

Reality and Justice: On Translating Horace Odes, 1, 34

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REALITY AND JUSTICE:  
ON TRANSLATING HORACE

ODES, I, 34

—  
*Seamus Heaney*  
—

*Keeping us right.*

*In the midst of what is going on now, it is hard, when you sit down at a desk, to feel confident that morning after morning spent fiddling with words and rhythms is justifiable activity — especially as there is never any certainty that the whole thing won't have to be scrapped. And on the other hand, external or public activity is more of a drug than is this solitary toil which often seems so pointless.*

T.S. Eliot to E. Martin Brown (London, 1942)

A couple of days after the attacks of September 11th I talked on the phone with two American friends who chanced to be on holiday in Florence at the time. Dismayed like everybody else at what had happened, missing “the reciprocity of tears” that would have been more richly available at home, they were finding that the best way to deal with the desolation in America was to keep doing the things they had come to Italy to do. Their way of getting through those days was to seek out and look hard at pictures and sculptures that kept standing their ground, as it were, in spite of the shaken state of the world around them.

This was not a case of trying to forget atrocity by escaping into the reverie that art works can induce. On the contrary, these were two people out to put art to the test rather than to retreat into it. What they were after was the up-frontness of the made thing. Its power to keep itself whole and its viewers hale, its capacity to distinguish itself from us and our needs and at the same time to make ourselves and our needs distinct and contemplable. What they sought in the galleries was the equivalent of the thing the Polish poet Julia Hartwig seeks in the written sentence. “Everything in me,” she writes, “longs for a moment when a shape/surmounts the shapelessness in which I dangle ... / ... a sentence a solid sentence/restores the earth beneath my feet.”

My friends were wanting art to hold up at the moment when they were being most borne down upon. They had a stake in its worth being proved *in extremis* since they are a couple who have lived lives based on the humanist wager. They know not to expect uplift from art, but they also expect not to be let down by it. And it was because of this knowledge and their unreadiness to renege on it that I found myself saying, not for the first time, that in these extreme cases the challenge faced by the artist – and hopefully also by the policy-makers – is the one W. B. Yeats formulated so plainly in his introduction to *A Vision*: “to hold in a single thought reality and justice”.

As a motto for the times, Yeats’s phrase has much to recommend it, but in the days after the terrorist attacks it began to resonate in my own mind as counsel for the literary translator. As I worried and worded and reworded an English version of a poem by Horace, I became more and more tied up in the Gordian knot of text and context. In the circumstances, any translation from the classics was going to be read as a response to the contemporary situation, an attempt to “restore the earth beneath our feet,” so what the translator had to do was to hold in a single expression truth to reality in the present while doing justice to the original poem.

In particular I was trying to do justice to an ode in which Horace expresses the shock he feels as the thunder-god Jupiter drives his chariot across a clear blue sky: usually, the poet implies, he would be ready for thunder and lightning because usually there would be a massing of clouds and a general sense of threat in the atmosphere. This time, however, the god had arrived so suddenly there was no time to prepare for his terrific sound and fury, and it almost seemed that the safety of the world itself had been put in question. The poem is in four stanzas, the most powerful of which are the two in the middle. In them, the phenomenon of the thunder is evoked in images and locutions which kept holding up for me and standing their artistic ground after our own world had been shaken. Their uncanny strength and sooth-saying force were so undeniable I felt called upon to attempt the whole poem.

The ode in question is Number 34 in the First Book of *Odes*, and while not every reader will understand or want to see the Latin original, it is still worth printing here:

Parcus deorum cultor et infrequens  
 insanientis dum sapientiae  
     consultus erro, nunc retrorsum  
                     vela dare atque iterare cursus

cogor relictos. Namque Diespiter,  
 igni corusco nubile dividens  
     plerumque, per purun tonantis  
             egit equos volucremque currum;

quo bruta tellus et vaga flumina,  
 quo Styx et invisi horrida Taenari  
     sedes Atlanteusque finis  
             concutitur. Valet ima summis

mutare et insignem attenuat deus,  
 obscura promens; hinc apicem rapax  
     Fortuna cum stridore acuto  
             sustulit, hic posuisse gaudet.

A literal translation may also be useful. This one is taken from a Victorian edition (1887), and its very datedness is probably useful in that it keeps the poem (for the moment) at a certain cultural distance:

*Heaven's niggard and unfrequent worshipper, while versed in Wisdom's  
 foolishness I stray, now backward am I forced to turn my sails, and retrace  
 the course I have forsaken;*

*For the Father of the sky, who mostly cleaves the clouds with gleaming  
 flash, has driven through the undimmed firmament his thundering steeds  
 and flying car, whereby the ponderous earth and wandering streams,  
 whereby the Styx and grisly site of hateful Taenarus, and the confine of  
 Atlas, are rocked.*

*To change the highest for the lowest, God has power; and he makes mean  
 the man of high estate, bringing what is hidden into light: from one, with  
 flapping loud, Fortune the spoiler bears away the crest, 'tis her joy to place  
 it on another.*

Obviously, there was an eerie correspondence between words “valet ima summis mutare ... deus” (the god has power to change the highest things to/for the lowest) and the dreamy, deadly images of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre being struck and then crumbling out of sight; and there was an equally unnerving fit between the conventional wisdom of the Latin

“obscura promens” (bringing the disregarded to notice) and the *realpolitik* of the terrorist assault, in that the irruption of death into the Manhattan morning produced not only world-darkening grief for the multitudes of victims’ families and friends, but it also had the effect of bringing to new prominence the plight of the Palestinians and much else in and about the Arab world.

Still, the original is a poem of religious awe rather than any kind of political comment or coded response to events. It is the voice of an individual in shock at what can happen in the world, and there and then it came to me that the phrase “Anything can happen” would be a fair twenty-first century translation of the Latin “*valet...deus*” (a/the god is capable), and that it would also give specific voice to the reality of the world in the autumn of 2001.

Once I had taken this liberty, I was emboldened to take more and ended up with a version from which the whole first stanza is dropped and “*rapax Fortuna*,” the predatory goddess at the end, becomes an image for the impulse to attack or to retaliate, whether that impulse be unleashed or repressed. The biggest liberty, however, was to add a stanza. The image of the shaken earth called up an image of the lifted roof, and since Atlas was already present in the poem, (“*Atlanteus finis*” translated by my Victorian editor as “confines of Atlas” alludes to the edge of the Africa where he stands holding up the sky) the next move was suddenly there, asking to be made. But I believe the poem still does justice to the sense and emotional import of the original while being true enough to what has happened in our time.

*This essay is republished courtesy of the author and Translation Ireland.*

*See page 92 for Michael Longley’s discussion of the classics.*