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VZS **ALB hub**

A conversation with Robert Fitzgerald,
poet, translator, and teacher

"What appears to be impossible is always tantalizing"

Interviewer: Peter Geller

In conversation, Robert Fitzgerald seems to share the hypnotic power attributed to the Homeric singer of tales. But the relationship between Fitzgerald and Homer goes further than their ability to spellbind.

Fitzgerald's verse translation of *The Odyssey*, published in 1961, was praised as "the best and truest *Odyssey* in the English language," earning him the first Bollingen Award for the best translation of a poem into English. His verse translation of *The Iliad* will be published next fall.

In addition to these translations, Fitzgerald has collaborated with the late Dudley Fitts on English versions of the *Alcestis* of Euripedes, and the *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles. His independent translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* completes the Oedipus Cycle.

Between his graduation from Harvard in 1933, and his return in 1965 as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, Fitzgerald applied his far-ranging linguistic, critical, and artistic gifts to journalism, teaching, and versification, as well as to translation. A distinguished poet in his own right, he has published four collections of poems. His newest, *Spring Shade*, combines the three earlier collections with 22 later poems and selected translations.

Since his appointment to the 203-year-old Boylston Professorship—Harvard's fourth oldest endowed chair—Fitzgerald has divided his teaching between the departments of English and comparative literature.

His students know him as a compassionate and painstaking teacher, and they continue to turn to him for criticism and inspiration long after they graduate. Reading the inscription of Fitzgerald's *Odyssey*, "For my sons and daughters," any former student must feel himself included in that number.

On almost any day of the week, Fitzgerald may be found in his Warren House garret, amid his treasury of books and manuscripts.

As you enter his compact study, he may rise slightly, stooping because of the slanted ceiling; with a decorous, almost courtly sweep of his arm, he will motion you to a seat opposite him.

Although he seldom looks at you while he is speaking—preferring a point to the north of your head, or the view of Prescott Street from his window—his voice is quiet, personal, reassuring. He speaks slowly, giving the impression that every word is deliberately weighed.

Whether the subject of conversation is rarefied or mundane, Fitzgerald's oddly inflected, measured manner of speaking soon creates the uncanny sensation, by imperceptible degrees of change, that he has managed to slip from ordinary spoken English into poetic incantation.

The following conversation with Fitzgerald was recorded by Peter Geller.

When I came to Harvard, I had no Greek at all. I had rather a choice between learning Greek and learning German, and I chose Greek.

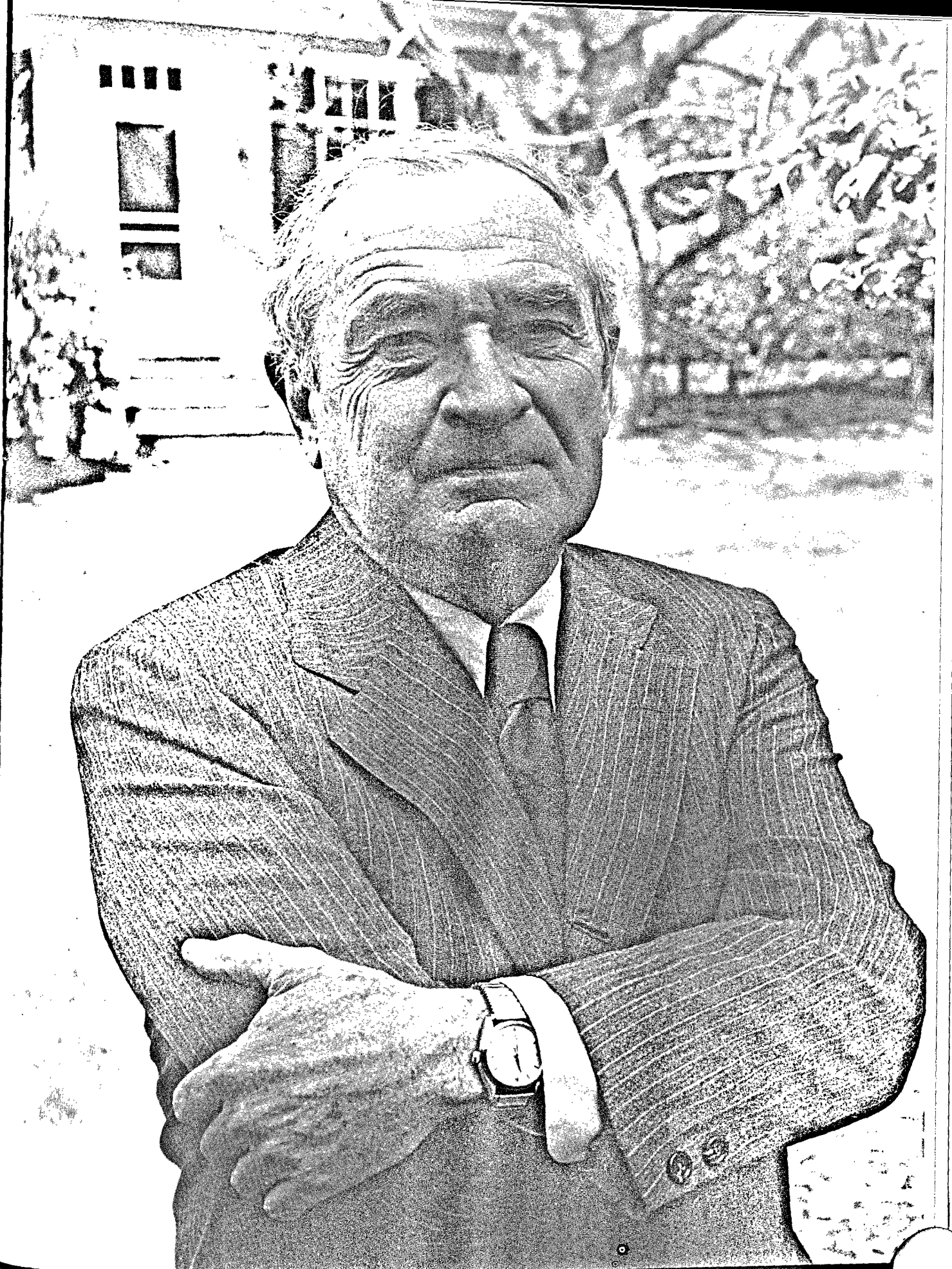
I began with elementary Greek as a freshman. As a sophomore, I had Professor Gulick in Plato, and John Finley, who was then an instructor, in Euripedes and the lyric poets.

