

THE ODYSSEY OF HOMER

1887-8

50. E. D. A. Morshead, two reviews,
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Morshead (1850-1912) was a classical scholar and translator who taught at Winchester. Each review is of one volume of the translation.

When, more than ten years ago, we were all of us reading the 'Lovers of Gudrun', and were dazzled by the strange new brilliancy of the unsetting sun of the North, many must have said that it would be a good day for English literature if the 'double might of hand' that had drawn Jason and Medea as unerringly as it had drawn Kiartan and Gudrun would turn to the one complete epic of Greece, and tell us, once for all, of the wanderings of Odysseus. It was something of disappointment, or at least of hope deferred, when Mr. Morris gave us the more elaborated, yet far less perfect, *Aeneid*. *Sigurd*, it is true, quenched all regrets for a time. If stronger or nobler poetry than its final portion has been written during the present century, I admit myself unable to name it. And now an instalment, at all events, of the long-desired *Odyssey* is in our hands; it is not to be thought of that it should remain an instalment. If the charm of writing it be, as it must be, even greater than the charm of reading it, Mr. Morris can surely not pause, still less desist; to do so would argue him more, or less, than human.

There is not, to my mind, any true criticism in mincing matters, in qualifying the good as abstractedly imperfect, or the bad as containing the potentiality of goodness. If to be reminded in every line of the Homeric method and fluency of narration; if to have the figures of

Odysseus, and Nausicaa, and Alcinous, acting and speaking with the same straightforward simplicity as they use in the original; if to find on every page lines that recall Homer at his best, and Mr. Morris's best work elsewhere; if to feel everywhere the sunlight 'of that old-world morn'—if, I repeat, the presence of these merits makes a good translation of Homer, then I think this is not only the best verse translation of any part of Homer that I have ever seen, but one of the best literary efforts, in this kind, that we possess. I do not say that it is faultless—there are tricks or mannerisms in it which recur somewhat artificially, not leaving on the mind quite the same effect as the recurrent phrases of Homer. And the question of the true metre for translating Homer, like the question of free will, 'finds no end, in wandering mazes lost.' But here is half the *Odyssey*, translated line for line, without serious omission or expansion, in the metre, and by the poet, of *Sigurd*.

But in opinions about poetry 'the mind of a man,' as Homer would say, 'fleets hither and thither, and ponders in divers ways.' It is high time to desist from giving judgments, and to show Mr. Morris's work, so far as may be possible, by extracts—with this proviso, that one of the special charms of his work inevitably evaporates in such a process—the charm of its consecutiveness. Everyone knows that of Homer, and especially of the *Odyssey*, this is the unique merit—that we pass from book to book, from the narrative about Odysseus to the narrative of Odysseus, with 'a free onward impulse.' Alone, perhaps, among epics, the *Odyssey* leaves us wishing there was more of it. Unless I am much mistaken, readers of this translation, apart from any knowledge of the original will feel the same.

Let us see Telemachus set forth upon his voyage (bk. ii., ll. 420–8) 'mid the sounds of 'wind, wave, and bark.'

But Grey-eyed Athene sped them a happy wind and fair,
The north-west piping keenly across the wine-dark sea.
But Telemachus bade his fellows, and egged them busily,
To gear their tackling duly, and they hearkened and so did;
For into the mid-thwart's hollow the pine-tree mast they slid
When up aloft they had raised it; then with forestays it they stayed,
And hauled the white sails upward with ox-hide ropes well laid.
With the wind the mid-sail bellied and the purple wave began
To roar out aloud round the keel, as forth the good ship ran.

This has the very breath of the sea—the second line is pure Homer; the little thing one would wish altered is a word of which Mr. Morris is extremely fond—'egged'—which rather suggests surreptitious encour-

agement. Any one can see—or, rather, hear—how Mr. Morris varies the cadence of a metre which in less skilful hands is apt to have a certain un-Homeric monotony.

