

LITERARY TRANSLATION

THOUGHTS ACROSS TWO THOUSAND YEARS

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Introduction

Index of Writers

Thoughts across Two Thousand Years
46 BCE to 2012

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INTRODUCTION

When this site was established ten years ago, one of its aims was to engage in the actual, practical business of translating. As the Site Rationale then explicitly stated:

it is the practice of translation, rather than its theory, that is emphasised here. Theories of translation have been much explored and widely promulgated in recent years. But at the centre of this site lies a fascination with the actual practical business of translating this word, or line, or rhythmic pulse, or syntactic order, into a vibrant and persuasive English.

That emphasis has informed the many thousands of lines of poetry, drama, and prose fiction, that have appeared here in the last decade. To date, nearly thirty major texts or bodies of work in world literature have been rendered into what I hope has truly been ‘a vibrant and persuasive English’. Yet, on the tenth anniversary of the site, now has seemed an opportune moment to present some of the more theoretical and historical dimensions of literary translation, and in a way that is not highly specialised or obscurantist, but clear and accessible to the general reader. Hence the following sequence of thoughts about literary translation that span nearly two thousand years, from 46 BCE to 2012. The sequence begins with Cicero, and concludes with a marvellous compilation last year of a Shakespearean sonnet in fourteen different languages.

What immediately emerges from the sequence is not only the continuities of the concerns over two millennia, but also their changes and variety. The ancient tensions between word-for-word fidelity and stylistic beauty, for instance, or between the claims of the original language and the new language into which the text is being translated, are heard in almost every century, though the responses are not always the same. Similarly, the question of a translator’s mastery of his or her source language as well as the target language is often raised, though with different answers being given. Then again, the fragility (even futility) of translation is counterpointed by a view of it as central to, and sustaining of, the human condition. In these, and many other ways, writers for two thousand years

INTRODUCTION

have engaged in what T.S. Eliot famously described as the ‘intolerable wrestle with words’.

In making the selection, which could of course have been many times larger, I have tried to choose relatively short extracts that seemed to focus a particular writer’s argument. Many of the passages are in prose, though as can be seen, translation has also been the subject of poetry, too. The tone of voice that can be heard ranges from lofty speculative detachment to irony and playfulness, and from complete uncertainty to dogmatic assurance. The selection is arranged chronologically, and can be read as a historical sequence. Equally, it can be dipped into if a particular period or writer is of interest. Inevitably, much of the material presented here derives from the last two centuries, though it should be pointed out that roughly a third of it was written before 1800. The realisation is a salutary reminder that, although Translation Studies may seem a relatively new discipline in schools and universities, it has in fact a rich and generous history, which stretches back far into ancient times and cultures.

Tim Chilcott
July 2013

INDEX OF WRITERS

As noted in the Introduction, the sequence of thoughts has been arranged chronologically, from 46 BCE to 2012. The alphabetical list below identifies the nearly one hundred contributors to that sequence, with dates attached. If a particular writer’s views are of interest, simply scroll down the list to the relevant year.

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Bursk, Christopher	2006
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Chamberlain, Lori	1988
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Davie, Donald	1975
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DuPlessis, Rachel Blau	2001
Fanshawe, Sir Richard	1647
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<i>Quarterly Review</i>	1820, 1823
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Radice, Betty	1974
Rafael, Vincent L.	2009
Reid, Alastair	1981
Rider, Henry	1638
Robinson, Douglas	2000
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Roscommon, Earl of	1684
Rossetti, Dante Gabriel	1861
Schegel, A.W.	1798
Schleiermacher, Friedrich	1813
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Shapiro, Norman	<i>before</i> 1995
Shelley, Percy Bysshe	1821
Statman, Mark	2010
Steiner, George	1966, 1973
Tomlinson, Charles	1980
Townshend, Aurelian	<i>fl.</i> 1601-43
Trask, Willard	1986
Trevisa, Sir John	1387?
Tytler, Alexander Fraser	1790
Valéry, Paul	1953
Venuti, Lawrence	1995, 2010
Wechsler, Robert	1998

LITERARY TRANSLATION

THOUGHTS ACROSS TWO THOUSAND YEARS

46 BCE

...nec converti ut interpres, sed ut orator, sententiis isdem et earum formis tamquam figuris, verbis ad nostrum consuetudinem aptis. In quibus non verbum pro verbo necesse habui reddere, sed genus omne verborum vimque servavi. Non enim ea me adnumerare lectori putavi oportere, sed tamquam appendere.

[...I haven't translated as an interpreter, but as a speaker, keeping the same ideas and forms or (as you might say) 'shapes' of thought, but in a language that conforms to the way we use it. I didn't think it necessary to produce a word-for-word translation, but one that reflected the general stylistic features and the force of the original. I didn't think I needed to count them out to readers like coins, but to pay them by weight, as it were.]

(Cicero, *De optimo genere oratorum*,
trans. Tim Chilcott)

circa 18 BCE

*...non circa vilem patulumque moraberis orbem,
nec verbo verbum curabis reddere fidus
interpres nec desilies imitator in artum,
unde pedem proferre pudor vetet aut operis lex.*

[Don't keep on circling round the well-worn paths,
And don't translate pedantically, word for word.
Don't follow an idea, and jump down like the goat into the well,
From which modesty, or the structure of the work, prevents escape.]

(Horace, *Ars Poetica*, trans. Tim Chilcott)

95

vertere Graeca in Latinum veteres nostri oratores optimum iudicabant. id se L. Crassus in illis Ciceronis de Oratore libris dicit factitasse. id Cicero sua ipse persona frequentissime praecipit... sed et illa ex Latinis conversion multum et ipsa contulerit. ac de carminibus quidem neminem credo dubitare, quo solo genere exercitationis dicitur usus esse Sulpicius ... neque ego paraphrasim esse interpretationem tantum volo, sed circa eosdem sensus certamen atque aemulationem.

[Our earlier orators thought highly of translation from Greek into Latin. In the *de Oratore* of Cicero, Lucius Crassus says that he practised this continually, while Cicero himself advocates it again and again... But paraphrase from the Latin will also be of much assistance, while I think we shall all agree that this is specially valuable with regard to poetry; indeed, it is said that the paraphrase of poetry was the sole form of exercise employed by Sulpicius... But I would not have paraphrase restrict itself to the bare interpretation of the original: its duty is rather to rival and vie with the original in the expression of the same thoughts.]

(Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, X, v,
trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler)

395

Ego enim non solum fateor, sed libera voce profiteer me in interpretatione Graecorum absque scripturis sanctis ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est non verbum e verbo sed sensum exprimere de sensu.

[Indeed, I not only admit, but freely proclaim, that in translating from Greek, except from Sacred Scripture, where the very order of the words is a mystery, I have not translated word for word, but sense for sense.]

(St Jerome, letter to Pammachius, entitled
De optimo genere interpretandi)

428

In all the more learned churches, it is now said that this translation [of the Septuagint] was so inspired by the Holy Spirit that many spoke as if with the mouth of one... even though something is found in Hebrew versions

different from what they have set down, I think we should cede to the divine dispensation by which they worked.

(St Augustine, *De doctrina christinana*,
trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr.)

1304

E però sappia ciascuno che nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può de la sua loquela in altra transmutare senza rompere tutta sua dolcezza e armonia. E questa è la cagione per che Omero non si mutò di greco in latino come l'altre scritture che avemo da loro. E questa è la cagione per che li versi del Salterio sono senza dolcezza di musica e d'armonia; ché essi furono transmutati d'ebreo in reco e di Greco in latino, e ne la prima transmutazione tutta quella dolcezza venne meno.

[Everyone should know that nothing harmonised according to the rules of poetry can be translated from its native tongue into another without destroying all its sweetness and harmony. This is the reason why Homer has not been translated from Greek into Latin as have been other writings we have of theirs. And this is the reason why the verses of the Psalter lack the sweetness of music and harmony; for they were translated from Hebrew into Greek and from Greek into Latin, and in the first translation all their sweetness was lost.]

(Dante, *The Convivio*, Book 1, trans.
Richard Lansing)

1305

Siquidem pene totum humanum genus...cum celitus tanta confusione percussi sunt ut, qui omnes una eademque loquela deserviebant ad opus, ab opera multis diversificati loquelis desinerent et nunquam ad idem commeritum convenirent.

Solis etenim in uno convenientibus actu eadem loquela remansit: puta cunctis architectoribus una, cunctis saxa volventibus una, cunctis ea parantibus una; et sic de singulis operantibus accidit. Quot quot autem exercitii varietates tendebant ad opus, tot tot ydiomatibus tunc genus humanum disiungitur; et quanto excellentius exercebant, tanto rudius nunc barbariusque locuntur.

[Previously all the human race had spoken one and the same language while carrying out their tasks; but now they were forced to leave off their

labours, never to return to the same occupation, because they had been split up into groups speaking different languages. Only among those who were engaged in a particular activity did their language remain unchanged; so, for instance, there was one for all the architects, one for all the carriers of stones, one for all the stone-breakers, and so on for the different operations. As many as were the types of work involved in the enterprise (i.e. building the Tower of Babel), so many were the languages by which the human race was fragmented; and the more skill required for the type of work, the more rudimentary and barbaric the language they now spoke.]

(Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, trans. Steven Botterill)

c. 1385-90

...the best translating is out of Latin into English, to translate after the sentence, and not only after the words, so that the sentence be as open, either opener, in English as in Latin, and go not far from the letter; and if the letter may not be sued in the translating, let the sentence ever be whole and open, for the words owe to serve to the intent and sentence, and else the words be superfluous either false.

