sleep.

Otherwise, the content is rather commonplace, never deep or recondite, but still hinting at a proper sense of the situation. Horace's poetry does not employ strikingly original thoughts or metaphors, but repeatedly uses stock images, a feature some critics feel detracts from its achievements. Peter Levy {18} regards Horace as the greatest of Roman poets, but John Conington, {19} whose translation is still a classic, has this to say.

'The Odes of Horace, in particular, will, I think, strike a reader who comes back to them after reading other books, as distinguished by a simplicity, monotony, and almost poverty of sentiment, and as depending for the charm of their external form not so much on novel and ingenious images as on musical words aptly chosen and aptly

combined. We are always hearing of wine-jars and Thracian convivialities, of parsley wreaths and Syrian nard; the graver topics, which it is the poet's wisdom to forget, are constantly typified by the terrors of the quivered Medes and painted Gelonians; there is the perpetual antithesis between youth and age, there is the ever-recurring image of green and withered trees, and it is only the attractiveness of the Latin, half real, half perhaps arising from association and the romance of a language not one's own, that makes us feel this "lyrical commonplace" more supportable than common-place is usually found to be. It is this, indeed, which constitutes the grand difficulty of the translator, who may well despair when he undertakes to reproduce beauties depending on expression by a process in which expression is bound to be sacrificed.'

Contemporary poetry is quite different from Horace's — much more original but less confident, eloquent or given to public statement. Often its language is provisional, experimental and exploratory, placing concept above technique, and aiming for an impression of questing sincerity. {12} That being the case, Horace translations can never be entirely contemporary in style, not if they are to convey the essential nature of the Odes in all their variety. Examples: the hymn-like Centennial Ode: {1}

May Phoebus of the shining air,
Diana of the sylvan shade,
prized and honoured, grant the prayer

we here have made

this holy time. Let gods above
respect the words the Sibyl wills,
and chosen youths, and those who love
our seven hills.

The song-like I 10: {1}

Descent of Atlas, Mercury
I sing, who shaped our mortal race
with speech and wrestling, beautifully
an answering grace.

You, messenger of Jove and gods,
are lyre's inventor but discreet,
enchanting still, against all odds,
in wise deceit.

The wry humour, as in I 33: {1}

Why all this grief, Tibullus? Must we groan
at yet more miseries in verse to know
how faithlessly has cruel Glycera thrown
you over for some younger beau?

The lovely Lycoris for Cyrus burns
but he for sour Pholoë's mad instead.
Yet no more than the gentle roe deer yearns

for wild Apulia wolves to wed

Pathos, as I 24: {1}

Why be modest in our weeping when
immoderate was his hold on us? Inspire
us, Melpomene, who the sire of men
has given golden voice and lyre.

So on Quintilius is endless sleep.
When will such honesty and faith combined
in virtuous loyalty, and that with deep
integrity, his equal find?

Seriousness, as in I 15: {1}

When that false shepherd had across the deep
conveyed his Helen in the Trojan boat,
Nereus lulled unwilling winds asleep
that all this omen note:

'Great punishment you're bringing back this hour,
for Greeks, fresh congregated, will forestall
these wedding hopes, and have old Priam's power
from this dark moment fall.

Mock seriousness, as in II 13: {1}

An evil day they chose to plant this tree:

those sacrilegious hands are much to blame
for this attempt to ruin posterity
and bring the regions round to shame.

He broke his father's neck, and, like enough,
has spilt the blood of guest inside a room
in deepest night, or conjured some such stuff
of Colchis spells and evil's doom

The Pindar-like authority of III 4: {1}

As did the agent of the thunderbolt,
whose rule of wandering birds our Jove decreed,
or once obedience to the heavenly vault
was shown by snatching Ganymede,

he came: with youth and native vigour, cast
untried and lately from the nest, this one,
the winds of spring instruct, restraint now past,
how new-plied efforts would have won

With tone come questions about Horace's real attitude to Augustus, which is much disputed, indeed as to whether we can ever really know. Many do see a change between the writing of the first three books and the fourth, however, and where Horace is non-committal, as here in III 14, it seems best to allow some mock solemnity to glimmer through the lines: {1}

Like Hercules, O men of Rome,
defying death, the laurels' cause,
comes conquering Caesar home
from Spanish shores.

May wife rejoice in one as he,
who, having gifts of gods repaid,
now shines with sister, equally
bedecked by braid

But by the fourth book, Horace seems more the fully paid-up Augustan: IV 14:

What titles and memorials can Senator
and citizen, Augustus, celebrate
your many virtues with, through them implore
the highest honours of the State?

Across all realms the sun can oversee
you're titled greatest prince, a title earned
in wars — a power the Vendelici, free
till late of Roman laws, have learned. {1}

Interpretation Difficulties

An academic translation restricts itself to what's on the page: difficulties are pointed out, various solutions discussed, but the real problems are not papered over. Such commonsense will not serve a literary rendering, however, where everything has to pull together: constructive shaping, consistency of tone, appropriate diction and shaping of

emotion to keep us turning the pages. Sometimes the text does not fully make sense: II 5, 21-4:

quem si puellarum insereres choro,
mire sagacis falleret hospites
discrimen obscurum solutis
crinibus ambiguoque uoltu.

These last lines allude to the concealing of young Achilles among the female attendants of Deodamia on Scyros, and his unmasking by Odysseus, but the effect is one of erotic confusion. Why has it been introduced? The matter has been much discussed, but in this freely translated section the solution is simply that, just as Lalage comes to accept her sexual identity, so must the Cnidian Gyges:

who, if you put among a choir of girls,
the wisest stranger could not tell apart:
the mix of hidden manliness and curls
that's so confusing to the heart.

But Barine is not so straightforward:

Vlla si iuris tibi peierati
poena, Barine, nocuisset umquam,
dente si nigro fieres uel uno
turpior ungui,
crederem; sed tu simul obligasti
perfidum uotis caput, enitescis

pulchrior multo iuuenumque prodis
publica cura.

Why should we believe the femme fatale only if the gods have punished her for lying? It makes no sense, unless the slightness of the punishments suggests the fibs don't amount to much:

Had you been a wit the worse
for lies you told: a blackened tooth
or nail, Barine — curse for such untruth —
I might believe that all was paid.

That's supplying what is only faintly indicated, and seriously compressing the literal meaning of lines 5-7:

Any if of law you offending
penalty, Barine, had injured ever
tooth if black were made even one
ugly nail,

I would believe; but you at once bind
to faithless vows head, shine
beautiful many youths and project
public concern

But poems are often a compromise between what comes to the pen and what the author would dearly like to have written, in creation and translation, and here it seems better

to aim for less fidelity to the Latin and continue Horace's gentle mockery:

But in that faithless head you are
to youths more beautiful, arrayed
as shining star,

Barine is attractive, therefore, precisely because she is faithless and not to be believed: a lesser mortal would fall afoul of the gods.

Fidelity to Text

How close or faithful should be the translation to the original Latin? Sir Edward Marsh was expressing a rather extreme view when he said:

'Exact fidelity, when by a lucky chance available, is a great virtue; but it comes second to ease and naturalness, and when the capricious Goddesses of Rhyme and Metre oppose the attempt, the translator must have the same freedom as the poet had to choose, from among the variety of ways in which a thought can be put, the one that suits him best; nor need he shrink from small omissions or even additions which make no substantial difference to anything except the vigour or the elegance of his rendering.' {4}

The danger of such freedom is the ease in which the renderings become the translator's poems more than their author's, which is indeed the case with many renderings in Marsh's volume. What we want, I suggest, is a translation

where every stanza can be immediately identified with the original, and a translation where the meaning, connotations, tone and appeal of the original have in large measure been carried over.

That's a good deal less easy than it seems, particularly in the famous Odes we now read through the English translations that have made them famous. Earlier critics were much divided about IV 7, for example, but the Housman rendering with its famous fourth line has made many converts:

The snows are fled away, leaves on the shaws
And grasses in the mead renew their birth,
The river to the river-bed withdraws,
And altered is the fashion of the earth.

Yet that line is largely an invention of the translator. The Latin is:

Diffugere niues, redeunt iam gramina
campis arboribus comae;
mutat terra uices et decrescentia ripas
flumina praetereunt;

And the word-for-word rendering:

Fled away the snows, return the grass fields
the hair of trees,

changes earth in succession, and diminishing banks
rivers pass

Nonetheless, that inspired 'altered is the fashion' with its Biblical echoes admirably captures the welcome return of spring, and is worth retaining, if a little muted

The snows are fled away, the fields new grassed,
and trees are filled with leaves' rebirth.
The streams, diminishing, flow quietly past,
and in its turn is changed the earth. {1}

Again, the concluding four lines of I 5 are nothing to speak of:

Intemptata nites.Me tabula sacer
uotiua paries indicat uuida
suspendisse potenti
uestimenta maris deo.

Untried you shine. I sacred tablet
offered on wall declare soaked
suspended powerful
clothes to sea god.