Let us match, against this departure, the landing of Odysseus upon Phaeacia (bk. v., ll. 391–405).

All dead the gale was fallen, and all was calm and clear,
And no breath of air was about; then he saw the land anear,
As he looked forth very sharply upraised on a swelling sea:
And as dear as the life of a father to his children seemeth to be,
Who in sickness hath been lying and wasting away for long,
And suffering grievous torment, and worn by the God of wrong;
But now the Gods release him, and his life is dear and good—
E'en so dear unto Odysseus was the sight of land and wood;
And he swam on stoutly, striving to tread the earth once more
But when at last he was gotten within shouting space of the shore,
Then indeed he heard the thundering of the surf on the reefs of the sea,
For flung forth on the rocks of the mainland the swell roared dreadfully,
And all things there were weltering in the salt-sea wave and the foam,
And therein was no haven for ships and no wind-free harbouring home,
But crags and jutting nesses and reefs by the sea washed o'er.

Has 'the surge and thunder of the *Odyssey*' ever sounded in finer English than this?

There is a more sombre land than sunny Phaeacia, and Circe shall point the way thither (bk. x., ll. 506–18).

Step the mast, and the white sails spread ye, and sit ye there beside,
And the breath of the wind of the Northward shall waft thee on thy way.
But when through the stream of Ocean thy ship hath passed on a day,
There, then, is Persephone's Grove in the long deserted land
Where the tall black poplars flourish and the fruitless willows stand.
There by deep-eddying Ocean haul up upon the bank,
And go thy ways unto Hades and his dwelling dark and dank,
Where the stream of Flaming Fire into Grief-River goes,
And the Water of the Wailing, a rill that from Hate-flood flows.
And thereby is a rock and the meeting of two roaring rivers wide;
Draw up thereto, O hero, and e'en as I bid thee abide.
There, then, a pit shalt thou dig of a cubit endlong and o'er,
And thereby the due drink-offerings to all the dead shalt thou pour.

It is impossible to make adequate extracts from the following book, the *ἔκλυια*,¹ where Odysseus does the bidding of Circe, and the images

¹ The book of the dead.

of the bodiless dead come thronging around him. It is perhaps the most powerful and pathetic scene in the whole of Homer, and it shows Mr. Morris at his best, if, as I think, his sympathy is deepest with the early wistful gaze of man into the spirit-world. If selection were to be made, perhaps the prophecy of Tiresias's spirit (xi., ll. 100-137), and the subsequent converse of Odysseus with Anticleia, would bear off the palm. But it must suffice to say so, and leave readers of the *Academy* to verify or disprove.

There is no table of errata appended. It may therefore be worth while to note some little flaws. In iii., ll. 148 and 190; in iv., l. 42; in xii., l. 59—there are slips, either of pen or press. In iii., l. 324, there is a misleading disorder of the words; in iv., l. 187, there is an awkward, though perhaps inevitable, attraction of 'him' for 'he'; in l. 841 *αἰπὼν*¹ is rendered 'baleful,' which loses the force of the phrase; in vi., l. 24, the verb is assuredly ill-chosen; in x., l. 132, the grammar or punctuation is confusing; in xii., l. 82, *φαιδίμε*² is not exactly = 'lief and dear.'

A purist would perhaps find fault with the rhymes in i. 383-4; ii. 297-8; x. 171-2. The recurring use of the word 'flit' in the transitive sense of *making fly*, strikes one, writing apart from books of reference, as unusual; so does 'flockmeal' (x., l. 119), and 'dorsars' (vii., l. 96). Aegisthus is always Aegistheus, one hardly sees why; 'the whale-great sea' for *μεγαλήτεα πόντον* (iii., l. 158) is courageous, but suggests rather 'great as a whale' than 'full of great whales,' which is surely the meaning. Perhaps others besides myself will be ignorantly puzzled at 'heap up his howe' for *σῆμα χεῶν*³ (ii., l. 222, &c.), till the memory of the Maes-howe by the Stones of Stennis, in Orkney, comes to their rescue.

