

The translator and the monument

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Traductor

I have come to speak to you, not as a scholar, but as a verse translator, about one word in a collection of classical poems I have been struggling for some years to express in my own language (a somewhat trans-Atlantic variety of American). It is not a word that has been at issue among translators, or, to my knowledge, among scholars; and, indeed, when it is pronounced according to the rules of Latin prosody, it does not even require to be translated.

Exegi monumentum aere perennius
regalique situ pyramidum altius...

You probably recognize these lines. They are part from the very famous beginning of the poem which closes Book III of Horace's *Odes*. You will recall that Books I-III were published together in the year 23 BC. The lines just quoted are in the same meter as the ode opening Book I—the first Asclepiad, a meter used nowhere else in the collection—and are thus organically related to that earlier poem, which ends, not with a statement of what the poet has accomplished, but with a declaration of what he hopes to achieve. This is in the form of a curious request to his rich and powerful protector, Maecenas. It is curious because Horace is casting Maecenas in the role of posterity, of a literary historian; and it sounds curious to modern ears, for its high-flown diction seems almost comically exaggerated in a declaration of what appears to be merely a generic ambition. The poet is telling his patron—a leading minister in the Augustan régime—that if he will only include him among the lyric poets—lyric *seers*, he calls them—he, Horace, will be assured of immortality; as if being a lyric poet were enough to make one a classic.

quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseres,
sublimi feriam sidera vertice.

Both these images —the monument and the *vates* jogging the stars— are memorable; and they are clearly meant to be so. They stand out, with a strong architectural presence, at either end of a miscellany¹ of lyric poems which contains several metaphors that illustrate the role of the lyric poet and the function of lyric poetry. It is one of the things that makes the Odes so fascinating to poets and translators —and scholars: the fact that they contain a virtual theory of lyric poetry, and at the same time they put that theory into practice.

The word *monumentum* would seem more appropriate to an exhaustive history of public works under Augustus than to a collection of lyric poems characterized by brevity, diversity, and deftness —or briskness, as Dryden put it.² These are not exactly the qualities we usually think of when we encounter the word “monument”. We forget that the etymology of “monument” is buried in the lightest of soils —the shifting sands of thought itself. Go back far enough, and you come to the Indo-European men, “to think”, “to bear in mind”. Less remotely, *monumentum* is derived from *monere*, “to warn”, “to instruct”, “to remind”. Terence uses it to mean a sign or tell-tale mark, in what must have been a rather archaic use of the word even in his day.³ In the writings of authors who belonged, roughly, to the generation of Horace’s father, it came to signify a work —any work— that recalled the memory of a person, deed, or event: a tomb (especially a family sepulchre), statue, palace, bridge, road; in short, any memorial to the personage who caused it to be erected or to the person, institution, or event it was built to honor. The *monumenta regis* mentioned in Book I, Ode 2 —the only other occurrence of this word in the collection— was a palace erected for Numa, the successor to Romulus as king of Rome, and its significance was essentially religious: it proclaimed the city’s legendary beginnings and its special bond with the god Mars.

Rome was full of such architecture; it was as much a city of monuments in Horace’s time as it is today. But there were monuments of another, less grandiose order as well. Virgil refers to a love-token as a *monumentum amoris*, and Cicero speaks of *monumenta literarum*.⁴ The practice of calling a literary work, especially a corpus of writing or an author’s oeuvre, a *monumentum* was common by Horace’s time. *Monumentum* was the kind of word, I suspect, that always appeals to intellectuals, one of those polysyllables which suggests that the speaker is familiar with matters beyond the reach of ordinary citizens; and indeed it has lent its glamor, long after the disappearance of the Roman empire, to those stories called *monumenta rerum gestarum*, which were the pride of erudite libraries from the Middle Ages to our own Latinless time.