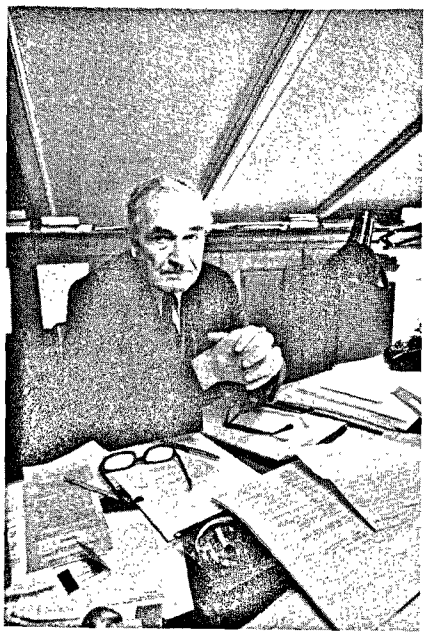
In my third year I was at Trinity College, Cambridge, and while I was there, I had a cable from John Finley and Milman Parry. They asked if I would take the lead in a production of the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles, in Greek. The Classical Club proposed to produce it the next year, when I would be back as a senior.

That made senior year rather interesting, because it involved a great deal of work. I had to memorize about 700 lines of Greek verse, and I also had to learn to sing, because there were several passages of what's called *kommos* in the Greek play—interchanges between the chorus and one of the actors.

The music for the choruses was provided by Elliott Carter, and it was a very fine score. It was a melodic score, by a man who knew Greek and was able to preserve the Greek meters in his music. It was really a very fine piece of work. I think that Carter had been at Harvard the year before, and was at that point in Paris studying with Nadia Boulanger.

Milman Parry was the director. I believe John Finley coached the chorus. Henry Hatfield was chorus leader, Harry Levin took the part of Odysseus, Rogers Scudder played Neoptolemus, and I had the part of the suffering hero, Philoctetes. And we filled Lowell House dining room with representatives, I suppose, of





Fitzgerald in his Warren House garret.

"I called on T.S. Eliot in his London office, that year I was in England. I was planning to become a lawyer then, and he encouraged me in that. He said some of his best friends were lawyers."

all the classics departments in New England for two nights running, in the late spring of 1933.

The experience of putting on the play made me better acquainted with Milman Parry, whose work on Homer I was not clearly aware of at the time. He had been an instructor of mine when I was a sophomore in a Latin course—Horace and Plautus—and I got to know him and like him very much during my senior year. I felt very badly when I had news of his death a couple of years later. At that time, when his friends went through his books, John Finley picked out and sent to me Parry's copy of Sophocles' plays, which I still have. So I've always felt very warmly toward all those people, and I feel that there has always been a bond between the people who made that effort to produce a Greek play, in Greek, at Harvard in 1933.

Did you ever think, in those days, of the possibility of translating Greek poetry into modern English verse?

By the time I had done four years' work in Greek, I did begin to appreciate the verse of Sophocles, and the verse of Homer in particular. And I had that sense of it, that comes to one with familiarity, as of something not to my mind satisfactorily rendered in the English translations that I saw. Indeed, these verses seemed *sui generis*, and in effect untranslatable. But I suppose that what appears to be impossible is always tantalizing. And so I did vaguely think, even when I was at Harvard, of someday trying to do something about that.

My taste for Latin and Greek poetry was encouraged by Dudley Fitts, who had been my master at Choate, and who became one of my best friends. He was himself an admirable and, I would say, a fluent Latinist. During my years at Harvard, in fact, he corresponded with me in Latin. His Latin was far and away more fluent and better than mine. No doubt my interest was stimulated by his great wit and enjoyment of Latin and Greek things.

Did you go to Cambridge specifically to study Greek literature?

Well, to divide my time between Greek and Latin and philosophy. Those were my interests.

I've heard you attended Wittgenstein's lectures at Cambridge.

I attended Wittgenstein's—whatever they were—Tuesday afternoons, and I was one of four or five who did at that point. He was not then so well known as he became later.

And then you returned to Harvard, played Philoctetes, and graduated in the middle of the Great Depression.

As everybody knows, those years were difficult ones. It was, I think, October or November before I could get any job at all. It turned out to be on a newspaper in New York City—The Herald Tribune. I was a reporter.

Was it a financial necessity to go to work, or had you considered graduate school?

I had considered graduate school. I had even conceived the notion of going to Paris and studying medieval philosophy with Etienne Gilson. But neither that nor law school, which had been planned for me by my family, turned out to be possible. I didn't have enough money to go to graduate school, so I went to work.

I worked for about eighteen months as a city reporter, as a rewrite man, and as assistant to the editor of the business section of the Tribune. That is something a little distinct from the financial section.

The editor of the business section was a nice man named Harvey Runner, an old-fashioned newspaperman. He had newspapered all over the country, and he had found this little corner for himself on the big-city newspaper, writing perhaps three or four columns a day. He needed someone to help him do it, and I was elected, I gather because I hadn't been doing very well as a city reporter. I was slow getting my copy in. I was always uncomfortable about deadlines.