(John Purvey, attrib., 'On Translating the Bible')

1387?

...holy writ in Latin is both good and fair, and yet for to make a sermon of holy writ all in Latin to men that can English and no Latin, it were a lewd deed, for they be never the wiser for the Latin, but it be told them in English what it is to mean; and it may not be told in English what the Latin is to mean without translation out of Latin into English. Then it needeth to have an English translation, and for to keep it in mind that it be not forgotten, it is better that such a translation be made and written than said and not written.

.....

...I wot that it is your will for to make this translation clear and plain to be known and understood. In some place I shall set word for word, and active for active, and passive for passive, a-row right as it standeth, without changing of the order of words. But in some place I must change the order of words, and set active for passive, and again-ward. And in

some place I must set a reason for a word, and tell what it meaneth. But for all such changing, the meaning shall stand and not be changed.

(Sir John Trevisa, 'Dialogue between a Lord and a Clerk upon Translation'; 'Epistle... upon the Translation of Polychronicon into our English Tongue')

1391

This tretis... wol I shewe the under full light reules and naked words in Englissh, for Latyn ne canst thou yit but small, my litel sone. But natheles suffise to the these trewe conclusions in Englissh as wel as sufficith to these noble clerkes Grekes these same conclusions in Grek; and to Arabiens in Arabik, and to Jewes in Ebrew, and to the Latyn folk in Latyn; whiche Latyn folk had hem first out of othere diverse langages, and written hem in her owne tunge, that is to seyn, in Latyn. And God woot that in alle these langages and in many moo han these conclusions ben suffisantly lerned and taught, and yit by diverse rueles; right as diverse pathes leden diverse folk the righte way to Rome.

(Geoffrey Chaucer, *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*)

1513

Traist weill, tae follae a fixed sentence or maiter, is mair practick, difficil, and mair straiter.
... Wha is attached ontill a stake, we see,
may gae nae faurer, but wrele about that tree.
Richt sae am I tae Virgil's text y-bound;
I may nocht flee, less than a fate be found,
for tho I wad transcend and gae beside,
his wark remains, my shame I can nocht hide;
and thus I am constrained, as near I may,
tae haud his verse and gae nae ither way.

(Gavin Douglas, Prologue to the First Book of the *Eneados* [Virgil's *Aeneid*])

1567

And now I have him [Ovid] made so well acquainted with our toong,
As that he may in English verse as in his owne bee soong.

Wherein although the pleasant style, I cannot make account,
 Too match myne author, who in that all other dooth surmount:
 Yit (gentle Reader) I doo trust my travell in this cace
 May purchace favour in thy sight my dooings too embrace...
 (Arthur Golding, 'The Preface Too the
 Reader', trans. Ovid's *Metamorphosis*)

1598-1611

...less than fifteen weeks was the time in which all the last twelve books
 [of Homer] were entirely new translated. No conference had I with any
 one living in all the novelties I presume I have found. ...

...Always conceiving how pedantical and absurd an affectation it is in the
 interpretation of any author...to turn him word for word, when (according
 to Horace and other best lawgivers to translators) it is the part of every
 knowing and judicial interpreter, not to follow the number and order of
 words, but the material things themselves, and sentences to weigh
 diligently, and to clothe and adorn them with words, and such a style and
 form of oration, as are most apt for the language into which they are
 converted.

...The worth of a skilful and worthy translator, is to observe the
 sentences, figures, and forms of speech proposed in his author; his true
 sense and height, and to adorn them with figures and forms of oration
 fitted to the original, in the same tongue to which they are translated.
 (George Chapman, 'The Preface to the
 Reader', and 'To the Reader', *Homer's
 Iliads*)

fl. 1601-43

Verball Translators sticke to the bare Text,
 Sometimes so close, the Reader is perplex,
 Finding the words, to finde the wit that sprung
 From the first writer in his native tongue.
 (Aurelian Townshend, 'To the Right
 Honorable, The Lord Cary')

1603

...to this defective edition (since all translations are reputed femalls,
 delivered at second hand...), I [was] yet at least a fondling foster-father,
 having transported it from *France to England*, put it in English clothes,
 [and] taught it to talke our tongue...

(John Florio, Preface to Montaigne's
 Essays)

1605-15

Translating from one language to another, unless it is from Greek and
 Latin, the queens of all languages, is like looking at Flemish tapestries
 from the wrong side, for although the figures are visible, they are covered
 by threads that obscure them, and cannot be seen with the smoothness
 and colour of the right side.

(Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don
 Quixote*)

1611

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh
 the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtaine, that
 we may looke into the most Holy place; that remooveth the cover of the
 well, that wee may come by the water... Indeede without translation into
 the vulgar tongue, the unlearned are but like children at Jacobs well
 (which was deepe) without a bucket or some thing to draw with...

.....

Neither did wee thinke much to consult the Translators or Commentators,
 Chaldee, Hebrew, Syrian, Greeke, or Latine, no nor the Spanish, French,
 Italian, or Dutch; neither did we disdaine to revise that which we had
 done, and to bring backe to the anvil that which we had hammered ...
 wee have not tyed our selves to an uniformitie of phrasing, or to an
 identitie of words ... that we should expresse the same notion in the same
 particular word; as for example, if we translate the Hebrew or Greeke
 word once by Purpose, never to call it Intent; if one where Journeying,
 never Travelling; if one where Thinke, never Suppose; if one where
 Paine, never Ache; if one where Joy, never Galdnesse, &c. Thus to minse
 the matter, wee thought to savour more of curiositie then wisdom...
 ('The Translators to the Reader',
 introduction to the King James Bible)

1611

- 1 And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
- 2 And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
- 3 And they said to one another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.
- 4 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
- 5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
- 6 And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
- 7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
- 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
- 9 Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

(Genesis, xii)

1628

Some Readers I make no doubt they wil meet with in these dainty mouth'd times, that will taxe them, for not comming resolved word for word, and line for line with the Author [...] I used the freedome of a Translator, not tying myself to the tyranny of a Grammatical construction, but breaking the shell into many peeces, was only carefull to preserve the Kernell safe and whole, from the violence of a wrong, or wrested Interpretation.

(W.L[atham], *Virgil's Eclogues*
Translated into English)

1638

Translations of Authors from one language to another, are like old garments turn'd into new fashions; in which though the stuffe be still the

same, yet the die and trimming are altered, and in the making, here something added, here something cut away.

(Henry Rider, *All the Odes and Epodes of Horace. Translated into English Verse*)

1640

...the diversity that one finds amongst languages is so great, in the construction and shape of periods as well as in figures and other ornaments, that at every turn one must adopt a different air and visage, unless one wishes to create a monstrous body, such as those of ordinary translations, which are either dead and listless or confused and muddled, without any order or charm. Hence one must take heed that an Author's grace not be lost through too much scrupulousness, and that the fear of being unfaithful to him in some one thing not result in infidelity to the whole. ... It is difficult, moreover, to be very exact when translating an Author who is not himself exact. One is often forced to add something to his thought in order to clarify it; at times it is necessary to retrench one part in order to give birth to all the rest. This means, however, that the best translations seem to be the least faithful.

.....

...I do not always cleave to the words or thoughts of [an] Author; whilst keeping in sight his purpose, I fit things to our air and manner. Diverse times require not only different words, but different thoughts; and Ambassadors are accustomed to dress in the fashion of the country where they have been sent for fear of appearing ridiculous to those whom they endeavour to please.

(Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt, Preface to his *Tacitus*, and to his *Lucian*, trans. Lawrence Venuti)

1647

...this famous Dramatick Poem [*Il Pastor Fido*] must have lost much of the life and quickness by being powred out of one vessel...into another. ... a Translation at the best is but a mock-Rainbow in the clouds, faintly imitating the true one.

(Sir Richard Fanshawe, introduction to *Il Pastor Fido*)

1648

Such is our pride, our folly, or our fate,
That few but such as cannot write, translate

.....

That servile path thou nobly do'st decline,
Of tracing word by word, and Line by Line;
A new and nobler way thou do'st pursue,
To make Translations, and Translators too:
They but preserve the Ashes, thou the Flame,
True to his Sence, but truer to his Fame.

(Sir John Denham, *To Sir Richard Fanshawe, upon his Translation of Pastor Fido*)

1654

Lorsque la version du Lucien de M. d'Ablancourt parut, bien des gens se plainquirent de ce qu'elle n'étoit pas fidèle. Pour moi je l'appelai la belle infidèle, qui étoit le nom que j'avois donné...à une de mes maîtresses.

[When M. d'Ablancourt's *Lucian* appeared, many people complained that it wasn't faithful. I called it 'the beautiful unfaithful woman', which was the name I'd given to one of my mistresses.]

(Gilles Ménage, [unidentified provenance])

1656

I conceive it a vulgar error in translating poets to affect being *fidus interpres*. Let that care be with them who deal in matters of fact or matters of faith; but whosoever aims at it in poetry, as he attempts what is not required, so shall he never perform what he attempts; for it is not his business alone to translate language into language, but poesie into poesie; and poesie is of so subtile a spirit, that, in pouring out of one language into another, it will all evaporate; and, if a new spirit be not added in the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a *caput mortuum*.

(Sir John Denham, Preface to Book II of the *Aeneid*)

1656

...I am not so enamoured of the Name *Translator*, as not to wish rather to be *Something Better*, though it want yet a *Name*. I speak not so much all this, in defence of my manner of *Translating, or Imitating* (or what other Title they please) the two ensuing *Odes* of *Pindar*. ... I have in these two *Odes*...taken, left out, and added what I please; nor make it so much my aim to let the Reader know precisely what he spoke, as what was his *way* and *manner* of speaking...