The paradox of a work consisting of words inscribed on scrolls of papyrus —words written by a freedman’s son from an arid province— reaching higher and standing more permanently than bronze or stonework⁵ is only meaningful

if “monument” is understood not just as an expression of literary egomania, but as an indication of something greater than the “individual talent”, as Eliot called it, something the poet feels he has placed himself in the service of. Just as the function of *monumenta regis* in Odes I, 2 is to remind the reader of Rome’s mythic origins, the *monumentum* of III, 30 serves to memorialize the source—or sources—of the Horatian odes.

Towards the end of *Exegi monumentum*, Horace makes a statement that sounds, again, a little anticlimactic to modern ears:

princeps Aeolium carmen ad Italos
deduxisse modos

“I have been the first (or foremost) to transfer the Aeolian lyric into Italian measures.” If we take the poet at his word (which is what a translator tries to do, knowing full well that in the end he will betray it), that is the extent of his achievement: a metrical tour de force. After the high-flown talk about outdoing the pyramids, he appears to be staking his claim to fame entirely on his skill in domesticating early Greek meters, apparently claiming nothing more than what a translator possessing an exceptional degree of virtuosity might boast of. Are we to take this to mean that Horace saw himself as a kind of translator?

Obviously, he was a great deal more than that, and it would be absurd to argue the contrary. Still, the fact is he took pride in the ability and virtue he showed in going back to the forms, conventions, themes, diction, and (as he himself says) the *spirit* of a poetry that was alien to his own tongue; a poetry that had died with the decline of classical Greek civilization and had later been resurrected thanks to the superficial, enamelled brilliance of the Alexandrian poets. Only it was not to the urbane Alexandrians that Horace looked back, but to the ecstatic singers of what was, compared to Augustan Rome, a primitive society. Of course, Horace and his contemporaries were able to read a good deal more of that society’s poetry than the few hundred glittering fragments we possess—about a score of which read like stark foreshadowings of lines from Horace. But it was about as distant from them as our medieval poets are from us. Its tradition—the lyric tradition—was not one the Romans seem to have regarded very highly. Cicero is said to have remarked that, even if his life’s span were doubled, he would still have no time to waste on reading lyric poets.⁶

Novalis called verse translation the poets’ poetry,⁷ and most modern poets and critics regard it as at least an ancillary poetry (the question is just how ancillary is it?), recognizing, as they do, that, on the one hand, the craft of fitting words together and forming lines and stanzas is essentially the same in verse translation as in writing original poems; and, on the other hand, that poets enrich their expressive range, if not the language in which they write (as

Milton extended the polyphony of English through writing —less memorably—in Latin) when they put it to the test of another expression, another tongue.⁸ Nevertheless, most of us want a clear distinction between original poetry and adapted or translated poetry, as if we felt that the integrity of the former was too fragile to survive without the protection of a solid conceptual barrier separating it from “mere translation”. To Horace and his contemporaries this barrier ran along a different line than it does for us, and it was easy and tempting to pitch one’s camp in the no man’s land of “imitation” or “adaptation”. The Roman notion of a literary work (an “original” as opposed to a “translation”) was conservative: what it required was not “originality” at all costs, but the prestige of reflected light from a Greek source. But the distinction existed nonetheless.

In claiming to be the first to bring to Latin the song forms of Sappho and Alcaeus —the poets he alludes to primarily whenever he mentions Aeolian lyric— Horace uses *deduco*, a verb whose range of meanings takes in a vast territory from “displacing”, “deflecting”, “removing”, “accompanying a bride from her father’s house to that of her husband”, “founding a colony”, to “persuading”, “seducing with words”, and “composing a poem”. He does not use *transfero*, from which “translation” is derived, doubtless because that word designates the most literal kind of translating and copying, the work of clerks and hacks, if not worse (a *traditor* was originally an embezzler, a man who transferred public funds to his own pocket). Nor does he use the more respectable *imitatio*. In a poem (*Epistle* 19, Book I) written around the time that he was putting the final touches to *Odes* I-III, Horace states that he does not consider his relationship to the Greek poets as one based on a fidelity to subject matter and vocabulary (*res et verba*). Only an imitator would do that, he says —and imitators are a servile herd. Instead he claims to have respected the more difficult accuracy of meter and spirit (*numeros animosque*). Echoing his boast in *Exegi monumentum*, he goes on to say that he has introduced Parian iambs to Latium:

Parios ego primus iambos
Ostendi Latio

In this particular instance, he is referring to the very early poet, Archilochus of Paros, who is associated with a meter known as “limping iambs” (which was in fact adapted into Latin not by Horace, but by his immediate forerunner, Catullus). The influence of Archilochus on Horace is only the echo of an echo —the ring of Archilochian vehemence reverberating in the Alcaic tonalities of some of his sterner verses— but in the lines just quoted Horace is tracing a genealogy and making it reach back in history as far as he can. His reason for doing it is that he wants to give stature to the tradition, the idea⁹ of lyric poetry by reminding us of its origin: the monody

of the earliest Greek lyric poets. This is partly because, to the Romans, there was an aura of sacredness to that origin—they knew that many of the early monodies were hymns to the gods—and partly because it was connected to music. In writing the *Odes*, Horace was striving to recover tonal and rhythmical qualities that had been lost when, after the fifth century, lyric poetry was no longer chanted to the accompaniment of an instrument.

But Horace was no primitivist, and the meters he appropriated were in fact far less rudimentary than those of Archilochus. They were based, not on iambs, but on two combinations of dactyls and trochees developed respectively by Sappho and Alcaeus. All but six of the 104 odes he wrote in his lifetime are in one variety or another of these two meters. This was more than a display of technical brilliance: it was a revolution in poetry—and, like all revolutions, it involved violence. The radical disjunctions in the normal word order of Latin that make Horatian verse such a rich instrument for poetry, and such a headache for schoolboys, constitute an extraordinary violation of the Roman language—whose gender was, of course, feminine. A psychoanalytic critic could have plenty of fun with this; so could a shock-trooper of political correctness.

In spite of—or perhaps thanks to—his linguistic sadism, Horace rendered his native tongue and civilization a great service in recovering for its poetry (a poetry that was no longer oral but written, no longer sung but recited in public or read out loud to oneself in private) the musicality of a tradition of chanted lyrics that was thought to go back to the origins of culture. More than that, he consolidated the foundations of one of the most enduring of literary genres, adding to it a dimension it does not seem to have had at first: the dimension of translation (to use that term in its widest sense). I suspect that it was not in fact until it acquired this dimension that the lyric really came into its own as a historical genre. If W. R. Johnson is right to say that “what distinguishes lyric from epic and drama (...) are the extreme compression of the things that are imagined—inward motions of the soul that are revealed not through a series of actions (ta dramata), but through words alone—and the total concentration of the moment of private discourse, this speaker speaking to another...,”¹⁰ then surely with the lyric we are in the ambit of the translatable. The tantalizing possibility of transferring “inward motions” from one language, one idiom, one expression, to another seems so naturally a part of the words we are reading that we experience it as something as integral to lyricism as is the sense of intimacy, of being privy to a private discourse. This possibility is held out to us, as is the impossibility of ever achieving a totally successful translation. Whether or not the origins of the lyric lie in music, the fact that the earliest lyrics required an instrumental accompaniment suggests that they were conceived as expressions of a dimension beyond verbal expression; that they were in a sense already translations of a language

without words, a language closer to music. So in a very real sense the lyric can be said to contain the philosophical justification for the act of verse translation, an act that is often thought to be, even by translators—or should I say, especially by translators—unjustified and unjustifiable in absolute terms.