But let us end, as we began, by gratitude. There are many translations of the *Odyssey*, and several good ones; but time has brought us the best, from Mr. Morris.

In April, 1887, the present writer had the opportunity of expressing, in the *Academy*, the hope that Mr. Morris would not long 'leave half-told' the story of Odysseus. That hope has found fulfilment far sooner than, in such cases, is usual. There are few things, perhaps, on which people differ more widely than on the merits of a translation—and the reason is not far to seek. A masterpiece like the *Odyssey* possesses nearly every poetical merit that could be named; but it by no means follows that it presents each of those merits to each of its readers in an equal degree. We have instinctively a favourite literary quality, and we carry

¹ Steep, hard.

² Brilliant.

³ To raise a mound.

into our reading of a translation an unconscious desire to find in it, above all things, that quality of the original which we prefer. We do not, perhaps, adequately examine ourselves whether what we like best in the *Odyssey*, or any such poem, is its highest quality—so hard is it, even with the aid of Homer, to cry 'Sursum mentes!' and rise above our lower to our higher appreciation. I recognise this so fully that I am half-ashamed that I cannot express any other opinion on Mr. Morris's second volume than that which I formed about his first. Of all verse translations of Homer that I have seen this seems to me to be the best, to have most of the matter and the manner of the original. But I am fully aware that a defective appreciation of the original, in matter and manner, will vitiate one's judgment of a translation. I know that good judges find Mr. Morris's version faulty, particularly in mannerism and the coinage of compound words in English. There is nothing for it but to plead one's plea, illustrate it as far as one may by extracts from the translation, state the qualities which it seems to share most fully with the original, and leave the verdict to the jury that is always sitting—the lovers of Homer.

The *Odyssey*, perfect as an epic, is, if possible, more perfect as a romance or fairy-tale. It bears, I think, a much stronger mark of individual genius than the *Iliad*. I never have felt any intrinsic difficulty in believing that certain parts of the *Iliad* are by a different hand or hands, while the *Odyssey* seems to me so intensely one as to make the idea that it is a compilation almost visionary; the art of collaboration would have reached the miraculous stage. And this individual genius in the *Odyssey* seems to me pre-eminent in the art of story-telling, of romantic narrative. We may prefer the *Iliad*, we may challenge the *Odyssey*, or any other poem, to match its best passages, its most memorable lines; but few will say, I think, that tale for tale, it is told with the perfect, simple, unconscious art of the *Odyssey*. It is finer in episodes; not so fine or complete as a whole. If this be so, the presence of this same skill in a translator would, in my own view, cover a multitude of minor sins. It is a *sine qua non*, though not the only one.

Secondly, for a verse translation, some approximation to the dignity and rapidity of the Homeric measure is essential. The couplets of Pope, the Spenserian stanzas of Worsley and Conington, form the high-water mark of what can be done in those directions; but the antitheses, the forced pauses, of the one, and the festooning of the separate stanzas, by the other, cancel a quality of the original which, as probably the