(Abraham Cowley, Preface to *Poems*)

1658

*Je suis plus amoureux d'un Vers que je compse,
Que des Livres entiers que j'ay traduites en Prose.
Suivre come un esclave un Auteur pas à pas
Chercher de la raison où l'on n'en trouve pas,
Distiler son Esprit sur chaque periode,
Faire d'un vieux Latin du François à la mode,
Eplucher chaque mot comme un Garammairien,
Voir ce qui le rend mal, ou ce qui le rend bien;
Faire d'un sense confus une raison subtile,
Joindre au discours qui sert un langage inutile,
Parler assuerement de ce qu'on sçait le moins,
Rendre de ces erreurs tous les Doctes tesmoins,
Et vouloir bien souvent par un caprice extreme
Entendre qui jamais ne s'entendit soy mesme;
Certes, c'est un travail dont je suis si lassé,
Que j'en ay le corps foible, & l'esprit émoussé.*

[I'm more in love with one poem that I've written
Than whole books I've translated into prose.
To follow each footstep of an author like his slave,
And look for reason where there's none to find,
To extract the spirit of each age, and make
Of ancient Latin some fashionable French,
To scrutinise each word like a grammarian
And see what makes it bad, or makes it good,
To fashion subtle reasoning from meaning that's confused
And join in chatter that a useless language serves,
To talk with certainty of what one knows the least
And make up learned evidence from these mistakes,
On a mere whim to want always to understand

What never can be understood.
 This is a job, for sure, of which I'm tired,
 My body's weakened and my spirit's dulled.]
 (Guillaume Colletet, *Discours contre la
 traduction*, trans. Tim Chilcott)

1680

All Translation I suppose may be reduced to these three heads.
 First, that of Metaphrase, or turning an Authour word by word, and
 Line by Line, from one Language into another. ... The second way is that
 of Paraphrase, or Translation with Latitude, where the Authour is kept in
 view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so
 strictly follow'd as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplyfied, but
 not alter'd. ... The Third way is that of Imitation, where the Translator (if
 now he has not lost that Name) assumes the liberty not only to vary from
 the words and sence, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion.

.....

No man is capable of Translating Poetry, who, besides a Genius to that
 Art, is not a Master both of his Authour's Language, and of his own; Nor
 must we understand the Language only of the Poet, but his particular turn
 of Thoughts, and of Expression, which are the Characters that distinguish,
 and as it were individuate him from all other writers.

.....

...thought, if it be Translated truly, cannot be lost in another Language;
 but the words that convey it to our apprehension (which are the Image
 and Ornament of that thought), may be so ill chosen, as to make it appear
 in an unhandsome dress, and rob it of its native Lustre. There is therefore
 a Liberty to be allow'd for the Expression, neither is it necessary that
 Words and Lines should be confin'd to the measure of their Original.
 (John Dryden, Preface to *Ovid's Epistles*)

1684

'Tis true, Composing is the Nobler Part,
 But good Translation is no easy Art
 For tho Materials have long since been found
 Yet both your Fancy and your Hands are bound

And by Improving what was writ before,
 Invention Labours less, but Judgment more.

...

Each Poet with a different Talent writes,
 One praises, one instructs, another bites;
 Horace did ne'er aspire to Epic Bays,
 Nor lofty Maro stoop to Lyric Lays.
 Examine how your Humour is inclin'd,
 And which the Ruling Passion of your Mind;
 Then seek a Poet who *your* way do's bend,
 And Chuse an Author as you chuse a friend:
 United by this Sympathetick Bond,
 You grow Familiar, Intimate and Fond;
 Your Thoughts, your Words, your Stiles, your Souls agree,
 No longer his Interpreter, but He.

...

Take pains the genuine Meaning to explore,
 There sweat, there strain, tug the laborious Oar.
 Search ev'ry Comment that your care can find,
 Some here, some there may hit the Poet's Mind.
 Yet be not blindly guided by the Throng.
 The Multitude is always in the Wrong.
 When things appear unnatural or hard,
 Consult your Author, with Himself compar'd.

...

While in your Thoughts you find the least debate,
 You may confound, but never can translate.
 Your Style will this through all Disguises show,
 For none explain more clearly than they know:
 He only proves he understands a Text,
 Whose Exposition leaves it unperplex'd.

Words in One Language Elegantly us'd
 Will hardly in anotherbe excus'd,
 And some that *Rome* admir'd in *Caesar's* Time
 May neither suit our Genius nor our Clime.
 The genuine Sence, intelligibly told,
 Shews a Translator both discreet and bold.

Excursions are inexpiably bad,
 And 'tis much safer to leave out than add.
 (Earl of Roscommon, 'An Essay on
 Translated Verse')

1685

...a translator is to make his author appear as charming as possibly he can, provided he maintains his character, and makes him not unlike himself. Translation is a kind of drawing after the life; where every one will acknowledge there is a double sort of likeness, a good one and a bad. 'Tis one thing to draw the outlines true, the features like, the proportions exact, the colouring itself perhaps tolerable; and another thing to make all these graceful, by the posture, the shadowings, and, chiefly, by the spirit which animates the whole.

(John Dryden, Preface to *Sylvae: Or, the Second Part of Poetical Miscellanies*)

1711

The qualification of a translator worth reading must be a mastery of the language he translates out of, and that he translates into; but if a deficiency be to be allowed in either, it is in the original, since if he be but master enough of the tongue of his author as to be master of his sense, it is possible for him to express that sense with eloquence in his own, if he have a thorough command of that. But without the latter he can never arrive at the useful and the delightful, without which reading is a penance and fatigue.

(John Dryden, *The Life of Lucian*)

1715

...It is the first grand duty of an interpreter to give his author entire and unmaimed; and for the rest, the diction and versification only are his proper province, since these must be his own, but the others he is to take as he finds them. ... It is certain no literal translation can be just to an excellent original in a superior language: but it is a great mistake to imagine (as many have done) that a rash paraphrase can make amends for this general defect; which is no less in danger to lose the spirit of an ancient, by deviating into the modern manners of expression. ... It is not to be doubted, that the fire of the poem is what a translator should

principally regard, as it is most likely to expire in his managing: however, it is his safest way to be content with preserving this to his utmost in the whole, without endeavouring to be more than he finds his author is, in any particular place.

(Alexander Pope, Preface to *The Iliad of Homer*)

1720

I am not of an Opinion, too common to Translators, to think that One is under an Obligation to extoll every thing he finds in the Author he undertakes: I am sure one is no more oblig'd to do so, than a Painter is to make every face, that sits to him handsome. 'Tis enough if he sets the best Features he finds in their full, and most advantageous Light. But if the Poet has private Deformities, tho' Good-breeding will not allow to expose him naked, yet surely there can be no reason to recommend him, as the most finish'd Model of Harmony and Proportion.

The translator ought to be as intent to keep up the Gracefulness of the Poem, as artful to hide its Imperfections; to copy its Beauties, and to throw a shade over its Blemishes; to be faithful to an Idolatry, where the Author excells; and to take the Licence of a little Paraphrase, where Penury of Fancy, or Dryness of Expression seem to ask for it.

(Sir Samuel Garth, preface to *Ovid's Metamorphoses*)

1748

He that can abstract his mind from the elegance of the poetry, and can confine it to the precepts will find no other direction, than that the author should be such as may deserve a translation; that he who intends to translate him, should endeavour to understand him; that perspicuity should be studied, and unusual or uncouth names sparingly inserted, and that the stile of the original should be copied in its elevation and depression. These are the rules which are celebrated as so definite and so important, and for the delivery of which to mankind, so much honour has been paid.

(Samuel Johnson, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, n.d.)

1753

Our shallow language, shallow'r judges say,
Can ne'er the force of antient sense convey;

.....

There are, who timid line by line pursue,
Anxious to keep th' Original in view;
Who mark each footstep where their master trod,
And after all their pains have mist the road.
There are, an author's sense who boldly quit,
As if asham'd to own the debt of wit;
Who leave their fellow-trav'ler on the shore,
Launch in the deep, and part to meet no more.

(Thomas Francklin, *Translation: a Poem*)

1789

The first thing, without doubt, which claims [the translator's] attention, is to give a just representation of the sense of the original. This, it must be acknowledged, is the most essential of all. The second thing is, to convey into his version, as much as possible, in a consistency with the genius of the language which he writes, the author's spirit and manner, and, if I so express myself, the very character of his style. The third and last thing is, to take care, that the version have at least, so far the quality of an original performance, as to appear natural and easy, such as shall give no handle to the critic to charge the translator with applying words improperly, or in a meaning not warranted by use, or combining them in a way which renders the sense obscure, and the construction ungrammatical, or even harsh.

(George Campbell, 'Preliminary
Dissertations', *The Four Gospels*.
Translated from the Greek)

1790

I would...describe a good translation to be, *That, in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language, as to be distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work.*

Now, supposing this description to be a just one, which I think it is, let us examine what are the laws of translation which may be deduced from it.

It will follow,

- I. That the Translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work.
- II. That the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original.
- III. That the Translation should have all the ease of original composition.

.....

In order that a translator may be enabled to give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work, it is indispensably necessary, that he should have a perfect knowledge of the language of the original, and a competent acquaintance with the subject of which it treats.

.....

