

TRANSLATION AND ITS PROBLEMS

THE theory of translation is still so undeveloped that any serious study of it is bound to deserve attention. This would be so if the writer touched no more than a few familiar languages; when his experience ranges from East to West and from ancient to modern centuries, the interest is correspondingly greater. Mr. Bates's new book¹ is therefore particularly welcome, though in the matter of principles he is less explicit than one could wish, his method through the greater part of the book being to present different modern versions of the same passage (sometimes two, sometimes as many as five) and to leave the reader to draw conclusions. What follows is partly a commentary on Mr. Bates's positive statements, partly a record of personal conclusions from the material provided. His own endeavour is 'to provoke thought without unduly provoking the reader'; mine is the same.

In his opening pages Mr. Bates stresses the value of translation as a means to international understanding; few would dispute this, but few again have ever visualised the matter practically. Hence there is aptness in the detailed account of translation in modern Italy, an account which in its knowledge and sympathy is itself an excellent preamble to the renewal of a broken friendship. It is good to find justice done to the intellectual qualities of the Italians and recognition paid to the high standards of scholarship which distinguish much 'popularisation' of Greek and Latin classics. We are given, moreover, an interesting cross-section of Italian opinion (official and unofficial) on the political and cultural significance of translation—a question of particular importance in Italy since so much is translated into Italian and so little out of it. Political propaganda apart, one would welcome signs of a similar concern in this country. When one considers the English books which in fact get translated, one cannot but be dissatisfied—not so much with the plethora of ephemeral or tendentious work as with the dearth of sober, quiet and normal literature. If we would have ourselves understood abroad, we should somehow encourage good translations of books which without self-praise or apology reflect permanent qualities in English life and thought—books not written with an eye to the foreigner and therefore more revealing. Rather at random, I would in-

¹ *Intertraffic: Studies in Translation*. By E. S. Bates. (Cape; 8s. 6d.).

stance some of our best children's books, records of country life, and the Cambridge series to which belong *Purbeck Shop* and *The Wheelwright's Shop*—things which in the ordinary way would never be translated, and if translated might not be widely read, but which would give their small public more sympathy with England than many elaborate defences of our policy. Further afield, there is the whole question of the East and the impressions given it of European thought. Few things could be more pathetic than a list I once saw of nineteenth-century works which had been translated into Chinese, with John Stuart Mill leading the enlightenment. Well, we have something better than that to offer China, but in this case as in the other it is unlikely that the work would be done well without some planning (if the word may still pass) and without a subsidy from some group or society seriously concerned with international relations.

Translation from modern languages has its own problems and responsibilities; when we turn to ancient or 'classical' literatures another group of questions arises. Mr. Bates is chiefly concerned with Chinese, Japanese and Greek; then again with the Bible, which calls for separate treatment. In the case of the first three we have to deal with literatures and cultures which are all more or less unfamiliar to the great number of modern Europeans, and we have to consider, first, what are the most valuable and representative works in these languages; secondly, which among these can be adequately translated. For it may well prove that certain important works are incapable of adequate translation, whether in themselves or relatively to our own time; some poetry may elude translation entirely, some may have ceased to be translatable, and there are some prose writings so difficult in content and wording that their interpretation will always, perhaps, be disputed. A brief view of the three literatures in question reveals characteristic differences. The typical verse-forms of Japan are supremely fragile and elusive; on the other hand, its central classic is a long novel—possibly the best in the world—which brings the reader nearer the heart of its civilisation than perhaps any single work in any language; this, the *Tale of Genji* (about 1000 A.D.), is of an eminently translatable *genre* and has in fact been admirably translated by Arthur Waley. In Chinese the typical classical poems, though remote enough from European structure,² provide better foothold for the translator than do the Japanese, but the Confucian classics which lie at the root of Chinese culture abound

² See Mr. Bates, pp. 53-55, for a fascinating display in three columns of the structure of a Chinese poem.

in passages where all our translators grope. The Greek classics—philosophy, history, poetry—are nearer to ourselves and contain few things which could not once have been translated into English, but the opportunities have been missed. The best prose may yet be well rendered; the time for adequate rendering of the verse has probably passed.