translators themselves felt, even more keenly than their readers must feel can very ill be spared. Of the first of these two qualities—that of poetic power in romantic narrative pure and simple—Mr. Morris is completely master. I hazard the opinion that no English poet, since Chaucer, has possessed exactly this gift in so eminent a degree. There may be higher gifts, but this is a peculiar one that all can recognise and enjoy. It is the common quality in poems otherwise so widely different as 'The Lovers of Gudrun,' 'The Hill of Venus,' 'Bellerophon in Lycia,' and this version of the *Odyssey*. Anyone to whom this gift conveys a special pleasure will find it hard to make much ado about the mannerisms which undoubtedly appear in Mr. Morris's style—defects on which a surely superfluous stress has been elsewhere laid. I do not myself admire, e.g. the rendering (book xiv., l. 73) of 'ἄθι ἔθνεα ἔρχατο χολρών'¹ by 'where penned were the piglings' crew'; on the other hand, the much-criticised version of book xiii., l. 388—'Τρόίης λύομεν λιπαρὰ κρήδεμνα'² 'We loosed aforetime the shining coil of Troy,' seems to me exactly what Homer says, exactly the metaphor in which Euripides followed him, exactly a case in which Mr. Morris is both bolder and wiser than his critics. Let anyone read for himself the passages (pp. 294, 245) where these expressions occur, and judge if mannerism can be charged upon them as a whole. My strong impression is that half these 'mannerisms'—I do not say all of them—are more careful approximations to Homer's manner than some critics have discerned. As to the 'Phaeacians oar-fain' (p. 232, l. 36) for Φαιήκεσσι ἐλιηρετμοισι³ what is the objection? We speak of a person as 'heart-sick,' of Carlyle as 'world-weary,' without scruple or blame; why may not the Phaeacians be 'oar-fain'? Homer calls them so by a compound, not a periphrasis. Suppose 'oar-fain' is not elsewhere used in English literature—well, somebody once used 'heart-sick,' or 'world-weary,' for the first time.

On the second point—the suitability of the metre of *Sigurd* as a representation of Homer—most people have made up their opinion one way or other. I cannot deny that, for translating Homer, rhyme is a fetter as well as a grace; that all rhyming couplets, in whatever metre, do break up 'the pure line's gracious flow,' the Homeric music, in some degree. The couplet, in fact, diverts our thoughts somewhat from the line or the paragraph—even Mr. Morris cannot overcome this

¹ Where a group of young pigs came.

² We loosed the shining head-dress of Troy.

³ Oar-loving Phaeacians.

result, though at times (to repeat an illustration from vol. i.) he touches the actual harp of Homer.

ἀκραῖη Ζέφυρον, κελάδοντ' ἐπὶ οἴνοπα πόντον.¹
'The north-west piping keenly across the wine-dark sea.'

The difficulty lies in the fact that rhyme inevitably balances two lines in some degree; and Homer never balances his lines.

But it is time to fulfil the pledge made above, and to be silent while Mr. Morris shows us, in English, his idea of Homer. Let the scene be the slumber of Odysseus, in the magical bark of the Phaeacians, while she speeds him over the sea for the last time (book xiii., ll. 19–32, p. 234)

E'en then upon his eyelids did sleep and slumber speed,
Sweetest, and most unbroken, most like to death indeed;
But she, as over the plain the stallions' fourfold yoke
Rush, driven on together by the whiplash and the stroke,
And rear aloft and speed them, and easy way they make,
So rose her stern on the sea waves, and following on her wake
Rolled on the dark blue billow of the tumble of the sea:
So all unscathed and steady she sped, nor swift as she
Might fly the stark gerfalcon, the swiftest of all fowl,
As swiftly running onward she cleft the sea-flood's roll,
Bearing a man most like to the gods for his wisdom and guile,
Who many a sorrow had suffered, and was soul-tossed on a while
As he went through the warfare of men and the terrible deeds of the deep;
But slept there now unfeared, and forgot all woes in sleep.

As poetry and translation, this must speak for itself; but one may say, in passing, what a scene is here for an artist! The slumbering chieftain and the men of Scheria in their mystic bark, not to see Scheria again! And the voyagings and toils of Odysseus, like that other weird of which Shakspeare wrote, are thus 'rounded with a sleep.'

The warning of Odysseus to Amphinomus, to escape from the imminent doom of the Wooers (book xviii., ll. 130–50, p. 333), seems to me at once one of the gentlest and one of the most impressive things in the *Odyssey*; nor does it suffer in Mr. Morris's hands:

There is nought more mightless than man of all that earth doth breed,
Of all that on earth breatheth and that creepeth over it.
For while God giveth him valour and his limbs are lithe and fit,
He saith that never hereafter the vale shall he abide;

¹ The fresh-blowing north-west wind murmuring (roaring) across the wine-dark sea.

