

Read the article and then answer the questions at the end on a separate piece of paper.

Heroic Enterprise

December 22, 1996, By Richard Jenkyns (from the New York Times)

a review of THE ODYSSEY by Homer. Translated by Robert Fagles. Introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. 541 pp. New York: Viking.

Translators are the most generous of people, especially translators of poetry: they act as go-betweens, bringing us to an acquaintance with literatures other than our own, knowing all the while that there is so much in the best verse that can never be carried across from one language to another. In some respects, though, Homer is easier to translate than many great poets: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* depend much less on nuances of diction and the complex overtones of words than (say) Virgil or Aeschylus, and each is carried forward by a strong plot and a forceful narrative drive. Amazingly, E. V. Rieu's prose version of the *Odyssey*, first published in 1946, was Penguin Books' best-selling paperback until they knocked it from first place by publishing another literary classic, "Lady Chatterley's Lover." Rieu seems dated today, sometimes bureaucratic ("Amphinomus carried the day and the meeting adjourned"), often too polite (for "Cease these outrages" he has "I do ask you to refrain from these outrages") and generally rather pedestrian, but his success showed that Homer can command a large modern audience.

A new version of Rieu, revised and much improved by his son, was published in 1991; either this or the rival prose translation by Walter Shewring in Oxford's World's Classics series is a good one for the reader who is looking for the closest rendering of Homer's words, though neither is as close as Martin Hammond's Penguin translation of the *Iliad*, which like the Authorized Version of the Bible manages to sound like real language while remaining extraordinarily near to the original words.

But every prose translation must necessarily misrepresent Homer for the simple reason that Homer is a poet, and every generation needs verse translators to convey Homer's spirit to a new audience in a way that even the finest prose can never do. Matthew Arnold's classic essay "On Translating Homer" singled out those qualities that any English version should strive to represent: Homer, he said, is eminently rapid, eminently plain and direct, both in expression and ideas, and eminently noble. It is very hard to find a way of reproducing all these characteristics in English. The rapidity is partly a matter of sound: Greek, especially Homeric Greek, has a very large number of short syllables, and the verse movement in these epics is faster and more flowing than in those of Virgil, Dante or Milton. But Homer also moves rapidly because, coming out of a tradition of oral, nonliterate poetry, he composes in larger blocks or units than literate poets. Characters and objects are supplied with what modern scholarship, not very happily, has called "formulaic" adjectives: recurrently ships are "swift" and the sea "wine-dark"; Odysseus' son, Telemachus, is *pepnumenos*, "shrewd" or "sensible," while Odysseus himself is *polutmetis*, "wily," or *polutropos*, literally "much-turning" or "much-turned," a word that seems to refer both to his wanderings and to his resourcefulness. Whole lines are formulaic and often repeated; for example, "As soon as early rosy-fingered dawn appeared." Whereas Virgil's density encourages readers to linger over every word, Homer's familiar formulas impel them quickly forward. One of the translator's challenges is how to deal with the formula style.

The success of Robert Fagles's new translation can be seen from his opening lines:

*Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
the hallowed heights of Troy.*

*Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.*

How good that is. As he explains in a postscript, Mr. Fagles mostly uses a line of five- or six-beat stress, leaning more toward six beats; occasionally he expands to seven beats or contracts to three (as in the third line above). These sudden contractions are unlike Homer, but they work. Homer's meter, the dactylic hexameter, can have as many as 17 syllables in a line, and seldom has fewer than 15; unlike the standard English meters, Mr. Fagles's lines are long enough to give an idea of Homer's reach, and he has found rhythms that correspond well to Homer's rapidity. "Man of twists and turns" preserves the multiple suggestiveness of *polutropos*, and it manages to sound like a special phrase, not quite part of ordinary language, without being self-conscious or eccentric. The same may be said of the inversion of word order in "Many cities of men he saw": it reminds us that we are reading a heroic poem, composed in a heightened language, but it feels natural and unforced. The verse idiom of the 20th century does not allow poets to create a grand style, but Mr. Fagles has been remarkably successful in finding a style that is of our time and yet timeless, dignified and yet animated by the vigor and energy essential to any good rendering of this poem.

It is interesting to compare the much-admired 1965 translation by Richmond Lattimore:

*Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven
far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.
Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of,
many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea,
struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions.*

Lattimore is mostly closer to the Greek than Mr. Fagles, but Mr. Fagles has not distorted the text in any way that matters; though his manner is more "poetic," he is (to return to Arnold's terms) essentially as plain and direct as Lattimore, and distinctly more noble, so that Lattimore seems a little flat in the comparison. It is perhaps significant that Lattimore begins "Tell," while Mr. Fagles begins "Sing"; here, in fact, it is Mr. Fagles who is the more literal.

We can indeed see Mr. Fagles, *polutropos* and *polumetis* himself, searching for English equivalences to Homer's effects. The "Iliad" begins, "Sing to me, Muse, of the wrath of Achilles son of Peleus"; Greek allows the poet to put the single word "wrath" first. Other translators have supposed this effect to be ruled out by English word order and the existence of the definite article, but not Mr. Fagles: "Rage -- Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles" is the opening of his 1990 translation. How will he manage with the start of the *Odyssey*, where the single word "man" is similarly the first word? He cannot do as he did with the "Iliad"; still, his use of the epanalepsis, or rhetorical repetition, "the man . . . the man," indicates by repetition what the Greek indicates by word order.

His way with Homer's formulas is flexible. "When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more" is allowed to recur, sometimes with minor variants. He is freest with the lines introducing speeches, and here one may sometimes question his judgment. For example, when Odysseus replies to the princess Nausicaa's farewell, his words are introduced by a wholly formulaic line: "Answering her, cunning Odysseus said. . . ." Mr. Fagles writes, "Odysseus rose to the moment deftly, gently." That is graceful, indeed touching, and yet it strikes the wrong note, not because it is a free rendering but because it comments and interprets, making an assessment of Odysseus' diplomacy and moral quality. An essential trait of Homer is his transparency, his

objectivity: he does not tell us what to think, and a translation is false to his spirit if it represents him as interposing an authorial judgment.

Still, it would be wrong to cavil much. Let us hear Nausicaa's own words:

*Farewell, my friend! And when you are at home,
home in your own land, remember me at times.
Mainly to me you owe the gift of life.*

That preserves the clear simplicity, luminous and unsentimental, that makes the scene so poignant. But Mr. Fagles can be tough as well as gentle: such scenes as Odysseus' shipwreck and his slaughter of the suitors crackle with fire and excitement. This book is a memorable achievement, and the long and excellent introduction by Bernard Knox is a further bonus, scholarly but also relaxed and compellingly readable. Mr. Fagles's translation of the *Iliad* was greeted by a chorus of praise when it appeared; his *Odyssey* is a worthy successor.

Answer the questions on a separate piece of paper.

- a. How does Robert Fagles translate the word "polutropos" different than his successors?
- b. What makes the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* easier to translate than most other poetry?
- c. Why might some prefer Hammond's or Shewing's translations?
- d. Conversely, why might we prefer Fagles' translation?
- e. Matthew Arnold says that Homer's verse must be "rapid," "plain and direct, both in expression and ideas," and "noble." Why is that hard to accomplish in modern English?
- f. How in the few lines that Jenkyns supplies can we see how Fagles achieves this in his translating?
- g. What allows Fagles to begin the *Iliad* with "Rage"?