So I assisted Harvey Runner for about, I guess, the last six months or so that I worked on the paper. Then, in the spring of 1935, it was suggested that I might apply to the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. I went to see a man in New York who was then on the board of that artists' colony, Stephen Vincent Benét. I showed him some of my poems, and he recommended me—he and a woman named Tess Slesinger, who was the brightest short-story writer of that year. They gave me a fellowship for the summer, June, July, and August.

I quit The Herald Tribune and went to Peterborough, and there I put together the first book of my poems. And that was, I suppose, rather a turning point for me, and I bless the people who thought of the MacDowell Colony, as an escape for me from newspapers.

Was it impossible to support yourself as a poet?

I would not have been able to support myself with poetry. Practically nobody is. That was out of the question from the beginning. I remember when I called on T. S. Eliot in his London office, that year that I was in England, and we talked about the whole business, he said the

trouble with poetry is, it is not a profession. At that time I was planning to become a lawyer, and he encouraged me in that. He said some of his best friends were lawyers.

While I was at Peterborough that summer, my friend Dudley Fitts and I got the notion of translating a play of Euripedes, just for fun. And so, we translated the *Alcestis*. It was published in New York in the fall, and that began, for me, this peculiar eccentricity of trying to match Greek with good English. It turned out to be rather a pleasant custom; every two or three years Fitts and I would translate a play. The next one we translated was the *Antigone* of Sophocles, I think in '38.

After that there was a hiatus as far as this collaboration goes. I was by that time working for Time magazine in New York.

I went to work for Time in '36. I worked there in the beginning as a book reviewer, writing book notes with T. S. Matthews, who was then writing the longer reviews. Then I worked as assistant editor of the business and financial section. I wrote business stories, and finally I was rewarded with the art department of Time, and I edited and wrote that for two years, from '37 to '39.

In 1939, in the fall, just about the time the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed, I became editor of the books section of Time, and from that point for a year or so I was engaged in reviewing books. My companions were James Agee and Calvin Fixx. They wrote reviews, I wrote reviews, and we were jointly responsible for the book reviewing at Time.

Then in June 1940, there appeared one day in New York the evening World Telegram, and the front page of this newspaper was occupied entirely by one large photograph of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, through which, or under which, or alongside which, German panzer and infantry divisions were marching. And the headline of this edition of the World Telegram was one single line of French: *Ici repose un soldat français mort pour la patrie.*

I looked at that and I realized that I was through with New York and Time. At least that's what I thought. I knew that before long everybody, my friends and I, were going to be in the Army or Navy, and I wanted to read, to get a chance to think things over before that happened. So I resigned from Time magazine and I went as far away as I could get.

No, I went as far away as I could get *before* I resigned. I went out to California, to Palo Alto, and got a room in a small hotel there, and visited a man whose integrity I was quite sure of in literature—Yvor Winters, who lived in Palo Alto. I stayed there thinking and reading Spanish. I'd been learning Spanish for some time.

The result was that when I got back to New York I did resign, or at least I tried; I was persuaded to make it a year's leave. I had saved enough money to go on leave for a year, so I went—to Santa Fe, New Mexico. I stayed that winter and spring, '40 and the spring of '41, and there I made many poems and translated the *Oedipus at Colonus* of Sophocles, which I had always wanted to translate since I had read it in college—a very beautiful Greek play.

Then, of course, when the money was gone, I went back to New York and they took me on again at Time, and gave me a job writing the radio section.

I worked at that for a year or so, before I decided I had better get in the Navy. So I got in the Navy, and had eight weeks' training at Fort Schuyler, which before the war had been the Coast Guard training station up in the Bronx, in New York. And I got a commission as a j.g. and worked in New York at an office job in a "shore station" for about a year.

Then, late in '44, I was sent out to the Pacific, to the headquarters of CINCPAC, Commander in Chief of the Pacific at Pearl Harbor, and eventually, when those headquarters moved out to Guam, I moved with them. I was on the staff in a menial capacity, censoring press dispatches. Toward the end of the summer of '45 I was detailed to go on the battleship Missouri, and it was understood that I would do combat reporting during the landings that were planned for that autumn on the main Japanese island, Honshu. A friend of mine, who was an artist and did good sketches, was going to do the sketches, and I was going to do the historical or narrative part of whatever was to come of these landings. But of course all of that was unnecessary; the war came to an end and eventually I came back to New York. When I got back to New York in 1946, I began doing one book review a week for Time, and looking for something else to do.

I take it that you still preferred book reviewing to newspaper reporting.

I much preferred Time to the newspaper because of the time-span. On the newspaper everything was over every day, and something new came up the next day. With the weekly newsmagazine, at least there was an arc of a week during which one could think things over and try to improve one's writing. So that suited me better.

I think you once wrote that you mistrusted the journalistic apparatus as a mirror of the world.

Yes, well, one must, because of the peculiar speed with which things have to be got into print. And of course newspaper stories or magazine stories are about events involving people whom the given reporter might never have seen before in his life, and might never see again, and therefore whom he could have very, very slight understanding of. Neither would he, in spite of all his research and digging—and he would have time for only a certain amount of that—be able to understand the background, as we would call it, of these isolated events.

That's an exaggeration, because of course there are continuing affairs, continuing political situations that good reporters can become extremely intimate with. But nevertheless the whole journalistic presentation of things is limited in that way, in that it cannot have the profundity, if you like, of imagination and thought that would enable people to grasp the mysterious event in its full dimensions.

I suppose that's a brief and rather poor summary of the way in which I felt about it, and Agee felt about it, and others do, and have, and will.

But at the same time I have never really cared very much for the snobbism with which one finds academic people sometimes referring to or thinking of what they call journalism. Excellent things are constantly done by good writers who devote themselves to news or to daily events.

For example, Shaw's music criticism was all journalism, and it's wonderful, and one can think of other instances. So I would not want to be misunderstood on this matter. I did not fully believe in journalistic writing; on the other hand I would uphold it against certain of its detractors, and I was not utterly discontented with that kind of work.

Did you feel that journalism was in any way an apprenticeship for later artistic work?