A good translator must be able to discover at once the true character of his author's style. He must ascertain with precision to what class it belongs; whether to that of the grave, the elevated, the easy, the lively, the florid and ornamented, or the simple and unaffected; and these characteristic qualities he must have the capacity of rendering equally conspicuous in the translation as in the original.

(Alexander Fraser Tytler, *Essay on the
Principles of Translation*)

1791

Whether a translation of Homer may be best executed in blank verse or in rhyme, is a question in the decision of which no man can find difficulty, who has ever duly considered what translation ought to be, or who is in any degree practically acquainted with those very different kinds of versification. I will venture to assert that a just translation of any ancient poet in rhyme, is impossible. No human ingenuity can be equal to the task of closing every couplet with sounds homotonous, expressing at the same time the full sense, and only the full sense of his original.

.....

Fidelity is...of the very essence of translation, and the term implies it. For which reason, if we suppress the sense of our original, and force into its place our own, we may call our work an *imitation*, if we please, or perhaps a *paraphrase*, but it is no longer the same author only in a different dress, and therefore it is not translation. ...The free and the close translation have, each, their advocates. But inconveniences belong to both. The former can hardly be true to the original author's style and manner, and the latter is apt to be servile. The one loses his peculiarities, and the other his spirit. Were it possible, therefore, to find an exact medium, a manner so close that it should let slip nothing of the text, nor mingle any thing extraneous with it, and at the same time so free as to have an air of originality, this seems precisely the mode in which an author might be best rendered.

(William Cowper, Preface to *The Iliad of Homer*)

1798

Frenchman: The Germans translate every literary Tom, Dick, and Harry. We either do not translate at all, or else we translate according to our own taste.

German: Which is to say, you paraphrase and you disguise.

Frenchman: We look on a foreign author as a stranger in our company, who has to dress and behave according to our customs, if he desires to please.

German: How narrow-minded of you to be pleased only by what is native.

Frenchman: Such is our nature and our education. Did the Greeks not Hellenise everything as well?

German: In your case it goes back to a narrow-minded nature and a conventional education. In ours education is our nature.

(A.W. Schlegel, *Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer*, unknown translator)

1800

...Rarely can a characteristic, terse, and significant statement be transplanted from one language to another so that it will produce exactly the same effect in the new language. Even in the realm of prose, the most nearly perfect translation will at best relate to the original in the same way that a musical piece relates to its transposition into another key. Musicians know what that means. Every translation either remains dead and its style appears forced, wooden, and unnatural, or it frees itself of the constraints of adherence to language, and therefore is satisfied with the notion of an *à peu près*, which rings false. ... Poems cannot be translated; they can only be transposed, and that is always awkward.

(Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Über Sprache und Worte', *Parerga und Paralipomena*, trans. Peter Mollenhauer)

1813

...the different tribal dialects of one nation and the different developments of the same language or dialect in different centuries are, in the strict sense of the word, different languages, which frequently require a complete translation. Even contemporaries who are not separated by dialects but who come from different social classes that have very little contact and who are far apart in their education can often communicate with each other only through a similar process of translation. Are we not often compelled, after all, to translate for ourselves the words of another person who is quite like us, but of a different temperament and mind?

.....

...the further removed [languages] are from one another in etymology and years, the more it will be seen that not a single word in one language will correspond perfectly to a word in another, nor does any pattern of declensions in the one contain precisely the same multiplicity of relationships as in another.

.....

Now as for the translator proper who truly wishes to bring together these two quite separate persons, his writer and his reader...what sorts of paths might be set off upon to this end? In my opinion, there are only two possibilities. Either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in

peace as much as possible and moves the writer towards him. These two paths are so very different from one another that one or the other must certainly be followed as strictly as possible, any attempt to combine them being certain to produce a highly unreliable result and to carry with it the danger that writer and reader might miss each other completely.

(Friedrich Schleiermacher, 'Methoden des Übersetzens', trans. Waltraud Bartscht, Susan Bernofsky)

1816

It can even be argued that the more a translation strives toward fidelity, the more it ultimately deviates from the original, for in attempting to imitate refined nuances and avoid simple generalities it can, in fact, only provide new and different nuances. Yet this should not deter us from translating. On the contrary, translation, especially poetic translation, is one of the most necessary tasks of any literature, partly because it directs those who do not know another language to forms of art and human experience that would otherwise have remained totally unknown, but above all because it increases the expressivity and depth of meaning of one's own language.

.....

...a translation should indeed have a foreign flavour to it, but only to a certain degree; the line beyond which this clearly becomes an error can easily be drawn. As long as one does not feel the foreignness (*Fremdheit*) yet does feel the foreign (*Fremde*), a translation has reached its highest goal; but where foreignness appears as such, and more than likely even obscures the foreign, the translator betrays his inadequacy.

(Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Aeschylos Agamemnon metrisch übersetzt*, trans. Sharon Sloan)

1817

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-browed Homer ruled as his desmesne;

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When some new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He stared at the Pacific – and all his men
 Looked at each other with a wild surmise –
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

(John Keats, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer')

1819

There are three kinds of translations. The first acquaints us with the foreign country on our own terms; a plain prose translation is best for this purpose. ...it completely neutralises the formal characteristics of any sort of poetic art and reduces even the most exuberant waves of poetic enthusiasm to still water. ... A second epoch follows, in which the translator endeavours to transport himself into the foreign situation but actually only appropriates the foreign idea and represents it as his own. I would like to call such an epoch *parodistic*, in the purest sense of that word. ...the third epoch of translation...is the final and highest of the three. In such periods, the goal of the translation is to achieve perfect identity with the original, so that the one does not exist instead of the other but in the other's place. ... A translation that attempts to identify itself with the original ultimately comes close to an interlinear version and greatly facilitates our understanding of the original. We are led, yes, compelled as it were, back to the source text: the circle, within which the approximation of the foreign and the familiar, the known and the unknown constantly move, is finally complete.

(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Übersetzungen', trans. Sharon Sloan)

1820

The proper domain of the Translator is, we conceive, to be found in the vast mass of feeling, passion, interest, action and habit which is common to mankind in all countries and in all ages; and which, in all its languages, is invested with its appropriate forms of expression, capable of representing it in all its infinite varieties, in all the permanent distinctions of age, profession and temperament, which remain immutable... [The translator] will likewise, if he is capable of executing his task upon a

philosophic principle, endeavour to resolve the personal and local allusions into the general, of which the local and personal variety employed by the author, is merely the accidental type; and to reproduce them in one of those permanent forms which are connected with the universal and immutable habits of mankind.

([anon], *The Quarterly Review*, n.d.)

1821

...the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower – and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*)

1823

...the two characteristics of a good translation are, that it should be *faithful*, and that it should be *unconstrained*. Faithful, as well in rendering correctly the meaning of the original, as in exhibiting the general spirit which pervades it: unconstrained, so as not to betray by its phraseology, by the collocation of its words, or construction of its sentences that it is only a copy.

([anon], *The Quarterly Review*, n.d.)

1827

...every translator is to be regarded as a middle-man in [a] universal spiritual commerce...for say what we may of the insufficiency of translation, yet the work is and will always be one of the weightiest and worthiest affairs in the general concerns of the world. ... each translator is a prophet to his people.

(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, letter to Thomas Carlyle)

1835

...in translation...we have of late been acquiring some new ideas; and it seems now to be pretty generally felt that the main object of a translator should be to exhibit his author and not himself. If a work is worth translating at all it is worth translating *literally*.

(James Moir, *Edinburgh Review*, 60)

1856

One of [the principles of translation that I oppose] is, that the reader ought, if possible, to forget that it is a translation at all, and be lulled into the illusion that he is reading an original work. Of course a necessary inference from such a dogma is, that whatever has a foreign colour is undesirable and is even a grave defect. The translator, it seems, must carefully obliterate all that is characteristic of the original, unless it happens to be identical in spirit to something already familiar in English. From such a notion I cannot too strongly express my intense dissent. I am at precisely the opposite; – to retain every peculiarity of the original, so far as I am able, *with the greater care the more foreign it may happen to be*, – whether it be a matter of taste, of intellect, or of morals. [...] the English translator should desire the reader always to remember that his work is an imitation, and moreover is in a different material; that the original is foreign, and in many respects extremely unlike our native compositions.

(Francis W. Newman, preface to *The Iliad of Homer*)

1861

No one can tell [the translator] how Homer affected the Greeks; but there are those who can tell him how Homer affects *them*. Those are scholars, who possess, at the same time with knowledge of Greek, adequate poetical taste and feeling. No translation will seem to them of much worth compared with the original; but they alone can say whether the translation produces more or less the same effect upon them as the original. ... [The translator] is to try to satisfy *scholars*, because scholars alone have the means of really judging him. A scholar may be a pedant, it is true, and then his judgment will be worthless; but a scholar may also have poetical feeling, and then he can judge him truly; whereas all the poetical feeling in the world will not enable a man who is not a scholar to judge him truly. For the translator is to reproduce Homer, and the scholar

alone has the means of knowing that Homer who is to be reproduced. He knows him but imperfectly, for he is separated from him by time, race, and language; but he alone knows him at all.

.....

To suppose that it is *fidelity* to an original to give its matter, unless you at the same time give its manner; or, rather, to suppose that you can really give its matter at all, unless you can give its manner, is just the mistake of our pre-Raphaelite school of painters, who do not understand that the peculiar effect of nature resides in the whole and not in the parts. So the peculiar effect if a poet resides in his manner and movement, not in his words taken separately.

(Matthew Arnold, 'On Translating Homer')

1861

The life-blood of rhymed translation is this, – that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one. The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty.

.....