Far from excluding the translator, then, Horace's monument constitutes at once an invitation and a warning. Enter, it commands; and though, as he labors to approach what the poet seems to have achieved so effortlessly, the translator feels that the words inscribed above the gate are proclaiming "Abandon all hope ye who enter here", what they are really saying is: *There is no end to translating*. The *Odes* are not a mausoleum, but they are a kind of labyrinth, a Piranesi-like architecture of memories leading to other memories. I suggested earlier that they can be read as a memorial to the origins of lyric poetry, but I do not mean they are a retrospective memorial; there is nothing nostalgic or mummified about them. On the contrary, they channel life—the surge and music of a current that began long before Horace was born and continued to flow after the classical world fell into ruin. Perhaps, in the end, they should be compared to an aqueduct. They tier aloft, bringing, as they once brought the pellucid inspiration of Greek monody to Rome, the essence of classical lyricism to our own lyric tradition: the tradition of Petrarch and Ronsard and Du Bellay, Milton and Marvell and Dryden, Leopardi and Montale, Baudelaire and Bonnefoy, Mandelstam and Brodsky, Keats and Yeats and Auden and Walcott.

Fortune has dealt generously with Horace—how many poets ever obtain what they ask for?—but she has played a singularly perverse joke on him: she has granted him a fame that comes as close to being immortal as any, but she has seen to it that the language he wrote in is dead. Horace survives, but he survives in translation. The accomplishment he staked his posthumous fame on is no longer a part of his poetry; it is the one thing in it that is untranslatable. Literary historians will continue to record the fact that he adapted early Greek meters to Latin; but to translators this is, and will continue to be, only one fact among many—and certainly not the essential one. The translator may or may not attempt to produce an equivalent of Horace's Latinized Greek meters in his own language; if he succeeds in doing so without preserving the life that beats in Horace's verse, he will have failed. Or, sacrificing formal equivalences in an attempt to capture spirit, he may try to suggest something of the breath and pressure of Greek poetry on Horace's verse, but, at best, he will manage only to give a distant impression of the Greek ghosting some of the motions of Horace's Latin. Horace's actual achievement simply cannot be rendered in translation. So, while Horace brings us to translation, he also confronts us with its limits.

The challenge of translating a work universally regarded as a monument raises the question of what translating, or attempting to translate, a classic

really means. With the *Odes* that question becomes very insistent indeed. If we cannot translate what Horace says to be the main thing about his achievement, what are we translating? For that matter, doesn't the implicit assertion in *Exegi monumentum* that the poet's fame will live as long as the sacred rites of Rome are carried out preclude the need for translating? Which are the reasons to translate a Latin poet if Rome is eternal? (If the downfall of the Greek civilization inspired any thoughts in Horace about cultural relativity, he did not voice them anywhere in his writings.) It is on the banks of the torrent Aufidus, in the hinterland of his native Apulia, that Horace imagines his fame increasing after his death, not by the Ganges or the Rhone, in the hubub of barbarian babble and stammer. Nowhere in the *Odes* is there a trace of a hint that he ever considered the eventuality that he might one day be translated, that what he did for Alcaeus and Sappho might be done for him.

Still, I believe that the key to translating Horace —particularly the *Odes*— can be found in his poems, in how he assessed his own achievement, and in his repeated statements about bringing Aeolian music to Rome. Though the term he uses on at least three separate occasions —*modos*— has the precise meaning of “meters”, he is obviously referring to something more than formal arrangements of dactyls and trochees in stanzas of eleven, nine, and ten syllable lines. He is talking about rhythms and cadences and rate; he is talking about tone —gay or elegiac, as the case may be; he is talking about manner, the graceful simplicity of the Greek lyricists; and he is talking about measure, the Greek dignity allied to the Roman gravity of words that are weighed. It is significant that he boasts of two apparently contradictory achievements, though in his mind they are really one and the same thing: in *Epistles* I, 19, he says that he has adapted without altering the “measures and verse technique” (*modos et artem carminis*) of his Greek models; and in *Odes* III, 30, he says that he has transferred their lyric poetry (*Aeolium carmen*) to Italian measures (*Italos modos*). Both statements sound remarkably like a description of what is involved in verse translation, the actual conducting of an extremely complex interweave of energies, rhythms and syllabic contrasts and harmonies from one language to another, but they suggest the two different phases of appropriation and domestication which are the systole and diastole of the translator's experience.