I think that that's a delicate question, and who can say, looking back on one's writing work whether or not it was? In some ways, yes; I think certainly, the discipline of having to organize and write something in a hurry, and very often, and to get things straight: to get the names right, to get the addresses right, to know all facts as well as one can. Ac-

A PASSAGE FROM HOMER'S ILIAD (Book VIII, lines 553-565)

I. **George Chapman** (1611)

The winds transferd into the friendly skie
Their supper's savour, to the which they sate delightfully
And spent all night in open field. Fires round about them shinde.
As when about the silver Moone, when aire is free from winde
And stars shine cleare, to whose sweete beames high prospects and the brows
Of all steepe hils and pinnacles thrust up themselves for showes
And even the lowly vallies joy to glitter in their sight,
When the unmeasur'd firmament bursts to disclose her light
And all the signes in heaven are seene that glad the shepheard's hart;
So many fires disclosde their beames, made by the Troyan part,
Before the face of Ilion and her bright turrets show'd.
A thousand courts of guard kept fires, and every guard allow'd
Fiftie stout men, by whom their horse eate oates and hard white corne,
And all did wishfully expect the silver-throned morne.

II. **Alexander Pope** (1715)

The Troops exulting sate in order round,
And beaming Fires illumin'd all the Ground.
As when the Moon, refulgent Lamp of Night!
O'er Heav'ns clear Azure spreads her sacred Light,
When not a breath disturbs the deep Serene;
And not a Cloud o'ercasts the Solemn Scene;
Around her Throne the vivid Planets roll,
And Stars unnumber'd gild the glowing Pole,
O'er the dark Trees a yellower Verdure shed,
And tip with Silver ev'ry Mountain's Head;
Then shine the Vales, the Rocks in Prospect rise,
A Flood of Glory bursts from all the Skies:
The conscious Swains, rejoicing in the Sight,
Eye the blue Vault, and bless the useful Light.
So many Flames before proud Ilion blaze,
And lighten glimm'ring Xanthus with their Rays.
The long Reflections of the distant Fires
Gleam on the Walls, and tremble on the Spires.
A thousand Piles the dusky Horrors gild,
And shoot a shady Lustre o'er the Field.
Full fifty Guards each flaming Pile attend,
Whose umber'd Arms, by fits, thick Flashes send.
Loud neigh the Coursers o'er their Heaps of Corn,
And ardent Warriors wait the rising Morn.

III. **Henry David Thoreau** (1839)

They, thinking great things, upon the neutral ground of war
Sat all the night; and many fires burned for them.
As when in the heavens the stars round the bright moon
Appear beautiful, and the air is without wind;
And all the heights, and the extreme summits,
And the wooded sides of the mountains appear; and from the heavens an infinite ether is diffused,
And all the stars are seen; and the shepherd rejoices in his heart;
So between the ships and the streams of Xanthus
Appeared the fires of the Trojans before Ilium.
A thousand fires burned on the plain; and by each
Sat fifty, in the light of the blazing fire;
And horses eating white barley and corn,
Standing by the chariots, awaited fair-throned Aurora.

curacy and order are good qualities, and of course at Time there was time, indeed, in which to write as well as one could, sometimes, about various things. So that was all right.

What came of your attempt to find other work in 1946?

I picked up the phone one day, which was ringing, and it was the president of Sarah Lawrence College. He wanted to know if I thought I could teach, and I said I had no idea whether I could teach or not. He said, well, I should come out and try it.

There was a woman there named Genevieve Taggard, who had given courses in poetry at Sarah Lawrence for I don't know how long—ten years, maybe—and was retiring. I was offered a part-time job, to go out there I think on Monday and Tuesday, two days a week. I took it, and that's how I began college life again.

I went to Sarah Lawrence from the fall of '46 until '53, with some interludes. I was at Princeton in the fall of '49 and the spring of '50, and fall of '50 and the spring of '51; I also went out to Indiana University's school of letters in two summers, the first I think '51, the second '52.

Were you teaching poetry all this time?

I was teaching whatever I thought I could teach, and that would have been versification—of which I thought I knew something—and twentieth-century poetry. I remember the first thing I did at Indiana was a course in the religious lyric, which Austin Warren had been scheduled to give. But he became ill, and so I did that. The second year at Indiana I did a course on Vergil and the Vergilian tradition. Fortunately one of the few books I was able to take to the West Pacific with me was a text of Vergil, and I had read a great deal of Vergil out there. So it came in handy.

When did you begin to make translations?

I'd always wanted to try to translate Homer ever since, I guess, I began reading *The Odyssey* in 1931, and for various reasons, in 1952, it seemed to me the time had come. I think one of the reasons, oddly enough, was that in the course of a review by my friend, Dudley Fitts, of some books on Homer—a review that appeared in The Kenyon Review—he remarked that no really satisfactory translation of *The Odyssey* existed at that time. He said one should be made, and the man to make it was Robert Fitz-

gerald. Now I don't recall his ever having said anything like that to me, and I was struck by this, as it were, injunction by my old friend to think seriously about Homer.

So I began thinking seriously about it.

Weren't you daunted by the wealth of translations that already existed?

No, I wasn't ever daunted by the number of translations that existed, because I'd sampled enough of them to know that none was what one wanted. I believe there was a very common feeling among people who knew Homer, and who knew the quality of the prose translations, which were those that were mainly used —T. E. Shaw's, and Herbert Palmer's, and Butcher and Lang, and even Rouse's very appealing translations—that these were all good for some things, but did not really meet the case, didn't fill the bill.

There were, though, some famous verse translations, weren't there?

The famous earlier verse translations were by George Chapman and by Alexander Pope, and of course these were in the verse and idiom of, respectively, the early seventeenth and the eighteenth century. If you try reading them you will find that they are extremely interesting literary works, but that they are in effect unreadable over the long span to a twentieth-century reader who wants something in living English that represents Homer, and that will carry him along as Homer does. So that was how it really began. My mind kept circling back to it as a real possibility.