The task of the translator... is one of some self-denial. Often would he avail himself of any special grace of his own idiom and epoch, if only his will belonged to him; often would some cadence serve him but for his author's structure – some structure but for his author's cadence; often the beautiful turn of a stanza must be weakened to adopt some rhyme which will tally, and he sees the poet revelling in abundance of language where himself is scantily supplied. Now he would slight the matter for the music, and now the music for the matter; but no, he must deal to each alike. Sometimes, too, a flaw in the work galls him, and he would fain remove it, doing for the poet that which his age denied him; but no, – it is not in the bond.

(Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Preface to *The Early Italian Poets*)

1861

Classical scholars ought to set their faces against the double heresy of trying to enforce that foreign poetry, however various, shall be all rendered into one English dialect, and that this shall, in order of words and in diction, closely approximate to polished prose. ... [I have tried] to retain every peculiarity of the original, so far as I am able, with the greater care, the more foreign it may happen to be, – whether it be a matter of taste, of intellect, or of morals.

(Francis W. Newman, *Homeric Translation in Theory and Practice: A Reply to Matthew Arnold*)

1871

'Do you know languages?' [asked the Red Queen]. 'What's the French for fiddle-de-dee?'

'Fiddle-de-dee's not English,' Alice replied gravely.

'Who ever said it was?' said the Red Queen.

Alice thought she saw a way out of the difficulty this time. 'If you'll tell me what language "fiddle-de-dee" is, I'll tell you the French for it!' she exclaimed triumphantly.

But the Red Queen drew herself up rather stiffly, and said, 'Queens never make bargains.'

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*)

1882

What is most difficult to translate from one language into another is the tempo of its style: that which is grounded in the character of the race, to speak in a physiological manner, in the average tempo of its 'metabolism'. There are some well-meaning translations that are nothing but involuntary generalisations of the original and as such can almost be considered forgeries. This is so because they failed also to translate the original's courageous and cheerful tempo which helps us to be consoled for, if not to skip over, all that is dangerous in words and things. The German speaker is almost incapable of expressing this *presto* quality in his language and, as is fair to conclude, is incapable of many of the most delightful and daring *nuances* of unfettered, freethinking thought. Just as

buffo and satyr are strangers to the corporeal and oral sense of the German, so will Aristophanes and Petronius be untranslatable to him.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, trans. Peter Mollenhauer)

1892

The excellence of a translation will consist, not merely in the faithful rendering of words, or in the composition of a sentence only, or yet of a single paragraph, but in the colour and style of the whole work. ... [The translator] must ever be casting his eyes upwards from the copy to the original, and down again from the original to the copy.

(Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*)

1898

There is no such thing as a good or better translation of poetry from another language – there are only poor and less poor renderings.

(Christian Morgenstern, letter to the Copenhagen newspaper, *Politiken*)

1898

...translation involves three requirements difficult to fulfil: *Xin* (faithfulness), *Da* (comprehensibility) and *Ya* (conformability). Faithfulness is difficult enough to attain but a translation that is faithful but not comprehensible is no translation at all. Comprehensibility is therefore of prime importance.

(Yan Fu, trans. of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*)

1912

It is conceivable the poetry of a far-off time or place requires a translation not only of word and of spirit, but of 'accompaniment,' that is, that the modern audience must in some measure be made aware of the mental content of the older audience, and of what these others drew from certain fashions of thought and speech. Six centuries of derivative convention

and loose usage have obscured the exact significance of such phrases as: 'The death of the heart,' and 'The departure of the soul'.

(Ezra Pound, *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti*)

1917

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. ... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be, instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language.

(Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur*, trans. Harry Zohn)

1917-18

A great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations; or follows it.

.....

...is a fine poet ever translated until another his equal invents a new style in a later language? ... Is any foreign speech ever our own, ever so full of beauty as our *lingua maternal* (whatever *lingua maternal* that might be)?

(Ezra Pound, 'Notes on Elizabethan Classicists', *The Egoist*)

1918

Great originals shine through even awkward translations.

(Christian Morgenstern, *Stufte*, trans. Max Knight)

1923

... While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.

.....

Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.

.....

A real translation... is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax...

(Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, trans. Harry Zohn)

late 1920s

The translation of a poem having any depth ends by being one of two things. Either it is the expression of the translator, virtually a new poem, or it is as it were a photograph, as exact as possible, of one side of the statue.

(Ezra Pound, unpublished note to projected edition of the works of Guido Cavalcanti)

1934

[an imaginary conversation between Shakespeare and Jonson, who are discussing the best way of translating famous verses from the prophet Isaiah, in preparation for the 1611 Authorised Version]

... Ben read from the paper. "Get thee up, O Jerusalem, and be bright, for thy light is at hand, and the glory of God has risen up upon thee."

'Up-pup-up,' Will stuttered profanely.

Ben held on. "See how darkness is upon the earth and the peoples thereof."

'That's no great stuff to put into Isaiah's mouth. And further, Ben?'

"But on thee God shall shew light and on – or "in", is it?' (Ben held the proof closer to the deep furrow at the bridge of his nose.) "on thee shall His glory be manifest. So that all peoples shall walk in thy light and the Kings in the glory of thy morning."

'It may be mended. Read me the Coverdale of it now.' ...

'Umm-umm! Coverdale saith, "And therefore get thee up betimes, for thy light cometh, and the glory of the Lord shall rise up upon thee. For lo! While the darkness and cloud covereth the earth and the people, the Lord shall shew thee light, and His glory shall be seen in thee. The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness that springeth forth upon thee." But "gentes is for the most part, "peoples", ' Ben concluded.

'Eh?' said Will indifferently. 'Art sure?'

This loosed an avalanche of instances from Ovid, Quintilian, Terence, Columella, Seneca, and others. Will took no heed till the rush ceased, but stared into the orchard through the September haze. 'Now give me the Douai and Geneva for this "Get thee up, O Jerusalem", ' said he at last.

'They'll be all there.' Ben referred to the proofs. 'Tis "arise" in both,' said he. "Arise and be bright" in Geneva. In the Douai 'tis "Arise and be illuminated."

'So? Give me the paper now.' Will took it from his companion, rose, and paced towards a tree in the orchard, turning again, when he had reached it, by a well-worn track through the grass. Ben leaned forward in his chair. The other's free hand went up warningly.

'Quiet, man!' said he. 'I wait on my Demon!' He fell into the stage-stride of his art at that time, speaking to the air.

'How shall this open? "Arise?" No! "Rise!" Yes. And we'll no weak coupling. 'Tis a call to a City! "Rise – shine" ... Nor yet any schoolmaster's "because" ... "Rise – shine; for thy light is come, and –" He refreshed himself from the apple and the proofs as he strode. "And – and the glory of God!" – No. "God's" over short. We need the long roll here. "And the glory of the Lord is risen on thee." (Isaiah speaks the part. We'll have it from his own lips.) What's next? ... "See how?" Oh, vile – vile! ... And Geneva hath "Lo" (Still, Ben! Still!) "Lo" is better by all odds: but to match the long roll of "the Lord" we'll have it 'Behold.' ... [Then] "Darkness covers" – no – "cloakes" (short always). "Darkness clokes the earth, and gross – gross darkness the people!" (But Isaiah's prophesying, with the storm behind him. Can ye not feel it, Ben? It must be "shall") – "Shall cloke the earth" ... The rest becomes clearer ... But

on thee God Shall arise” ... (Nay, that sacrificing the Creator to the Creature!) “*But the Lord shall arise on thee*”, and – yes, we sound that “thee” again – “and on thee shall” – No! ... “*And His glory shall be seen on thee.*” Good!’ He walked his beat a little in silence, mumbling the two verses before he mouthed them.

‘I have it! Hark, Ben! “*Rise – shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen on thee. For, darkness shall cloke the earth, and gross darkness the people. But the Lord shall arise on thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee.*”

‘There’s something not all amiss there,’ Ben conceded.

(Rudyard Kipling, *Proofs of Holy Writ*)

1934

I have this idea that one can always translate a poet – English, Latin, or Greek – exactly word for word, without adding anything, preserving the very order of the words, until at last you find the metre, even the rhymes. I have rarely pushed the experiment that far; it takes time, I mean, a few months, plus uncommon patience. The first draft resembles a mosaic of barbarisms; the bits are badly joined; they are cemented together, but not in harmony. A forcefulness, a flash, a certain violence remains, no doubt more than necessary. It’s more English than the English text, more Greek than the Greek, more Latin than the Latin...

(Alain [Émile Chartier], unidentified provenance)

1937

Among intellectual undertakings, there is no humbler one [than translation]. Nevertheless, it is an excessively demanding task. ... [however], the translator is usually a shy character. Because of his humility, he has chosen such an insignificant occupation. He finds himself facing an enormous controlling apparatus, composed of grammar and common usage. What will he do with the rebellious text? Isn’t it too much to ask that he also be rebellious, particularly since the text is someone else’s? He will be ruled by cowardice, so instead of resisting grammatical restraints he will do just the opposite: he will place the translated author in the prison of normal expression; that is, he will betray him. *Traduttore, traditore.*

...

We must begin by correcting at the outset the idea of what a translation can and ought to be. ... Translation is not a duplicate of the original text; it is not – it shouldn’t try to be – the work itself with a different vocabulary. I would say translation doesn’t even belong to the same literary genre as the text that was translated. ... Translation is a literary genre apart, different from the rest, with its own norms and own ends. The simple fact is that the translation is not the work, but a path towards the work.