And are very flat if translated without verse devices:

And are dazzled by your radiance. As for me,
the tablet on the temple wall indicates

that I have dedicated my dripping clothes
to the god who rules the sea. {20}

Even that prose is a considerable expansion of the plain Latin, and it seems better to go a little further and write proper verse:

Your looks delight him and outdazzle day,
but still through grief the powerful sea god roves.
With votive hung, I pay
my penance in these storm-drenched clothes. {1}

The Jewelled Phrase

Horace's mosaic of lapidary excellence in phrasing cannot be reproduced in so different a language as English but some equivalent is possible in traditional verse. Strict free verse — i.e. traditional verse where some formal characteristic has been relaxed or given an extra subtlety, generally the metre or line length — also has this propensity, but not so called 'free verse' of contemporary poetry. This 'verse' is not a verse at all, or not in the commonly accepted meaning of regularity in metre, but an astutely written prose that aims at a pleasing and idiomatic precision, often through vivid images, dislocations, collages, ready-made phrases, private allusions and themes drawn from critical theory and the act of writing. Such lines are exceptionally difficult to write well, and commonly avoid anything like rhyme or alliteration that would suggest artificiality or second-hand sources.

But even echoes of the jewelled phrasing can be only partial

and inexact, i.e. it's not generally possible to match excellence for excellence. Where the Latin, for example, is: IV 6, 25-8:

Doctor argutae fidicen Thaliae,
Phoebe, qui Xantho lauis amne crinis,
Dauniae defende decus Camenae,
leuis Agyieu.

it's possible to write lines jewelled in assonance and alliteration, which indeed are dense, even 'difficult' but they do not necessarily have what Wilkinson calls a haunting beauty:

One Thalia was never loath
to tutor, one in Xanthus dews
would bathe, Agyieus: as both,
defend my muse.

Nonetheless, some happier fusions of verse technique can be made, as the following suggest — a long list for an important Horatian feature:

I 1, 22: or where soft founts of sacred waters fall.

I 2, 21: Though fewer for each father's fault,

I 3, 39-40: He vaunts his folly to the sky
and meets with Jove's reproving thunderbolts.

I 4, 19-20: nor Lycidas, whose loveliness enthrals the boys,
not soon have young girls yearn

I 5, 1-2: What slim, rich-scented youth, on roses lain,
now courts you, Pyrrha, in the grotto's shade,

I 6, 20: be love a fire or passing frown.

I 11, 1: Not you nor I, Leuconoë: no one knows

I 13, 19-20: a true love's bond that never fails
till funeral obsequies close off our day.

I 16, 1-2: Lovelier than lovely mother's claims
to beauty, treat my verses as you please:

I 17, 11-12: while valley loans
to upland Ustica the songs that sink
in tinklings onto pebbled stones.

I 24, 1-2: Why be modest in our weeping when
immoderate was his hold on us?

I 28, 34-6: though hurrying on,
reflect: I need but brief oblations. Three mere fists
of wind-spent dust to cast, and I am gone.

I 32, 1-2: If I have fashioned in my shade

some trifle of a year or two,

I 33, 15-16: a girl that's harder than the Hadrian sea
that on Calabrian headlands breaks.

I 38, 5-8: The myrtle unadorned will do
quite admirably, and common vine
give shaded arbour where we too
shall drink our wine.

II 1, 32-3: What gulf or mourning stream is mute on wars?
What sea's not blemished with that Daunian flood
of wretched slaughter? Show me shores
not inundated with our blood.

II 7, 6: imbibing wine the length that long days sent:

II 13, 39-40: and Orion's let
the timid lynx and the lion go.

II 14, 4: How Postumus, Postumus, the years must fleet
away.

II 15, 1-2: We'll shortly see these ostentatious, vast
estates leave little ground for men to plough

II 18, 15-6: each day is from an earlier won
and new moons, waxing, ever wane and shift.

II 19, 31-2: Among
his friendly acts he licked your turning feet
and ankles with his triple tongue.

III 1, 29-32: Nor will his vineyards fall to flattening hail,
his farm to weather's treachery, nor will
the rain affect the trees, or dry fields fail

III 2, 13: But yet to die
for one's own country is both sweet and just.

III 2, 31-2: But if revenge fall short, she rarely leaves
the criminal whose steps she hounds.

III 4, 77: of criminally licentious Tityos,

III 5, 27-8: can the wool,
once purple dyed, return to white?'

III 5, 55-6: on to green Venafrum meadows, or
Tarentum with its Spartan air.

III 13, 13-5: loquacious waters in their babbling state,

III 16, 34: secrete for me its mellow sweetness, nor

III 17, 8: the waters of the welling Lyris

III 23, 15-6: and trail

there rosemary and myrtle flowers.

II 26, 1-2: I served my sweethearts well enough till now
and not without magnificence was blest,

III 30, 1: A monument more durable that brass

III 30, 10: the Aufidas with roarings fills the air,

IV 1, 1-4: I beg and beg you, back again
from battles interrupted, Venus, make
me not of good Cinara's reign,
but, savage mother of such loves, forsake

IV 2, 1-3: He who'd be as Pindar only fêtes
himself with waxy feathers and with fame
to fall like Daedalus in glittering straits

IV 3, 20: adopted wholesale by the silent fish,

IV 4, 75-6: Through all the dangerous perils wars conceive
a strong, sagacious mind will guide.'

IV 5, 7-8: as spring
time sunshine brightens every forward glance
and makes the days more welcoming.

IV 7,15-8: moon on moon reproves the seasons' waste,
we go on deathward still, and must

with Tullus, and with Ancus lie, and haste
with good Aeneas into dust.

IV 9, 51-2: The last he's not afraid of: for his friends
and country will give up his breath.

IV 12, 11-2: To him all flocks are dear that occupy
the shaded hills of Arcady

IV 14, 26-8: as will, with bull-like power, the Aufidus
pour on the wide Apulian Daunus fields
its swift-loosed flood of waters, furious

IV 15, 29-32: then our tongues and Lydian pipes employ,
as did our fathers in the days before:
and sing of chiefs, Anchises, and of Troy,
who are the people Venus bore.

CS 73-6: May Jove and gods still kindly gaze
as we with chorused words of men
from Phoebus' and Diana's praise
turn home again.

But what of the more prosaic odes, whose frequency seems to increase through the collection, making a higher proportion of the total in book three than in the two previous books, and becoming particular prevalent in book four? They are not among the translators' favourites, and many readers have found them like 'prize poems', clever but laboured.

Even Horace remarks (III 3):

Enough of this, my Muse. My playful strings
to such great arguments do not belong.
So stop attempting these more heavenly things,
and lessening them to trivial song.

Translators can only work with what they are given, and that sympathetic identification mentioned above only serves to dampen inspiration further. An honest, workmanlike rendering is probably the best that can be achieved: IV 4, 5-12

he came: with youth and native vigour, cast
untried and lately from the nest, this one,
the winds of spring instruct, restraint now past,
how new-plied efforts would have won

a sweeping terror, much as tempest shakes
the sheepfold of its flocks, in action led
to fierce, tumultuous fights with nests of snakes,
or as the lion freshly bred

And IV 14, 13-20:

In turn the elder Nero entered on the fight
and, with the favouring omens plain to all,
defeated and so put to headlong flight
the hordes of Rhaetians. That vast fall

received its rapturous approbation when
he daunted minds, exhausting combatants
who grappled with our free and fearless men —
as will the Auster winds advance

Summary and Assessment

Contrary to contemporary theory, {21} as I've tried to show, here and elsewhere, {15} too everyday a diction makes for problems with Horace translations. Nor is the observation of Wilkinson's, that verse in the manner of Conington's was too Popean, and anyway unlikely to be improved upon, entirely true. The translations here go back to Conington's approach but use longer lines to achieve decent verse, i.e. with the graces expected of several hundred years of development, and possessing a properly supportive and patterned sonic texture. It is of course a compromise, and like most compromises, not wholly satisfactory to either party. The translations are sufficiently close for any stanza to be immediately recognisable, but the semantic content is commonly clipped or compressed a little, and the more successful translations as poems are often those showing the widest departures from the literal sense.

As far as the verse is concerned, the stanza shaping is consistent, with all strophes given their own individual, strictly rhymed measures, but the shaping does not wholly contain the content in the usual manner of English verse. The rhyming is sometimes on words that would not normally be emphasized in this way — i.e. the enjambment is very

pervasive, no doubt common enough in blank verse but usual frowned on in rhymed measures. It is, of course, what Horace does, and the style can present itself as a move towards that 'difficult, foreign, Latin Horace' mentioned earlier, but the innovation becomes less emotively effective as it departs from traditional shaping. We respond through our experience of English verse down the centuries, reading today through the echoes of the past, which is one reason why contemporary verse has so small an audience: its words don't resonate with the usual extended but half buried meanings.

This translation makes no attempt to replicate the original Latin metres by English metres, of course: failures by generations of gifted poets, not to mention centuries of angry disputation, should suggest it cannot done. Nor are the different Latin strophes rendered into different English measures beyond the number of feet or stresses to the lines: the metre is iambic throughout, though not without a variety to match the tone of the original.

