

It's been said so often that every reader must have heard it: poetry is untranslatable. Unfortunately, Latin (and Greek) would be almost completely unread these days, if none of it were ever translated at all. What a quandary for classicists! Trying to accomplish something which is naturally very difficult and which everyone agrees is foredoomed from the moment the translator picks up a pen—it's enough to deter anyone.

What are the choices? First, teach would-be readers the ancient languages. (Among other things, that's what we classicists are still doing, but it's quite a long way round, you might say.) Second, translate the Latin poem—and since I'm a Latinist I'll leave out Greek from here on (no offence intended to the Hellenists)—into English prose. Usually this is what we prefer to do, since poetry written by non-poets is often very unappealing. A prose translation can be as accurate, even literal, as we wish. However, a literal version of most poems is almost as unattractive as a doggerel verse one, though it may have the real value of helping the learner to interpret the Latin and so to appreciate the original poetry better. If we opt for prose, the best course is to write in as fluent and readable an English as we can, without bringing in (or leaving out) details which are not in the original (or, conversely, which are). Nothing added, nothing omitted, and make the end product sound as if it had been written in English to start with. This is a great goal, but again, it is seldom if ever achievable in practice.

A third option is to translate our Latin poem into poetry. This is an excellent choice for a practising poet, and many English poets have chosen to turn Latin verse into English poetry, with remarkable success in plenty of cases. Yet, the better the resulting poetry, the less Roman the end result can sometimes sound: the attractively musical, rhythmic English seems somehow to conceal the Latin original.

Milton's fine version of Horace's famous Pyrrha Ode provides perhaps the best example of a poet choosing a literal approach. At the other end of the scale come poems which are better called imitations than translations. These may motivate readers to improve their Latin skills, but don't do much to help them wrestle with the original Latin syntax or vocabulary.

Another difficult decision for the translator: what to do with names or references which readers are certain to find confusing or meaningless? Footnotes can be useful, but too many become an annoyance. Finding a more familiar parallel might sometimes work, but seems sort of cheating. Often one chooses to leave out the topical names or details (presumably Roman readers knew what they referred to), and instead to write in generalities, even though the end product may lack character and color.

Then what rhyme scheme, length of stanza or lines should the translator choose? Some try to make the English poem as similar in form to the Latin one as they reasonably can, but since Latin verse was based on very different ideas about what constitutes poetry, too close a reproduction can sound strangely unpoetic in English.

All in all, the translator's job is, at best, a tricky and often frustrating one. If you are interested in trying it (and most classicists enjoy giving it a go now and then) you may enjoy writing your own poem as an imitation rather than a translation. Then try a careful prose translation, polishing it repeatedly until you have a version which is both accurate and idiomatic. Then it's time for the challenge of Latin poem to poem in English—a challenge indeed!

(Two prizes will be awarded for a verse imitation or a verse translation of one of Horace's Odes. Send it in to the Editor, clearly identifying it as either an imitation or a translation by Dec. 1st, 1994. We will publish the best submissions in the next edition of *Labyrinth*.)

Here's a version of Horace Odes 1.1, in which the poet dedicates his work to his patron, Maecenas:

To Maecenas, on Choices in Life

Maecenas, to you, of ancestral royalty,
Protector, patron, I offer this proudly.

Olympia's dust lends some their worth,
As their chariots' smoking axles turn
Close round the post: lords of the earth
Raised to the gods by the winner's palm.

This man's in heaven: Rome's fickle votes
Have made him magistrate, twice and again.
That fellow revels in his barley and oats,
His Libyan wheat, piled deep in his barns.

No shifting this farmer from paternal field,
From shovel and hoe, not for Attalus' wealth.
No launching him in Cyprian-keeled
Ship: he's terrified sick to put to sea.

With African wind and the waves at odds
Even that trader trembles and shivers.
"Give me my streets or quiet fields, ye gods!"
Storm over? "Refit her now! Must get richer!"

Another man sips his vintage cups,
Spending the working time of day afield;
He lies in green shade among buttercups
By the sacred source of a gentle stream.

Many love army life: fifes and horns,
Battle cries (cursed by mothers and wives)
Excite them. Hunters face freezing dawns,
Forget their wives too, when their loyal hounds
Sight a doe or stag, or the Marsian boars
Rip their neat nets with slavering jaws.

And me? Twined ivy, the poet's reward,
Sets me with the gods. A cool grove,

Soft-stepping nymphs dancing toward
Singing satyrs draw me aside.
I'll pipe Euterpe's flute, or if she still lets
Me, pluck Polyhymnia's strings and finger her frets.

Maecenas, if you only judge me a master of song,
I'll touch the stars as I sing, before long!