On Translating Homer's *Iliad*

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Abstract: This reflective essay explores the considerations facing a translator of Homer's work; in particular, the considerations famously detailed by the Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold, which remain the gold standard by which any Homeric translation is measured today. I attempt to walk the reader through the process of rendering a modern translation in accordance with Arnold's principles.

"It has more than once been suggested to me that I should translate Homer. That is a task for which I have neither the time nor the courage."[1] So begins Matthew Arnold's classic essay "On Translating Homer," the North Star by which all subsequent translators of Homer have steered, and the gold standard by which all translations of Homer are judged. A reader will find Arnold's principles referenced, directly or indirectly, in the introduction to most modern translations – Richmond Lattimore's, Robert Fagles's, Robert Fitzgerald's, and more recently Peter Green's. Additionally, Arnold's discussion of these principles serves as a primer of sorts for poets and writers of any stripe, not only those audacious enough to translate Homer.

While the title of his essay implies that it is about translating the works of Homer, Arnold has little to say about the *Odyssey*, and he dedicates his attention to the *Iliad*. The greater and more profound of Homer's two epics, the *Iliad* relates the events of a few weeks in the tenth and final year of the long, stalemated Trojan War, and by doing so evokes the tenuousness of human life and the blighting tragedy of all war. At the time of Arnold's writing in 1861, eighteen complete translations of the *Iliad* had been published in the English language – a remarkably small number given that the *Iliad*, the oldest of Homer's two epics, is believed to have been composed

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around 730 – 700 BC. Since then, and despite Arnold's observation that at the time of his essay the "study of classical literature is probably on the decline,"[2] sixty-five new translations have appeared, a figure that does not take into account many partial translations and adaptations.

The most recent of those translations is my own. And while I concur with Arnold that this effort required much time, I make no claim to courage. A better attribute might be, to use a very Iliadic word, *alkês*, which has connotations of "courage," but is more about "strength as displayed in action," to quote Liddell and Scott's indispensable *Greek-English Lexicon* – in other words, "fighting-spirit."[3] Undertaking a translation of either of the Homeric poems, but especially the *Iliad*, which at 15,693 lines of verse is some 3,000 lines longer than the *Odyssey,* is a lot like swimming a monster workout: lap by lap one toils away, back and forth, and suddenly the end of the workout arrives and thousands of meters – or verses – lie behind.

Matthew Arnold was not only a critic and accomplished classicist, but also a major poet of his own age. He is the author of such celebrated poems as *The Scholar Gypsy*, *Dover Beach*, and *Balder Dead*, the latter offering a hint of what an *Iliad* translation by him might have sounded like:

> So on the floor lay Balder dead; and round
> Lay thickly strewn swords, axes, darts, and
>   spears,
> Which all the Gods in sport had idly
>   thrown . . .[4]

Yet as Arnold never did translate Homer, we have instead only his essay, which lays out the rules for doing the job properly. The essay was originally delivered as a series of three separate lectures, a fact that perhaps accounts for its easy-going, conversational readability. Arnold is not infallible; but in its penetrating insights into what makes Homer sing and its fearless citation of efforts that have failed, "On Translating Homer" is nonetheless a master class in such poetic essentials as tone, pace, syntax, and vocabulary.

Arnold's assumption – not shared by everyone – is that a translation of Homer's work should sound as much as possible like Homer. Arnold, then, precludes the inspired interpretive approach taken by Christopher Logue, whose *War Music* and other works riff off portions of the *Iliad*. While I am a great admirer of Logue's work, as also of Alice Oswald's more recent *Memorial*, which weaves an original elegiac poem out of the *Iliad*'s many descriptions of dying heroes, I concur with Arnold: the offering of a complete translation of the *Iliad* should strive to replicate the Greek original in as many ways as the English language allows, as Arnold states, "to reproduce the *general effect* of Homer."[5]

A successful translation, according to Arnold, must uphold four principles, which are best quoted in full as he declared them:

> [T]he translator of Homer should above all be penetrated by a sense of four qualities of his author: – that he is eminently rapid; that he is eminently plain and direct both in the evolution of his thought and in the expression of it, that is, both in his syntax and in his words; that he is eminently plain and direct in the substance of his thought, that is, in his matter and ideas; and, finally, that he is eminently noble.[6]

Having stated at the outset that he would not translate Homer, Arnold was in the enviable position of being able both to laud Homeric qualities and to launch withering critiques at those translators who had failed to realize them, without, so to speak, setting foot on the Trojan field of battle. To revisit Arnold's principles after having made an actual translation is a somewhat more awkward business. But, as Arnold implied, translators of Homer are lion-hearted, and I will therefore attempt to explain

Arnold's principles in the shadow of my own efforts.

RAPID: The swiftness of the Homeric line of verse is principally due to the epic's meter – its rhythm – the dactylic hexameter: an ancient meter believed to descend from Indo-European heroic poetic tradition.[7] The Greek word *dactyl* means "finger," and like a finger, the poetic dactyl has one long and two short units: in this case, syllables. The quantity of a syllable, whether it is long or short, is determined by the duration it takes to sound it. A long-short-short phrase, then, is much like a phrase of whole-half-half notes in music. *Hex* is Greek for "six," and the dactylic hexameter line accordingly consists of six such metrical units. In theory, that is, since the meter allows substitution of two longs (a *spondee*) for a dactyl, and the last unit always has a two-beat ending, usually a spondee, but on occasion a *trochee* (which is long-short). Because individual lines of verse can obviously take a wide variety of metrical shapes, these substitutions allow for great flexibility; this variety saves the *Iliad* from sing-song monotony.

In Greek, this meter moves very swiftly, as can be discerned even in transliteration of the *Iliad*'s opening lines:

> Menin a-eide thea, Pele-i-ado Achille-os
> oulomenen, he muri Achai-ois alg' etheken,
> pollas d'iphthimous psukas A-i-di pro-i-apsen

English metrical patterns, on the other hand, are not determined by whether a syllable is long or short, but by whether it is stressed or unstressed. The word *WONderful*, for example, is a natural dactyl, as is *Po-et-ry*. Thus, when the hexameter is replicated in English – something infrequently done – it does not produce the same effect as the Greek, as can be seen in the most commonly cited example of English dactylic hexameter, Longfellow's *Evangeline*.

> Then rose a sound of dread, such as startles
> the sleeping encampments
> Far in the western prairies or forests that
> skirt the Nebraska,
> When the wild horses affrighted sweep by
> with the speed of the whirlwind,
> Or the loud bellowing herds of buffaloes
> rush to the river.[8]

Even in what should be a fast-paced action scene, the English hexameter moves at a stately pace. Although Arnold advocated the dactylic hexameter as being, in theory, the best meter for translation, he was able to find in the whole of English literature only one actual example that he commended: the translation of a scant few lines from book 3 of the *Iliad* by the Provost of Eton, which to the modern ear, at least, ring very flat:

> Known to me well are the faces of all: their
> names I remember;
> Two, only two remain, whom I see not
> among the commanders,
> Castor fleet in the car – Polydeukes brave
> with the cestus[9] (Homer *Iliad* 3.235 – 237)

In short, while the *Iliad*'s specific meter greatly accounts for its epic swiftness, its literal replication does not work well in English. As a consequence, many metrical patterns have been attempted by English-speaking translators. In modern times, Richmond Lattimore used a free six-beat line in his fine translation:

> Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son
> Achilleus
> and its devastation, which put pains
> thousandfold upon the Achaians,
> hurled in their multitude to the house of
> Hades strong souls
> of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the
> delicate feasting
> of dogs, of all birds. . . .[10] (1.1 – 5)

Robert Fagles, in the introduction to his translation, gives a good account of his choice of a loose five- or six-beat line, expanded at times to seven beats, and even at times contracted to three beats,[11] a choice that mirrors the flexible variety of Homer's Greek:

> Rage – Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
> murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
> hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
> great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
> feasts for the dogs and birds. . . .[12] (1.1 – 5)

In the footsteps of Fagles, I similarly chose a varied beat, allowing the English to contract or surge as occasion and natural wording demands, but, like Fagles, always with an eye on where the stressed beats fall:

> Wrath – sing, goddess, the ruinous wrath of Peleus' son Achilles,
> that inflicted woes without number upon the Achaeans,
> hurled forth to Hades many strong souls of warriors
> and rendered their bodies prey for the dogs,
> for all birds. . . .[13] (1.1 – 5)

Meter is not the only feature determining how rapidly a line flows. The sound and very meaning of a word are also considerations. Take, for example, Athena's dash to Earth from Olympus in book 4:

> As when the son of devious Cronus hurls forth a star,
> a glittering portent to sailors or vast army of men,
> from which shards of fire stream in multitude (4.75 – 77)

Swift words like *hurls* and *streams*, even *shards*, help speed the lines in this flashing scene.

Conversely, however, a single word can also drag a line like a sea-anchor. Take for example the very simple Greek word, much used in the *Iliad*, and my personal nemesis: *therapon*. This noun, according to Liddell and Scott, means "henchman, attendant, companion in arms, squire." A *therapon* might be a warrior's charioteer; he attends the warrior and stands below him in rank, but is unquestionably "noble." Translating the word as "attendant" works fairly well in a number of situations, but it does not work at all for the most significant of all *therapons* – Patroclus, who is the *therapon* and companion of Achilles (also called Aeacides, or "descendant of Aeacus"). This is seen in book 17, when the Achaeans wage a desperate fight over the body of Patroclus, who has been slain by Hector:

> But for the others the great strife of hard contention rose
> the whole day long; and always, relentlessly, the sweat of toil
> stained the knees and shins and feet of each man under him,
> and the hands and eyes of those who fought
> about the noble *therapon* of swift-footed Aeacides. (17.384 – 388)

About the noble *attendant* of swift-footed Aeacides? In this momentous context the word is lightweight and inconsequential. *Comrade in arms* is a mouthful, and also, strictly speaking, not quite correct. *Lieutenant*? But this introduces a modern military sensibility that is not balanced by comparable military-like terminology elsewhere in the poem. *Squire* is the exact and appropriate term. But to drop this word – more evocative of Camelot – into the Bronze Age battle would produce the dragging sea-anchor effect. The line would slow because the reader would do a double-take to accommodate it. Eventually I settled for *henchman* (as did Lattimore; Fagles used *aide-in-arms*), recognizing it as a tough, muscular word, that conjures a right-hand man, and not a servant. The primary meaning of henchman, according to the OED, is "a faithful supporter or assistant," while its secondary meaning is "squire or page attending a prince or nobleman." The negative aspect of this term is, of course, that it has acquired connotations of being "a faithful supporter" in "criminal or dishonest activities."[14] But, as I rationalized, few warriors in this war had clean hands.

PLAIN AND DIRECT: Homer, Arnold states, is plain and direct in syntax and choice of words; and plain and direct in his matter and ideas. These principles are well demonstrated by an example that is neither plain nor direct, Pindar's *First Olympian Ode*, composed in 476 BC:

> Water is best,
> while gold gleams like blazing fire in the night,
> brightest amid a rich man's wealth;
> but, my heart, if it is of the games that you wish to sing,
> look no further than the sun: as there is no star
> that shines with more warmth by day from a clear sky,
> so we can speak of no greater contest than Olympia.[15] (Pindar *Olympian I* 1 – 7)

The marvelous tumble of ideas, the luring-in of the reader through a cascade of images to we know not where, is characteristic of modern, stream-of-conscious poetry. Dazzling and sophisticated, Pindar is neither simple nor direct in either style or ideas.