So this rendering, which is simply another in what is never final, particularly in the popular field of Horace translation. The many sources of help and inspiration for this translation are listed in the References and Further Reading in the free Ocaso Press publication. In summary, this translation is a plea for diversity, and a hope that the laudable demand for accessibility in modern translation does not destroy what makes the classics worth reading — that they express a

splendidly different attitude to life than ours, and do so in language that is very hard to match.

Finally, it should be said that very different approaches to translation are possible — indeed preferred today — and these are admirably reviewed by Helen Henze in her Odes of Horace. {22}

Ocaso Press's free Horace Odes are in pdf ebook format.

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Elegies of Sextus Propertius: Previous Translations

Nineteenth Century Renderings

The Elegies of Propertius with Notes, literally translated by the Rev. P.J.F. Gantillon, with metrical versions by Nott and Elton, appeared in 1884, {7} and was a pleasing work that is still listed in academic bibliographies. The diction of the prose translation was much of its time:

he taught me, desperate power! to despise
chaste maidens and to live recklessly. (1.1.5-6)

But the phrasal rhythms preserved the standard diction from bathos and generally steered the elegy to a successful conclusion:

Witnesses, rise and weep for me, while the grateful earth is paying tribute to my worth when alive. To some virtues heaven has been opened: may I earn, from my merits, the privilege of being one whose bones are conveyed into Elysium in triumph. (4.11.99-102)

A little stodgy, but an accurate rendering, and perhaps preferable to overworked verse renderings of the period, for example this by E.D.A. Morshead, which accompanied George Ramsay's student edition of Selections from Tibullus and Propertius in 1895: {8}

Lo, I have said! Rise, ye who weep; I stand
In high desert, worthy the Spirit Land.
Worth hath stormed heaven ere now; this, this I claim —
To rise, in death, upon the waves of Fame. (4.11.99-102)

Here the rhyme needs have caused too many departures from the sense, and the grandiloquence is out of keeping with the quiet pathos of the piece, one of the finest of Latin elegies. The metrical versions by Nott and Elton accompanying Gantillon's prose translated only a few of the elegies, and were in the late Augustan manner: rhyming couplets or quatrains with a good deal of phrase inversion and antithesis. The renderings could be mechanical, as is Propertius at times, but few were without well-turned lines:

He taught me, then, to loathe the virtuous fair,
And shameless waste my wild and driftless hours. (1.1.5-6. Elton)

At length the tyrant taught me to detest
Chaste nymphs, and banished reason from my mind:
Nor one whole year has the dire frenzy ceas'd;
Still Fate forbids my mistress to be kind! (1.1.5-8. Nott)

And some achieved a good deal more:

Though now on reedy Styx the oar he ply,
Ev'n now, the murky sail of Hell survey;
Let her he loves recall him with a sigh,
He shall retrace the unpermitted way. (2.27.12-15. Elton).

Twentieth Century Renderings

Ezra Pound's important but idiosyncratic 1919 rendering is given a detailed examination on a separate webpage: pound-homage-to-sextus-propertius-translation.html.

Robert Lowell 1974

Robert Lowell allowed himself only one translation of Propertius, {13} that of Elegy 4.7, which he paraphrased with typical vigour and brilliance:

A ghost is someone: death has left a hole
For the lead-coloured soul to beat the fire:
  Cynthia leaves her dirty pyre
  And seems to coil herself and roll
  Under my canopy,
Love's stale and public playground, where I lie
And fill the run-down empire of my bed.
I See the street, her potter's field, is red
And lively with the ashes of the dead. (4.7.1-6)

In tone, stanza arrangement and literal sense, the rendering was far more Lowell than Propertius, but much could be forgiven for lines like:

A black nail dangles from a finger tip
And Lethe oozes from her nether lip. (4.7.7-8)

And

Would it have strained your purse
To scatter ten cheap roses on my hearse? (4.7.33)

Unfortunately, the verse was rather too magnificent, not allowing emotional shading, and the rigid ode structure was unable to capture the concluding two lines. In fact, though Lowell used traditional rather than free verse, his approach was that of Pound's, employing the stand-alone image instead of narrative. But in place of Pound's evocative vignettes, Lowell used a thickened expression, building up scenes with a vividness and power that are not found in the Latin.

Franklin Adams 1960

Franklin P. Adams' translations {14} were a throwback to an earlier age: to a racy light verse:

Cynthia first and the wonderful eyes of her
Taught me the meaning of Love and Romance;
Now I have sung to the stars and the skies of her —
Love has diluted the pride of my glance.
Ah! 'tis a year, yet the madness diminishes
Never a fraction, a tittle, or jot,
Though I anticipate well what the finish is,
Though I bewail my unfortunate lot. (1.1.1-8)

Good fun, and charming, but wildly unlike the Latin.

Passages — indeed whole renderings — were immensely readable, but there was no hint of the real Propertius and his troubles:

Could cure me of my lover's itch —
As I admitted truthfully
Wrecked on a sad and troublous sea.
For when by Venus I was caught,
She bound my hands behind me taut.
But lo! my ships have found the bay:
Mine anchor's cast; I shout "Hooray!"

John Warden 1972

Like Pound, John Warden {15} replaced the elegiac couplet with lines expanding to fit the content, from trimeter:

So death is not the end of it; ghosts
exist, pale wraiths flitting
from the inclusive pyre. (4.7.1-29

to heptameter:

There was nobody to cry my name as my eyes grew dim (4.7.23)

But whereas Pound used a stress verse with many phrasing devices to give each line or line segment a coherent identity, Dr. Warden employed a more contemporary language in

iambic throughout. The result was pleasing, a very readable version indeed, and one that could accommodate the prose meaning entirely, but it also produced a certain sameness in the lines, with limited emotional or dramatic impact. Content did not fuse with form in the way necessary for poetry, and at times the elegies became a miscellany of lyrics and narrative stretches. There was certainly gain, here a beauty and delicacy not in the original:

May your grave
be choked with thorns
May your shade
be choked with thirst
May your spirit
find no rest. (5.4.1-3)

But also loss: some lines became surprisingly pedestrian and none-too-accurate renderings of what was beautiful in the Latin:

She was the first to enslave me, and she did it with her eyes
till then I'd never felt love's poisoned arrows. (1.1.1-2)

Inversions could be used unnecessarily, without making proper sense:

Don't waste Apollo's time by keeping him under arms;
but let your verse go slim and pumiced fine. (3.1.7-8)

And whereas some passages came close to light verse:

I much admire the Spartan wrestling schools,
but most of all I like the women's rules:
for girls and men can wrestle in the nude
(the Spartans think such exercise is good) (3.14.1-4)

Others failed just where good verse skills were most required:

Garlands wither and die
and the fallen petals float in the wine bowls.
Today we ride on the crest of love
but the end may come tomorrow. (2.15.49-54)

W.G. Shepherd 1986

W.G. Shepherd's Propertius: The Poems, {16} first issued in the Penguin Classics Series in 1986, and reissued by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2004, employed a dignified prose set out as free verse. The sense was transcribed closely, if at the cost of some stiffness, and the rendering broadly respected the line divisions:

CYNTHIA was the first To capture with her eyes my pitiable self.
Till then I was free from desire's contagion.
Love Then forced me to lower my gaze of steady hauteur
And trampled my head with his feet. (1.1.1-4).

There was no Latin text, but the book did have an introduction (by Betty Radice), a select bibliography, a translator's foreword, notes on the poems, glossary of proper names and alphabetical index of Latin first lines — an academic production, in short, though none the worst for that. The prosier sections of the elegies were rendered with admirable good sense:

The robber Cacus lived there, in a dreaded cavern,
And gave out separate sounds from a triple mouth. (4.9.9-10)

In places the prose approached blank verse, and could be refreshingly succinct and literal:

As on the lonely beach the Cnossian lay
Fainting while Theseus's keel receded. (1.3.1-2)

In more eloquent sections, however, the limitations of what is essentially prose become apparent:

In vain will you summon my dumb shade, Cynthia
For how can my crumbled bones achieve speech? (2.13.57-8).

Fainting while Theseus's keel receded. (1.3.1-2)

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is essentially prose become apparent:

In vain will you summon my dumb shade, Cynthia
For how can my crumbled bones achieve speech? (2.13.57-8).