The last sentence requires amplification. Obviously verse may be rendered either in verse or in prose, and I suggest in the first place that little can be expected now of verse translation from the major works of Greek poetry, at least from epic and tragedy. The time for such things was when epic and verse drama were still natural forms in English, though, even then, it may be doubted if anyone except Milton united the necessary power with sufficient knowledge and discipline. As things are, it should be recognised that such forms are extinct in modern English; and the lyric powers we retain are of little help in representing ambitious and elaborate forms with which neither poet nor public has any connaturality. Greek lyric verse is another matter. Formidable though Pindar is, he might yet be translated by some Hopkins of the future, and there is nothing utterly to prevent, though there is much to impede, translation in English verse of Sappho or Ibycus.

Mr. Bates, I think, would not agree with these judgments, for he has a surprising tolerance of bad verse when the translator attracts him in other ways. True, he does not accept Gilbert Murray, but he not only accepts, he most warmly praises Cotterill's *Odyssey*, whence he deliberately displays the following:

There is a child of the goodman . . . I serve him as nurse in
the palace—

Such a precocious chit . . . on my walks comes trotting beside
me.

Him I shall manage to wheedle abroad; and a profit enormous
Sure will he bring, wherever to foreign folk we export him.

Well, if you can bear 'a profit enormous,' I suppose you can also bear the metre and the jumble of styles. But I should like to believe that such sufferance is abnormal.

There remains translation from verse into prose, and here it is important that the translator should be neither too diffident nor too confident of the possibilities before him. For a long time, which includes the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, it was commonly assumed that all rendering of verse must be in verse. The best poets were too busy, too proud, or too unlearned, and verse translation fell into minor hands, while men who could write English prose in

the grand style did not, in their humility, attempt translations of Homer or the tragedians; a very great loss. Even in recent times, writers have wasted linguistic gifts by translating into unreadable verse without asking themselves what might have been done in prose. There is no excuse for such error now. Waley's versions from the Chinese are an obvious model for imitation; Lane's from the Arabic are an earlier essay in a similar manner, and sometimes are very good indeed:

There is no writer that shall not perish;
 but what his hand hath written endureth ever.
 Write, therefore, nothing but what will please thee
 when thou shalt see it on the day of resurrection.

That is undoubtedly worth having, and Mathers' pretentious verse is vulgar by comparison.

But not every kind of verse so readily yields results in prose. Lane's original Arabic, like much other Eastern verse (Hebrew and Chinese, for instance), had the form of more or less antithetic couplets which make their own units in translation. The same method would rarely be successful with Greek or Latin couplets, where the lines often run on and real antithesis does not regularly occur. Here, and still more with lyric verse, line for line translation must usually be abandoned for continuous prose, but then it is hard to keep some pattern and escape an accidental air. A dismal proof of this may be found in the two versions quoted by Mr. Bates of a satirical passage from Anacreon; in either case the prose falls so meaninglessly about that the common reader cannot be expected to guess why such a poem should have been written at all. Rhyme is clearly demanded here—not for sensuous charm, but to keep the thing in shape.

This particular difficulty is less serious in longer poems whose internal development tends to set up its own rhythm. A poem of epic length, in fairly plain diction and with continuous narrative or continuous argument, may preserve a surprising part of its character in a good prose translation; so with René Hague's *Roland*, Barnett's *Gitā*, Carlyle's or Sinclair's *Dante*. But it is difficult so to render a static poem where thought is poised rather than moving; prose can brush only the surface of the *Aeneid*, which is narrative in appearance but meditative in essence. Again, even when the narrative is direct in itself, an elaborate convention of poetic diction may thwart the prose translator, who has either to prune his version to accord with modern expectations or else to load its movement with ornaments which are bound now to look ill at ease, though an earlier English style might have carried them well enough. Lawrence

raised this problem when introducing his *Odyssey*, and his reference to Homer's 'Wardour Street Greek,' though ill received in some quarters, is certainly not without foundation. The problem is more pressing still in the case of Greek tragedy, which, however direct in plot and characters, is often so indirect in language—and in ways so particularly against the bent of our times—that a completely faithful translation of it can be embarked on only by those who confuse the possible and the impossible. Those less confident might perhaps attempt a deliberately simplified paraphrase—avowedly so, with no deceit to the reader—and weigh the presentability of the result. Cocteau, I think, made some such experiments with Sophocles, but I read them too long ago to remember how good they may have been.