The *Odes* demonstrate that such an enterprise is permissible and feasible and in that sense they endure as a monument to the possibilities of interlingual poetry. If Horace's leading intention was, as he suggests, to validate the language of his own nation and extend its expressive range by absorbing and naturalizing the “glory that was Greece”, as Poe romanticized it —he is one of the earliest examples of a familiar figure in literary history: the poet (especially the lyric poet) who reaches for his meanings upstream to what he perceives to be an etymologically purer age, even if this means crossing

a linguistic frontier. Though not a translator, he was an appropriator and it is largely thanks to him that translation has become an integral part of the poetic act—or has come to be recognized as integral, for perhaps it is always present, in the chain that links an Archilochus with an Alcaeus, an Alcaeus with a Horace. The fact that Horace has been translated, imitated, parodied, and echoed in turn—that the chain has continued down to our own day—demonstrates this even more cogently. The paradox of his achievement goes to the heart of how we think about poetry and language: it gave depth and polish and an unprecedented versatility to Latin as an instrument for poetry and, together with Virgil’s achievement, it hoisted Roman poetry to heights previously attained only by the Greeks. But in giving stature to the poetic process of appropriation and adaptation from one language to another, one civilization to another, it opened the way for the appropriation of Horace by later poets.

What made it possible? What intellectual or spiritual grounds could there be for the act of transferring *modos animosque*, the rhythms and spirit of poetry, across the language barrier? The answer that the Roman world was a “natural” successor to the Greek universe, that its virtues and attainments were genealogically derived from it, as its gods were domesticated Greek gods, is relevant, but too general. Once again, the clue lies within the *Odes*, and specifically in the suggestion first made in Ode I, Bk.I, and again in *Exegi monumentum*, that Horace’s poetic undertaking rests on a privileged relationship between the poet and the muses. The ending of *Exegi monumentum*, which echoes the ending of the ode that opens this three book monument, reminds the muse Melpomene of this relationship and its mutual obligations—much like the mutual obligations between the poet and his patron.

sume superbiam
 quaesitam meritis et mihi Delphica
 lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam.

“Invest yourself in the pride you bought with your own merit,” he tells her, casting himself in the role of a confidant, “and” (all the mutuality of the relationship rests on that small copulative *et*) graciously bind my hair with Delphian laurel. (Delphian because Apollo, the patron of poets and Muses, was worshipped at Delphi.) In other words, “I scratched your back, now scratch mine.”

So in the end, Horace is addressing *Exegi monumentum*—and the entire collection—to Melpomene, in an echo of his dedication of Ode I, Bk. I to Maecenas. As Maecenas is his benefactor, so Melpomene is his genius—Melpomene who was sometimes regarded as the muse of poetry in general, though strictly speaking she is the muse of dirges and tragic poetry. As Horace has singled out Alcaeus as his primary model for lyric poetry, it is right that,

in putting the final touch to the *Odes* —even though his literary edifice is not a tragic one— he should invoke Melpomene rather than one of her sisters. But again, beyond the ceremonial rightness of this gesture, what is Horace getting at? Why is he, so to speak, inscribing the muses' name on his monument? Is this just an elegant flourish, a mythological carving on a neo-classical façade? Or is Horace hinting at something deeper, something not just decorative but central to his enterprise?

Again, I think the answer is to be found within the *Odes*. There are several passages I might point to, but for the sake of brevity I will mention just one: half a dozen lines toward the end of Ode I, Book I, a spot of vital importance in the over all architecture of *Odes* I-III. To stick as close as possible to the original words, what Horace says here is that the honorific “ivy” that is placed on the “learned brow” of poets connects him (and the whole emphasis of *me doctarum hederæ præmia frontium* falls on *me*) with the gods above (literally because ivy was sacred to Bacchus, the god of inspiration, and to Apollo, the tutelary deity of poetry; and because the art of poetry, owing to its divine origins, was considered to be specially dear to the gods). What is interesting here is that the poet's brow is described as “learned” (*doctarum... frontium*) rather than inspired, as if Horace considered poetry a field of learning. Exactly what kind of “learning” he mean becomes clear in the next lines.

me gelidum nemus
 nympharumque leves cum Satyris chori
 secernunt populo, si neque tibias
 Euterpe cohibet nec Polyhymnia
 Lesboum refugit tendere barbiton.