Contemporary Renderings

G.P. Goold 1990

Professor George Goold brought a lifetime's study of Propertius to his 1990 Loeb Edition of Propertius Elegies, {1} which incorporated many suggestions of Dr. Stephen Heyworth, who was to later edit the Oxford Classical Text of Propertius. Goold made radical transpositions of the text, but the accompanying translation was not modern in style, being a remodelled Edwardian prose, stout-hearted and sensible in diction but sometimes heavy and over-periodic. It coped well with straight narrative:

The crime of Tarpeia and her shameful grave will be my tale, and how the dwelling of ancient Jove was captured. (4.4.1-2)

but was wholly at a loss with the celebrated passages:

Only, Cynthia, while there is light, do not disdain the rewards of life! If you give me all your kisses, you will yet give all too few. And just as petals drop from a withered garland, petals you see strewn in profusion and floating in the cup, so for us, who now love with spirits raised high,

perhaps tomorrow's day shall round our destinies. (2.15.49-55)

Guy Lee 1992

Guy Lee was the author of much well-received translation when he prepared Propertius: the Poems {4} {17} for publication in the Oxford World's Classics series. There was no Latin text, but the renderings were accompanied by a helpful introduction (by R.O.A.M. Lyne), an extensive glossary, a bibliography and a list of departures from Barber's Oxford Classical Text. Dr. Lee employed unrhymed couplets, usually pentameters but expanding to the content:

Cynthia first, with her eyes, caught wretched me
Smitten before by no desires. (1.1.1-2)

Although you're leaving Rome against my wishes, Cynthia,
I'm glad you'll be in rural isolation (2.19.1-2)

May earth, Procuress, overgrow your grave with thorns
And (what you will not wish) your ghost feel thirst. (4.5.1-2)

The rendering was often line for line, and the verse had the neatness of compressed meaning:

Whose threshold, wet with prisoner's suppliant tears,
Glided chariots celebrated. (1.16.2-4)

The diction, moreover, was generally that of ordinary speech, but ranged from contemporary slang to the rare and archaic. Many couplets were competently turned:

Whenever therefore death shall close my eyelids
Let this be the order of my funeral (2.13.17-18)

But as for me, in every place and all the time,
In sickness and in health, I'm with you still. (2.21.19-20)

In the celebrated passages, however, Dr. Lee was apt to paraphrase for effects that did not come off:

For just as petals drop from fading garlands
To float haphazard in wine-bowls,
So for us lovers who now walk so tall
Tomorrow may bring the fated close. (2.15.49-54)

But the real difficulty was the verse itself: an uncadenced mixture of traditional and free verse styles that exasperates the trained ear. Perhaps in trying for an idiomatic and flexible line, Lee often broke the metre, adding the odd word (here the unnecessary 'that', which wrong-foots the whole line):

It's not that I'm scared to get to know the Adriatic
Or sail the salt Aegean, Tullus (1.6.1-2)

Or he used the stress verse of Pound without its exactness

of cadence:

But, Cynthia, you will call back my dumb spirit in vain;
My bits of bone will have nothing to say. (2.13.57-8)

Or in shaping the emotional utterance, the phrasing lost rather than built on its rhythmic base:

Let us sate our eyes with love while Fate allows.
The long night comes and the day of no return. (2.15.23-4)

A.S. Kline 2001

Tony Kline's translation appears on his popular Internet site, {18} one of many free translations that have proved so useful to students. The translation can be copied readily, and unfamiliar names are hyperlinked to an extensive glossary. The rendering closely follows the text, allowing itself no 'improvements' or embellishments.

Cynthia was the first, to my cost, to trap me with her eyes: I was
untouched by love before. (1.1.1-2)

That plain tone sometimes passes into the colloquial:

you can hardly find rest for a single month, poor thing, and now there'll be another
disgraceful book about you. (2.3.3-4)

And occasionally into the crude and loutish:

slither about in a thin silk dress (1.2.2)
the cock-up at Cannae (3.3.10)

For the greater part, however, the rendering employs a sensible prose that conveys the sense admirably, even if it generally lacks the affective organization needed for poetry. As usual, the style serves well for narrative:

the horseman was skilled with the bridle, equally with the plough: and his helmet was wolf-skin, decorated with a shaggy crest: (4.10.19-20)

But fails in the more emotionally charged passages, resorting to unconvincing exhortation:

You while the light lasts, then, don't leave off life's joys! Though you give all your kisses, they'll prove all too few. As the leaves fall from dried garlands: as you see them scatter in cups and float there: so we, now, the lovers, who hope for great things, perhaps fate, tomorrow, will end our day. (2.15.49-54)

Odd phrases have the genuine touch of poetry, but the lines by their nature fall back into a language more suited to everyday use than elegiac expression:

The stars are witnesses, girl, and the frost at dawn, and the doors that opened secretly for unhappy me that nothing in my life was ever as dear to me as you: and you will be, forever, too, though you're so unkind to me. (2.9.41-2)

Vincent Kranz 2007

Vincent Kranz employed a contemporary diction and something neither quite verse nor prose to make an unlovely but clear translation: {19} {20}

Cynthia as the first. She caught me with her eyes, a fool
who had never before been touched by desires.
I really hung my head in shame
when Love pressed down on it with his feet.
He taught me to hate chaste girls!
He was cruel when he told me to live without plan.
It's already been a whole year that the frenzy hasn't stopped.
Even now, the gods are against me. (1.1.1-8)

The rendering was generally faithful to the original, and the line divisions were respected, but the diction had a coarseness foreign to Propertius, and the dialogue was clumsy even by everyday or popular novel use. Equally something a colleague should have queried was the jarring mix of tones (here plebeian, academic and literary):

"If only you could experience the nights you always

force me to endure, you asshole!
At first I evaded sleep with the purple thread,
and again, exhausted, with song of the Orphic lyre.
Left all alone, I was singing lightly to myself
the frequent long delays when your lover is about.
Then drowsiness pulled me, slipping in its soft wings.
She at last cured my crying." (1.3.39-46)

Kranz's translation received the usual academic commendations, {19} but also an unflinching review by J.L. Butrica, {20} who pointed out the difficulties in making Propertius a streetwise kid.

S.J. Heyworth 2007

Dr Stephen Heyworth's work was largely an attempt to explain and justify the text of Propertius published in the Oxford Classical Texts {22} series. His book examined the textual problems of Propertius, taking the corrupt passages in turn and evaluating the suggestions scholarship has made towards resolving the difficulties. Stylistic excellence was not the aim of the added translation, but more a plain rendering of the prose sense as far as the remaining difficulties allowed.

Cynthia was the first; she caught me with her eyes and made me miserable-I had never been infected with desire before. (1.1.1-2)

Hey lucky me! Hey, night fair to me! Hey you, little bed made happy by my darling. (2.15.1-2)
Just as the petals have abandoned garlands as they wither and you see them floating scattered in bowls, so for us who now as lovers breathe deep, perhaps tomorrow will enclose our fate. (2.15.51-55)

No one reads such things for literary pleasure, but the examples do show that even prose needs careful word choice and sentence patterning if it is to convey what Propertius is prized for.

Patrick Worsnip 2018.

In the latest rendering of the Odes — by Patrick Worsnip and with an extended introduction by Peter Heslin — today's tendency to replace elevated language with the everyday has produced something that is witty and reasonably accurate but (as to be expected) somewhat limited in the aesthetic dimension. Little trace of the elegance of Propertius remains, of the elegiac nature of his lines, or their poetry: {23}

Cynthia was first, her eyes
made me a prisoner of war.
I had until then been untouched by Amor
who now pulled down the vanity of my glance(1.1. 1-4)

It wasn't their dress sense that caused Leucippus' daughters

to give Castor and Pollus the hots,
or set lustful Apollo and Idas
at odds over Marpessa. (1.2. 18-22)

Conclusions

It should be clear, at least until our understanding of Propertius changes, or further manuscripts are found (which seems unlikely), that translations of a literal or academic nature are now fully catered for. Anyone wanting the prose sense of Propertius's Elegies need only borrow the Loeb edition {1} from their local library or visit Tony Kline's website {18}, perhaps consulting books by Lynne {5}, Richardson {2} and/or Heyworth {22} to understand the original better. For a literary translation there is now the free Ocaso Press publication.

The Latin text can be loaded down from Internet sites {24-5} and those unable to read the language can run the text through QuickLatin {10} or online sites {11-2} to obtain a word-for-word translation and explanatory grammar.

Sound recordings of Propertius and other Latin poets are also available {7}, and to read the Latin for themselves — which helps enormously to bring their authors to life — students can practise with Clive Brooks's volume, {6} which comes with two CDs of audio files (though not including Propertius).

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Ezra Pound's 1919 Homage to Sextus Propertius

Into the quiet world of Latin scholarship, and verse renderings with Romantic or Augustan echoes, burst Ezra Pound, whose Homage to Sextus Propertius {1} was and remains the most controversial of translations. It was heartily disliked at the time, and remained largely unappreciated outside Modernist circles for decades. {2} But, if the rendering was often careless and wrong-headed, it could also be vivid and beautiful.

Shades of Callimachus, Coan ghosts of Philetas,
It is in your grove I would walk. (Pound 1.1-2, Loeb 3.1.1-2)

No, now while it may be, let not the fruit of life cease.
Dry wreaths drop their petals, their stalks are woven in baskets,
Today we take the great breath of lovers,
tomorrow fate shuts us in. (P 8.28-32: 2.15.49-54)

The twisted rhombs ceased their clamour of accompaniment;
The scorched laurel lay in the fire-dust; (P 9.1.1-2: 2.28.35-6)

Of course there could be indifferent lines. The guying of academic language in:

Was Venus exacerbated by the existence of a comparable equal?
Is the ornamental goddess full of envy?
Have you contempted Juno's Pelagian temples,
Have you denied Pallas good eyes? (P 8.10-13: 2.28.9-12)

With the doubtful 'exacerbated', 'ornamental', 'contempted' and 'Pallas'.
Some lines are plain bad, here the repulsive imagery, not in Propertius:

How easy the moving fingers, if hair is mussed on her forehead,
If she goes in a gleam of Cos, in a slither of dyed stuff (P 5.2.7-8 2.1.5-6)

Or here with translation errors, giving hilarious results:
Io mooed the first years with averted head,
And now drinks Nile water like a god (P 8 .19-20: 2.28.17-8)

There were also irritating mannerisms: anaphora

When, when, and whenever death closes our eyelids (P 6.1: 2.13.17)

An over-Latinate humour:

The dry earth pants against the canicular heat (P 8.4:

2.28.4)

And an irony that passes into self-mockery.