I applied for and got a Guggenheim. Then I began inquiring around New York as to what publishers were interested in that kind of thing, and what kind of arrangement they would make. The best by far of the arrangements offered me was from Doubleday and Company—the editor there then being Jason Epstein, who had introduced Anchor Books in this country, and had really made the first great success with paperback books. I gather he was in a position to make the kind of offer he did: I was given a five-year contract, a three-thousand-dollar advance each year, and thereby enabled to go ahead with that work.

Did that become your sole occupation?

That was all I did, or practically all I did, from the fall of '53 until the summer or early fall of 1960, except for one or two academic interludes. I went to Notre Dame in the spring semester of '57 as a visiting professor, and taught theory of criticism and seventeenth-century lyric. And in '61 I went out for a ten-week quarter at the University of Washington

. . . AS TRANSLATED BY SIX POETS (1611-1971)

IV. **Alfred Tennyson** (1863)

And these all night upon the bridge of war
Sat glorying; many a fire before them blazed.
As when in heaven the stars about the moon
Look beautiful, when all the winds are laid,
And every height comes out, and jutting peak
And valley, and the immeasurable heavens
Break open to their highest, and all the stars
Shine, and a shepherd gladdens in his heart;
So many a fire between the ships and stream
Of Xanthus blazed before the towers of Troy,
A thousand on the plain; and close by each
Sat fifty in the blaze of burning fire;
And eating hoary grain and pulse the steeds,
Fixt by their cars, waited the golden dawn.

V. **Richmond Lattimore** (1951)

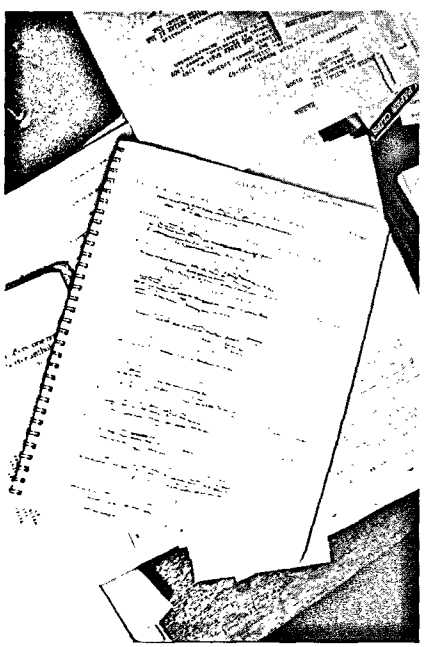
So with hearts made high these sat night-long by the outworks
of battle, and their watchfires blazed numerous about them.
As when in the sky the stars about the moon's shining
are seen in all their glory, when the air has fallen to stillness,
and all the high places of the hills are clear, and the shoulders out-jutting,
and the deep ravines, as endless bright air spills from the heavens
and all the stars are seen, to make glad the heart of the shepherd;
such in their numbers blazed the watch fires the Trojans were burning
between the waters of Xanthos and the ships, before Ilion.
A thousand fires were burning there in the plain, and beside each
one sat fifty men in the flare of the blazing firelight.
And standing each beside his chariot, champing white barley
and oats, the horses waited for the dawn to mount to her high place.

VI. **Robert Fitzgerald** (1971)

Then on the perilous open ground of war,
in brave expectancy, they lay all night
while many campfires burned. As when in heaven
principal stars shine out around the moon
when the night sky is limpid, with no wind,
and all the look-out points, headland, and mountain
clearings are distinctly seen, as though
pure space had broken through, downward from heaven,
and all the stars are out, and in his heart
the shepherd sings: just so from ships to river
shone before Ilion the Trojan fires.
There were a thousand burning in the plain,
and round each one lay fifty men in firelight.
Horses champed white barley, near the chariots,
waiting for Dawn to mount her lovely chair.

"What I value is the sort of clean spring, the rebound of my own mind from the Greek into whatever I could bring out of my own resources to render it. . ."

Fitzgerald makes his translations in large ledgers—one book of Homer to a ledger. An enlargement of the passage below appears opposite page 48.



in Seattle to take the place of Ted Roethke, who was on leave. Otherwise, just the work on Homer's *Odyssey*, which was finally completed in 1960 and published in 1961. It comes to seven years over-all, or six working years, let us say.

My translation went over, as you know, very well in the United States. It was greeted rather coolly by many of the English reviewers.

Do you have any theories about that?

I don't, really. I remember John Wain reviewing it and saying it fell into "translation-ese" because of certain phrases or certain kinds of vocabulary. "Woeful" is a word that I used, and he objected to, and a friend of mine in London, Maggie Haferd, said, "Well, the English are awfully pernickety about such things, but it's very American to have used the word 'woeful.' Robert Frost used to use the word 'woeful' all the time; he would say of someone, 'He's a woeful man.' But the English ear does not appreciate the blending in of these archaisms, as they seem." That's one reason.

Perhaps they objected to your making a verse translation. Anthony Burgess and Vladimir Nabokov, for example, have denounced the category of non-literal translation as being, often, too "arty."

Yes, I don't think Nabokov would much approve of my translation, because he would say, Give us the literal meaning and we will supply the poetry, if you like. And you can see how, to a certain fine taste, there'd be a point in that, and how impatient one could become, if one knew the original, seeing the half-baked attempts of people to be poetic when translating something wonderful that you happen to know. So I understand all that thoroughly. I've often felt that way myself.

Did you intend from the beginning to translate the Homeric poems in verse?

Oh yes, my God yes. It's too complete a falsification of Homer to put it into prose. Remember that the Homeric poems, and all poems of that nature, all heroic poems, are more than tales. In the conception, in origin, they were metered, they were tales in meter, and meter was extremely important to them . . . important to the artist, who could not function without a musical component: his instrument, and his meter.