By contrast, the language of Homer, even in his most high-flying similes, is straightforward; and it is with plain vocabulary and clean, driving phrases that he conjures what appear to be closely observed scenes. Consider book 12, in which the barrage of stones thrown by the opposing Greek and Trojan armies are compared to heavy snowfall:

> [A]s flakes of snow pour down in drifts
> on a winter's day, when all-devising Zeus begins
> to snow, showing to mankind these the shafts of his artillery,
> and hushing the winds to sleep, he heaps the snow steadily, so that it shrouds
> the heights of high mountains and peaks of cliffs,
> and blossoming lowlands and the rich worked-lands of men;
> and the snow drifts the bays and beaches of the gray salt sea,
> and the sea swell splashing it is stilled; and all else
> is cloaked from above, when the snows of Zeus weigh down;
> just so did the stones fly thick from both sides. (Homer *Iliad* 12.278 – 287)

Like Pindar, Homer deploys a cascade of images, but in his case each is like a brushstroke applied to the great panoramic scene. The cumulative result is a scene of great power, but evoked through plain, unconvoluted words and phrases.

Arnold, a master of disparagement, further illustrated Homer's plain and straightforward style by dissecting a translation that failed to honor these traits: namely, Alexander Pope's celebrated translation of the *Iliad*, published between 1715 and 1720, rendered in heroic rhymed couplet (and famously assessed by the classicist Richard Bentley as "a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer").[16] Declaring it "very far from my wish to hold Pope up to ridicule," Arnold nonetheless cited for condemnation a famous passage from book 8, in which the watch-fires of the Trojan enemy appear like stars on the dark plain:

> The conscious swains, rejoicing in the sight,
> Eye the blue vault, and bless the useful light.
> So many flames before proud Ilion blaze,
> And lighten glimmering Xanthus with their rays.

The long reflections of the distant fires
Gleam on the walls, and tremble on the spires.
A thousand piles the dusky horrors gild,
And shoot a shady lustre o'er the field.
Full fifty guards each flaming pile attend,
Whose umber'd arms, by fits, thick flashes send:
Loud neigh the coursers o'er their heaps of corn,
And ardent warriors wait the rising morn.[17]
(8.697 – 708)

Pope, as Arnold puts it, composes with his eye on his style; Homer composes with his eye on the object before him. The objects of Homer's attention, then, whether "moral or material," in Arnold's words, are truly drawn; they are authentic, and their effectiveness derives from the fact that one believes them. Here is the same passage from book 8, ungilded and rendered with what I hope Arnold would deem its Homeric simplicity:

and all the stars are seen, and the shepherd's heart rejoices,
so between the ships and streams of Xanthos
in such multitude shone the watchfires of the Trojans' burning, before Ilion.
A thousand fires were burning on the plain, and by each one
sat fifty men in the glow of fire's gleaming,
and the horses munched their white barley and their grain
standing beside their chariots as they awaited Dawn on her fair throne. (8.555 – 565)

Because Homer is so straightforward in thought, in syntax, and in language, his Greek, relative to that of other authors', is not difficult to read. This is despite the fact that his language is, in fact, highly artificial, the result of a long oral tradition that acrued its diction and syntactical forms from different eras and dialects. No people spoke "Homeric Greek"; Homer's Greek is a poetic invention.

This raises one of the most difficult questions for a translator: should a translation reflect this artifice? When Arnold wrote his essay, Francis Newman, a scholar and linguist, had recently published a translation that consciously strove to evoke this artificiality. Given that "the entire dialect of Homer [is] essentially archaic," Newman wrote, "that of a translator ought to be as much Saxo-Norman as possible." Consequently, his translation was prefaced by a glossary of unfamiliar English terms like *beeve*, *beknow*, *gramesome*, and *sithence*.[18]

Is the translator's duty to Homer's audience, or to his own? The truth is we have no idea of how Homer's audience understood the poems, or even who his audience might have been. And regardless of who made up the audience, how much did the language of his poem, as opposed to its compelling cast of characters and story, matter to them?