(José Ortega y Gasset, *La Misera y el esplendor de la traducción*, trans. Elizabeth Gamble Miller)

1953

Writing anything at all... is a work of translation exactly comparable to that of transmuting a text from one language to another. This is because, within the range of any one language, ... our interlocutor, our simple or complex intent, our leisure or haste, and so on, modify our speech. We have one language for ourselves, from which all other ways of speaking differ more or less. One language for our friends, one for general intercourse, one for the rostrum. There is one for love, one for anger, one for command, and one for prayer. There is one for poetry and one of prose, if not several in each category, and all this with the same vocabulary (more or less restricted or extended as the case may be) and subject to the same syntax.

(Paul Valéry, ‘Variations sur Les Bucoliques’, trans. Denise Folliot)

1954

When the violin repeats what the piano has just played, it cannot make the same sounds and it can only approximate the same chords. It can, however, make recognisably the same ‘music’, the same air. But it can do so only when it is as faithful to the self-logic of the violin as it is to the self-logic of the piano.

Language too is an instrument, and each language has its own logic. I believe that the process of rendering from language to language is better conceived as a ‘transposition’ than as a ‘translation’, for ‘translation’ implies a series of word-for-word equivalents that do not

exist across language boundaries any more than piano sounds exist in the violin.

(John Ciardi, Note to his translation of Dante's *The Inferno*)

1955

Attempts to render a poem in another language fall into three categories. (1) Paraphrastic: offering a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form, the conventions attributed to the consumer and the translator's ignorance. (2) Lexical (or constructional): rendering the basic meaning of words (and their order). This a machine can do under the direction of an intelligent bilingualist. (3) Literal: rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is a true translation.

.....

The term 'free translation' smacks of knavery and tyranny. It is when the translator sets out to render the 'spirit' – not the textual sense – that he begins to traduce his author. The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase.

.....

The person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language, has only one duty to perform, and that is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text. The term 'literal translation' is tautological since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation or a parody.

The problem, then, is a choice between rhyme and reason: can a translation while rendering with absolute fidelity the whole text, and nothing but the text, keep the form of the original, its rhythm and its rhyme? To the artist whom practice within the limits of one language, his own, has convinced that matter and manner are one, it comes as a shock to discover that a work of art can present itself to the would-be translator as split into form and content, and that the question of rendering one but not the other may arise at all.

(Vladimir Nabokov, introduction to *Eugene Onegin: a Novel in Verse* by Aleksandr Puskin)

1955

What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
And profanation of the dead.
The parasites you were so hard on
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O Pushkin, for my stratagem.
I travelled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza, patterned on a sonnet,
Into my honest roadside prose –
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

(Vladimir Nabokov, 'On Translating "Eugene Onegin"', *The New Yorker*, 8 January)

1959

...poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting.

(Roman Jakobson, 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation')

1959

One thing seems clear: to translate a poem whole is to compose another poem. A whole translation will be faithful to the *matter*, and it will 'approximate the form' of the original; and it will have a life of its own, which is the voice of the translator.

(Jackson Mathews, 'Third Thoughts on Translating Poetry')

1960

...a verse translation [into English] offers an experience in *English* poetry. It takes the reader away from the foreign literature and into his own, away from the original and into something different. The instant he departs from the words of the original, he departs from *its* poetry. For the words are the poem. Ideas can often be carried across, but poems are not made of ideas...: they are made of words. Regardless of its brilliance, an English translation is always a different thing: it is always an *English* poem.

(Stanley Burnshaw, *The Poem Itself*)

1961

I have been reckless with literal meaning, and labored hard to get the tone. Most often this has been *a* tone, for *the* tone is something that will always more or less escape transference to another language and cultural moment. I have tried to write alive English and to do what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America. ... Strict metrical translators still exist. They seem to live in a pure world untouched by contemporary poetry. Their difficulties are bold and honest, but they are taxidermists, not poets, and their poems are likely to be stuffed birds. A better strategy would seem to be the now fashionable translations into free or irregular verse. Yet this method commonly turns out a sprawl of language, neither faithful nor distinguished, now on stilts, now low, as Dryden would say... I believe that poetic translation – I would call it an imitation – must be expert and inspired, and needs at least as much technique, luck and rightness of hand as an original poem.

(Robert Lowell, introduction to *Imitations*)

1962

The first law in translating for the theatre is that everything must be speakable. It is necessary at all times for the translator to hear the actor speaking in his mind's ear. He must be conscious of the gestures of the voice that speaks – the rhythm, the cadence, the interval. He must also be conscious of the look, the feel, and the movement of the actor while he is speaking. He must, in short, render what might be called the whole gesture of the scene.

(Robert Corrigan, introduction to *Six Plays of Chekhov*)

1964

...the ideal role of the translator calls for a person who has complete knowledge of both source and receptor languages, intimate acquaintance with the subject matter, effective empathy with the original author and the content, and stylistic facility in the receptor language. However, such an ideal set of abilities is rarely found...

.....

Since no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations. The total impact of a translation may be reasonably close to the original, but there can be no identity in detail. Constance B. West... clearly states the problem: "Whoever takes upon himself to translate contracts a debt; to discharge it, he must pay not with the same money, but the same sum."

(Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*)

1964

...two kinds of translation exist; they do not have the same function or the same nature. In one, something (meaning, aesthetic value) must remain identical, and it is given passage into another language; these translations are good when they go "from like to same"... And then there are translations that hurl one language against another... taking the original text for a projectile and treating the translating language like a target. Their task is not to lead a meaning back to itself or anywhere else; but to use the translated language to derail the translating language.

(Michel Foucault, untraced article devoted to Pierre Klossowski's trans. of the *Aeneid*)

1964

You've often heard me say – perhaps too often – that poetry is what is lost in translation. It is also what is lost in interpretation. That little poem

['Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'] means just what it says and it says what it means, nothing less but nothing more.

(Robert Frost, cited in Louis Untermeyer,
Robert Frost: A Backward Look)

1965

When I was young, no one told me that, more than anything else, translating would require being able to speak and write in one's native language. Evidently this is considered an obvious statement; however, that assumption is unfortunate and, as everyone knows misleading. Again and again one comes across translations considered to be authoritative simply because they were done by language experts who can actually prove that they know all the nuances of the other language and speak it as fluently as a native since they have lived or worked in the country for twenty or thirty years. But to master a foreign language at the level of a certified simultaneous translator by no means indicates the ability to properly serve the native tongue. One can destroy a work of art from a foreign language much more decisively with awkward and incorrect English – or whichever other target language might be appropriate – than with one or the other translation error.

(Hans Erich Nossack, 'Übersetzen und übersetzt werden', trans. Sharon Sloan)

1966

Arguments against verse translation are arguments against all translation... There can be no exhaustive transfer from language A to language B, no meshing of nets so precise that there is identity of conceptual content, unison of undertone, absolute symmetry of aural and visual association. This is true of a simple prose statement and of poetry.

(George Steiner, introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*)

1969

I don't become the author when I'm translating his prose or poetry, but I'm certainly getting my talents into his hang-ups. They literally own me for that time. You see, it's not just a matter of reading the language and understanding it and putting it into English. It's understanding something

that makes the man do it, where he's going. And it's not an entirely objective process. It must be partially subjective; there has to be some kind of projection. How do you know which word to choose when a word may have four or five possible meanings in English? It's not just understanding the text. In a way you live it each time, I mean, *you're there*. Otherwise, you're not holding the poem.

(Paul Blackburn, unidentified interview)

1970

[The translator] must be willing & able to let another man's life enter his own deeply enough to become some permanent part of his original author. He should be patient, persistent, slightly schizoid, a hard critic, a brilliant editor [...] We are all hundreds, maybe thousands of people, potentially or in fact.

(Paul Blackburn, response to a questionnaire from the *New York Quarterly*)

1971

When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words he already knows. In this sense, translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two tongues, and the histories of all peoples parallel the child's experience. Even the most isolated tribe, sooner or later, comes into contact with other people who speak a foreign language. The sounds of a tongue we do not know may cause us to react with astonishment, annoyance, indignation, or amused perplexity, but these sensations are soon replaced by uncertainties about our own language. We become aware that language is not universal; rather, there is a plurality of languages, each one alien and unintelligible to the others. ... Translation had once served to reveal the preponderance of similarities over differences; from this time forward translation would serve to illustrate the irreconcilability of differences, whether these stem from the foreignness of the savage or of our neighbour.

.....

The discoveries of anthropology and linguistics do not impeach translation itself, but a certain ingenuous notion of translation, the word-

for-word translation suggestively called *servil* (servile) in Spanish. I do not mean to imply that literal translation is impossible; what I am saying is that it is not translation. It is a mechanism, a string of words that helps us read the text in its original language. It is a glossary rather than a translation, which is always a literary activity. Without exception, even when the translator's sole intention is to convey meaning, as in the case of scientific texts, translation implies a transformation of the original.

.....

[cites, with approval, the words of Arthur Waley: 'I have always found that it was I, not the texts, that had to do the talking.'].]

.....

...In its first phase, the translator's activity is no different from that of a reader or critic: each reading is a translation, and each criticism is, or begins as, an interpretation. ... The second phase...is parallel to the poet's, with this essential difference: as he writes, the poet does not know where his poem will lead him; as he translates, the translator knows that his completed effort must reproduce the poem he has before him. The two phases of translation, therefore, are an inverted parallel of poetic creation. The result is a reproduction of the original poem in another poem that is...less a copy than a transmutation. The ideal of poetic translation, as Valéry once superbly defined it, consists of producing analogous effects with different implements.