With many questions still unconsidered, I pass to the section on the Bible, which abounds in sallies at the uncritical orthodox. There is time to make a few points only; first, on the matter of historical change in the meaning of important words—a thing stressed by Mr. Bates in application to the Old Testament. The fact of such change is common ground to all students of language, and doubtless has application in the Bible as elsewhere. But I find that those most concerned with this principle often apply it wrongly through failure to distinguish the equivocal and the analogical. When an eighteenth-century writer gives the name 'economist' to a bargain-hunter, we quite rightly say, 'This has nothing to do with economics.' But when the same writer calls a watchmaker an 'artist,' we have no right to say, 'This has nothing to do with art.' That is a tendentious interpretation, just as it is a tendentious interpretation of Plato to translate his 'justice' in certain contexts by something like 'principle of compensation.' This also has bearings on the Old Testament.

Then there is this attack on the credibility of the Gospel narrative. 'Even with Jesus Christ, we have only four words reputed to be his handed down to us, and those are a quotation from the older Scriptures³; the remainder of his sayings are those translated into another language from the recollection of hearsay evidence dating back forty years previously at least. Should we regard as evidence for vital purposes now what we were told had been said in another language in 1900?' Why not? A and X, who are both bilingual, had important conversations in French in 1900; these conversations, which changed the course of A's life, are recorded by

³ Mat. 27: 46, Mk. 15: 34. The uncritical orthodox will have no difficulty in adding Mk. 5: 41 and 7: 34.

him in English now. *A*'s integrity is transparent. His English is somewhat Gallicised; he writes "at present" for an emphatic "now," which gives us "*à présent*" as the original French. Moreover, there is not only *A*, there are *B* and *C* and *D* to corroborate. Moreover, *A*, *B*, *C* and *D* have been brought up to memorise sayings in the manner still practised among primitive peoples though rare among book-ridden Europeans. And so forth . . . Sceptical historians have staked their reputations on far less evidence.

Then again: 'No real advance can be made as long as people believe that the writers [of the Bible] had access to sources of information about human life denied to others.' This is nobly democratic, but the nature of things is not democratic and has decreed, for instance, that Mr. Bates should have access to many sources of information about human life which are denied to the average Eskimo. But that, doubtless, is not what Mr. Bates had in mind; he meant only to deny that any revelation has ever taken place. But this is by no means so simple a matter as it may appear to a sceptical man of letters; it is certainly not settled by a repetition of stock difficulties about the Old Testament. The holder of such a view must provide solid philosophical proof, either that God does not exist, or that, if he does, the giving of a revelation is incompatible with his nature. But, alas! Mr. Bates regards philosophy and metaphysics as picturesque nonsense which may sometimes make an accidental appeal to the literary man (pp. 29, 51, 137). Very well; but in that case he should admit the discussion of truth or untruth to lie outside his scope.

In general, his attitude to the Bible, like that of so many moderns, is one of inverted Little-Bethelism; here as elsewhere, the revolutionary is the bourgeois' grandson. I will make one final point (pre-scinding as hitherto from Christian theology as such). It is possible to treat any great tradition, religious or philosophical, as so much Mumbo-Jumbo from which nevertheless certain 'human values' may be extracted and savoured by the connoisseur. It is a common proceeding with Orientalists whose linguistic and anthropological appetites are uncontrolled by a serious discipline of thought; but it is essentially an uncritical proceeding. To borrow favourite terms of dispraise from Mr. Bates himself, it is an academic method divorced from life. For men have lived by these great traditions, and to ignore their experience is to unfit oneself for interpretation. The truest knowledge is knowledge from the inside.

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