But in one bed, in one bed alone, my dear Lynceus
I deprecate your attendance; (P 12.15-6: 2.34.16-7)

Yet what was abundantly achieved was a real voice, a genuine and moving affection for Cynthia, and the poet's acceptance that he will not be understood by his contemporaries, and even less by his mistress.

Great Zeus, save the woman, or she will sit before your feet in a veil,
and pour out a long list of her troubles. (P 9.10-2: 2.28.45-6)

Pound called his work 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' but the rendering contained far too much straight borrowing to be either something in the manner of Propertius, or a poem on his themes. Nor was it strictly translation. Pound introduced lines and phrases of his own, and left out mythologies he thought tedious or tending to spoil the verse flow. Indeed, the whole demeanour of the Elegies was subtly altered. Propertius's invocation at the beginning of Book Three became an attack on false standards, equating Propertius's wish to avoid writing epics for Augustus with the despair and cynicism that afflicted Europe at the close of the First World War.

Then there were slips with real names:

Polydamas incorrectly made Polydmanus in later editions. (P 1.31: 3.131)

The cheerfully appearance of the odd schoolboy howler:

Nor of Welsh mines and the profit Marus had out of them. (P 5.2.21: 2.1.24)

And scraps of fourth-form humour.

And in the meantime my songs will travel,
And the devirginated young ladies will enjoy them
  when they have got over the strangeness, (P 1.32-3: 3.2.1-2)

It was, in short, a most unacademic translation, and one which still divides the Classics and English fraternities. {3}

But Pound, in all probability, was not aiming for fidelity to text — he was not a self-effacing man, and corrected very few of the errors pointed out to him {2} — so much as using Propertius for his own writing ends, creating a more flippant and one-sided version than the poetry warrants. Where scholars are undecided about the later elegies, Pound saw them as irony, if only subtle irony, and adopted an engaging but put-down tone. What didn't meet that interpretation,

notably the sober elegy of Cornelia that closes Book Four, he happily ignored.

But if the translation infuriated scholars, far more baffled was the general reader. Part of the trouble lay with the 1892 Lucian Mueller {4} text, on which Pound based his translations, which juxtaposed lines and passages that later scholars have moved to more sensible positions, but Pound also rearranged the order of the twelve elegies he chose to translate, and removed large sections of those choices. The translations themselves could be very free, moreover, following the verse opportunities rather than translating what was on the page. Without the Latin to consult, few would guess that:

A new-fangled chariot follows the flower-hung horses;
A young Muse with young loves clustered about her
  ascends with me into the aether, . . .
And there is no high-road to the Muses. (P 1.13-6: 3.11-4)

Referred to the Roman triumph, the young loves being the kinsfolk that traditionally rode in the victor's chariot. Or that the mysterious:

"Bright tips reach up from twin towers, Anienan spring water falls into flat-spread pools." (P 3.3-4: 3.16.3-4)

Simply referred to the waterfalls at Tivoli, where Cynthia instructed Propertius to meet her.

Ezra Pound's Innovations

The saving grace was the verse, where Pound developed a style useful to him in the Cantos and to Modernism generally. {4} Because that verse is often misunderstood, allowing contemporary styles to dwindle into little more than prose, it is worth looking at the details. Pound made several innovations.

1. He ignored the elegiac form, replacing the couplets by lines or line segments of varying lengths that were meaningful and cadenced units in themselves.

Love interferes with fidelities;
The gods have brought shame on their relatives;
Each man wants the pomegranate for himself (P 12.2-4: 2.34.2-5)

2. He made units some fused evocation of meaning, tone and emotion, often by vivid images that were only loosely linked by argument or narrative.

We, in our narrow bed, turning aside from battles:
Each man where he can, wearing out the day in his manner (P 5.2. 36-7: 2.1.45-6)

3. He pruned away the unnecessary, allowing the words left to fill out with their full meaning:

Rumours of you throughout the city,

and no good rumour among them. (P 11.18-9: 2.32.23-4

And phrases with a reverberating simplicity:

When the Syrian onyx is broken. (P 4.25: 2.13.30)

4. He used a diction that was not contemporary but a judicious mixture of the poetic (aforetime), the academic and the archly self-knowing or deprecating (young ladies): see below.

5. To give rhythmic coherence to the units, Pound adopted the cadences of his skilled contemporaries, but replaced their traditional accentual-syllabic verse by stress verse to no common base, i.e. to free verse. That allowed him to introduce snippets of conversation:

"You need, Propertius, not think
"About acquiring that sort of reputation. (P 2.19-20: 3.3.17-8)

And adjusted the tone, here ironic:

She did not respect all the gods
Such derelictions have destroyed other young ladies aforetime. (P 8.6-7: 2.28.6-7)

And here simple and passionate:

You ask on what account I write so many love-lyrics
And whence this soft book comes into my mouth.
Neither Calliope nor Apollo sung these things into my ear,
My genius is no more than a girl. (P 5.2.1-4: 2.1.1-4)

He arranged the units with great skill, ostensibly avoiding the constraints of conventional verse, but actually playing variations on the iambic pentameter that can usually be sensed beneath.

Nor at my funeral | either |will there be| any long trail |
  bearing ancestral lares | and images ||
Nor at | my fu | neral ei | ther will | there be |
any | long trail | bearing | ances |tral la | res
and | ima ges || (P 6.13-14: 2.13.19-20)

7. He made typography, the layout on the page, important. Where Pound wanted to emphasize words or thwart expectations, he broke the line, down-setting the important items:

Seeing that long standing increases all things
                regardless of quality. (P 1.25-6: 3.1.

Suddenly, the Elegies became challengingly different, as fresh and relevant to contemporary readers, Modernists believed, as Propertius was to his Roman audience. In fact Propertius was following in a long tradition, and his lines were startling only in the ease with which he further

developed its inherent properties. By contrast, Pound's work was new, and revealed other dimensions, asking for poems to be constructed on fresh principles, and bound together by unusual devices.

The last was the great difficulty. *Homage* is an untidy poem, with many lines of great beauty and felicity of expression, but not cohering into a satisfying whole. Roman poetry was an extension of oratory, and therefore constructed on a complex rhetoric. The Homage was built on Pound's belief in the imaginal nature of Chinese verse. Individual scenes or vignettes are not easily integrated without some intervening narrative, however, as every film director knows, and Pound himself found in the Cantos. No doubt links could be made — indeed were made in some faltering way through the Homage by the loose association of ideas — but an organizing linkage would doubtless have entailed further departures from the Latin, adding a matrix to images that were most vivid when left to stand for themselves.

Nonetheless, the Homage does have more unity and compelling beauty than any correct and complete rendering, which, with the text now rearranged, necessarily includes many broken, trivial and unsatisfactory elegies.

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Virgil's Georgics: Previous Prose Translations

Older Versions

Prose is the safe option, for if it denies the translator the expressive power of verse it also prevents him blundering badly. The first two examples have the elevated diction of English prose of the period, splendidly echoing the original, but now needing a little updating.

H. R. Fairclough: 1916

What makes the crops joyous, beneath what star, Maecenas, it is well to turn the soil, and wed vines to elms, what tending the cattle need, what care the herd in breeding, what skill the thrifty bees — hence shall I begin my song. O most radiant lights of the firmament, that guide through heaven the gliding year, O Liber and bounteous Ceres, if by your grace Earth changed Chaonia's acorn for the rich corn ear, and blended draughts of Achelous with the newfound grapes, and you Fauns, the rustics' ever present gods (come trip it, Fauns, and Dryad maids withal!), 'tis of your bounties I sing. {15}

J. W. Mackail: 1934

What makes the cornfields glad; beneath what star it befits to upturn the ground, Maecenas, and clasp the vine to her

elm; the tending of oxen and the charge of the keeper of a flock; and all the skill of thrifty bees; of this will I begin to sing. You, O bright splendours of the world, who lead on the rolling year through heaven; Liber and gracious Ceres, if by your gift Earth exchanged Chaonian acorns for the swelling ear, and tempered her draughts of Achelous with the discovered grape; and you, O Fauns, guardian presences of the country, trip it together, Fauns and Dryad girls; of your gifts I sing. {16}

Free Verse Translations

Free verse is a beautiful but exacting medium, and the examples which follow are not entirely the real article — indeed read better when the faculties by which we enjoy verse are switched off. Be that as it may, that which calls itself free verse today commonly ranges from variations on a metrical base to a 'chopped up prose' where metrical phrasing is downplayed or absent. In Georgics translations, the range is from:

P. Fallon and E. Fantham 2009

What tickles the cornfield to laugh out loud, and by what star
to steer the plough, and how to train the vine to elms,
good management of flocks and herds, the expertise bees need
to thrive — my lord Maecenas, such are the makings of the song
I take upon myself to sing.