(Octavio Paz, *Traducción: Literatura y Literalidad*, trans. Irene del Corral)

1972

...I cannot regard the essential legitimacy of poetic translation – as distinct from the means and the areas and limits of tolerable compromise – as highly controversial. I would endorse the more challenging majority view of the task, which is that the task exists, and must be tackled. The goal is to create a poem in the target language, which should simulate, as near as may be, the total effect produced by the original on the contemporary reader. Total effect to me means *import* as well as *impact*, i.e. both what the poem imparts to the mind and how it strikes the senses; cognitive as well as aesthetic (stylistic, formal, musical, 'poetic') values, pretending for just a moment that these two congruent entities can somehow be analytically separated. Again, 'import as well as impact' means import *through* and *congruent with* impact; it does not mean a

message in garbled prose, with subsequent assurances by way of stylistic and other commentary that the corpse in its lifetime was poetry.

.....

The central problem of verse translation...in a sense the only one, is not whether there can and should be simultaneous fidelity to content and form, but rather how to decide, first, what constitutes double fidelity in a given case and how it can be best approximated.

(Walter Arndt, *Pushkin Threefold: Narrative, Lyric, Polemic, and Ribald Verse*)

1973 (rev. 1991)

...a human being performs an act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving a speech-message from any other human being. Time, distance, disparities in outlook or assumed reference, make this act more or less difficult. Where the difficulty is great enough, the process passes from reflex to conscious technique. ... 'Translation', properly understood, is a special case of the arc of communication which every successful speech-act closes within a given language ... in short: *inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*. A study of translation is a study of language.

.....

...despite [its] rich history, and despite the calibre of those who have written about the art and theory of translation, the number of original, significant ideas in the subject remains very meagre. ... Over some two thousand years of argument and precept, the beliefs and disagreements about the nature of translation have been almost the same. Identical theses, familiar moves and refutations in debate recur, nearly without exception, from Cicero and Quintilian to the present-day.

.....

To a greater or lesser degree, every language offers its own reading of life. To move between languages, to translate, even within restrictions of totality, is to experience the almost bewildering bias of the human spirit towards freedom. If we were lodged inside a single 'language-skin' or

amid very few languages, the inevitability of our organic subjection to death might well prove more suffocating than it is.

(George Steiner, *After Babel*)

1974

Translation is a search for an equivalent, not for a substitute. ... Logically, a translator should begin his work with a search for at least a metrical equivalent of the original form. Some translated poems indicate that the translators are aware of this. But the tension involved is too high, it excessively shackles individuality; calls for the use of an “instrument of poetry in our own time” are too strident –and the translators rush to find substitutes. This happens primarily because these translators are themselves poets and their own individuality is dearest of all to them. Their conception of individuality precludes the possibility of sacrifice, which from my point of view is the primary feature of mature individuality, and also the primary requirement of any (even technical) translation.

.....

Meters in verse are kinds of spiritual magnitudes for which nothing can be substituted. They cannot even be replaced by each other, and especially not by free verse. I don’t mean that by rejecting meter in translation the translator commits sacrilege, but he is certainly deceiving the reader.

.....

Translation is hard, sweaty, nerve-racking work. It requires sacrifice or congeniality.

(Joseph Brodsky, ‘Beyond Consolation’,
New York Review of Books, 7 February)

1974

...don’t...be under any delusions about translating being more creative than critical writing – in the sense that nothing in my experience involves so much drudgery, minute application, exasperation at being tied to another’s thought processes. Great self-discipline is needed if one is to be a faithful interpreter and not fall into the temptation of ‘improving’ one’s original. For me there is satisfaction in a job well done and a reasonably phrased sentence, but every time I start on a new translation I have to push myself to get down to it and wonder why I thought I could... You

can only learn if you can translate by working on something fairly substantial. Be prepared to find that like some poet-translators I know, you find the process too limiting and demanding.

(Betty Radice, letter to William Radice,
October, cited in *The Translator’s Art*)

1975

...the true translation, far from englobing or simply repeating the parent text, preserves its otherness. Translation lives between languages and while it draws them together serves also to keep them apart. The original is brought home into the receiving language and culture and yet retains something of its alien identity there.

(D.S. Carne-Ross, ‘Cracking the Code’,
New York Review of Books, 30 October)

1975

Translation is something which takes more liberties (i.e. takes on more responsibilities) than the “trot”, but denies itself the liberties of the imitation and of other relations more tenuous still.

(Donald Davie, ‘Poetry in Translation’,
the Open University)

1976

...I’ve spent the last days, furthermore,
Ransacking Athens for that translation of ‘Palme.’
Neither the Goethehause nor the National Library
Seems able to unearth it. Yet I can’t
Be just imagining. I’ve seen it. Know
How much of the sun-ripe original
Felicity Rilke made himself forego
(Who loved French words – verger, mûr, parfumer)
In order to render its underlying sense.
Know already in that tongue of his
What Pains, what monolithic Truths
Shadow stanza to stanza’s symmetrical
Rhyme-rutted pavement. Know that ground plan left
Sublime and barren, where the warm Romance
Stone by stone faded, cooled; the fluted nouns

Made taller, lonelier than life
 By leaf-carved capitals in the afterglow.
 The owlet umlaut peeps and hoots
 Above the open vowel. And after rain
 A deep reverberation fills with stars.

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
 And every bit of us is lost in it
 (Or found – I wander through the ruin of S
 Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)
 And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
 Color of context, imperceptibly
 Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
 To shade and fiber, milk and memory.
 (James Merrill, 'Lost in Translation')

1980

The success of translation depends...on a writer's confrontation with his given moment. It depends also on his capacity and readiness to undertake it and is thus, in some sense, a self-interested undertaking. In the doing of it, that writer is thrown up against a new scale of things, adding to his awareness of alternatives in literary expression, an awareness which carries over to his reader. ...in all the great examples of how to do it, the matter is two way – the poet-translator is extending his own voice, is sometimes writing his finest work, and is performing a transmission of civilisation in the process of extending his own voice.

(Charles Tomlinson, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Verse in English Translation*)

1981

Translators, more than anyone else, tend to become weary of the subject of translation. Enmeshed in it, they balk at discussing its impossibilities. For them, each literary work presents its peculiar problems, all requiring unique solutions, so that for them there can be no theory of translation, only the exacting act, varying enormously from text to text. ...Any translator can testify that the translation of a poem involves the most exhaustive possible reading of the original, which must be scrutinised,

heard, and brooded over at length before it can assume anything like its shape in another language. Translation is an act that must go through the critical process and beyond it, since it must reach decision.

(Alastair Reid, 'Climbing Macchu Picchu', *New York Review of Books*, 5 November)

1985

The point is no longer merely the hackneyed though doubtless sensible claim that translations is 'impossible' because the lexical correspondences between languages are imprecise (for example, because *la porte* in French does not have exactly the same meaning as 'door' in English); nor, indeed, is the point the much more decisive one that translation is doomed to be inadequate because attempts to construct contrastive grammars powerful enough to support machine translation have revealed that a strong theory of translation, capable of prescribing correct choices, is not within reach. The point now is also that translation, when it occurs, have to move whatever meanings it captures from the original into a framework that tends to impose a different set of discursive relations and a different construction of reality. When English rearticulates a French utterance, it puts an interpretation on that utterance that is built into English; it simply cannot let the original say what it says in French...

(Philip E. Lewis, 'The Measure of Translation Effects', in Lawrence Venuti, ed. *The Translation Studies Reader*)

1985

Translation is the 'trial of the foreign.' But in a double sense. In the first place, it establishes a relationship between the Self-Same and the Foreign by aiming to open up the foreign work to us in its utter foreignness... In the second place, translation is a trial *for the Foreign as well*, since the foreign work is uprooted from its own language-ground. And this trial, often an exile, can also exhibit the most singular power of the translating act: to reveal the foreign work's most original kernel, its most deeply buried, most self-same, but equally the more 'distant' from itself.

(Antoine Berman, 'Translation and the Trials of the Foreign', trans. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*)

1986

...when you translate you're not expressing yourself. You're performing a technical stunt. [...] I realised that the translator and the actor had to have the same kind of talent. What they both do is to take something of somebody else's and put it over as if it were their own.

(Willard Trask, in E. Honig, *The Poet's Other Voice: Conversations on Literary Translation*)

1988

'At best an echo,' translation has been figured literally and metaphorically in secondary terms. Just as [the] performance of a musical composition is seen as qualitatively different from the original act of composing that piece, so the act of translating is viewed as something qualitatively different from the original act of writing. Indeed, under current American copyright law, both translations and musical performances are treated under the same rubric of 'derivative works' (US Code, Title 17, section 101). The cultural elaboration of this view suggests that in the original abides what is natural, truthful, and lawful; in the copy, what is artificial, false, and treasonous.

(Lori Chamberlain, 'Gender and the Metaphors of Translation')

1989

The good thing about Chekhov is that you don't need to know a word of Russian to be able to translate his plays, because everyone knows what Chekhov is about, everyone knows by some sort of inner certainty what Chekhov intended and what he was saying and the idea of referring it to some original text is absolutely odious.

(Michael Frayn, *Platform Papers*)

1993

What is most interesting to translate and most susceptible of success is the impossible, or, even better, the untranslatable. And there are some truly untranslatable words and phrases by any standards. These 'untranslatables', like the unwilling but much desired Colombian drug 'extraditables', are the richest linguistic sources to transfer to the target

language, are a challenge to art and ingenuity, and stimulate the imagination of the artist-translator, who in confronting the untranslatable cannot be lazily seduced by the surface obvious into producing an unimaginative, mechanical version...