The *Iliad* is highly respectful of the past. The epic describes a number of the tools of war – a silver-studded sword, a body-length shield, a boar-tusk helmet – that archaeology has shown belonged to the Mycenaean Bronze Age, a period predating the composition of the poem by at least five centuries. Presumably Homer's audience relished these descriptions of long-ago heirloom objects. Did they similarly relish the pseudo–Bronze Age language? It seems reasonable to believe that they did; but it is unclear where that leaves the modern English translator. Would a twenty-first-century *Iliad* really be better, be truer to Homer, if it were written in Elizabethan English? History gives us an example by which to judge: George Chapman's landmark translation, published between 1603 and 1616, the first ever in English (and the inspiration for Keats's sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*). Chapman's rendering of the watch-fire scene of book 8 is as follows:

And all the signes in heaven are seene that glad the shepheard's hart;

So many fires disclosede their beames,
made by the Troyan part,
Before the face of Ilion and her bright
turrets show'd.
A thousand courts of guard kept fires, and
every guard allow'd
Fiftie stout men, by whom their horse eate
oates and hard white corne,
And all did wishfully expect the silver-
throned morne.[19]

My regard for Chapman translation is very high, but I would not recommend it to a modern general reader as the best means of "hearing" Homer. The distinctive Elizabethan style and language is, in fact, far less suited to Homer's plainspoken directness than is modern English. As Arnold noted: "between Chapman and Homer there is interposed the mist of fancifulness of the Elizabethan age."[20] Translations, it turns out, can become dated. A humbling thought: translations are for their own time, and only Homer is forever.

NOBLE: The fact that such "perfect plainness and directness" can yield an epic poem of great nobility is one of the wonders of Homer's craft, and is, according to Arnold, "what makes translators despair."[21] And on this point, and indeed on the quality of nobility in general, I respectfully part company with Arnold.

By *nobility*, Arnold explains, he means that Homer "works as entirely in the grand style, he is as grandiose, as Phidias, or Dante, or Michael Angelo."[22] Arnold's choice of artists for comparison strikes me as very odd. All, possibly, could be called noble, but only Michelangelo – and only in some works – could be called Homeric. Odder still is the attribute *grandiose*, if we take the word to mean, as the OED states, "very large or ambitious, especially in a way which is intended to impress." Grandiose is the opposite of unselfconsciousness, a quality that greatly contributes to Homer's plain and direct style. More apt counterparts, I believe, are those given in a throwaway line in one of Isak Dineson's letters, in which she includes Homer with such phenomena as "the sea, the mountains and elephants."[23] Homer, like mountains and elephants, is undoubtedly grand, but never grandiose.

What Arnold means by nobility seems to be a fusion of two aspects of the word as defined, again, by the OED: the possession of "high moral principles," as well as being "impressive" and "magnificent."[24] All of this the *Iliad* certainly is. Yet these "noble" attributes entirely skirt the essence of the *Iliad*. The *Iliad*'s greatness does not rest upon such lightweight features as good taste, or lordly high-mindedness, or the fact, as Arnold cites, that "prosaic subjects" such as dressing, feasting, and equipping chariots are rendered in an elevated manner. The *Iliad* is great not because it is noble, but because it is epic, meaning "grand or heroic in scale," like the sea, elephants, and mountains. This sense of epic, of something momentous and profound, burns through Homer's rapid, plain, and direct style. Almost any random scene will prove this, as when Achilles, denouncing Agamemnon, withdraws from the war:

But I say openly to you, and I swear a great
oath to it –
yes, by this scepter, that never again will put
forth leaves and shoots
when once it has left behind its stump in
the mountains,
nor will it flourish again, since the bronze
axe has stripped it round,
leaf and bark; and now in turn the sons of
the Achaeans
busy with justice carry it around in their
hands, they who
safeguard the ordinances of Zeus – this
will be my great oath:
some day a yearning for Achilles will come
upon the sons of the Achaeans,
every man; then nothing will save you,
for all your grief,