Sirs of sky,
grand marshals of the firmament,
O Liber of fertility, and Ceres, our sustaining queen,
by your kind-heartedness earth traded acorns of Epirus
for ample ears of corn, and laced spring water with new wine,
and you, O Fauns, presiding lights of farming folk
(come dance, O Fauns and maiden Dryads,
your gifts I celebrate as well); {17}

Leaving aside the sheer silliness of the rendering (Virgil does not suppose horticulture tickles cornfields, or ploughs are steered by stars, etc.) the verse has a pleasing momentum and integrity, the departures from strict meter neatly emphasizing the poem's argument.

Through this: C. Day Lewis 1940

What makes the cornfields happy, under what constellation
It's best to turn the soil, my friend, and train the vine
On the elm; the care of cattle, the management of flocks,
The knowledge you need for keeping frugal bees:—all this
I'll now begin to relate....
You too, whatever place in the courts of the
Immortals Is soon to hold you — whether an overseer of cities
And warden of earth you'll be, Caesar, so that the great world
Honour you as promoter of harvest and puissant lord

Of the seasons, garlanding your brow with your mother's myrtle {18}

'Slangy' was the term sometimes applied to this rendering, which was popular in its time. There are problems with the diction — happy is flat, my friend too colloquial, and I'll now begin to relate is prose — but the chief shortcoming is limited integration of phrase into the main body of the work. The garlanding your brow with your mother's myrtle is rough-hewn blank verse — not at all bad, but standing apart from the metrical flow.

And J. Lembke 2005

What makes the crops rejoice, Maecenas, under what stars
to plough and marry vines to their arbor of elms,
what care the cattle need, what tending the flocks must have,
how much practical knowledge to keep frugal bees —
here I start my song. You, brightest luminaries of sky's
vast world who lead the onrolling year through the heavens,
you old Plater God, and you, generous Ceres, if earth
by your gift exchanged wild acorns for plump grains of wheat
and mingled ancient river waters with her first-ever grapes;
and you, guardian Gods of Fields and Folds, always present
in the countryside (step lightly, dance, Gods and Tree Nymphs!):

I sing your gifts. {19}

A modern translation, with the argument made plain and proper names rendered in their literal meaning. The verse is loose, however, failing to place the words in any aesthetic order, and the attempt at a sensible rendering that communicates with a modern audience sometimes forgets the decorum of Latin verse: 4. 351: . . . till Arethusa, first of the sisters to peek, . . Or adds a whimsy not found in the original: 2.80: And in no time at all, a great tree, amazed by unusual leaves and fruit not its own, tickles the belly of heaven with its laden boughs.

And L.P. Wilkinson 1982.

What makes the corncrops glad, under which star
To turn the soil, Maecenus, and wed your vines
To elms, the care of cattle, the keeping of flocks,
All the experience the thrifty bees demand —
Such are the themes of my song.
You brightest lamps
That lead the year's progression across the sky;
Liber and nurturing Ceres, since your grace
procured the earth should change Chaonia's acorns
For the rich ears of wheat and grapes be found
For lacing cups of Archeloüs' water;
You, too, the present help of farmers, Fauns
(Come Fauns and Dryad maiden, dance together:

yours are the gifts I sing); and you for whom
The earth, smitten with your great trident, first
brought forth the champing horse, Neptune; and you,
Hunter of woods, for whom in Cea's brakes.
Three hundred snow-white bullocks crop rich pasture; {20}

L.P. Wilkinson was a noted Virgil scholar, and his several books display a keen ear for the beauties of Latin verse. In this translation the section introductions are excellent, packed with useful information, and the rendering is generally faithful to the text, though not always appropriate in diction nor gracefully expressed. The 'loose, predominantly five-beat, metre which often streamlines itself into blank verse but which admits of variations such as the 'sprung' rhythm of Hopkins' is rarely successful, however, verging for long stretches on the prosaic. Exceptions are the famous sections where the translation rises a little to the power and beauty of the original, notably at the end of Book One, the praise of Italy, and the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

To this by A.S. Kline

I'll begin to sing of what keeps the wheat fields happy,
under what stars to plough the earth, and fasten vines to elms,
what care the oxen need, what tending cattle require,

Maecenas, and how much skill's required for the thrifty bees.
O you brightest lights of the universe
that lead the passing year through the skies,
Bacchus and kindly Ceres, since by your gifts
fat wheat ears replaced Chaonian acorns
and mixed Achelous's water with newly-discovered wine,
and you, Fauns, the farmer's local gods,
(come dance, together, Fauns and Dryad girls!)
your gifts I sing. {21}

Tony Kline's version is intelligent, informed and faithful, sometimes closer to the original than better-known translations. As a simple-to-read crib for busy students it could hardly be bettered, but the diction and awkward rhythms do not echo the excellence of Virgil's Latin.

Free Verse Characteristics

Free verse is not a lackadaisical or curiously ordered prose but verse in which some formal characteristics have been relaxed or given an extra subtlety, usually by reducing the regularity of metre or line length. Unfortunately — and why good free verse is so difficult to write — removing such vital supports calls for greater skills in intertextual matters: assonance, alliteration, phrasing, cadence, vowel harmony, etc. — skills which are only gained by practice in writing verse, and in reading it. I have no quarrel with free verse, and indeed employ it throughout the Ocaso Press version, collecting lines of varying length into formal hexameters. Here, in the opening section, each line has a rhythmic unity, iambic, but with wide differences in pace and phrasing:

What makes the cornfield joyful,
and beneath what star we turn the earth,
Maecenas?
How may vines be fastened to the elm?
What husbandry to manage cattle,
breed the ox?
What knowledge have the thrifty bees?
With such I start my song.
And you,
O radiant lights
that lead the seasons in their fruitful dance,
and you,
both Liber and propitious Ceres,
who have turned Chaonian acorn lands to thick-sown fields of wheat
and mixed in drafts of Archeloüs new-made wine;
and Fauns,
you rustic deities who serve for local powers —
so dance you Dryad girls and gods—
your gifts I celebrate.
And Neptune giving birth to neighing horse
when your great trident struck the earth,
and you,
the dweller of the woods,
for whom three hundred head of snowy cattle browse the Ceos thicket lands;
Tegean Pan that guards the flocks,
though much you love Maenales lands,

come, leave your own Lycaeus groves and favour us;
Minerva of the olive gift,
and you,
young man,
who first revealed the curving plough,
Sylvanus,
planter of the pliant cypress tree,
and you,
obliging gods and goddesses who watch our fields,
to nourish native fruits we have not sown,
and have the heavens so plentifully water crops.
And you,
great Caesar,
who in time will join the gods,
in unknown company,
but choosing, it may be, to safeguard cities,
care for lands,
become the source of wondrous harvest on the widespread earth,
the seasons' potentate that wears his mother's myrtle crown,
who broods on boundless seas,
the sovereign breath that mariners to far-off Thule look to,
Tethys furthers,
winning you as son-in-law with waves,

These can then be 'reassembled' as hexameters:

What makes the cornfield joyful, and beneath what star

we turn the earth, Maecenas? How may vines be fastened
to the elm? What husbandry to manage cattle,
breed the ox? What knowledge have the thrifty bees?
With such I start my song. And you, O radiant lights
that lead the seasons in their fruitful dance, and you,
both Liber and propitious Ceres, who have turned
Chaonian acorn lands to thick-sown fields of wheat
and mixed in drafts of Archeloüs new-made wine;
and Fauns,you rustic deities who serve for local
powers — so dance you Dryad girls and gods— your gifts
I celebrate. And Neptune giving birth to neighing
horse when your great trident struck the earth, and you,
the dweller of the woods, for whom three hundred head
of snowy cattle browse the Ceos thicket lands;
Tegean Pan that guards the flocks, though much you love
Maenales lands,come, leave your own Lycaeus groves
and favour us; Minerva of the olive gift,
and you, young man, who first revealed the curving plough,
Sylvanus, planter of the pliant cypress tree,
and you, obliging gods and goddesses who watch
our fields, to nourish native fruits we have not sown,
and have the heavens so plentifully water crops.
And you, great Caesar, who in time will join the gods,
in unknown company, but choosing, it may be,
to safeguard cities, care for lands, become the source
of wondrous harvest on the widespread earth, the seasons'
potentate that wears his mother's myrtle crown,
who broods on boundless seas, the sovereign breath

that mariners to far-off Thule look to, Tethys
furthers, winning you as son-in-law with waves,

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Virgil's Georgics: Previous Verse Translations

Heroic Couplets

There are two reasons for not adopting the heroic couplet. First is its structure, which boxes up the content, packaging it into sections that deny the phrase by phrase expressiveness of Virgil's orginal. Second is Dryden's translation of 1697, still immensely readable.