Untranslatable lines are natural meadows of translation and yield the best wild herbs. What has never been done in the adopted language will expand its thematic and formal boundaries and its literature. Traditions of theme and form are altered by the infusion of poems from other languages, especially the impossible ones.

(Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice*)

before 1995

I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections – scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. It should never call attention to itself.

(Norman Shapiro, cited in Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*)

1995

The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognisable, even the familiar, and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text.

(Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*)

1997

...In stunning contrast to a fair number of musical performers who are avid to seize the limelight and to soak up every last drop of credit for the emotionality of the piece they are in essence merely resuscitating from dormancy, most translators seem to want to remain totally hidden behind the authors they are serving. Yes, *servicing*.

From what I can tell from my readings, literary translators tend to be quite reverential towards their authors...and their self-esteem seems at about the level of a peon...

How sad, because the truth is that, despite all the reverence for the original, a skilled literary translator makes a far larger number of changes, and far more significant changes, than any virtuoso performer of classical music would ever dare to make...

In virtually every line of every high-quality translation of any piece of literature, small creative acts of faithful infidelity take place at one of another level of grain size – small creative acts in which jams are turned into yams, windows into transoms, Paris buses into Amstertrams...

(Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Le Ton beau de Marot*)

1998

The process of translation is [like] a trial from beginning to end: discovering and building the evidence (knowledge of the author's works, of the cultural and artistic context of his works, and often of his life); interpreting the evidence (figuring out what the original means and what's most essential to it, and then determining the range of alternatives); and making numerous judgments and decisions.

(Robert Wechsler, *Performing without a Stage: the Art of Literary Translation*)

1999

The translator does not first need to understand the text before he translates it. Rather, translating the text becomes part of the process of finding – and making – its meaning; translating turns out to be only a more intense and more demanding form of what we do whenever we read.

(J.M. Coetzee, 'Going All the Way', *New York Review of Books*, 2 December)

2000

Our inability to translate foreign ideas for which our native tongue possesses no equivalent is only a special case of our more general inability to express the ineffable in words. If that is the case, then the translation of religious and mystical texts, and of the more vatic forms of

lyric poetry, might be a place to look for more 'permanent' or stable, perhaps even universal, translation limits.

(Douglas Robinson, 'The Limits of Translation', *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France)

2001

Translation says the unsayable twice, once in another language.
(Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Draft 36: Cento')

2006

Because one day I grew so bored
with Lucretius, I fell in love
with the one object that seemed to be stationary,
the sleeping kid two rows down,
the appealing squalor of his drooping socks.
While the author of *De Rerum Natura* was making fun
of those who *fear the steep way and lose the truth*,
I was studying the unruly hairs on Peter Diamond's right leg.
Titus Lucretius Caro labored, dactyl by dactyl
to convince our Latin IV class of the atomic
composition of smoke and dew,
and I tried to make sense of a boy's ankles,
the calves' intriguing
resiliency, the integrity to the shank,
the solid geometry of my classmate's body.
Light falling through blinds,
a bee flinging itself into a flower,
a seemingly infinite set of texts
to translate and now this particular configuration of atoms
who was given a name at birth,
Peter Diamond, and sat two rows in front of me,
his long arms, his legs that like Lucretius's hexameters
seemed to go on forever, all this hurly-burly
of matter that had the goodness to settle
long enough to make a body
so fascinating it got me

through fifty-five minutes
of the nature of things.

(Christopher Bursk, 'Why Latin Should Still
Be Taught in High School', *The Improbably
Swervings of Atoms*)

2009

A translator without historical consciousness is a crippled translator, a prisoner of his representation of translation and of those carried by the social discourses of the moment.

(Antoine Berman, *Toward a Translation
Criticism*, trans. F. Massardier-Kenney)

2009

The task of the translator is...mired in a series of intractable and irresolvable contradictions. It begins with the fact that translation itself is a highly volatile act. As the displacement, replacement, transfer, and transformation of the original into another language, translation is incapable of fixing meanings across languages. Rather, as with the story of Babel, it consists precisely in the proliferation and confusion of possible meanings and therefore in the impossibility of arriving at a single one. For this reason, it repeatedly brings into crisis the locus of address, the interpretation of signs, the agency of mediation, and the ethics of speech.

(Vincent L. Rafael, 'American English
and National Insecurities')

2010

Poetry is...said to be untranslatable, or, more practically, poems are untranslatable, or, more subtly, in a poetic text *the poetry* is untranslatable, because it is the synthesised meeting point of at least five different aspects of uniqueness: (1) the entire structural, sonic, and semantic complex which is the language, or languages, in which the poem is written; (2) the particular historical state of that complex at the time the work was written; (3) the individual poet's deployed version of that language, his or her idiolect; (4) the poetic voice, or style, of the poet at that point in her or his creative life; and (5) the particular development of that idiom in this individual poem.

.....

...the exact reproduction of the poetry of the original is strictly impossible. However, since no translation can be such a reproduction, while this sets a limit to what translating can achieve, it doesn't set such a limit only to the translation of poetry but to the translation of anything, and to those translations from experience which are original poems. Once this is accepted, then it becomes possible to see how poetry, like everything else, is translatable, if that word is understood to mean a *remaking* in the other terms of a different structure of materials.

.....

[poetry translation is] faithfully imitative approximation.
(Peter Robinson, *Poetry & Translation:
The Art of the Impossible*)

2010

Translation is a form of passive aggression. In doing it, a writer chooses to forgo original authorship so as to play havoc with a foreign original in a process of imitation, zigzagging between the foreign and receiving languages but in the last analysis cancelling the first in favor of the second. Is translation a socially acceptable form of literary vandalism? Or does it just require a distinctively warped frame of mind, one that secretly nurtures a refusal to kowtow to the authority of a foreign writer or text, that prefers to deliver the kick beneath the table?

No doubt, other translators will refuse to recognise themselves in this account, less a portrait than a provocation...

(Lawrence Venuti, 'Mémoires of
Translation', <http://exchanges.uiowa.edu>)

2010

the danger is not
that he'll take over
my poems
but that when it happens
I won't know

(image of cow, of horse
of cadaver or sleepy river
or a pure and less
than innocent love)

so when someone points it out
I won't see –
already eaten
devoured

(Mark Statman, 'Translating García
Lorca', *Tourist at Miracle*)

2010

[The] perfect translator must be a writer able to subsume him or herself into the greater writer's text and identity. Writer-translators with their own style and worldview might become fretful at the necessary self-abnegation; on the other hand, disguising oneself as another writer is an act of the imagination, and perhaps easier for the better writer.

.....

...translation involves micro-pedantry as much as the full yet controlled use of the linguistic imagination. The plainest sentence is full of hazard; often the choices available seem to be between different percentages of loss.

.....

To compare several different versions of [a text] is not to observe a process of accumulation, some gradual but inevitable progress towards certainty and authority (except in the occasional discarding of error); rather, it is to gaze at a sequence of approximations, a set of deliquescences. How could it be otherwise when almost every word of the [original] can be rendered in several different ways?

(Julian Barnes, *London Review of Books*,
18 November)

2011

...the practice of translation rests on two presuppositions. The first is that we are all different: we speak different tongues, and see the world in ways that are deeply influenced by the particular features of the tongue that we speak. The

second is that we are all the same – that we can share the same broad and narrow kinds of feelings, information, understandings and so forth. Without both of these two suppositions, translation could not exist.

Nor could anything we would like to call social life.

Translation is another name for the human condition.

(David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*)

2011

This is a poem about a poem to be translated! By the time it lands on the translator's desk, it will have been prepared already for the operation by being put into English. The poem in English is like a note for the surgeon attached to the (dead) body. But in the original language, this hasn't happened yet, of course! The poem in Welsh tells us what the surgeon will do to it, after it's been 'prepared'.

Y Sawl Sy'n Fy Nhrosi i

Erbyn iddo 'nerbyn i,
A 'mynedd a 'nhu mewn-i

Wedi mynd, a heb waed mwyl,
Heb anadl, yn bibonwy,

Gall hwn, fel meddyg â lli,
Fy agor heb gyfogi,

A heb lanast, trawsblannu,
Tywallt ei hun i'r twll du.

Wedi gwneud y gwniadwaith,
Ni welwch ô lei law chwaith.

A rhoed y doctor wedyn
Arnaf i yr enw a fyynn.

To my Translator

Now you've received me, doctor,
With my brain and my insides

LITERARY TRANSLATION

Removed, with no more blood
Or breath, in ice,

You can go ahead
And operate without nausea.

Perform a tidy transplant
Of yourself into the hole.

And when the needlework is done,
Nobody will see a trace of your hand.

Then you can make up
A name for me.

(Twm Morys, 'To My Translator', at
matsnews.blogspot.com.)

2012

Skal jeg sammenligne deg med en sommers dag?
Veel zachter en veel zonniger ben jij.

Der Sturm zerreißt des Maien Blütenkränze,
Och sommarns fröjd hvad är så kort som den?

As vezes em calor e brilho o Sol se excede
Interdum, aut hebes est aureus ille color;

Toute beauté parfois diminue de beauté,

Sciupata del caso o dal mutevole corso di natura;

Mas tu eterno estío no decaerá

Ty nikdy neztratíš nynejší jas své krásy,

Kuolemakaan ei kersku; vaikka vaellat sen varjossa,

Sen esitken ebedi misralarla zamana

Mentre els homes respirin i els ulls puguin mirar,

So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 18 in a multilingual
version, *The Guardian*, 23 April)