> when at the hands of man-slaying Hector
> dying men fall in their multitude; and you
> will rip the heart within you,
> raging that you paid no honour to the best
> of the Achaeans. (1.233 – 244)

Or when Zeus gives his pledge to Achilles's mother Thetis that he will ensure the honor of her son:

> "Come, I will bow my head for you, so that
> you may be convinced;
> for among immortals this is the greatest
> testament of my determination; for not revocable, nor false,
> nor unfulfilled is anything to which I have
> bowed my head."
> The son of Cronus spoke, and nodded
> with his blue-black brows,
> the ambrosial mane of the lord god swept
> forward
> from his immortal head; and he shook
> great Olympus. (1.523 – 529)

The epic tone burns through scenes of quiet tenderness, as when Hector takes his leave, for the last time, from his wife Andromache and young son:

> So speaking shining Hector reached out for
> his son;
> but the child turned away, back to the
> breast of his fine-belted nurse,
> crying, frightened at the sight of his own
> father,
> struck with terror seeing the bronze
> helmet and crest of horsehair,
> nodding dreadfully, as he thought, from
> the topmost of the helmet.
> They burst out laughing, his dear father
> and lady mother.
> At once shining Hector lifted the helmet
> from his head,
> and placed it, gleaming, on the earth;
> then he rocked his beloved son in his arms
> and kissed him,
> and prayed aloud to Zeus and to the other
> gods. (6.466 – 475)

Tone is everything. One can dissect the disparate elements of Homer's craft, but his genius lies in the unfolding of his story in the white-hot tone of the inspired speaker, forging simple language into scenes of momentous import so that, like the cries of men on the field of battle, his story seems to reach to the brazen sky. This, the epic voice of Homer, is what transformed an oft-told tale of a distant war into the sublime and devastating evocation of War, and all its mortal tragedy.

ENDNOTES

[1] Matthew Arnold, *On Translating Homer: Three Lectures Given at Oxford* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 1.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

[4] Matthew Arnold, *Balder Dead*, opening lines.

[5] Arnold, *On Translating Homer*, Lecture II, 31

[6] Ibid., Lecture I, 9f.

[7] On the Vedic cognates, see Gregory Nagy, *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 229 – 261. For a succinct overview of the different theories about the origin of the hexameter, see Richard Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary – Volume IV: Books 13 – 16* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.

[8] Henry W. Longfellow, *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (Boston: William Ticknor, 1847), verses 630 – 633.

[9] Arnold, *On Translating Homer*, Lecture III, 77f. For comparison, my rendering of the verses follows:

> I see them all now, the rest of the dark-eyed Achaeans,
> those I know well and could name –
> but I cannot see the two marshals of the people,
> Castor, breaker of horses, and the skilful boxer Polydeukes.

[10] Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[11] Robert Fagles, trans., *Homer: The Iliad* (New York: Viking, 1990), xi.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Unless otherwise noted, this and subsequent translations from Caroline Alexander, trans., *The Iliad: A New Translation by Caroline Alexander* (New York: Ecco Press, 2015).

[14] John Simpson and Edmund Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

[15] Anthony Verity, trans., *Pindar: The Complete Odes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

[16] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland: And a Criticism on Their Works* (Dublin: Pat. Wogan, Old-Bridge, 1804), 568.

[17] Alexander Pope, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (London; New York: Cassell and Company, 1909), 167.

[18] F. W. Newman, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (London: Walton and Maberly, 1856), vi; glossary terms at xxiff.

[19] George Chapman, trans., *The Iliad* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press: 1998), 180.

[20] Arnold, *On Translating Homer*, Lecture I, 11.

[21] Ibid., 29.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Isak Dinesen, *Letters from Africa, 1914 – 1931*, trans. Anne Born, ed. Frans Lasson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[24] Simpson and Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*.