What makes a plenteous harvest, when to turn
The fruitful soil, and when to sow the corn ;
The care of sheep, of oxen, and of kine,
And how to raise on elms the teeming vine ;
The birth and genius of the frugal Bee,
I sing, Maecenas, and I sing to thee.
Ye deities ! who fields and plains protect,
Who rule the seasons, and the year direct,
Bacchus and fostering Ceres, powers divine,
Who gave us corn for mast, for water, wine
Ye Fauns, propitious to the rural swains,
Ye Nymphs, that haunt the mountains and the plains,
Join in my work, and to my numbers bring
Your needful succour ; for your gifts I sing.
And thou, whose trident struck the teeming earth,
And made a passage for the courser's birth ;
And thou, for whom the Csean shore sustains
The milky herds, that graze the flowery plains ;
And thou, the shepherds' tutelary god,

Leave, for a while, O Pan ! thy loved abode;
And, if Arcadian fleeces be thy care,
From fields and mountains to my song repair.
Inventor, Pallas, of the fattening oil,
Thou founder of the plough, and ploughman's toil ;
And thou, whose hands the shrowd-like cypress rear,
Come, all ye gods and goddesses, that wear
The rural honours, and increase the year;
You, who supply the ground with seeds of grain ; {5}

So early Augustan verse with its balance and rugged good sense.

Contemporary Rhyming Couplets

It is perfectly possible, with a little ingenuity, to create rhyming couplets in a more contemporary, fluid style:

What gladdens cornfields, and what star inclines
us turn the earth, Maecenus? How may vines
be trestled by the elm? Or flocks be cared
for, oxen bred? What qualities prepared
the bees for hives? And you, celestial lights

that lead the seasons in their fruitful rites,
with Lider and kind Ceres, you who meet
to turn the acorn lands to thick-sown wheat,
and mix with Archeloüs new-made wine.
10. You Fauns the rustics bless with wayside shrine —

so dance you Dryad girls and gods — your source
I celebrate. And Neptune's gift of horse
when his great trident struck the earth, the ways
of one who loves the wood, whose cattle graze
15. the width of Ceos thicket lands, great Pan
who guards Maenales lands and flocks of man,
Come, leave your own Lycaeus groves and bring
Minerva of the olive gift. I sing
of one who showed us how curved plough should be,
20. Sylvanus, bearer of the cypress tree,
of gods and goddesses who guard our fields
and in the unsown woods make good our yields,
that heavens so plentifully give us rain.
And you, great Caesar, who in time must gain . . .

The rhyme requirements and shorter line length make it difficult to match the content properly, however, and the odd reader who can still appreciate such verse today would probably want to stay with the more conventional phrasing of Dryden.

Blank Verse

Blank verse is more than able to render the Georgics effectively, and was indeed been the preferred choice in translations from the classics until 'free verse' became the norm. Again the arguments turn on history. There is no point in undertaking a new translation if the result is not a significant improvement on what is already available. J.B. Greenough's 1900 version, so often featuring on university Latin sites, is excellent:

J. B. Greenough 1900

What makes the cornfield smile; beneath what star
Maecenas, it is meet to turn the sod
Or marry elm with vine; how tend the steer;
What pains for cattle-keeping, or what proof
Of patient trial serves for thrifty bees;—
Such are my themes. O universal lights
Most glorious! ye that lead the gliding year
Along the sky, Liber and Ceres mild,
If by your bounty holpen earth once changed
Chaonian acorn for the plump wheat-ear,
And mingled with the grape, your new-found gift,
The draughts of Achelous; and ye Fauns
To rustics ever kind, come foot it, Fauns
And Dryad-maids together; your gifts I sing. {22}
It is not difficult to write something similar, updating the diction:
What gladdens cornfields, and beneath what star
Maecenas, are we made to turn the earth?
How may the vine be fastened to the elm,
or cattle tended, and the ox be bred?
What knowledge is possessed by thrifty bees? —
such are my themes. Celestial lights that lead
the seasons in their fruitful dance. How Bacchus
and propitious Ceres brought Chaonian
acorn lands to thick-sown fields of wheat,
10. and formed of Acheloüs new-made wine.

And Fauns, you gods of country folk-so dance
you Dryad girls and gods-your gifts I praise.
And Neptune giving horse when your great trident
struck the earth, and you, the woodland one
whose snowy cattle browse the Ceos thickets;
Pan that guards the flocks, though much you love
Maenales lands, come, leave your own Lycaeus
groves. And come Minerva, you of olive
gift, the youth who first revealed the curving plough,
20. Sylvanus, bearer of the cypress tree,
and you, great gods and goddesses who watch
our fields, to nourish fruits we have not sown,
have heavens so bountifully water crops. . .

But again words have to be left out to squeeze the content, already terse in Latin, into the shorter English pentameter.

R.C. Trevelyan 1944

What makes the cornfield glad, beneath what star,
Maecenas, it is well to turn the soil,
And wed the vine to the elm, how to tend oxen,
For nurturing flocks and hers what care is needful,
For keeping thrifty bees what knowledge, now
Shall I essay to sing. O ye most glorious
Lights of the universe, that lead along
Through heaven the gliding years; and you, Liber
And kindly Ceres, by whose bounty earth exchanged
Chaonian acorns for the rich ear of corn,

And blended with pure water from the stream
And new-found grape; and you Fauns, present deities
Of country folk (draw together, Fauns
And Dryad maidens), it is your gifts to men I sing. {12}

R.C. Trevelyan, a distinguished translator, avoided such compression by rendering ten of Virgil's hexameters by twelve English pentameters. Strangely, the result was not a success. The verse lacks the phrasing, cadences and extra graces so vital to blank verse, and something like half the lines are limp or clogged with unnecessary obstructions.

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Virgil's Georgics Verse Characteristics

Once the basics of the hexameter are grasped, we can look at what makes Virgil's verse the most accomplished in Latin. Virgil was a fastidious writer, and developed an extraordinary ear for cadence and verbal music by building on the work of two near contemporaries. The first was Lucretius, to whose majestic hexameters Virgil added tact, balance and variety. The second was Cicero, to whose carefully orchestrated periods Virgil added refinement and grace. The result in RC Trevelyan's words was 'pure poetry, by which I mean poetry whose power to charm consists almost entirely in the physical beauty of the verse, its imagery, and the atmosphere or the sentiment which it expresses. . . [where] the physical beauty and majestic sonority of the verse is everything, or nearly everything.' {12} L.P. Wilkinson spoke of the energy, appropriateness and grace in what would otherwise be dull, miscellaneous and workaday subject matter. {3}

Verse Characteristics

Several features are characteristic of Virgil, which we need to respect. {3} {13}

First is a beauty of phrasing, unmatched in Latin.

Second is an expressiveness, a shaping of phrasing and verse texture to bring out vividly whatever is being said. Wilkinson gives many instances in his sympathetic reading

of the verse. Three examples:

1. 201-2: a spondaic rhythm to represent persistent effort.

non aliter, quam qui adverso vix flumine lembum
remigiis subigit,

as will a skiff a rower draws against the stream:

1. 341-2. lazy summer pleasures expressed by sleepy spondaic lines.

Tum pingues agni et tum mollissima vina,
tum somni dulces densaeque in montibus umbrae.

The lambs are fattened, wine grows full, and sweet is sleep as shadows congregate about the hills.

1.369: twirl of in aqua amid the spondees suggesting the light movement of feathers:

aut summa nantis in aqua colludere plumas.

float and dance about the frothed-up water's top.

Third is a tact, refinement and variety. Alliteration is used a more refined manner than is the case with Lucretius. The so-called golden and silver lines {14} (abVerbAB and abVerbBA respectively, where a and b are adjectives and B

and A are substantives) are used much more sparingly than in Catullus.

Fourth is a superflux of rhythm and a tendency to carry it further than lesser hands would have done.

Fifth, lines in the Georgics are not end-stopped, but content is allowed to flow across the versification: an important consideration in choosing an appropriate English form.

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Virgil's Georgics: Rendering the Hexameter

A true hexameter, with Latin verse structure replicated, cannot be written in English, but an approximation forms the medium of Longfellow's Evangeline, {23} one of his more popular poems.

In the Acadian land, on the shores of the Basin of Minas,
Distant, secluded, still, the little village of Grand-Pre
Lay in the fruitful valley. Vast meadows stretched to the eastward,
Giving the village its name, and pasture to flocks without number.
Dikes, that the hands of the farmers had raised with labor incessant,
Shut out the turbulent tides; but at stated seasons the flood-gates
Opened, and welcomed the sea to wander at will o'er the meadows.
West and south there were fields of flax, and orchards and corn-fields.

The difficulty, as Highet {24} pointed out, is that the style pleases no one. To English readers it sounds rather prosaic, each line unnecessarily hobbled with a final disyllable. English generally lacks spondees, and to classicists the disyllable pressed into service hardly matches what a quantitative language provides. Something more than a

careful quietness is difficult to achieve with this form, and it seems not to have been used to translate the Georgics.