So, that being the nature of the animal, some equivalent for it needs to be found in the language in which you are translating, and that equivalent, the equivalent for Greek hexameters, is our own standard convention of blank verse, so called.

But blank verse covers a multitude of metrical facts, and is a much more subtle and flexible medium than people often think. For example, it, in its origin, owes a great deal to the Italian hendecasyllabic verse that Chaucer read so much of and was so fond of. His pentameters in English are in some respects closer to Continental hendecasyllabic verse than they are to, say, late nineteenth-century Tennysonian blank verse. So there are all these interesting possibilities in English pentameter verse, broadly considered. It doesn't turn out to be such a constricting or such a stale medium as you might think, if you were only thinking of Pound's great effort in the early part of the century to break up the pentameter. That was the first "heave," as he said. Well, that "heave" was well done. It was a heave that was necessary, but it did not in the end eliminate the possibility of writing in that particular kind of verse, as proven beyond any reasonable doubt by what Wallace Stevens did with it.

So your blank verse is unrhymed iambic pentameter?

Unrhymed, principally iambic, but often not so terribly iambic, pentameter, and often with hendecasyllabic quality, rather than decasyllabic quality.

And you chose this metrical system because it was the English equivalent of the Greek hexameter?

It seemed to be, as I always put it, the "old shoe," prosodically, for us, just as the hexameter was the "old shoe," prosodically, for them, in which one could be at ease.

Was there any collaboration on your Odyssey*?*

No, although as I would finish a book or a number of books, I would send them to Dudley Fitts, and Dudley, who was teaching at Andover, did me the priceless favor of reading these things aloud to classes of fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys; wherever they snickered, he would make a mark in the margin, because something, some double entendre, was to be found in the text, which I would then eliminate—the sensibilities of fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys being very sharp for double entendres.

Did you give any thought to continuing your old collaboration with Dudley Fitts?

Not really, no. It was I who had the passion to do Homer; he did not so much. What he was doing those years was translating Aristophanes, much to his relish and enjoyment. He did some wonderful versions of Aristophanes.

When did you decide to translate The Iliad *as well?*

After *The Odyssey* had come out, and I had done two or three small jobs of

writing and editing that I had wanted to do, I was continuously reminded of the fact that, like Mt. Everest, *The Iliad* was there. So, I don't know, bit by bit—although I had rather resolved not to do it—bit by bit I came around over the course of, well, four or five years to thinking that perhaps I could do it and should do it. By the spring of 1965 I was pretty well persuaded, and I entered into another contract with the same publisher on terms similar to the other, the first terms, to do *The Iliad*.

I suppose that the relationship between my work and Richmond Lattimore's has a certain interest. Before I began *The Odyssey*, early in 1953, I wrote to Dick Lattimore, whom I greatly respect and like, and said, Do you propose to do *The Odyssey*, or not? And he wrote back and said, No, I have other things that I want to do. To which I then replied, O.K., I will! Then four years at least went by and I had another letter from Dick, in 1957 (I think it was when I was in Indiana, at Notre Dame), and in his letter he said, in effect, What did I say? And my answer to that was, Please, go ahead—you know, maybe there is someone now at work in Australia who will do it better than either of us.

And so he did, he went ahead with his *Odyssey*. His *Iliad*, as you know, was published in 1952, and it became the standard *Iliad*, in this country, anyway, for use in humanities courses and such things. But I had felt that if he did not propose to do an *Odyssey*, then I should do it; if he had proposed to do it, I might not ever have done it. But at the time that I inquired, in 1952 or '53, his intention was not to do it. Then he changed his mind and did do it, and his version was published, I think, three or four years after mine. Did the fact that he changed his mind and decided to do both the Homeric poems influence me toward doing both the Homeric poems? I think possibly it did a little, yes, but only a little.

By then you had your method down pretty well, I suppose.

Yes, by this time translating Homer was a way of life that I found pleasant, and I knew from experience, one could say, not necessarily how it could be done, but how I could do it. And so when I got to doing *The Iliad*, I did do it in exactly the same way. It was just a matter of working at it every morning. The morning's task was to go to the notebook and translate some Homer, and this went on for years.

Now as to the mechanics of working on this translation: large ledger-type notebooks, but not as thick as ledgers, in which, usually, one book of Homer to a notebook would be inscribed by me in Greek, line by line, with two blank lines left under each line of Greek. While doing this I would use the dictionary and scholarship, and make up my mind what I thought was meant by difficult passages, so that when I came to do the translation all I had before me was my notebook and nothing else, just the text of Homer and the blank lines beneath it. And of course, after the best written version had been arrived at, there were many typed copies, one revision after another. I hesitate to say how many, in some cases, there were of those; but they kept mounting up.

When did you complete your translation of The Iliad*?*

The first draft was completed in April 1973, and during summer, revisions of all books were made and were supplied to the publisher. My next chance to improve things came when I got the copy-edited manuscript last March. I had been setting down some slight changes that I wanted made here and there throughout the poem, and when I got the copy editor's manuscript, I put them in. Then there were galley proofs in May, and that was the last chance.

What are some of the difficulties you encountered in translating Homer?

Well, as you know, there are formulaic epithets, and they're very important in the texture and quality of Homer: Achilles is *podarkes*, he's "swift of foot"; and Odysseus is *polymetis*, as they translate it wretchedly—a man "of many devices." So one had to arrive, if possible, at equivalents of these that could be used over and over again and would not be embarrassing and tedious to the English or American ear. And formulaic lines like the famous one for Dawn—there one had to see about getting into one line as much as possible of the particular kind of handsomeness and memorability that the Greek has.