But when the gods all-happy fashion his evil tide,
 Perforce that load of sorrow his stout heart beareth then;
 For in such wise still is fashioned the mood of earthly men,
 As the Father of Gods and of menfolk hath brought about their day.
 Yea, e'en I amongst men was happy in times now passed away,
 And wrought full many a folly, and gave way to my heart's desire.
 . . . Therefore indeed let no man in unrighteous fashion live,
 But hold in peace and quiet such things as God may give.
 But O me! how I see of the Wooers what fearful folly they plan,
 Whereas the goods they are wasting, and shaming the wife of the man,
 Who not for long I tell thee from his well-loved fatherland
 Will yet be aloof; nay, rather e'en now he is hard at hand.
 But thou—God lead thee hence, that this man thou may'st not meet
 When he hath gotten him homeward to his land the dear and sweet;
 For when under his roof he cometh, and they deal betwixt and between,
 The Wooers and he, nought bloodless shall be the work I ween.

It is hard to read this without a touch of sorrow that not even so could the courteous and kindly Amphinomus escape his doom and the 'mighty edge' of Telemachus' spear.

Every reader of *Sigurd*, with the 'Day of the Niblung's Need' in his memory, will turn instinctively to book xxii, the *Μνηστηροφονία*.¹ It is beautifully translated; yet I think that the physical horrors of the slaughter—which Homer, in his direct simplicity, will not spare us—do not altogether suit Mr. Morris's mood. He is better when his hand is more at liberty, when he can show us the tossing strife in the hall of Atli, with Gudrun looking upon it in the silence of many memories and one great resolve. To the final scene, however, he gives all the Homeric directness (book xxii., ll. 380-90, p. 411):

But about his house peered Odysseus, if yet a man there were
 Who, shunning the black doom-day, was left a-lurking there;
 But adown in the dust and the blood he beheld them all lying about,
 Yea, as many as the fishes which the fishers have drawn out
 With a net of many meshes from out the hoary sea
 Up on to the hollow sea-beach; there heaped up all they be
 Cast up upon the sea-sand, desiring the waves of the brine;
 But the sun their life is taking with the glory of his shine.
 Thus, then, in heaps the Wooers on one another lay.

Of minor criticisms I have not many to make. In vol. i. Mr. Morris always wrote *Aegistheus* for *Aegisthus*, in vol. ii. he insists (see book

¹ The killing of the suitors.

xxiv., *passim*) on calling them the Cephellenians, one sees not why. In book xiii., l. 166, the epithet *δολιχῆρετμοι*¹ looks odd in the form 'long-oar-wont'; the word *ingates* = 'entrances' (p. 235) is certainly unfamiliar so, I think, is 'twi-car' (p. 268), and 'wrap,' in the sense of 'snatch' (p. 275); 'godless' hardly conveys, in English, the idea of 'unprompted by a god,' 'conveying no heavenly omen,' which is certainly the meaning of book xv., l. 531; in book xvi., l. 401, *γένος βασιλῆϊον κτείνειν*² is something more than 'in a kingly house to kill'; there is a tendency to throw an apparently superfluous 'then' into the emphatic place at the end of the line (see book xvi., ll. 2, 421, &c.). The press seems to have made slips in book xvii., ll. 8, 207; there is something uncomfortable in the rhythm of ll. 69, 284, of book xiv., l. 87 of book xviii.; some awkwardness in the order of l. 62 of book xvi. But these are small matters. I can but conclude with repeating an opinion that this version of the *Odyssey*, now happily completed, is, not perfect but, worthy of the pen that wrote *Sigurd* and the *Earthly Paradise*. Few would desire higher praise.

¹ Using long-oars.

² To kill a descendant of a kingly race.