Hexameters: Free Form

Here only requirement is that the verse be a strict iambic, and that the lines invariably consist of six feet. It is the metre I've adopted for this translation, building on the free verse example given earlier. The hexameter is a difficult form, however, and requires a good ear for phrasing and wordchoice even to get the following, which has a natural but perhaps not very pleasing rhythm (from the Aeneid, by the classics translator of a generation back, Patric Dickinson): {25}

There are others assuredly I believe,
Shall work in bronze more sensitively, moulding
Breathing images, or carving from the marble
More lifelike features: some shall plead more eloquently,
Or gauging with instruments the sky's motion
Forecast the rising of the constellations:
But yours, my Roman, is the gift of government,
That is your bent — to impose upon the nations
The code of peace; to be clement to the conquered,
But utterly to crush the intransigent.

The hexameter is also much less controlling than the pentameter, giving a 'quieter' line — which allows more varied phrases to be strung together, but also needs a wide

range of verse craft to give continuity to the lines.hexameter is also much less controlling than the pentameter, giving a 'quieter' line — which allows more varied phrases to be strung together, but also needs a wide range of verse craft to give continuity to the lines.

Aims of the Ocaso Press Translation

1. A few liberties have been taken in completing lines and phrases, but not so much that any short section, selected at random, could not be immediately identified with the original. The translation is as line for line as I can reasonably make it.

2. Occasionally I have had to add a word or lose one to keep within an acceptable hexameter form, but significant departures are very few and noted in the Glossary.

3. Virgil, and Latin writers of the period generally, do not employ striking images, but stock epithets. My policy here has been to:

a. Write a fuller line than the Latin strictly says on the rare occasions that space allows something more worthy of the original. Some examples:

1.83: she's warmly bountiful when left asleep

1.313: the spring come blustering in with rainy showers

1.433 she sail the tranquil heavens with her horns

undimmed

2.313-4: then comes the useless, sour-leafed oleaster

3.14-5: For where the broad and slowly winding Mincius
meanders through its water-reeded banks

3.144: where fields are green with moss and plumpest grass

3.333-4: where darkness seems to congregate
and give an air of holiness to shadowed depths.

3.521-2: nor can the water coursing through the plains
that falls as quick electrum over tinkling rocks.

4.30-2: a wealth
of thyme and savory that fills the air with pungent
scent, and violets that drink from bubbling springs.

4.64: the dissonance of Cybele's soft cymbals sound.

4.63: or sound of flames when roaring through a furnace
flue.

4. 466. from daylight's first of dawning till the day retired.

b. Respect the deeper sense of the original. In 1.450, for example, many translators have introduced the image of dancing, which is not appropriate to the destructive power of

hail, and not one Virgil uses:

Trevelyan:

such pelting multitudes of hailstones will dance ratting of the roofs.

Wilkinson:

such showers of myriad hail
Will dance their pattering tap-dance on the roof.

Simple onomatopoeia seems better:

when heavy hail comes down and rattles horribly on roofs.

c. Otherwise return the translation to a more literal rendering than those of my predecessors, though still aiming for a pleasing integration of sound and sense. So the opening to the famous praise of Italy:

2.136-40: Trevelyan:

But neither Media's wealth of citron groves,
Nor fair Ganges, nor Hermus rolling down
his golden silt, may vie with Italy's glory -
Not Bactria, no, not India, or all Panchaia
So rich in spicy sands.

Lembke:

But not the groves of Persia, that land of fabled wealth,
not the Ganges, nor that Asian river that's muddy with gold
may vie with Italy's excellence, no, not the Afghan's land,
not India nor the fabled place of sand with frankincense.

Here becomes:

Not Persia with its sumptuous groves and soils, nor handsome
Ganges, nor the stormy Hermus with its gold
can match the fame of Italy. Not even Bactria,
India, nor Panchaïa with its incense sands.

4. Informal contractions of can't, 's, etc. have been used occasionally, which was certainly taboo a half century ago and even now is often thought to be too colloquial for Virgil. But it's little more than the elision of Latin, and to forbid its use is often to leave out words, as the English hexameter is never as terse as the Latin.

5. I've generally written a strict iambic, only breaking the metre for special effects. The impetuous chariot race that closes Book One: (1.510-12) where the extra syllables of 'oblivious' that have to be swallowed
echo the wild confusion of horse and rider:

as, from the opening barrier, the chariot

but races yet more reckless round the track, horses
oblivious of burden, rider's tangled words or rein.

The dreadful description of Cocytes, where the patterning is more free verse:

4.477-79: -all that the black mud
and loathsome reeds of Cocytes within the sluggish
waters of that hated lake bind fast.
And the 'singing' lines that end the work (4. 565-6):
So Virgil: a youth once dallying with shepherd's lays,
who sang of Tityrus beneath the beech tree's shade.

Often I've maintained the iambic across whole sections, following a feminine line ending with an opening trochaic on the next line. Continuity is the aim, the content being picked up by a sentence, developed naturally and handed to the next.

6. In contrast to translators from Dryden down, I've tried to avoid poeticisms and adopt Virgil's manner, which is to write sturdy sense and make what verse is possible by word choice and arrangement.

7. The content is sometimes carried over two or more lines, further than Virgil does, though I have generally tried to avoid too weak an ending for any particular line, i.e. not with an article, or even prepositions unless in idiomatic use. The English hexameter lacks the concluding spondee of the

Latin, but, by way of compensation, can be fashioned into organized paragraphs in the matter expected of extended compositions. In lines 1. 63-70, for example, where my rendering forms phrases with these numbers of feet: 5. 7. 4. 7. 6. 6. 6. 6, the lines still conclude forcefully:

So where the earth is rich and heaviest | I'd have
the teams of oxen ploughing from the earliest months, | |
and, with the furrows heaped in lines, | then leave the force
of summer sun to crumble clods to dust.|| But should
the land prove unrewarding all the same, | it can
be laid in shallow ridges till Arcturus rise, |
for weeds will not there suffocate the smiling crops, |
nor moisture here evaporate from sandy soils.||

Nonetheless, the corresponding division by content in the Latin is quite different, the concluding spondees pointing the lines in a way the simple English hexameter cannot.

Ergo age, terrae
pingue solum | primis extemplo a mensibus anni
fortes invertant tauri glaebasque iacentis |
pulverulenta coquat maturis solibus aestas;||
at si non fuerit tellus fecunda, | sub ipsum
Arcturum tenui sat erit suspendere sulco: |
illic, officiant laetis ne frugibus herbae,|
hic, sterilem exiguus ne deserat humor harenam.||

8. My aim was for an expressive and pleasing verse, but not

one that replicates the features of the Latin, which is well beyond my powers. Where, for example, Virgil chooses his goddesses for the verbal patterns their names make, I have only (with difficulty) been able to retain the metre. 1.343:

atque Ephyre | atque Opis | et Asia Deiopea Ephyre, |
Opis, | and the | Asian | Deïo | pea,

And for the concluding lines of the Orpheus and Eurydice story (4. 523-7) I have had to employ quite different effects:

Tum quoque marmorea caput a cervice revulsum
gurgite cum medio portans Oeagrius Hebrus
volveret, Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua
ah miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:
Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae.

But even then, the head torn off from marble neck
and midway floating down the Oegian Hebrus stream,
the voice cried out : Eurydice, and from his ice-
cold lips and fleeting breath Eurydice was heard
reverberating and murmuring down the river's length.

And so on: Latin has many advantages over English verse.

Translation Approaches

Virgil's text can be condensed, gnomic in places, and what we understand of the Georgics as a whole determines how we translate individual lines. Generations of scholars have

studied Virgil, and those interpretations, if coloured by the preoccupations of their times, are still relevant, making what is needed, it seems to me, not so much a strikingly original translation {31} {32}, but one of considered richness. The eighteeth century rhapsodized over the beauties of Virgil's landscapes. The nineteenth century spoke of Virgils brooding and intense pity for human nature. The twentieth century looked more closely at its ambiguities and relationships to other poets' work. All observations reverberate in the text, and problems appear with the simplest lines:

1.4: apibus quanta experientia parcis (literarily: with thrifty bees how much experience) has been translated as:

Trevelyan: For keeping thrifty bees what knowledge

Lembke: how much practical knowledge to keep frugal bees.

Putnam: what skill the thrifty bees possess.

I incline to Putnam's reading, not simply for the partnership of man and nature in the Georgics noted in the ebook Introduction, but because thrifty otherwise makes little sense. We have to change thrifty to something like fastidious. What trials are best to settle the fastidious bees? Is an attractive line, but a vast expansion of what Virgil wrote.

In the same spirit I render line 1.41-2 as regret / with me

the ignorance of country ways, Suggesting that it is our ignorance of country ways after extended civil wars that Virgil is lamenting, not rural stupidity. It is those who have left the land, the likely readers of the Georgics, that may have lost their way.

Further notes can be found in the ebook Glossary, but I have kept the annotation light, or (shades of Nabokov) it would swell to a book in itself, quite out of keeping with a literary translation. Also largely unnoted are the individual departures from previous renderings, though I have greatly benefited from reading the work, as from the academic studies listed in the References and Resources. To them all I owe an immense debt of gratitude.

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