In the postscript to your Odyssey*, you remarked that the man who sang these poems was performing a great feat, in that he was playing many characters at once, similar to Shakespeare's trying to do a solo performance of* The Tempest*. Is there a recognizable "voice" to each character in the text itself that you, as translator, had to maintain consistently throughout the poem?*

There is, but it's very subtle, and one's impression is, in reading Homer, that Agamemnon speaks the same lingo as Odysseus. What emerges, however, is that what they say, though the phrases may be the same, is said in tones that are appropriate to each. So my argument would run that the *aoidos*, the performer and inventor of the poem originally, had histrionic talent and performed as an actor, making clear—not so much through his choice of words as through his inflection of these speeches—the character of each man.

And so it becomes, that being the case, permissible to accent slightly, not to overdo it, but to accent in the choice of words, in the idiom and vocabulary, and in the way things are put for a reader, the characteristics of certain speakers more broadly than the Greek of Homer in fact does.

It comes down to the difference between what one is doing or making: one thing would be an Anchor Book, to be read, usually, in silence by a reader; and the other, the original job, which was done in the open air by voices and ears alone, no writer intervening, and certainly no book.

What would happen if you were translating a particularly difficult passage, and you'd seen the way somebody else had done it, and you couldn't get out of your mind that person's solution?

I avoided that pretty well all through by not consulting anybody else's translation. I would occasionally look at, say, the Budé edition in French, which has Greek and French on facing pages; or there are in Italy little equivalents of that. So sometimes, not really as a systematic thing at all, I would, just for curiosity's sake, see how they did it in French or did it in Italian. But I avoided deliberately reading other previous English translations. I don't think it's advisable to do that.

I think that the life of one's work comes from the direct contact between the Greek and one's own resources, and it would be confusing and a kind of blurring to constantly be looking over one's shoulder or under one's elbow at what someone else had done.

What I value is the sort of clean spring, the rebound of my own mind from the Greek into whatever I could bring out of my own resources to render it. I thought of it as a matter of getting very deeply into the Greek, getting all the way into the Greek, getting past, in fact, the linguistic thing, and into the imagination and mind that conceived of this action and of these people; then to get all the way back out of the Greek until there was no vestige of Greekism left in the words that I was putting down.

This is difficult, because there's a long distance to travel first in one direction,

"Any writing that is going to be any good requires passion: passion against dullness, a passion against cheapness, a passion against what's second-rate."

and then a very long distance to travel in the other. Sometimes one is absolutely unaware that bits and pieces of the Greek idiom have clung to one's English. When you have an English version of a page or so of Homer done, sometimes only after weeks or months can it be visible to you that unnecessary Greekisms have stuck on it, and it is not entirely out into English, out in the clear into English, as it must be if it's going to be a good translation.

I don't know whether that makes anything clear, but that's very important: a description of the process that I think should go on. It must become an English work; it must become so much an English work that one does not necessarily feel within it the presence of a Greek work. It's got to be something that our language, and something that our imagination, can cope with.

I imagine that it is no easy matter to convey the Greek perception of the world in the English language, or in any other language.

Well, yes and no. If one is trying to render, let us say, French alexandrines, one has a series of words and rhymes that can with not too great literal variation be brought into one's own language, because ours is related that closely to French. One finds that an English decasyllabic line is better for rendering a French alexandrine than a line of twelve syllables would be. But one can, with a great deal of labor, as Mr. Wilbur has shown in his beautiful renderings of Molière, reach a clear and acceptable version that is really quite close to the French.

Now, as everyone knows, the classical word order (and this is even more notable in Latin), since these are inflected languages, allows of certain kinds of word order that are impossible to English grammar. And so there, right away, is a great difference. In a way this is, you might say, compounding the difficulty; in another way it is liberating, because since there is no question of matching syntax with syntax, one is free to develop one's own syntax. One is less bound, in a sense, by the classical challenge than one is by the French.

What I had in mind was the statement by Erich Auerbach that Homer never creates any perspective in time and place, that all phenomena take place in the foreground, in a local and temporal present which is absolute.

Well, there may I say that Auerbach's argument at the moment led him to these extreme statements; that they are true, and very well said, of the local effect but not of the general effect. If all phenomena take place in the foreground and among these phenomena there are, every so often, people telling stories about the past, then one becomes aware of a background, and you can't say there is no temporal perspective.

As to spatial perspective, how about the way the scene is widened, in both poems, and early on, to take in most of the known world? Not only that, but in *The Iliad*, for example, the death of a man in combat will often be accompanied by a brief descriptive phrase about the countryside he came from.

Someone once said that a translator needed "a poet's patience and scholastic passion blent." Does that sound accurate to you?

Patience is certainly required, and of course any writing that is going to be any good requires passion: passion against dullness, a passion against cheapness, a passion against what's second-rate; a passion for something worthy of the really quite extraordinary poems that these Homeric poems are.

How did you come to be Boylston Professor at Harvard?

Well, I had been asked to come for the year 1964-1965 as a lecturer. That was my academic title. I had the year's appointment and was happy to come. Toward the beginning of spring it seemed as though I might possibly be considered for an appointment as a professor of English. As I recall it there was very little talk about the Boylston Professorship, which had been lying fallow, so to speak, since Archibald MacLeish retired. And I never thought much about that, although the prospect of having an appointment that would allow me time to work on *The Iliad* (which by that time I had pretty well decided I was going to do) interested me very much.

In fact I was looking around at other places; there were other prospects. But what we finally agreed upon here was that I would be made a professor of English and that I would be granted leave in one term each year, leave without pay, for the first five years of my professorship, in order that I could do *The Iliad*.

Now that was the best and most generous arrangement that I could expect, it seemed to me, and it meant returning to Harvard, which I love, so I was very happy to take it. It was only after that had occurred that the chair was added unto me, so to speak. God knows I hadn't been gunning for the chair, and I wasn't aware that that was the seat that I was

Opposite page: A leaf from one of Fitzgerald's workbooks. Having copied out each line of Homer's Greek, Fitzgerald works it out in English in the space beneath.