More clearly than anywhere else in the *Odes*, or than any of his poems for that matter, Horace is telling us here what a lyric poet is and what he does: he is a man apart, cut off from the common crowd by his vocation which makes him a familiar of “cool” (i.e; shady, wooded) and secluded places frequented by invisible divine or semi-divine presences (“dancing nymphs”, “chanting satyrs”, “performing muse”). I think that what he means is that the lyric poet trains his hearing to voices and rhythms inaudible to, or unheeded by, ordinary human ears; he listens to the music of an order of reality —another reality— behind or beyond ordinary experience. Of course, he is speaking figuratively, and somewhat romantically, but if we read the *Odes* as a demonstration of the renewed lyric and a mapping out of its territory, then clearly the poet's apartness is a state of being, and the sacred grove where he practices his art is located in a part of the mind to which he withdraws in order to concentrate his perceptions and energies on the voice or voices articulating the poem in his thoughts. These voices can speak anywhere: in the Sabine

hills or in the prostitutes' district off the Campus Martius. Call them the voices of the muses, as the music that inspires the poem and plays through it is the music of the muses: specifically Euterpe, the pipe-playing muse of instrumental music, and Polyhymnia, the muse of lyric poetry and manifold rhythms. (Melpomene can be thought of as combining the tunefulness of the first with the rhythmicalness of the second.) They are like the voices that Sappho and Alcaeus heard and transmuted into poetry, showing the way to the lyric poets who came after them, just as they had learned from the singers who had preceded them. The vision with which Horace opens the *Odes* is of a constellation of poets whose speech expresses itself in the cadences of prophetic or oracular utterances; poets in whose mouth the gods sometimes speak. The image with which he brings the *Odes* to a close appears to be the opposite: a memorial, a sepulchre. But in fact, Horace's *monumentum* is neither frozen nor final. Its architecture declares the elevation of what was in the Roman world a minor—and alien—genre to a major one; it looks back to that genre's origins, and it confronts the ages to come with a total confidence not only in its own excellence, but in the lasting relevance of listening to the muses, that is to say, to the voices that speak in the privacy of the inner solitude where poems are born. Its architecture gives a permanent definition to a space—precisely the space of this privacy. Like the area enclosed within the walls of a temple, it is a space for contemplation and celebration. As such, it invites that peculiar form of contemplation and celebration that consists in translating poetry. If verse translation has a founding monument, surely it is the *Odes* of Horace and the way to honor it is translating it, not simply as one hears Horace, but as if one were hearing the voices that murmured in the depth of Horace's mind.

NOTES

1. The mystery of the internal architecture of *Odes* I-III continues to challenge the ingenuity of scholars, who devise charts as complicated as kinship tables to show how individual lyrics are related to each other and to the work as a whole. Their efforts are illuminating in spots, but ultimately neither convincing nor very relevant. Horace did not write for scholars with a passion for charts. Anyone reading *Odes* I-III as a collection is struck by the way the poems are organized in echoing or contrasting pairs, in groups and clusters and progressions, but the charm of Horace's *variatio* is precisely that its conjunctions and disjunctions are nearly always unexpected.
2. Preface to *Ovid's Epistles, Translated by Several Hands*, 1680.
3. *Eunuchus*, IV, 6, 15.
4. *De Officiis*, I, 44, 156.

5. Shakespeare renders this paradox accurately, though with an unmistakably Elizabethan accent, in Sonnet 50: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments/Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme."
6. Seneca, *Epistles*, 49, 5.
7. The translator, says Novalis, is "the poet of poetry" (quoted in Steiner, G., *After Babel*, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 338-339).
8. Steiner has some particularly illuminating things to say about this aspect of what he calls "the hermeneutic motion" (*op. cit.*, p. 296 f.).
9. I borrow the expression from W. R. Johnson's *The Idea of Lyric*, University of California Press, 1984, a book of graceful and passionate scholarship.
10. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.