"fire-hardened" stake

ἸΛΙΑΔΟΣ

Ν

procul ab hostibus

556 οὐ μὲν γάρ ποτ' ἄνευ δηΐων ἦν, ἀλλὰ κατ' αὐτούς

Never [illegible] of the enemy [illegible] for [illegible]

Always [illegible] the [illegible] among men one of [illegible]

στρωφᾶτ'· οὐδέ οἱ ἔγχος ἔχ' ἀτρέμας, ἀλλὰ μάλ' αἰεί

[illegible] the [illegible] the bristled and then [illegible], spear in play.

σειόμενον ἐλέλικτο· τιτύσκετο δὲ φρεσὶν ᾗσιν

[illegible] [illegible] from the [illegible]

hefting? [illegible] to [illegible] under his [illegible]

ἤ τευ ἀκοντίσσαι, ἠὲ σχεδὸν ὁρμηθῆναι.

to throw or [illegible]

[illegible] longing for [illegible] the son of Asios,

ἀλλ' οὐ λῆθ' Ἀδάμαντα τιτυσκόμενος καθ' ὅμιλον

[illegible] him in the press

Adamas [illegible]

Ἀσιάδην, ὅ οἱ οὖτα μέσον σάκος ὀξέϊ χαλκῷ

and [illegible] him, struck him [illegible], mid-shield,

ἐγγύθεν ὁρμηθείς· ἀμενήνωσεν δέ οἱ αἰχμήν

with [illegible] his [illegible]

[illegible] in his hand the [illegible]

[illegible] for the [illegible] Poseidon [illegible]

μεγαίρω grudge

κυανοχαῖτα Ποσειδάων βιότοιο μεγήρας.

[illegible] life, [illegible]

him [illegible] [illegible]

σκῶλος PALUS

καὶ τὸ μὲν αὐτοῦ μεῖν' ὥς τε σκῶλος πυρίκαυστος

[illegible] like a stake fire-hardened [illegible]

[illegible] (infixed)

ἐν σάκει Ἀντιλόχοιο, τὸ δ' ἥμισυ κεῖτ' ἐπὶ γαίης·

[illegible] the [illegible] section

hung [illegible] (Antilochus) ; [illegible]

ἂψ δ' ἑτάρων εἰς ἔθνος ἐχάζετο κῆρ' ἀλεείνων.

[illegible] lying on the ground. Antilochus' [illegible]

[illegible]

into his [illegible] of friends, [illegible].

"Each new poem in my experience is an adventure in realizing something that one had not realized before..."

going to be plopped in, but so it turned out. That is, some little time after the appointment was recommended by the department, the Crimson called up and said, We understand that you are appointed Boylston Professor; and I said, Well, you understand a lot more than I do, because no one has told me. Then, of course, someone soon did.

My teaching responsibilities were divided, and have always been, between the English department and the comparative-literature department, and both assignments have always been very enjoyable. I have felt boundlessly grateful to both departments for being welcomed in them and encouraged.

In comparative literature I have given —usually every other year, but sometimes for two years in succession—a course in narrative poetry, taking in Homer and Vergil and Dante, and these always in their languages, so that one had a chance at tasting successively the narrative styles of wonderful poems. And this has been very interesting and satisfying to me. In English I have given, usually every other year, a course in English versification. And then often English T, which is an advanced writing course, in which I have always taken both writers of prose and writers of verse, usually about half and half. I have believed that this mingling of the two kinds of work was interesting and fruitful for everybody concerned.

Have you ever considered giving a course in methods of translation?

I have considered it, yes. I remember that, twelve or thirteen years ago, when I was at the University of Washington very briefly, people there were still talking about how good a course in translation had been given there for several years by Jackson Matthews, the editor and translator of Paul Valéry; and that made me think about it. But I never got to the point of actually planning such a course.

Is it a possibility in the future?

Yes, I would say it is a possibility. It might be a good thing to try.

For you?

For me, although I think the emphasis in such a course would naturally be on technique, and I have done my bit with technique in the versification course that I give. So that dealing with technique in versification and at the same time in translation would be rather, to my mind, emphasizing too much that side of things. One wants to get into the substance of things as well as to the means, and instruments, and tools. And so I suppose for the reason that I gave the versification course, I never thought so seriously of giving a translation course.

You've said that you wanted poetry chiefly to be hair-raising. Have you held to that standard?

Well, put it in another way: I remember Wallace Stevens, in one of his letters, saying that poetry is magnificent or it is nothing. If you just want to read, you can read the newspaper. But it's the special quality of poetry to be exalting, hair-raising if you like, to reach and even sometimes to sustain a kind of intensity, to make one realize the nature of things more fully and more frighteningly, or more gloriously, than one normally does. And that is its peculiar distinction. So I don't think that there's anything strange about holding that standard.

Your book of poems, Spring Shade, *contains a seemingly exhaustive variety of verse forms and meters. Do you feel equally comfortable in all these styles?*

Could it be that one didn't care about doing the identical thing twice? If something has been done, there's no need to repeat it? Each new poem in my experience is a new adventure in realizing something that one had not realized before. And I mean making it real in verse, or in words on a page; "realizing it" also in the other sense. But the two processes go *pari passu*: one is engaged in making something in words and in an idiom that has been formed by the practice of poetry for centuries and generations, and the other is in having an experience or a new vision of things that goes with those words that are coming to make the poem on the page.

There are two inseparable components of this endeavor, one of them verbal, and the other intellectual, or emotional, if you like. And I have never consciously tried to arrive at a style that would be my invariable style. That doesn't interest me.

Do you plan to do any other major translations?

No, I plan to do no more translations at all, and to work at other things that I have deferred because I was doing Homer.

Other writing things?

Other writing things, yes.

Would these be poems?

Well, one can never predict that anything will be a poem. That always remains to be seen, like predicting that one will be brave, let us say, under certain circumstances. It always remains to be seen. So it remains to be seen whether what one makes is going to be a poem or not. And one cannot say, Now I am going to make poetry—because that's presumption, a kind of *hubris.* □